



Retreats

'God didn't take your child!'

SPECIAL TO THE PILOT

Sarah was only eight years old. She was a very sweet, little girl who loved to cook, do science experiments, and swim.

One beautiful sunny summer day, she kissed her mom goodbye, skipped off, and got on a bus on her way to a Catholic summer camp. Sadly, Sarah never returned. Despite flawless weather, four life guards, and very strict pool rules, Sarah died only a couple of miles away from home on that perfect summer day.

Anthony went to Iraq and survived four long years of duty. Exhausted, he finally made it home. One night, shortly after he got back, he and his closest friends decided to go out to celebrate yet another Super Bowl win for New England. On his way home, he took a wrong turn and ended up in the deep, cold waters of the Charles River and never came home. It took three days to find him.

Christa was a successful 39-year-old businesswoman who had the world by the tail. She recently met a man who could be "the one;" was up for a promotion at work; and was beginning to have a better relationship with her family. But, after several years of treatment for severe pain incurred after an accident, she

found herself addicted to opioids. One night, after using fentanyl for the first time, she slipped into a deep coma and never woke up.

These children, and the thousands of others who die every day in the United States, almost always leave behind devastated parents, shattered and broken by the "worst nightmare" of all: the death of a cherished 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 give?

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. With parish-based One-Hour, One-Day, and Weekend Spiritual Retreats throughout the archdiocese, the 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. Parents who come to Emmaus Ministry retreats have lost precious children whose



ages range from prenatal and stillbirth to middle age. Our oldest parent is a 94-year-old mother grieving her 65 year-old son. Causes of death include illnesses, accidents, murders, suicides, drownings, and overdoses. Time since the death has ranged from only a few weeks to more than forty years ago. The hole in the heart of a grieving parent is always there, and spiritual nourishment is always needed, no matter what. For a parent, a child is a child forever and the bond is eternal. Typically, parents can travel great distances to come to Emmaus Ministry retreats. Although they are parish-based retreats, they are also regional, in that they typically attract parents from a 50 to 100-mile radius and beyond. It is not unusual for parents, who found the ministry on the internet, to

fly into Boston from states as far away as Louisiana, Florida, and Arizona, as well as Canada.

Retreat team members always include other grieving parents who have participated in several Emmaus Ministry retreats, joined by spiritual leaders, who are priests, deacons, pastoral associates, friars, sisters, or spiritual directors. Also serving on retreat teams are parish volunteers who provide everything, from prayer shawls to breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Seeing how various parishes and collaborators join together in this powerful ministry is especially gratifying. Several pastors have told us that, through this ministry, parishes are working together, often for the first time.

So, what happens at Emmaus Ministry retreats? As parents gather, it is obvious that the age of the child, the cause of the death, and even how long ago the child died doesn't matter ... there is an instant bond. Parents feel that finally they are among others who 'get it.' The hole in their hearts is the common denominator; the grief of a parent is totally different from any other. Before the retreat, when

asked what they hope to gain from the retreat, many parents would agree with one mother who wrote, "I am coming to this retreat to restore my faith after it has been truly tested with the death of my son; to find acceptance of this horrific experience; to learn how to continue to parent my son, even in death; and to rejuvenate my relationship with God after I've been so angry and indifferent towards him for so long."

Emmaus Ministry retreats always open with a very moving Prayer Service during which candles memorializing the children are lit. Parents are reminded that the candles represent the power of ritual, sacred memory, and eternal hope. We light them to call us to prayer and in recognition of the sacred presence of God among us. We light them to recall that our children are also truly present here with us on this day. We ask the children to pray for us and with us.

Emmaus Ministry One-Hour, One-Day, and Weekend Spiritual Retreats are held throughout the Archdiocese of Boston — and in eight other dioceses outside of New England throughout the year. See www.emfgp.org for more information.