



## ***“God Didn’t Take Your Child!”*** **Emmaus Ministry Retreat Highlights**

Sarah was only 8 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?

Currently, nine archdioceses, dioceses and parishes in CT, RI, and AZ, in collaboration with 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, 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.*

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 includes abortions, 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 collaboratives 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.

Always a highlight of the retreat is the Spiritual Leader's reflection on the grief of a parent. Comments from past Spiritual Leaders that have been particularly comforting to parents include...

#### **Fr. John Vigilanti**

“The hardest thing a priest has to do,” said Fr. John Vigilanti of the Church of the Magdalene in Tarrytown, NY, “is minister to grieving parents. On the day of the child's funeral, no matter how old the child, all words fail. No matter how brilliant you are, how renowned a homilist you are, how much you care... there are no words for a grieving parent whose precious child has died. You have to be there for them. All you can say is, ‘I'm sorry.’ No other words make sense.”

“What good has come from the death of your child?” asked Fr. John. “Our first reaction is Nothing! We want our children back and there is nothing good about his/her death.” The discussion that ensued after these comments revealed that much good has indeed happened. Parents told of beautiful tributes they and others have experienced in loving memory of their children...benches in woods and on mountains...scholarships for kids in need... help for college students in danger of suicide or overdoses... inspiration to return to Church... the Emmaus Ministry... and many others.

#### **Fr. Dennis Schuelkens**

“The loss of a child is the greatest loss anyone can experience,” said Fr. Dennis Schuelkens of Sacred Heart of Mary-St. Joseph the Worker parishes in Weirton, WV. “We can be tempted to shake our fists and blame God. But, why were we all created? To get to heaven... to go home...to be in love... to look at love and see it look back at us... to gaze into the eyes of Love itself. That is heaven,” he said.

“When you get to heaven,” said Fr. Dennis, “your child will seek you out. He/she will call out to you... ‘Mom! Dad! I’m here! I’ve been here all the time!’ And you will run to each other, hug each other and talk and laugh and feel joy once again and for all eternity. There is more to this life than this world. We are a resurrected people,” he said.

### **Fr. Jim Laughlin**

“The mystery of innocent human suffering is one of our biggest challenges,” said Fr. Jim Laughlin of St. John-St. Paul Collaborative in Wellesley, MA, “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 child; a prediction of swords piercing Mary’s heart, and a harrowing flight to Egypt—all within months of his birth! Eventually, like many of us, Mary had to deal with the death of both her spouse 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. You will definitely see your children again. Your children, right now, live in the light of Christ. How beautiful it must be for them! They are actually there! And only a very thin veil separates you,” said Fr. Jim. “One day you will be reunited.”

### **Deacon Francis Roettinger**

“We Catholics don’t ‘clean up’ the crucifix,” said Deacon Francis Roettinger of St. Bede Parish in Williamsburg, VA. We include the corpus on the cross to remind us of the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ and God the Father. Our entire religion is based on the death of a child. Jesus is the Son of God and the son of Mary. Both God the Father and Mary, our mother, know our pain and grieve with us. While we must go through the crucifixion, the result will be resurrection. Resurrection guarantees that our children are alive and well and one day we will all experience the ultimate joy.”



### **Fr. Bob Longobucco**

“Jesus Christ hated death,” said Fr. Bob Longobucco of St. Kateri Parish in Albany, NY. In dying a humiliating and harrowing death himself, he destroyed it for us forever. Death still has its power, but not the final word. Resurrection has 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.”

### **Fr. Jurgen Liias**

“I believe that nothing in this world is more expressive of the mystery of evil than the death of a child,” said Fr. Jurgen Liias of St. Patrick Parish in Stoneham, MA. It is the ultimate manifestation of evil and disorder in the universe. But the love of God is bigger than the evil of this world,” he said. “According to a mystic, the mystery of iniquity is one inch shorter than the mystery of the love of God. God didn’t take your child. Death took your child. But Christ has taken your child away from death. That is what we believe as Catholics.”

“All of our relationships are like a dance. Death doesn’t end that dance. Through the Communion of Saints, the dance continues. Although we have to learn how to dance without the earthly presence of our children, it is through the grace of our Catholic faith that we have the gift of the Communion of Saints. We can continue to have a relationship with our children, a relationship that will eventually lead to a new heaven and a new earth, a place where there will be no more crying, no more sighing, and no more dying.”

Throughout the day, parents have the opportunity to share with others what they are feeling and where they are in their spiritual journeys. At each retreat, Parent Witnesses (parents who have been to previous Emmaus retreats) offer insights into their spiritual lives after the death of their children.

In individual, one-on-one, and small and large group gatherings, parents focus on their own spiritual journeys and reconnecting with God and their children. Particularly moving is the time parents spend in writing letters to their children or to God.

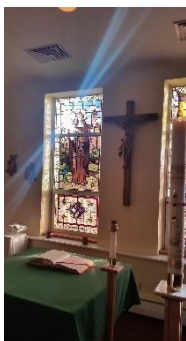




Later these letters are burned. The ash, with incense, is offered to God in prayer during Mass or the Closing Prayer Service.

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

- *“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, my child! You have work to do!’”*
- *“If we are angry with God and walk away from him, we are really saying that we are God and we know best. We are saying that we know better than God.”*
- *“Sometimes our faith is only a tiny pinprick of light, but it is there. We need to nourish it and cultivate it for it to grow. It will not grow on its own. It asks for, and requires, participation from us.”*
- *“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.”*
- *“Tears are prayers. It is not only ok to cry, but necessary. Tears of grief contain toxins that need to come out of your body. Tears are a release. No one has ever died from crying. After a time, you will definitely stop crying; you will feel a release; and you will feel better.”*
- *“My favorite quote is from Teilhard deChardin: ‘We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings have a human experience.’”*



At Emmaus Ministry retreats, many parents eagerly share signs from their children. Everything from pennies from heaven, cardinals, dragon flies, dimes, vibrant dreams, and very strange “coincidences.” All examples of our children reaching out to us through the thinnest of veils, we believe. After hearing parents talk about the very real presence of signs from their children, Fr. Jim Laughlin said, “Your mysticism has buoyed my faith!”

Parents often like to share with other grieving parents books, reflection, poems, and articles that they have found particularly comforting. At one of our recent retreats, a father shared this beautiful poem, which was very meaningful, particularly to those of us who are racked with guilt:

## 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

What reactions from others do grieving parents want? It is hard to tell because “complicated grief” can be very hard to understand and to others seems irrational at times. During a recent retreat, for example, one grieving parent expressed her severe disappointment in lack of support from her family. Why were they not calling her and supporting her in her grief? Another parent responded that calls from her family made her grief even more difficult because she felt that she had to console them when they were presumably consoling her.



At another retreat, several mothers agreed that the simple question, “How are you?” can be very painful. How could anyone ask me this question, one mother said. How could they not know how I am? 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.

After small and large group sharing, letter writing—and an Emmaus Walk where parents are paired with each by the Holy Spirit, the retreat reaches its high point with a Mass. It can be a private Mass, but usually it is a Saturday Vigil Mass where parents join parishioners.

After a dinner that is particularly comforting because parents can talk about their deceased children without appearing to “dwell on it” or being afraid to cry, Emmaus Ministry retreats close with a moving prayer service during which parents are reminded that the light of Christ and that of their precious children will shine forever. “When your children were co-created,” said Fr. Jurgen, “they were created not just as a human being, but as an eternal being that will live forever.”

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

- *“It was just what I needed to get me back on track with my faith and return to Mass regularly.”*
- *“Today helped me to see that the death of my child is not God’s doing, and there are others traveling this same journey”*
- *“The Holy Spirit was here!”*
- *“How awesome to merge my grief journey with my faith!”*
- *“I had my trepidations before the retreat, but my feelings changed the minute I arrived in the warm and welcoming environment. Sharing this spiritual journey with other parents who have traveled the same road was supportive and comforting.”*
- *“This day has given me peace.”*
- *“I was beside myself and didn’t know where to turn. Now I feel that I have some direction.”*
- *“Sharing with others help me to see and to seek.”*
- *“It sounded like a very long day and I planned on leaving early. When it ended, however, I was surprised at how fast the day went. I didn’t want to leave!”*

On a very strong note of peace, comfort and hope, Emmaus Ministry Retreats end. Parents who came as strangers often leave as friends. Faith that began in the morning as that tiny pinprick of light can slowly begin to grow and to expand in hope. Faith that began strong can often become even stronger. Children thought to be lost forever make their presence known.



With the help of God, our faith, and each other, there is the belief that we *will* get through this and someday we will all be together again for a glorious reunion. Parents almost always feel thankful for the opportunity to participate in a faith-based retreat. As one mother prayed, “Thank you, Lord, for weaving your grace through the fabric of this day.”

Emmaus Ministry One-Hour, One-Day, and Weekend Spiritual Retreats are held in many dioceses and parishes throughout the year. See [www.emfgp.org](http://www.emfgp.org) for more information.