



**St. Mary Parish  
Morgantown, WV**



**ONE-DAY RETREAT  
SATURDAY, October 19, 2019  
HIGHLIGHTS**

## **AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS**

Many years ago, tucked into the side of a hill in Belgium, there lived a monk who refused to go to bed every night without placing an empty suitcase at the foot of his bed.

Every morning the monastery housekeeper would see the empty suitcase and put it back into his closet. For quite some time this went on every night... with the monk placing the suitcase at the foot of his bed and the housekeeper putting it back into his closet.

Finally, one day she asked him why he did this. He replied, *“The empty suitcase is at the foot of my bed to remind me that I don’t really live here. This world is only one part of my journey. I know where I am really headed... I am heaven bound.”*



At the seventh annual Emmaus Ministry Retreat for Grieving Parents in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston offered on October 19<sup>th</sup> at St. Mary Parish in Morgantown, Fr. Gary Naegele used this story to remind parents that there is more to life than this world.

The Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents serves the spiritual needs of parents whose children of any age have died by any cause, no matter how long ago.

Enjoying the beauty of a crisp, colorful, fall day in WV, a special group of grieving parents gathered in St. Mary's newly renovated church and parish center.

At this particular retreat we welcomed 18 parents: 12 mothers and six fathers. We honored 16 children: 13 sons and three daughters. One mother lost four children. Age at the time of death ranged from perinatal to 40 years old. Time since the death ranged from six months to 41 years ago. Cause of death included Suicide (5); Perinatal (4); Accident (4); Overdose (2); and Illness (1).

In addition to Fr. Gary, retreat team members included many parishioners who provided all nourishment for the day, as well as Emmaus Parent Companions who donated Memorial Candles and Comfort Crosses. Also included were Jeanne and Ted McKeets from the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston and Ed and June Cesa and Sr. Rachel Blais from St. Mary Parish.

The bond of grieving parents is unique, unlike any other type of grief. It doesn't really matter how the child died, when the child died, or even how old the child was when he/she died, grieving parents share a special bond. And that is what we experienced this day in Morgantown.

The moving Opening Prayer Service focused on the Light of Christ and the promise of eternal life—and the fact that the Light of Christ, and the light of our children warm us, embrace us, and remain with us every day of our lives.



Fr. Gary gave an inspiring reflection focused on the spirituality of the grieving process for parents. St. Francis of Assisi welcomed Sr. Death, he said, because it was a way of going home.

In 1 Corinthians (15: 54-57) St. Paul said...

“Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Death doesn't have the final word, said Fr. Gary. “You cannot have Good Friday without Easter, and you cannot have Easter without Good Friday,” he said. Easter is the fullness of creation.

In a very interesting observation, Fr. Gary said that we have all already died once. We have all died at birth. That is, we have all died to life in the womb, which was very comfortable and easy. Given the choice, we would have all stayed there where everything was taken care of for us!

But we had to die to life in the womb to be given the gift of life. So too, when we die to life on this earth, we are given the gift of eternal life forever, the fullness of our human potential. This is what our children have already been given.

But right now, said Fr. Gary, we are at the foot of the cross. Death has pierced our hearts and we know the desolation of loss. We have no time for frivolities; we have become authentic and honest.

Jesus himself was not immune from suffering, said Fr. Gary. He wept for his friend, Lazarus. He raised the son of the widow of Nain from the dead--and the daughter of Jairus, among others.



And then, of course, there was Mary, who knows our pain only too well. Fr. Gary talked about the famous Michelangelo Pieta sculpture in St. Peter's in Rome. Mary is lovingly holding the dead body of her son. Her right arm is supporting his body, while her left arm is extended outward, giving her son to us and inviting us to know him.

How can good come out of suffering? This is an ancient question, said Fr. Gary. As Catholics, he said, we believe in Jesus' very real presence in the Word (Scripture) and the Sacraments... particularly the Eucharist.

Jesus suffered the worst of the worst. What came out of it? Eternal salvation for all of us, he said.

When you wonder where your children are, said Fr. Gary, think of the "thinnest veil" because that is what separates you from your child. Just on the other side of this veil are the angels, the saints, and your children, he said.

Quoting Psalm 56, Fr. Gary said...

In God I trust without fear; my wanderings you have counted; my tears are stored in your flask (vial). Are they not recorded in your book? In God I trust without fear.

How comforting to think that all of our tears are gathered together and held by God. To help us remember, Fr. Gary gave each parent a vial and asked us to keep it somewhere close so that we can be reminded that our tears are not shed in vain.

Concluding his reflection, Fr. Gary offered a poem by Grant Colfax Tullar:

“The Weaver,”

“My life is but a weaving  
Between my God and me.  
I cannot choose the colors  
He weaveth steadily.

Oft’ times He weaveth sorrow;  
And I in foolish pride  
Forget He sees the upper  
And I the underside.

Not ’til the loom is silent  
And the shuttles cease to fly  
Will God unroll the canvas  
And reveal the reason why.

The dark threads are as needful  
In the weaver’s skillful hand  
As the threads of gold and silver  
In the pattern He has planned

He knows, He loves, He cares;  
Nothing this truth can dim.  
He gives the very best to those  
Who leave the choice to Him.”

Afterwards, parents had the opportunity, if they wished, to share their own spiritual journeys with others—as part of a small group of mothers or fathers; individually on an Emmaus walk with another parent; or simply alone in the form of a letter to their child or to God.

Insights parents shared included...

- *Anchor Me*. This beautiful song (by Don McGlashan) in the Opening Prayer Service definitely expresses how I feel and what I need. I am angry with both God and with Mary. What I need most right now is an anchor.
- Does it get any easier? No! on one hand and Yes! on the other hand. One father referred parents to the handout provided, “It Gets Easier.” A vibrant discussion ensued on how and why it does or does not get easier for a parent grieving the death of a precious child.
- Several parents talked about how the death of their child profoundly affected their families. Though there are many hardships and challenges, several

parents said that the tragedy of losing their children somehow strengthened their family's bond. "We now love each other with a new intensity," said one parent. "We appreciate each other more." "Now," said another, "We don't take each other for granted. Anything frivolous is not important and we recognize this."

- Sometimes our other living children helped us more than we helped each other, one couple said. We can walk away from our pain or embrace it.



- When I told a priest that I struggle with my faith, said one father, he said, "You're not struggling with your faith; you just need more of it."
- Faith is like a mustard seed. It can be so very tiny and just a pin prick of light. But, if we give it the chance, it can grow into a mighty tree.
- I have a child-like faith in that my daughter is with God. I can't bring her back. She wants me to keep going. If the Lord can use me in some way, I have to listen. Whatever happens, I have to accept.
- As a grieving parent, we now realize we don't have a lot of control, even though we think we do. To help me in my daily struggle, I pray the Serenity Prayer.
- My son was an addict. I believe that he died at the hand of the Evil One. The Evil One is very much alive and well. I believe that if I lose my faith, that is just one more victory for the Evil One and I refuse to give him that.
- I don't believe that one day God says, "I think I want another angel in heaven this day." Or "I think I want another addict or paraplegic or mentally ill or perfectly healthy person in heaven this day." God doesn't take our children. Death takes our children. Through Jesus, God saves our children from death. They are home with him now in heaven.
- One mother shared a beautiful quote from Matthew McConaughey after the death of his father...

"The sorrow refined me, and I never looked at the world the same again. Everything I revered and looked up to suddenly dropped to eye level and felt more mortal and attainable, while everything I had patronized and looked down upon rose up to a more respectful eye level and wasn't beneath me. The world was suddenly flat, and I looked it square in the eye with more courage and incentive than ever before."

It is amazing to see the work of the Holy Spirit in an Emmaus Ministry retreat in bringing certain people together, sometimes unexpectedly. Many years ago, we thought we were in charge of these retreats, but we have learned that the only person truly in control at Emmaus Ministry retreats is the Holy Spirit.

After the retreat, parents had this to say...

- *“There is such a need for this. I spent a year trying to find something specifically for grieving parents...I wanted the Catholic perspective in how to manage the pain and grief because, after all, only God can heal us. Therapists or others can’t even come close.”*
- *“The emphasis on the spiritual journey is great.”*
- *“The day went by very quickly.”*
- *“I did find this retreat helpful in addressing my spiritual needs at this time and in the future.”*

We ended the day with a Vigil Mass, a delightful meal prepared by parish volunteers, and a beautiful Closing Prayer Service.

After lots of hugs and a blessing from Fr. Gary, the uplifting day of peace, comfort, and hope ended.

Ed and June Cesa urge parents who are interested to contact them if they wish to serve on future retreat teams (anything from Check-In to Parent Witnessing) The intent is to continue the Emmaus Ministry not only in Morgantown, but also throughout the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston. For information on how to reach the Cesas, call Diane at 617-542-8057.

