



ONE-DAY RETREAT SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2020

“Like a Visit with My Deceased Daughter!”

As you are driving to this church on a very cold, but sunny day in February, you feel agitated and you question yourself, *“Why am I putting myself through this? What am I getting myself into? Do I really need to do this?”* Then you force yourself to walk into a room seeing 20 other people you never met, and you try to fight the urge to turn around and walk out. You console yourself with the thought that you can—and you will—leave for home whenever you want.

But then someone says something nice to you. You sit down and have a cup of coffee and start talking to a woman at the same table. Surprisingly, you feel an instant connection. Before you know it, the day begins. You gather together as a group and you begin to feel more comfortable. Maybe it’ll be ok after all.



And so began an Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents One-Day Retreat on February 8, 2020 at St John-St. Paul’s Collaborative in Wellesley, MA. Eighteen grieving parents gathered together to focus on the spirituality of the grieving process after the death of a child.

The Emmaus Ministry serves the spiritual needs of grieving parents whose children of any age have died by any cause, no matter how long ago. It is a Catholic ministry that welcomes all parents of any religion.

Parents in Wellesley that day honored 18 children, 10 sons and eight daughters. Ages at the time of death ranged from prenatal to 56 years old. Time since the death ranged from six weeks ago to 39 years ago. Cause of death included illness (7), overdose (6), suicide (2), accident (1), miscarriage (1), and unknown (1).

Members of the retreat team included Fr. Jim Laughlin, Fr. Robert Blaney, Kelly Meraw, Ann Mears, Laurie Jaco, and Diane and Charley Monaghan. Fred and Carole Zupicich donated the Memorial Candles in loving memory of their daughter, Jennifer; Linda and Tom Harkness

donated the Comfort Crosses in loving memory of their daughter, Kristin; and Laurie and Neal Jacob donated Retreat Support in loving memory of their daughter, Daryth.

Fr. Jim offered a beautiful and very comforting reflection during which he stated emphatically, “Your child is always your child, no matter what. You share a unique, unbreakable bond that can never be broken,” he said. “The death of a child is so wrong and we all wonder, “Where is God in all of this?””

In ministering to parents in this horrific situation, Fr. Jim said that he has found that there are no words of comfort. What parents really need, he said, is sacred silence acknowledging their grief. “When I learned of the tragic suicide of a young man whom I considered a friend, for example,” he said, “I forced myself to go to his mother, not having any idea of what I could possibly say to comfort her. I didn’t need to worry,” he said, “What she needed most from me was a long hug and sacred silence.”

In reality, the Holy Family was not the serene, contented perfect union they are usually depicted to be, said Fr. Jim. Mary and Joseph had to deal with an unplanned pregnancy, birthing their child in a filthy stable full of animals, and fleeing in fear for their lives—all within a few weeks of the birth.



“Then, Mary had to actually watch her son being murdered,” said Fr. Jim. “As she did so, she had to be wondering how this could possibly be the will of God. But the crucifixion led to the resurrection and death is not final. You will see your children again,” said Fr. Jim. “If only we could see what they see,” said Fr. Jim. “They are seeing God face to face. They have no more questions, no more hurt, no more pain. The veil between us and them is so very thin.”

“Your child is so close,” said Fr. Jim. “During the Mass when we sing ‘Holy, Holy, Holy,’ your child is very much here with you. They are in the fullness of joy. The reality of the resurrection is very clear.”

“Maybe you don’t feel it,” said Fr. Jim. “No one can tell you how to feel. If you take comfort in your faith, that is a blessing. If you are angry with God, let your feelings flow. He can take it. No matter what, God’s unfathomable love is impossible to understand, but it is always and forever there,” said Fr. Jim.

Throughout the day parents had the opportunity to share thoughts, feelings, and insights—if they wished; nothing was required or expected.



One mother described a new statue of Mary at St. Bonaventure’s Parish in Plymouth, MA in which she is pictured as an older woman extending a candle, the light of the world, to all of us. Did Mary know

that her baby boy would one day save the world? What was she thinking at the foot of the cross?

When one mother seemed to feel overwhelmed by the sadness of her son's situation near the end of his life and the circumstances of his passing, another mother asked her to tell us about the joys that her son brought into her life and the lives of others. As she talked about the happy times and the beauty of his giving life to many other families through organ donation, everything changed.

When another mother expressed deep concern over where her son's soul is right now because he lived a wild life and was not religious at all, a parent talked about the gospel of the Prodigal Son in which the father, even though humiliated and rejected by the son in all ways he held sacred, continued to stand at the window day after day, waiting for his son to come home. When the son eventually did return home, the father was overjoyed and ordered a huge party to celebrate the son's return. So, too, did the Father welcome your son home, said this parent.

Parents talked about the huge toll that the death of a child takes on marriages, mainly because mothers and fathers grieve so differently—and the fact that it so hard to recognize and accept that fact. Parents who have lost children are eight times more likely to divorce, said one father. A wife, sitting next to her husband, said “We are not going to let that happen.” Fr. Jim said, “Stating that fact out loud is a testament to your faith in your marriage. It won't happen.”

Parents talked about seeing and feeling signs from their children... dimes, cardinals, and dreams. As we were talking, one mother said that she was struck by the banner on the wall behind where we were sitting. “Faith in Our Future,” it read. How fitting a message, she said. Every Sunday is like Easter, said Fr. Jim. Take these signs wherever and whenever you get them.

Kelly Meraw, a convert to Catholicism, gave an absolutely beautiful reflection on Gifts of our Catholic faith, the sacraments--and the tremendous comfort they offer to grieving parents. We live in a broken world, said Kelly. The loss of a child is horrific. Some of us cling to God; others feel hugely abandoned. This experience will push you to the edge of your faith life. The greatest struggle of all of us throughout this life, she said, is for peace. Read the complete version of [Kelly's very moving reflection](#) on these beautiful gifts of our Catholic faith.



All of the grieving parents were warmly welcomed at St. John's Vigil Mass. Fr. Jim incensed our beautiful candles and Kelly Meraw honored our children with a moving Litany of Saints invoking their names.

In his homily, Fr. Jim talked about how the presence of the Holy Spirit was palpable among the parents as they ministered to each other throughout the day. God is present in sacred silence, said Fr. Jim. Who in your life needs that love right now? Who can you be present to? How can you respond in love to those around you who need it most? There are those who may only be able to experience love today through you.

After Mass we broke bread and shared a delicious meal with each other, which was particularly comforting because grieving parents don't often have the chance to freely talk about their children with others who truly understand.



The Closing Prayer Service was particularly touching, led by Fr. Robert. It included the laying on of hands by Fr. Robert, meant to provide comfort and symbolizing the power of God entering a person through the meditation of the priest. We also received the Sacrament of Anointing, which offers courage, strength, and peace.

Fr. Robert surprised all of us when he left the altar and went to the piano and, together with Kelly, sang and played "The Cloud's Veil," which is a very poignant hymn that reminds us that "You are by my side."

When the retreat was over and parents slowly began to collect themselves and leave, it was amazing to see the difference from when they had first arrived in the morning. Gone was the fear and hesitation, replaced by joy and lots of hugs. "You can laugh with acquaintances," said Charley Monaghan, "but you can only cry comfortably with family and friends. Today, we have found new family and many new friends.

As opposed to being a very heavy day dealing with death and destruction, it was an extremely uplifting day. Parents left feeling peace, comfort, hope, and love... Their children are alive and well and at work in their lives every day!

After the retreat, parents said....

- *"This retreat was like a visit with my deceased daughter."*
- *"I found so much peace and comfort from this retreat."*
- *"A safe and supportive environment was exactly what I needed."*
- *"Hearing others' pain and stories of loss made me feel less alone."*
- *"It was an extraordinary day for me."*
- *"I would love to meet with these people from all walks of life again. I feel like they are family."*

And so another Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents retreat ended in Wellesley. The Archdiocese of Boston is committed to meeting the spiritual needs of grieving parents through this ministry in all regions. See www.emfp.org for other upcoming retreats. Currently, we are actively searching for other parishes in the Archdiocese interested in adopting the ministry on an ongoing basis (with lots of help from us). Please call Diane at 617-542-8042 for more information.

