

**Weekend Retreat
January 17-19, 2020
Bishop DeFalco Retreat Center
Amarillo, TX**

Anchor Me

Picture, said the priest, a very busy harbor and lots of commotion with sailboats, ferries, and commercial vessels coming and going; people rushing to work; seagulls cackling; airplanes and helicopters noisily taking off and landing.



Just a short distance away offshore, ships are quietly anchored. Leave the clutter of the harbor and the outside world behind this weekend, recommended Fr. Shane Wieck, Associate Pastor of St. Laurence Parish in Amarillo. Go to the ship offshore and plunge deep into the quiet waters under it—at least for a time—to look for your anchor, to look for your God. There you will find peace and calm.

Fr. Shane was talking to a group of grieving parents gathered at the Bishop DeFalco Retreat Center January 17-19, 2020 for its first Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents spiritual retreat.

Founded in 2008 by Charley and Diane Monaghan and the Franciscan Friars of St. Anthony Shrine in Boston, MA, the Emmaus Ministry is a Catholic program that

serves the spiritual needs of parents whose children of any age (from conception to old age), have died by any cause, no matter how long ago.

Eighteen parents participated in this retreat. They came from Tulia, Lubbock, Hereford, Canyon, Spearman, and Olton, in addition to Amarillo. They honored 18 children: nine sons and nine daughters. Age at the time of death ranged from prenatal to 61 years old. Time since the death ranged from five months ago to 18 years ago. Cause of death included illness (8); car/motorcycle accident (4); suicide (3); murder (2); miscarriage (1). Four couples were mourning the deaths of two of their children.



Members of the retreat team included James Schulte, Diocese of Amarillo Family Life Director; Linda Astuto, Bishop DeFalco Retreat Center Executive Director; Katie Bright; D’Ana Carreon; Fr. Shane Wieck; Fr. Juan Carlos Barragan; Davlyn Dueterhaus, Valerie and Mark Morrow, and St. Thomas the Apostle Prayer Shawl Ministry.

Parents began arriving at the Retreat Center around 5pm Friday night. Most felt nervous, tentative and unsure of what to expect, but were glad that they came.

After dinner, the retreat started with a beautiful Opening Prayer Service that began with another anchor image as we listened to the song, “Anchor Me” by The Tenors...

*When sadness crashes like an ocean
When fear is deeper than the sea
When I am swallowed by the darkness
Will you come and anchor me?*

The Opening Prayer Service focused on candles representing the light of our children in our lives—and on Christ, the Light of the world: “*We light these candles knowing that our children are in the Light. The light they brought into our lives and our hearts continues to shine. As we see the light of these candles and feel the warmth of their flames, we know that the Light of God’s love brings our children here among us, for they live on in the Light. One day we too will share that Light.*”

Parents lit memorial candles bearing photos of their children. There was a quiet beauty in the chapel with the flickering of the Paschal Candle above the memorial candles burning steadfastly in the shadow of the tabernacle. Drawn to the chapel and the candles, parents often spent time there in vigil throughout the weekend. For many, the presence of their children and of the Holy Spirit was palpable.

After the Opening Prayer Service, one mother said, “Here, tonight, I felt my son’s presence—and knew that he was safe—for the first time.”

After the prayer service, parents were able to relax and get to know each other at a wine and dessert social offered by the Retreat Center.



Saturday morning started with a beautiful Mass celebrated by Fr. Shane. During his homily, Fr. Shane also exhorted us to turn to the Blessed Mother in our pain, *Stabat Mater*. Mary felt the movement of Jesus deep inside of her when she was pregnant, he said. She fed him from her breasts. She changed his diapers. She wiped away his tears. She held his hands when he was taking his first steps. She was terrified when he was lost in the temple. And, horrified, she watched him die. She didn’t suffer the pains of birthing her son, said Fr. Shane. But she did suffer the pain and agony of birthing the Church as she stood at the foot of the cross. Let her embrace you in your pain today, said Fr. Shane, because she knows it firsthand.

After the Mass, Davlyn Duesterhaus offered a reflection during which she quoted from Rabbi Harold Kushner’s book, *The Lord is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the 23rd Psalm*. God’s role is not to protect us from pain and loss, but to help us prevent pain and loss from ruling our lives. Death is the ultimate healing, she said.

Throughout the rest of the weekend, parents had the opportunity to share their spiritual journeys with each other one-on-one, in small groups of mothers and fathers, and together in large groups.

We invoked the Holy Spirit to pair parents as they walked the grounds of the Retreat Center together for an hour. “I know why I was paired with my Emmaus Walk partner,” said one mother. “The Emmaus Walk was special,” said another.

After a short break, we wrote letters to our children. “I particularly liked writing a letter to my child,” said one parent. Burning them, knowing that the smoke was

rising in prayer to heaven, was very powerful. The ashes from the letters were scattered over the retreat center's Stations of the Cross outside.

Parents whose children have seemingly died out of the state of grace often agonize about their souls. Remember the gospel of the prodigal son, suggested one parent. The prodigal son did virtually everything that was anathema to Jews at the time. He took his father's hard-earned money and used it for food, drink, sex and any pleasure he desired. In the end, he lost it all. Hungry, dirty, and smelling very badly, he survived by tending to pigs, which were considered among the most unclean of all creation at the time. He decided to go back to his father and beg for work, so he could eat. His father, in the meantime, stood at his window watching and waiting for his son to come back. When he finally did, his father was overjoyed with happiness. He gave him a ring, fine clothes, and shoes, elevating him and demonstrating his value and worth. What the son did didn't matter. He repented. He was home. And the father rejoiced. So too will our merciful Lord at the return of our children.



Parents also talked about our children who died without being baptized. Jesus said that we need to be baptized by water, noted one parent. He did not say we had to be baptized physically, in the flesh. If the only way to be baptized is the way we do it now, said this parent, that means that Abraham and all of the people of the Old Testament, including our Blessed Mother, are not in heaven, which, of course, is not true. I personally believe, said this parent, that John the Baptist is still baptizing. Your children will enter the kingdom because John will be there to make it happen, he said. We also have "baptism of desire," said another parent. The fact that you desire your child to have been baptized is another way to make it happen. For God, there is no timeline. The fact that you desire the baptism after the death is not relevant and does not affect your desire for the baptism.

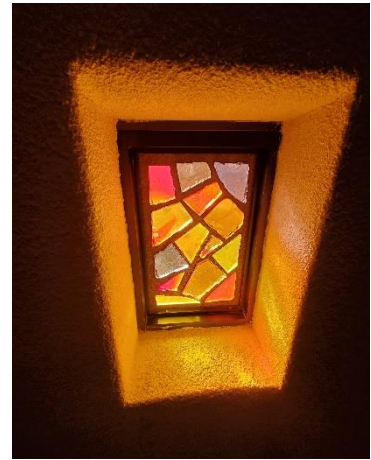
Before the retreat, parents told why they were coming and what they hoped to get out of the retreat. One mother said, *"I knew I had to do something because I was in such a bad place. I didn't tell anyone I was coming because they would want to come with me and I wanted to come by myself. I need this so badly."*

Other parents said...

"I just want to feel close to God and to feel some comfort and peace of mind."

“I hope to find peace and comfort and come to the realization that she is in heaven... My faith tells me this, but my heart and my mind have not been convinced yet.”

“We are hoping that this retreat will help us better grasp that there was a purpose or meaning behind what happened and to not be angry with God.”



After the retreat, parents said...

“When I first got here, my throat was tied up in a knot, my stomach was upset, and I was shaking. Now all of that is gone and I feel peace.”

“The experience here was very cathartic. It has eased my pain a whole lot and also my mind.”

“I found it to be very helpful in that it gave me the peace that I had been lacking.”

“It is amazing to see the differences in the countenances of each of us, compared to what they were when we first came on Friday night. Then we were unsure and afraid. Now we are happy.”

Our Sunday morning Mass was celebrated by Fr. Juan Carlos Barragan. After Mass, he told the story of a little boy who spent days and days lovingly working on perfecting his small wooden boat--sanding it, building it, and painting it. Finally, the time came to float his boat, so he took it to the river running through the middle of town.

Totally delighted, he danced with it as it began to float downstream. Soon, to his dismay, however, the flow of the river became stronger and stronger and eventually carried his boat away. The boy was devastated.

Downstream, a man found the boat lodged against the bank of the river. He sold it to a thrift store, whose owner put it in the front window of the store. The next time the boy went downtown, he saw the boat. He rushed into the store and explained to the store owner, who was not impressed, that the boat was really his. If you

want it back, said the owner, you need to buy it. So, after many months of toiling, the boy was finally able to buy his own creation back.

This is what God has done for us, said Fr. Juan. He lovingly and painstakingly created you and your children in his image. He created you; he sanded you; he painted you. Then he lost you and your child to the original sin of our parents, Adam and Eve. But, using the precious blood of his only son, Jesus Christ, he purchased you back. Take consolation in the fact that he is with you always, said Fr. Juan, and the fact that your children are with him.

After a brief Closing Prayer Service during which we extinguished the wicks of our memorial candles—but not the eternal lights of our children—this beautiful retreat ended.

In stark contrast to Friday when parents arrived cautiously and warily, the goodbyes on Sunday morning were full of hugs, laughter, joy, and hope that someday we will gather again for another very special Emmaus Ministry retreat.

The Diocese of Amarillo and the Bishop DeFalco Retreat Center are working to adopt the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents throughout the diocese as an ongoing, official ministry. If you are interested in adopting it in your parish—or would like more information on how to help grieving parents in your area—please call James Schulte at 806-383-2243 or Linda Astuto at 806-383-1811 or Diane Monaghan at 617-542-8057.

