



ST. JAMES CATHEDRAL
a catholic community



ONE-DAY RETREAT FOR GRIEVING PARENTS
Saturday, March 9, 2019
St. James Cathedral
HIGHLIGHTS

Death is Not the End of Our Story

“A parent’s worst nightmare” is a phrase we hear frequently. Often it refers to children who are estranged from their parents, at war with each other, in the throes in addiction, or one of the many other ways that children can rock a parent’s world. Having your precious child die, however, is the *ultimate* parent’s worst nightmare. In an instant, life changes forever.

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 Diocese of Orlando and St. James Cathedral recently introduced the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents, a program serving the spiritual needs of parents whose children of any age have died by any cause, no matter how long ago.

Founded in 2009 by Franciscan Friars in Boston, MA, the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents helps local dioceses, parishes, and parents offer One-Hour, One-Day, and Weekend spiritual retreats. Seeking peace and

comfort in the teachings of the Catholic Church, parents come to these retreats for reassurance that life has changed, not ended; that their children are eternal beings; and that someday we will all have a glorious reunion and be together again in heaven.

On Saturday, March 9, 26 grieving parents and seven retreat team members gathered at St. James Cathedral for the first-ever Emmaus Ministry One-Day Retreat in Florida.



We welcomed 13 mothers and 13 fathers, the first time in the history of the ministry that the group was evenly divided between mothers and fathers. In addition to Orlando, parents came from Maitland, Winter Garden, St. Cloud, Windermere, and St. Augustine.

We honored 16 children whose ages at the time of death ranged from two years to 59 years old. Time since the death ranged from six weeks ago to 46 years ago. Cause of death included illness (5), accident (4), suicide (4), overdose (2), and drowning (1).

Members of the retreat team included Fr. Miguel Gonzalez, Rector of St. James Cathedral, Justin Reyes, Director of Pastoral Ministry at St. James Cathedral, as well as Jim Cushing, Susann Engel, Sue Judd, Dorothy Reisch, Sherry Krawczyk, Barbara Murray, Karen Kornegay, and Diane and Charley Monaghan.

Fr. Miguel Gonzalez welcomed us saying that this retreat would launch the ministry in Orlando and was the first of others to come in the years ahead. *“We hope to discover the Lord among us,”* he said before beginning the day in prayer.

During a very moving Opening Prayer Service, we lit Memorial Candles for our children symbolizing Christ as the Light of the World and our children as the light of our lives. We were reminded that our children live on in the Light; they are eternal beings who will never die. In song, we asked Jesus to *“Open the Eyes of My Heart, Lord”* and to journey with us in our Emmaus walk.

Fr. Miguel gave an inspiring reflection offering pathways to peace, comfort, and hope for grieving parents. He talked about being a priest for 21 years and how difficult it was to minister to grieving parents because their grief was so deep. As a priest, he learned early on that love, support, and presence was what was needed most.

As one of the first responders to the tragedy at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando in 2016, Fr. Miguel said he ministered to many parents with the same questions... *Why did this happen to my child? Where is my child now? How could God do this to me? Where can I find hope and peace?* These are the questions of all grieving parents, said Fr. Miguel.

Then Fr. Miguel told us of something that happened when he was 11 years old that changed his life. He was living in Miami, but also had family in Puerto Rico, where he was born. One of his favorite uncles, who owned a jewelry store, was stabbed to death in a robbery. The murder, and seeing the horrific image of his slain uncle on the front page of the local newspaper seriously traumatized the family, including both the 11-year-old Fr. Miguel and his grandmother, the grief-stricken mother of his uncle. His grandmother never recovered, said Fr. Miguel.



Fr. Miguel asked us to remember the words of Wisdom 3:1-3...

The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment shall touch them. They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead; and their passing away was thought an affliction and their going forth from us, utter destruction. But they are in peace.

Jesus Christ is in solidarity with us, said Fr. Miguel. He understands human suffering because he experienced it. And he experienced the death of his best friend, Lazarus.

Recently Fr. Miguel had a dear friend call him to tell him of the death of her eldest daughter who died delivering a beautiful baby girl. He could not presume to offer her any words of wisdom...just the reminder that Mary, our mother, knows and understands her pain. Mary stood at the bottom of the cross, not knowing “why,” yet remained steadfast in her love of Jesus, her son.

Death is not the end of our story, said Fr. Miguel. Christ rescues us. One day we will all be reunited and there is a great sense of peace in knowing and embracing this fact. In John 14:1-7 we hear...

In my Father's house there are many places to live... I am going now to prepare a place for you, and after I have gone and prepared you a place, I shall return to take you to myself, so that you may be with me where I am.

You know the way to the place where I am going. Thomas said, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' Jesus said: I am the Way; I am Truth and Life. No one can come to the Father except through me.

The Lord didn't take your child, said Fr. Miguel. Death took your child. The Lord took your child from death and he leads you and your child back to the kingdom of heaven.

Because Christ has conquered death, we will all experience eternal life, said Fr. Miguel. We can discover that,



even after death, our relationship with our deceased loved ones continues to strengthen, grow, and be nurtured. We can see the light of victory. We can all be together again.

The best way to join in this relationship with your children, said Fr. Miguel, is to be embraced by the Eucharist, the very real presence of Jesus Christ and the Communion of Saints, including your children. The Eucharist at Mass is a foretaste of the glorious banquet to come in heaven, he said.

Fr. Miguel then told us about the time when he was a young priest called to the hospital to minister to a young couple preparing for a very high-risk birth of twin boys after their first pregnancy. By the time he arrived at the hospital, the boys, named Robert and Joseph, had died. The parents were devastated. Fr. Miguel had no words. All he had to offer was his presence.

Even though it was a few towns away, the couple asked Fr. Miguel to celebrate the funeral Mass. Again, he had no words for the homily. Instead, he knelt before the broken parents and gave them two roses. One for Robert and one for Joseph. Roses don't last long, said Fr. Miguel, but the absolute beauty of their message of love and hope lives on and on, as do Robert and Joseph. Two years later, Fr. Miguel baptized the couple's newborn son, Robert Joseph and eventually their beautiful daughter, Emily Rose.

Hope is alive, said Fr. Miguel. Hope helps us deal with pain and assures us of the promise of eternal life. Darkness disappears forever. If we allow the Lord to shed his light on us, the fear and sadness of grief will be no more.

After Fr. Miguel's poignant reflection, parents moved through the day experiencing various ways to focus on their spiritual journeys after the death of their precious children. They gathered in a large group, small groups of mothers and fathers, one-on-one walks with other parents, and in private time for reflection in the chapel or walking the grounds.



It was interesting to hear different parents' perspectives. For example, one father said that he took comfort in a statement by a family member that the hole in his heart from the death of his son will heal, but there will always be scar tissue.

In a different session, a mother said that the hole in her heart will never heal until the day that she and her young daughter will be reunited again.

One mother told the heartbreaking story of her beautiful two-year-old daughter born many years ago in the early seventies. Soon after her daughter was born, she became pregnant with her son. She planned on having both of her children baptized on the same day. However, her daughter's godmother insisted that she not wait. Soon after, the beautiful little girl in her white dress was baptized and everyone went home to celebrate. However, sometime during the celebration, the little girl found her way into a small fountain nearby and drowned. She was still wearing her baptismal gown.

Many years of pain and sorrow ensued, with very little peace or comfort. Eventually the family moved to Florida where the mother recently experienced the death of the little girl's father after more than 40 years of marriage.



Parents coming to an Emmaus Ministry retreat are asked to provide a photo of their child. This was particularly agonizing for this mother whose child had died on her baptism day. It pained her tremendously to search for a photo after all of these years... so much so that she almost didn't do it.

Finally, she did eventually find found a photo of her precious daughter. To fit onto the Memorial Candle, the photo had to be cropped to show the face of her child only. When she saw the photo on her candle during the Opening Prayer Service, she was stunned. "Seeing that photo on that candle was transformational for me," she said. "It gives me so much peace and comfort. And... I never realized how much my granddaughter looks exactly like my daughter. What a gift for me.

This is the first day of my healing process," she said.

Throughout the day at various sessions, parents shared insights, including "*Our children were never ours to begin with; they were gifts from heaven*" and "*It wasn't God's will that my child died; evil intervened.*" We had an interesting discussion of the "permissive vs perfect" will of God, while grappling with the question... "*How could a loving God let this happen?*"

Parents joined parishioners at the Cathedral's Saturday Vigil Mass, celebrated by Fr. Miguel. During the retreat parents wrote letters to their children, which were burned. During the Mass, ashes from the letters were mixed with incense and Fr. Miguel incensed the altar, the Memorial Candles, and the worshippers. It was beautiful knowing that our letters were now prayers rising with the incense to heaven.

During his homily Fr. Miguel told us that we probably often feel like Jesus in the desert... lonely, afraid, weak, discouraged, and tempted to give up. In these moments we can gather strength from our faith, said Fr. Miguel. A day in the dessert does not have to be barren, he said.



In addressing parents on the retreat, who were sitting together in the front pews, Fr. Miguel said, *“You have been an inspiration to me today. Your courage, inner strength, and willingness to share has edified my own faith. It gives comfort, consolation, and strength. Your sons and daughters have encountered Jesus Christ. Because of this, you can be filled with joy in the midst of your tears. Death does not have the last word. Good Friday ends with Easter Sunday,”* he said.

Parents enjoyed a delicious dinner together and ended the retreat with a moving Closing Prayer service that ended with the beautiful song, “Go in Peace.”

After the retreat, Justin Reyes said, *“I prepared myself for a difficult day. I thought it would be very sad and heavy. But it wasn’t. After hearing all of the parents and their thoughts on faith, I found it very uplifting.”*

Parents had these comments...

- *“It helped me find peace with the death of my son.”*
- *“The retreat was a warm place for sharing with others.”*
- *“I look forward to another retreat.”*
- *“I would like to have it in Spanish.”*
- *“This retreat was very spiritual and beneficial.”*

St. James Cathedral and the Diocese of Orlando are developing plans to offer additional Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents retreats in the future. For more information, see www.emfgp.org or call Justin Reyes at 407-422-2005, Ext 101.

