



## St Kateri Tekakwitha Parish Schenectady, NY



### One-Day Retreat November 17, 2018 HIGHLIGHTS

#### *“You Will Be Whole Again”*

Planning for an Emmaus Ministry retreat in the Diocese of Albany, NY began more than a year ago, and an early Nor-ester snow storm nearly derailed it. But early Saturday morning, more than 35 people gathered at St Kateri Tekakwitha Parish in Schenectady.



We welcomed 29 parents, 5 fathers and 24 mothers. We honored 26 children, 8 daughters and 18 sons. Time since the death ranged from 4 weeks ago to 46 years ago. Age at the time of death ranged from prenatal to 57 years old. Cause of death included illness (9); suicide (6); prenatal (5); accident (3); and overdose (2). Two mothers lost more than one child.

The retreat team was one of our largest ever, with more than 20 parishioners and friends generously and graciously offering their time and talent to support the grieving parents coming to this retreat seeking peace and comfort.

Fr. Bob Longobucco, pastor of St. Kateri, served as our host, spiritual leader, celebrant, and confessor. Harley McDevitt, Director of Pastoral Care Ministry for the Diocese of Albany and Kris Rooney, St. Kateri Pastoral Associate and mother of Matthew, provided leadership for the day.

Kimberly Conway and Kel Szydagis shared their gift of music for the Opening Prayer Service, which was wonderful and absolutely beautiful. Usually we need to use recorded music. They even learned Monica Brown’s *“The Emmaus Song”* to lead us in prayer.

Parishioners and members of the parish’s Bereavement Ministry served on “Crews 1-2-3” to purchase, set up, serve and clean up after all of our meals and snacks throughout the entire day. The Bereavement Ministry also subsidized the retreat financially.

Other members of the retreat team included JoAnn Bomeisl, who gave a moving Parent Witness in loving memory of Stephanie. Melanie Puerto-Conte helped coordinate; her daughter Daniela, sat in vigil with the candles the entire day.

Other local ministries were touched by this retreat by receiving leftover food and supplies. Several parishioners worked late or came in on their day off to prepare the church and Parish Center for our arrival. Fifteen Diocese of Albany parishes donated beautifully made prayers shawls, “handmade hugs” for each of the parents who were there.

Kathy and Abel Rodrigues donated the memorial candles in loving memory of their daughter, Erin. Krista and Rob Skinner donated the comfort crosses in loving memory of Aidan, their son. It was truly gratifying to see so much parish involvement and compassion.

Fr. Bob graciously welcomed us during the Opening Prayer Service saying he was honored and humbled to have us there at St. Kateri’s, especially during Thanksgiving week. He quoted from Genesis saying that we were like Jacob wrestling with God, wrestling with the struggle of being a grieving parent. “There is a blessing in struggle,” said Fr. Bob. “The gift of the Spirit is at work whether we feel it or not.”



Like the psalmists we ask...Why? How? There are no answers, said Fr. Bob. We have to find a way to trust in God, to believe that heaven will be even more beautiful than we could ever imagine.

Our tears come from love, said Fr. Bob. We have been born and ordered to love. But the universe wobbles and sin and death come in all forms. God does not want us to die, said Fr. Bob. But we have free will.

Jesus Christ hated death. In dying a humiliating and harrowing death himself, he destroyed it forever. The Resurrection now has the final word. Death still has its power, but not the final word. What we have to remember, said Fr. Bob, is that some good can come out of our children’s deaths. We are tattered, but there are signs of hope. God comes to us and meets us where we are. He rose from the dead out of love for each of us.

In heaven you will clearly know your child, said Fr. Bob. You will know each other fully—outside of any pain. *You will be whole again.* The God of Light is the God of Love. He knows what you need and he will not fail you, said Fr. Bob. You will all be together again in the Light. Let us have hope. Let us have peace, said Fr. Bob, concluding his poignant reflection.

Another theme of the day seemed to be “finding joy again.” JoAnn Bemeisl gave a thoughtful Parent Witness presentation during which she shared her own spiritual journey after the loss of her daughter, Stephanie.

“If I stayed with my head under that rock, I would never be able to feel joy again,” said JoAnn. If I focus on her loss, rather than all of the joy that she brought me, I would always be sad.

Right after Stephanie died, I had a dream, said JoAnn. In the dream, God came to me and said that I had the choice of never knowing Stephanie and consequently, this searing pain—or, in choosing to know

her, having the joy of her being and presence for 15 years. What parent wouldn't choose to have their child, no matter how much pain, said JoAnn.



I found that the more I wrote about my pain, said JoAnn, the less power that it had over me. My sadness was replaced by the joy that once was. I have decided to choose life. Not everyone grieves the same, she said. Be kind to each other.

Parents had the opportunity throughout the day to talk to each other (if they wished) in pairs, in small groups of mothers and fathers, and together as a large group. It was comforting to hear the perspectives of others and to have them know and understand our pain somewhat.

Fathers, in particular, found peace in being able to talk about their children and their spouses, possibly for the first time—and to cry in public without being judged.

One mother who ministered to her son during a long, particularly difficult illness resulting in death, said taking care of him was the most painful experience of her entire life. Another mother who had a similar experience with her son said that, for her, it was a gift. It was comforting to have both experiences validated.

Before we knew it, the day was almost over and we joined worshippers at St. Kateri's for their Saturday Vigil Mass, celebrated by Fr. Bob.

Once again, Fr. Bob welcomed us into the community and told everyone that he was honored to have us there. He gave a very hopeful homily during which he reminded us that when our world seems darkest, the Son of Man will always be there.

During one of the sessions in the afternoon parents wrote letters to their children, which were burned into ash. Fr. Bob took some of this ash and mixed it with incense during the Offertory. Then he bowed and incensed the candles of our children, which were on a table in front of the altar. Incense rising to heaven is like our prayers, our letters, rising to heaven as well. Then, in a very powerful moment for us, Fr. Bob came over to where the parents were seated. He bowed to us and incensed us as well, making our connection with our children even stronger. Thank you, Fr. Bob.

Throughout the day, we were reminded that the central mystery of our faith is that death is followed by life. No matter how difficult and chaotic our world becomes, we are invited by God to wait for and expect new life. In the midst of our struggles, we turn to him to see what gifts will come from the deepest of all losses, the death of our children. After a wonderful meal and a moving Closing Prayer Service, the retreat ended with joy, hope, and lots of hugs.

After the retreat, Kris Rooney, our very capable and gifted Parent Leader, said "Fr. James Keegan said, *'Mercy is the willingness to enter into the chaos of another.'* And we all did our part to do just that. I am touched and full of gratitude. Our own son Matthew in heaven might be smiling at how he was an instigator in it all. Thank you, Lord, for weaving your grace through the fabric of the day."

Parents had this to say...

*"Keep doing what you are doing. We were very blessed to be part of this retreat."*

*"I was beside myself and didn't know where to turn. Now I feel I have some direction."*

*“Continue this ministry throughout the diocese.”*

*“The male sharing was very beneficial. Please find a way to promote this aspect so (more) males attend.”*

*“If anything, my mind, heart, and spirit are more open.”*

Harley McDevitt is spearheading the effort to bring more Emmaus Ministry retreats to the Diocese of Albany. So far St. Clement Parish of Saratoga Springs and St. Edward the Confessor in Clifton Park have heeded the call. St. Clement’s retreat will be on April 27, 2019 and St. Edward’s will be on October 5, 2019. For more information on adopting the ministry at your parish, call Harley at 518-641-6823 or Diane Monaghan at 617-542-8057.

