



ONE-DAY RETREAT SATURDAY, JANUARY 12, 2019

“You Don’t Get to Rest in Peace, My Child! You Have Work to Do!”

Children die every day from illnesses, accidents, suicides, murders, and overdoses.



All of them leave behind devastated parents, shattered and broken by the “worst nightmare” of all, the loss of a precious child. What do you do as a parent? How do you survive this unimaginable situation? Where do you find any peace and comfort at all? What help can your Catholic faith possibly offer?

The Archdiocese of Boston and the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents, do indeed offer spiritual help to parents experiencing the heart-wrenching loss of a child of any age by any cause, no matter how long ago.

With parish-based One-Hour, One-Day, and Weekend Spiritual Retreats throughout the Archdiocese, the Emmaus Ministry brings much-needed peace and comfort to grieving parents by focusing on the rich teachings of the Catholic Church... *life has changed, not ended; your child is an eternal being who will never die; you will be together again someday.*

Most recently, the St. John-St. Paul Collaborative in Wellesley offered a moving One-Day Emmaus Ministry retreat, led by Fr. Jim Laughlin, Pastor; Fr. Robert Blaney, Parochial Vicar; Kelly Meraw, Director of Pastoral Care and Music; and Laurie Jacob, Bereavement Volunteer. Other retreat team members included Anne Mears, Jane Leonard, and Charley and Diane Monaghan.

Parents came from not only Wellesley, but also Chelsea, Norton, Auburndale Needham, Holliston, Lunenburg, and Waltham. They honored children who died from illnesses, suicide, overdoses, accidents, and drowning. Age at the time of death ranged from four years to 38 years old. Time since the death ranged from four months ago to 37 years ago.

As they gathered, it was obvious that the age of the child, the cause of the death, and even how long ago the child died didn't matter... there was an instant bond. Finally, they were among others who 'got it.' They were in the warm embrace of other grieving parents who understand their pain. The hole in their heart was the common denominator; the grief of a parent is totally different from any other.



During the Opening Prayer Service, Fr. Jim set the tone when he blessed candles memorializing the children by saying, "*They are separated from us by the thinnest of veils.*"

As one of the retreat's Spiritual Leaders, Fr. Jim told parents that he had been a priest for 28 years and had celebrated many Masses, weddings, funerals, and other liturgies. While it is difficult to remember everyone he has ministered to over the years, Fr. Jim said he can never forget the parents whose children have died. They have all made lasting impressions on him.



"What do you say to a parent who has lost a child?" said Fr Jim, "I have no idea. I have to rely on the Holy Spirit. What I have found that helps most," he said, "is not words, but hugs. For a parent, a child remains a child, no matter how old. You have this unbreakable, unique bond that lasts forever, no matter what," he said.

"The *mystery of innocent human suffering* is one of our biggest challenges," said Fr. Jim, "because we really don't know why it is or what to do with it."

We look at images of the Holy Family and see an idyllic portrait, said Fr. Jim, but Mary and Joseph had to deal with many difficulties: an unplanned pregnancy for which Mary could have actually been stoned; Jesus being born in a filthy stable with animals; the threat of slaughter of their newborn Jesus; and a harrowing flight to Egypt—all within weeks of his birth! And, eventually, like many of us, Mary had to deal with the death of both her husband and her child.

But we have the reality of the Resurrection, said Fr. Jim. Without that, our religion is meaningless. Christ conquered death. Because of that fact, we all will enjoy eternal life. We will definitely see our children again.

Your child, right now, lives in the light of Christ. How beautiful it must be for him or her! Your child is actually there! And only a very thin veil separates you, said Fr. Jim. One day you will be reunited. Isaiah says that God's love for us is like a mother's—never ending and totally unconditional. Even if a mother rejects her child, says Isaiah, God will never reject you.

The retreat began and ended with poignant prayer services honoring the children and reminding parents of the promise of eternal life. Parents were led in song by Kelly Meraw and Anne Mears, which was an unusual and beautiful addition to the retreat. After Fr. Jim's moving reflection, parents had one-on-one, small group, and large group sessions, all focused on their spiritual journeys and reconnecting with God and their children. Particularly moving was the time parents spent in writing letters to their children, which were burned and offered to God with incense in prayer during Mass.



Spiritual retreats are not support groups, but parents do support each other and are instruments of consolation. Beautiful insights they shared with each other that day include...

- "Visit, but don't dwell." We need to be gentle with ourselves, indulge ourselves in grief, and even succumb to it on some level at various times. But we can't dwell and wallow in it. We pick ourselves up, put on our masks, and function in the world because we have to.
- "Love is the only house big enough to hold all the pain in the world."

- “God, help my unbelief and give me the willingness to be open to you and what I need to do with my grief.”
- “God graces grieving parents in a way that is inexplicable.”
- “In deep suffering, the world slows down and, as grieving parents, we can see things we could not otherwise see.”
- “I get tired of people trying to fix me.”
- “People say stupid things to me out of fear that it will happen to them.”
- “To get out of my grief, I have found that I need to get out of myself and help others.”
- “For the peace and comfort I needed, I turned to art and music, places with no words.”
- “It is important to remember that God suffers—and wails—with us.”
- “When my son died, I felt as if I died. But I prayed to overcome the bitterness and despair I witnessed in other grieving parents in my family—and to feel the peace of the Lord.”
- Because I totally believe in the fact that our children are still alive and well and at work in our lives—with much work to do—I have told my beloved daughter, ***“You don’t get to rest in peace! You have work to do!”***

A father shared this beautiful poem:

TRUST ME

Do you believe that I am the Son of God?
And do you believe that I died for all men and
Women and that I rose from the dead?

Then why do you continue to be distracted
And anxious about your loved ones?
Would I refuse to work in their lives
Just as I work in yours?

I have not put you in charge of saving them.
I have already done that.
Nor have I charged you to change them.

Your task is to love, to forgive, to pray for them
And to turn them over to Me.

Come closer to Me yourself and
I will do the rest.

TRUST ME!

--Author Unknown, Association of Marian Helpers

It was interesting to observe the differences in parental need. One grieving parent was adamant in her disappointment in the support of her family. Why were they not calling her and supporting her in her grief? Another parent responded that having her family call her made her grief even more difficult because she felt that she had to console them when they were presumedly consoling her.

Which is the better way? With grieving parents, it is hard to tell. Knowing how to minister to a grieving parent is difficult at best. Many parents agree that simply saying how sorry you are for their pain and loss, giving hugs, being there, and letting them talk about their children may be among the most comforting gifts of all.



Many parents talked about receiving signs from their children. After this discussion, Fr. Jim said to the parents, “Your mystical experiences have buoyed my faith.”

Retreatants joined parishioners in the Saturday Vigil Mass during which their children were remembered by name, which was very comforting. In his homily, Fr. Jim encouraged worshippers to grow in intimacy with God by being real and telling him how we really feel, what is in the depths of our hearts. As with any relationship, said Fr. Jim, this is how we truly grow in love, by truly sharing our innermost thoughts.

The retreat closed with a moving closing prayer service during which parents were reminded that the light of Christ and that of their precious children will shine forever.

Afterwards, when asked about the retreat, parents said...

“Thank you to all involved. I am very grateful.”

“(This was) an opportunity to bring my deceased daughter back into my life.”

“I feel very filled with the Holy Spirit today.”

“It was just what I needed to get me back on track with my faith and return to Mass regularly.”

Fr. Robert said, “What a powerful ministry! It truly brings the peace and comfort of Jesus Christ to those who desperately need it so much. Thank you for bringing it here.”

The Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents, offering One-Hour, One-Day, and Weekend Spiritual Retreats, is available to any parish in the Archdiocese of Boston.

If you would like to come to a retreat, see www.emfgp.org for dates and locations. If you would like to explore the idea of adopting the ministry at your parish, contact Diane Monaghan at diane@emfgo.org or call 617-542-8057.

