



Archdiocese of
LOS ANGELES
St. Bartholomew Church



One-Day Retreat
December 7, 2019
Highlights

We Are Much More Than Flesh and Bones

A beautiful little girl with long brown hair dies unexpectedly. As does a precious baby only a few days old.... a troubled young man with a wife and two children... and a stunning, 20-something woman with the world by the tail. Along with 13 others. All done too soon, leaving behind devastated parents agonizing over what happened and why.

The life of a grieving parent definitely has a “before” and an “after.” Ministering to them can be daunting. What do you say? What do you do? How can you possibly help?



The Archdiocese of Los Angeles and St. Bartholomew Church in Long Beach recently introduced a powerful ministry serving the spiritual needs of parents whose children of any age have died by any cause, no matter how long ago: The Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents. Recently, they offered their first spiritual retreat.

On an overcast Saturday morning on December 7, 2019, 19 parents, including 14 mothers and five fathers, hesitantly gathered at St. Bart’s, not knowing what to expect. They were welcomed by Fr. Michael Reardon, Pastor; Sr. Mary Dean, Parish Ministry Director; Bernadette Tellez, Logistics Coordinator; Eva Hernandez, Archdiocese of Los Angeles

Program Coordinator for the Ministry of Consolation; members of the parish's Bereavement Committee, and Diane and Charley Monaghan, original founders of the ministry, who came to Long Beach from Boston, MA.

Other retreat team members included Valerie Morrow, Fran Feinberg, Jacquelyn Nguyen, Catherine Crow, Hector and Amparo Baldemor, Betty Simpson, Maria Morino, Nancy Noble, Debra Gorman, and Juliann Desmond.



The retreat honored 17 children, including 10 sons and seven daughters. Age at the time of death ranged from pre-natal to 56 years old. Time since the death ranged from 11 weeks ago to 26 years ago. Cause of death included miscarriage, stillbirth, and infancy death (7); suicide (4); illness (3), overdose (1); murder (1); and unknown (1).

During a very moving Opening Prayer Service, we were reminded that the Light of Christ pierces the darkness and the light of our children continues to brighten our lives. We lit beautiful Memorial Candles carrying photos of our children and received Comfort Crosses reminding us that *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”*

Fr. Michael served as our spiritual leader for the entire day. He began with a very comforting and inspirational reflection on the spirituality of the grieving process—emphasizing the fact that death is not the end.

While he has never lost a child, Fr. Michael said he lost two siblings and a nephew and saw how it devastated his parents and his sister.

Your pain is extraordinary, said Fr Michael, but it is not without hope. We are all on a journey that ends not in death, but in the fullness of life. Love is a contradiction, he said. It is as painful as it is joyful because the more we love, the more we grieve. How we react to grief depends on whether or not we have faith and hope.

Quoting Abraham Lincoln, Fr. Michael said...

“I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day.” He had to turn to a greater wisdom, to God, said Fr. Michael. Without something to hold onto, we fall into the fire.

Who is God—really? Is God really real? Or is he just a figment of my imagination? Who is he for me in good times? In bad times? If we have faith, said Fr. Michael, we are able to come together with God; we are able to encounter him.

Pope Benedict XVI said that Jesus' cross reminds us that there is no gift without pain. Each of us lives in the divine image of Christ. So, when the body passes away, all is not over. We are much more than flesh and bones, he said.



Our relationship with God must be ongoing, said Fr Michael. How can we strengthen it? Your children are still living, he said. We believe in the Resurrection and eternal life. Talk to them!

Quoting Psalm 23, Fr. Michael said, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me.

Remember the rod and the staff, said Fr. Michael. The rod protects us against evil and the staff gives us strength and balance. The “staff” of Our Lord, our faith, our family—and the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, give us strength. Remember the rod and the staff.

We are on a journey moving forward, said Fr. Michael. Crying is definitely part of that journey, not a sign of weakness.

According to Washington Irving...

“There is a sacredness in tears. They are not a mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are the messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition and of unspeakable love.”

Never be afraid of tears, said Fr. Michael, and don't apologize for them.

Charles Dickens said, “Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but--I hope--into a better shape.”

In conclusion, Fr. Michael said, “When we die, we are not blotted out of existence.” We need to remember the words of Isaiah...

Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength; they will soar on eagles' wings; they will run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint.

In large groups, small groups, and individually, throughout the day, parents had the opportunity to share their spiritual journeys. Some of their interesting insights included the following:

- *My faith was shattered after the death of my daughter, but I knew that God would always get me through. But... where is he now?*
- *Right now, we are in the middle of the Crucifixion. We need to remember the Resurrection that is still to come.*
- *They are still alive and well and here with us right now. We should ask each of them to pray for us.*
- *Your daughter is at peace now—no matter how she died. She will give you that peace if you are open to it.*
- *Out of all the billions of people in this world, no one can say, for sure without a doubt, what happens after you die. We need to believe in Jesus Christ and the promise of eternal life.*
- *I'm a cradle Catholic and always said that I believe in the Communion of Saints, but I never really understood what that meant... until now after my son has died.*

The Mass, of course, is the pinnacle of every retreat for it is there that we celebrate the sacrifice of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, and over and over again, are reminded of the promise of eternal life. Through the miracle of the Eucharist, we become one with Christ—and our children—for they are now one with Christ through the Communion of Saints.

We joined Fr. Think Pham and St. Bartholomew parishioners at their Saturday Vigil Mass. In his homily, Fr. Think spoke of heaven as our eternal destination and the “welcome home” we will receive, which will be the fulfillment of peace.



Earlier in the day, we wrote letters to our children or God, which were burned into ash. The ash from the letters were mixed with soil and used to plant a miniature rose bush. During the Mass the rose plant was prayerfully presented to the Blessed Mother by an Emmaus Ministry mother.

Graciously recognizing Emmaus Ministry parents at the Mass, Fr. Think asked parishioners to pray for us. He talked about an Italian custom during funeral Masses to applaud the deceased in celebration of their lives. So, he said, today we honor all of the beautiful children of the Emmaus Ministry parents gathered here with us at

this Mass, and celebrate their lives. At this point the entire congregation broke out in applause!

After Mass we enjoyed a delicious dinner prepared by parishioners, complete with white table cloths and beautiful floral centerpieces. It was amazing—and very comforting—to see how the entire parish embraced all of the parents that day.



The retreat closed with a poignant Closing Prayer Service during which we extinguished the wick of our Memorial Candles—but never the light of our children, which will shine brightly forever. Parents who entered tentatively in the morning seemed to stand and sit taller by the end of the day. There was a lot of laughter and joy.

“It is easy to laugh with other people,” said Charley Monaghan at the closing, “but you really feel comfortable crying only with close friends and family. Today we have found many new friends who feel like family.”

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

- *“This beautiful retreat provided acceptance, love, spirituality, and hope, all in one warm setting.*
- *“I did not expect much from this retreat, but it turns out that I got so much from this experience. Thank you so much.*
- *“It felt like a life-changing experience. I felt transformation within me and it has fired my motivation to reconnect with God.”*
- *“I feel that I am about to begin a new way to live the loss of my beloved son.”*
- *“It helped me to strengthen my faith.”*

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles and St. Bartholomew Parish, as well as several other parishes in the Long Beach area, are currently discerning how best to adopt the Emmaus Ministry to serve the spiritual needs of its grieving parents. For more information on upcoming programs, please see www.emfgp.org or call Eva Hernandez at 213-637-7547 or Sr. Mary Dean at 419-304-8530.

