



CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER MECHANICSVILLE, VA



One-Day Retreat Saturday, January 27, 2018

You Will Physically Hold Them Again!

Just outside of the main entrance of the Church of the Redeemer in Mechanicville, VA is a small, but beautiful, shrine for the unborn with a statue of Rachel and this Scripture passage from Jeremiah...

In Ramah is heard the sound of moaning, of bitter weeping. Rachel mourns her children; she refuses to be consoled because her children are no more. Thus says the Lord, *“Cease your cries of mourning; wipe the tears from your eyes. The sorrow you have sown shall have its reward. There is hope for your future.”*

What a beautiful way to start our second One-Day Retreat in the Catholic Diocese of Richmond!



Efficiently organized and coordinated by Mike School, Executive Director of the diocese’s Center for Marriage and Family Life, and Diane Atkins, Human Concerns Minister for the Church of the Redeemer, everything was beautifully prepared by their teams and ready to go long before the retreat began. We commented that this was one of our most well-organized retreats ever.

As always, the day began with a moving Opening Prayer Service during which we lit memorial candles for our children. We were reminded that the candles symbolize Christ, the Light of our world, and our children, the light of our lives. Seeing their pictures on the candles definitely warmed our hearts.

Members of the retreat team included

- Fr. Jay Wagner, Pastor, Church of the Redeemer Parish
- Deacon Ron Reger, Church of the Redeemer Parish
- Deacon Chris Colville, Church of the Redeemer Parish
- Daniel Whitehouse, Associate Director, Center for Marriage and Family Life
- Paul Amrhein, Director, Human Concerns/Pastoral Care, St. Brigid Catholic Church
- Deacon Frank and Pat Baskind, St. Mary Parish, Richmond
- Laurie Weeda, Church of the Epiphany, Richmond
- Christa Blomstrom, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Newport News
- Tom & Linda Harkness, *In Loving Memory of Kristen*
- Beth Rapoza, *In Loving Memory of Her Brother, Paul*
- Karen Kornegay, *In Loving Memory of Dylan*
- Charley & Diane Monaghan, *In Loving Memory of Paul*

Also serving on the team were Church of the Redeemer volunteers who graciously handled all food and refreshments for the day.

We welcomed 24 grieving parents from 11 cities in VA, including Falls Church, Quinton, Henrico, Powhattan, Stanardsville, Glen Allen, Vinton, Newport News, Hayes, and Pittsville, in addition to Mechanicsville. We also welcomed a couple who traveled from Emmitsburg, MD.



We honored 18 children whose age at the time of death ranged from prenatal to 55 years old. Time since the death ranged from one month ago to 46 years ago... proof that the hole in a parent's heart will go away only when we are reunited with our precious children.

Cause of death included suicide, drug overdose, illness, accident, stillbirth, miscarriage, and unknown.

Deacon Ron gave a wonderful reflection during which he focused on three things:

1. We live in a fallen world;
2. Death took our children, not God;
3. Our relationship with our children continues through the Eucharist.

Before he began, Deacon Ron apologized on behalf of all of those who have not experienced the death of a child. "We have no idea of what you are going through and we don't know what to say," he said. "Worse yet," he said, "we say nothing."

Deacon Ron expressed his appreciation to the Diocese of Richmond and how he was impressed that Mike School would be with us in solidarity all day long.

“We live in a fallen world,” said Deacon Ron. “There is evil in this world. Nothing is more evident of this than the death of a child. No pain is greater; no valley darker.”

Quoting Scripture, he said:

From the Book of Job (Ch 3: 24-26)

For to me sighing comes more readily than food; my groans well forth like water. For what I feared overtakes me; what I dreaded comes upon me.
I have no peace nor ease; I have no rest, for trouble has come!

From Isaiah (Ch 65: 17-20):

See, I am creating new heavens and a new earth;
The former things shall not be remembered, nor come to mind.

Instead, shout for joy and be glad forever in what I am creating.
Indeed, I am creating Jerusalem to be a joy and its people to be a delight;
I will rejoice in Jerusalem and exult in my people.

No longer shall the sound of weeping be heard there, or the sound of crying;
No longer shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days,
Nor anyone who does not live a full lifetime;

One who dies at a hundred years shall be considered a youth,
And one who falls short of a hundred shall be thought accursed

“Christ suffered in every way,” said Deacon Ron, “He was human. He knows us from the inside; he was one of us.”

“Evil is the bad news,” said Deacon Ron. “The good news,” he said, “is that love conquers evil. The love of God is bigger than the problem of evil. Our entire religion is based on the death of a child. Jesus, as the son of God and of Mary, died to free us from sin and from death.”



“Mary, as depicted in the beautiful Michelangelo Pieta, also knows our sorrow. The sword that each of us has experienced has also pierced her heart,” he said.

St. Paul said that we grieve, but we grieve with hope. Life for our children has *changed*, not ended. Life is not all about Good Friday. It is about Easter Sunday. The sting of death is not the end. It does not have the last word. Death has been swallowed up. O, death, where is thy sting?

“Everything grows out of that empty tomb,” said Deacon Ron. “Good Friday is not the end. Easter Sunday is our salvation.”



Citing the Communion of Saints, Deacon Ron reiterated that death doesn't end our relationship with our children. Death is not the end, but only one of the many phases of love. We love our children—not just as memories, but in the present. This new relationship with our deceased children requires work, but it is definitely there waiting for us to act on it.

“You continue to love them,” said Deacon Ron, “and they continue to love you. One day we will all be resurrected in the body and you will actually be able to physically hug them again. Make your requests known to the Lord. Peace will come,” he said.

Throughout the day, there were many opportunities for parents one-on-one and in small and larger groups to share their insights and experiences. Interesting reflections from parents included...

“I need to allow insights to come when they come and when I am ready. I have lots of lamenting to do. Wisdom can wait.”

“Why would God want us to feel this pain? This is hell on earth.”

“God doesn't want us to feel this pain. He weeps with us. The shortest passage in the Bible... Jesus Wept.”

“I know that there is good news, but that doesn't mean that it is ok. I know how the story turns out, but that doesn't mean I am enjoying this chapter.”

“I haven't been zapped by the Holy Spirit like you have.”

“One of the helpful comments I received from a friend was the reminder that our lives are short. This earth is just a blink compared to eternal life. We will see our children again soon. This life is just a speck. The problem is... day to day, life drags on for us here on earth.”

“When my son died, my dreams died. Now I need a new dream. God has work for me to do in the vineyard, I know. I just need to find out what that is.”

“It does make me feel better when I reach out to others and give some comfort. Maybe God will use us to help get others off of autopilot”

“It is in consoling that we are consoled.”

“It is so hard to deal with people who have no idea of our pain. Not only do they say stupid things, they are stupid.”

“There are some situations that are so toxic to my well-being that I have to recognize this and keep my distance.

“In terms of anger and forgiveness... it is so hard to get out of that anger trap. It can destroy you. You have to forgive and re-forgive every day.”

“It is important to remember that forgiveness does not equal acquittal.”

“Forgiveness is the greatest revenge.”

The sharing among this group of parents was particularly vibrant all-day long. Mothers met with other mothers, as did fathers. This retreat marked one of the first times that we needed more than one small group of fathers because of the large number who came.



We joined parishioners of Church of the Redeemer in a beautiful Saturday Vigil Mass and then concluded with our always moving Closing Prayer Service.

We extinguished *the wick* of the candles memorializing our children. But nothing will...or can.... extinguish the light of these beautiful children who live on forever. As we relight these candles on holidays or special days when we need to feel even closer, we remember them.

Afterwards, parents had this to say...

- *I wanted peace and understanding. I feel that I am able to walk away with that.*
- *It has been really safe and peaceful environment and I have met some kindred souls.*
- *It was comforting from the first moment.*
- *I had hoped for more in the way of helping provide techniques that people can use to reflect on the journey.*
- *Would suggest more small group time – less one on one.*
- *I loved the music, the reflections, the Emmaus walk*

- *It was enlightening to know that the grieving process is the same no matter what the cause of death.*
- *I love the emphasis on spiritual journey. It is the only real solution*
- *I treasured every moment, from the candle lighting, to the new friendships, to the talks and discussions, and finally the prayer services and mass.*

And so... another Emmaus Ministry Retreat for Grieving Parents ended.

Note: We are particularly grateful to the Catholic Diocese of Richmond, whose enthusiastic support of this ministry, made this retreat (and three others this year) possible. The diocesan team headed by Mike Stone and Daniel Whitehouse has worked tirelessly on scheduling all retreats for the year, coordinating the entire registration process, communicating with prospective and registered parents, provided funding for meals and refreshments—and even shopped for flowers. While our time is offered at no cost, the Diocese of Richmond covered our expenses to travel to VA. We are deeply grateful.

