

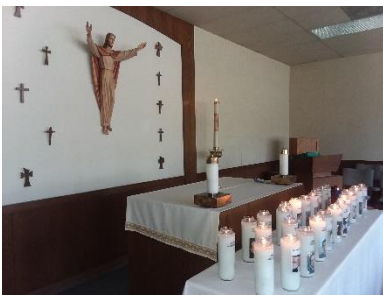


**One-Day Spiritual Retreat  
Notre Dame Church  
Saturday, June 8, 2019**

***When Your Child Was Born, the World Changed Forever***

What do you say to a mother whose precious little boy, with the brightest brown eyes and most infectious smile, dies unexpectedly in a tragic accident at a family member's home? What peace can you possibly offer a father whose beautiful, seemingly healthy daughter dies from a disease that was diagnosed less than a year ago? How do you comfort a grieving mother who has lost not one, not two, but three of her adult sons to illness and accident?

Ministering to grieving parents is a daunting task. For most, it is too challenging to even attempt. Recently, however, the Archdiocese of Newark adopted the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents to do just that.



The Emmaus Ministry serves the *spiritual* needs of grieving parents whose children of any age (from conception to old age) have died by any cause, no matter how long ago. Founded on the rich teachings of the Catholic Church on life after death, it offers One-Hour, One-Day, and Weekend Spiritual Retreats. Parents focus on where God is in their lives after the death of their children—and where their children are right now.

On June 8, 2019, a beautiful and sunny day, 25 parents gathered at Notre Dame Church in Caldwell, NJ for the Archdiocese's first One-Day Emmaus Ministry Retreat for Grieving Parents. There were six couples, 13 individual mothers, and 1 individual father. They came from West Orange, Hackensack, Brick, Toms River, Fairfield, Teaneck, Saddlebrook, Garfield, Newark, Livingston, Clifton, Berkeley Heights, Belleville, New Providence Caldwell, Ho-Ho-Kus, and Kearny.

Parents and members of the retreat team honored 23 children: 19 sons and 4 daughters. Ages of the children at the time of death ranged from in utero to 68 years old (a child is a child,

no matter how old). Six of the children honored were 10 years old or younger. Time since the death ranged from 4 months ago to 21 years ago. Cause of death included drowning, prenatal death, addiction/overdose, suicide, accident, and illness.



Members of the retreat team included Fr. Joe Kwiatkowski, Pastor of St. Rose of Lima Parish, who served as Spiritual Leader, Celebrant, and Confessor; Lauren Egan, Archdiocese of Newark, Retreat Coordination; Jack & Ann Muller, Retreat Coordination and Parent Witnessing; Maureen Menakis, Retreat Coordination and Parent Witnessing; Linda Guziejewski, Retreat Team; Kit Miller, Memorial Candles; Arthur and Renee Hill, Comfort Crosses; Charley and Diane Monaghan, Retreat Coordination; Ingrid Alfred, Hospitality Coordinator; Naomi Ferreira, Linda Chiappetta, and Deacon Andy Golden, Hospitality Team; and, Inserra Supermarkets, donation of all food and drink.

After a moving Opening Prayer Service during which parents focused on the meaning and ritual of “light,” Fr. Joe gave a beautiful reflection on the spirituality of grief. Before beginning he invoked the “Spirit of Consolation and Peace.”

When your child was born, said Fr. Joe, the world changed forever. It changed for the better. At Baptism you acknowledged that your child belonged not only to you, but also to God. As we see in Genesis, the imprint of Divinity is on all of us.

Adam and Eve were grieving parents after the loss of their son, Abel. We don’t know for sure, but some accounts say Adam lived for 900 years before he died—a long time for a grieving parent.

Fr. Joe shared that, as a young man, after caring for his dear mother who had Alzheimer’s disease, he actually hated God for what was happening in his life. It took him many years, he said, to realize that he was making the wrong person take the fall for his problems. It wasn’t God, he realized. Bad things are not from God. They are from the Evil One.

The death of your child is not from God, said Fr. Joe. It is not from your lack of parenting; it is not from anything you did; and it is definitely not from any disfavor with God. God is crying with you right now, he said. Death was never part of his plan.



How well does God know your child? asked Fr. Joe. According to Jeremiah (1-5) ... *Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born, I dedicated you.*

When Jesus raised two children from the dead in the New Testament, he did so tenderly. He told their parents that they were not dead, but asleep.



When Jesus died on the cross, said Fr. Joe, he took all of our pain and suffering with him. He took the pain of all deaths, especially the deaths of children. Death no longer has power because we will rise again. It has been defeated by love. Some day we will all be together again. Our destiny is the resurrection. You will hug and kiss your child again, said Fr. Joe. Nothing will ever separate you again. Very comforting words for grieving parents.

After Fr. Joe's reflection, parents had the opportunity to hear from each other in large group settings, in smaller groups of mothers and fathers, one-on-one in Emmaus Walks, and together while sharing meals.

In one session that is always very moving, two parents serving as "parent witnesses," shared where they are in their spiritual journeys after the death of their children.

Jack M talked about his answer to the question, "*Do you believe in heaven?*" He told us the true story of his father who was in hospice and very near death many years ago. It was the day, Jack said, that everyone decided he would go to the hospital and take his father off of life support. When he walked into the room, his father opened his eyes and asked what he was doing there. Jack replied that his father knew what this day was all about. "No," said his father, "Not today. I had a dream last night. I was going through a tunnel towards the light and I heard someone call out, 'Grandpa!' It was Jonathan (Jack's deceased son). He told me, 'Not yet, Grandpa.' It wasn't my time. So today is not the day, Jack." Instead of dying that day, Jack's father resumed chemotherapy and lived for another six years! "Do I believe in heaven?" said Jack, "Definitely!"



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Maureen M shared her spiritual struggle after the death of her precious son, Michael. She didn't believe that her son's death happened for some higher purpose or to make her a better person or to punish her for some reason.

She found much comfort in Fr. Ronald Rolheiser's book, *The Passion and the Cross* in which he writes, "*...when we are so paralyzed by fear and overcome by darkness that we can no longer help ourselves, when we have reached the stage where we can no longer open the door to let in light and life, God can still come through our locked doors, stand inside our fear and paralysis, and breathe out peace.*"

Her spiritual journey led her to unlock the door. What I have found, she said, is that death does not end my relationship with my son. He is with me in a different way. As I have a

continued relationship with Jesus, I have a continued relationship with Michael. I miss my son terribly and faith doesn't not take my grief away. But I also have hope. In searching for Michael, I have found God and that is my hope.

I have learned, she said, that "grief never ends... but it changes. It's a passage, not a place to stay. Grief is not a sign of weakness, nor a lack of faith... it is the price of love. The hope we have as Christians slowly heals us."



Throughout the day parents shared some of their meaningful insights. One mother said that if God had told her on the day her son was born that she would only have 42 years with him, and if he asked if she still wanted to mother him, she would have definitely said yes, as would all of the rest of us.

A mother who lost both of her children said that Mother's Day is particularly hard, but she celebrates it every year, because she is still a mother, no matter what.

Another parent observed that if we had died before our children, would we have wanted them to spend the rest of their lives incapacitated and mourning us? What would we want them to do?

I will never ever let my son go, said a mother. He is alive every day in my memories.



Several parents expressed dismay that the Evil One seems to be winning in our world today, while others pointed out the good that surrounds us everywhere. One father said that we can fold up our tents and never come out or we can have hope. This father finds hope in keeping his son's legacy alive by spreading positive energy through helping others.

The pinnacle of every retreat is the Mass. Fr. Joe celebrated the Mass during which he said Jesus is *re-presenting* his sacrifice to God. Bring all of your sacrifices to the altar as well, exhorted Fr. Joe.

After the Consecration, Fr. Joe invited us to join him, so we gathered around the altar. Jesus does not come to the Mass alone, he said. He brings the Communion of Saints and your children with him every time. They are here right now, he said. They are here at every Mass. Talk to them! And so, we did.

During his homily, Fr. Joe said that throughout the day he was amazed by the way, despite our heavy pain, we were able to reach out and minister to each other, to bring Jesus to each other. On this feast of the Pentecost, if that isn't the Holy Spirit in action, said Fr. Joe, I don't know what is.

After enjoying a wonderful meal together, we gathered in the chapel for the Closing Prayer Service. It was difficult to extinguish the wicks of the candles and say goodbye to each other. But we did so a little lighter in our pain, feeling much closer to our children and to God.

After the retreat, parents had this to say...

- The day... was like a healing balm for me.....How much more I'm aware of the Spirit working in all of our lives.
- I'm taking away a positive energy source and will connect with other retreat members.
- Just knowing you are out there and ready to help is a great solace.
- I felt the presence of my son.
- (There was) a lot of love between these walls.

The Archdiocese of Newark plans to assess interest from parishes in adopting the ministry on an ongoing basis. If your parish would like to explore this opportunity, please call Lauren Egan at 973-497-4327 or email her at [Lauren.Egan@rcan.org](mailto:Lauren.Egan@rcan.org).

For more information on the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents, see [www.emfgp.org](http://www.emfgp.org) or call Diane Monaghan at 617-542-8057.

