

# Retreat Guide

## Unlike any other: The grief of a parent whose child has died is unlike any other

SPECIAL TO THE PILOT

Mary got to Starbucks early for coffee with her friend, Jill. As soon as Jill got there and sat down, she could tell that Mary was quite upset. “What’s the matter?” Jill asked. Mary replied, “On my way here, I saw Joan (a mutual friend). I couldn’t believe what she said to me.” “What did she say to upset you so much?” asked Jill. Mary replied, “She said, ‘How are you?’ How could she say that to me? How could she ask me how I am? How does she think I am after the death of my son last month? I can’t believe how insensitive people can be.” (true story).

Irrational? Yes. Unusual? No, not for a mother whose child has died. Simple, innocuous questions or innocent statements that had no meaning before the death of a child now can cause immense and searing pain. And the people making these statements have no idea.

Other examples include:

“How many children do you have?” (Innocent, yet hurtful, question for grieving parents who really don’t know how to answer.)

“He is in a better place.” (I don’t want him to be in a better place. I want him to be here with me.)

“Are you over it yet?” (I’ll never be over it.)

“At least you can have more children.” (What child could possibly substitute for the child I have lost?)

“At least you had her for xx years.” (What year would you choose for your child to die?)

The hardest . . . “I know what you are going through.” (Unless you are a fellow grieving parent, you do not know what I am going through.)

The grief of a parent is very different from any other type of grief. People who have lost spouses, parents, and siblings — without exception — say that the loss of a child is very different from any other type of grief. Why is this so?

The death of a child — no matter how old (from in-utero to middle-age, for a child is always a child and a parent is always a parent), or how they died (from illness, accident, abortion, or suicide) — is out of the natural order. In addition to their precious child, parents also lose all of their future hopes and dreams for that child. At the same time, they often also experience significant destabilization of their families and their marriages. Studies have shown that the death of a child is the most devastating and stressful of any life event.

After the death of a child, for a

time, many parents are so affected by their grief that they are unable to focus and concentrate as they did before the death. As one parent said, “After a year, I was able to read headlines.”

For many grieving parents, things that seemed so important before, now hold no meaning. A total reevaluation of life is not uncommon. Many, if they are able, quit their jobs to pursue something more meaningful. Some adopt causes to honor their children. Others continue to search for ways to make sense of what has happened, to no avail. At a minimum, most grieving parents have no patience for “chit chat” or inconsequential conversations or activities.

The death of a child very often reveals the truth about friendships. People you thought were your friends are definitely not there for you; suddenly, you have nothing in common. “After the death of a child,” one parent said, “you need to rewrite your address book.” That being said, it is not unusual for God to place new friends and new opportunities for growth in your life.

Most grieving parents are no longer afraid of death. Many feel a compelling need to go and find their children in the afterlife to be sure they are ok. Others want to die to join their children because they see no reason for living. These are the parents who need to be reminded that the death of a child does not mean that they are no longer parents. Even after death, we can still minister to our children by praying for them, by living a life they would be proud of, and by dedicating our lives for good, so that someday we can join them in heaven.

So, how does one minister to grieving parents? Listen. Listen. Encourage parents to talk about their children — a lot. Let them cry. And always refer to their children in the present tense (based on our



Photo courtesy/The Emmaus Ministry

belief of eternal life). One of the biggest fears of grieving parents is that their children may be forgotten or viewed as if they never existed.

Acknowledge that you have no idea of what these parents are feeling, but that you are willing to walk with them, no matter what. Remind them of our rich Catholic teachings: Life has changed, not ended. It is possible to have a relationship with your child now; you don’t have to wait until you die. Someday there will be a glorious reunion and you will all be together again. You will hug

and kiss your child again.

Helping grieving parents recognize and embrace the promise of eternal life is the focus and mission of the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents, offered in cooperation with the Archdiocese of Boston and 12 other dioceses nationwide. Parents find much comfort and hope in One-Hour, One-Day, and Weekend Spiritual Retreats, which are offered both in-person and virtually. For more information, see [www.emfgp.org](http://www.emfgp.org) or call Diane, Paul’s Mother, at 800-919-9332.

## Come Away and Rest Awhile... Virtually



HOLY FAMILY  
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*“The Holy Spirit was alive and well and working through your wonderful team on Saturday morning. Though different in form, our Zoom retreat was prayerful, inspiring and comforting.” - Bobbie K*

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