



## ***“Coming to This Retreat Today Was Not Your Idea, No Offense”***

by Diane Monaghan, Emmaus Ministry Parent Companion

What does a mother who lost a stillborn baby girl 30 years ago have in common with a father whose 42-year-old son died three months ago? Lots!

Grieving parents have a deep, almost instant, bond—no matter how old the children, how the child died, or how long ago the death occurred. They find that the only people who can truly understand their pain are other parents, who are also struggling with it.

*Why did this have to happen? Where is my child right now? Where is God in my pain? How can my Catholic faith possibly help me now?* These are some of the questions the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents helps parents address during their One-Hour, One-Day, and Weekend Spiritual Retreats.



These retreats have been offered throughout the Archdiocese of Boston since 2009. The Office of Family Life hosted its first One-Day Emmaus Ministry retreat on October 15, 2022 at the Pastoral Center in Braintree.

Parents who came to this retreat lost children as recently as 3 months ago to as long ago as 33 years. Age of children who passed ranged from 6 months to 53 years old (a parent is a parent, no matter how old the child). Cause of death included SIDS (1);

stillbirth (1); house fire (2); accident (2); overdose (4); suicide (5); illness (9); and unknown (1).

Members of the retreat team included Fr, Joe Raeke, Pastor of Our Lady, Queen of Martyrs in Plymouth and Carver; Fr. Michael Nolan, Pastor of St. Mary’s in Waltham; Liz Cotrupi, RCAB Director of Family Life & Ecclesial Movements; Emily Elliott, RCAB Family Life Consultant; and grieving parents: Kathy and Myles M; Robin L; Betty W; Mary N; and Charley and Diane M, in loving memory of their children.



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Ann Mears, Music Ministry, and Kelly Meraw, Pastoral Associate of St. John-St. Paul Collaborative in Wellesley planned and provided beautiful music at the prayer services and Mass. Kelly Meraw also gave a thought-provoking and interesting reflection on the Sacraments.

Prayer Shawl Ministries of Our Lady of Angels, St. Mary's, St. Helen's and St. Thecla's parishes prayerfully knitted prayer shawls, which the parents deeply appreciated.

Mother Olga and the Sisters of the Daughters of Mary of Nazareth in Quincy served as our prayer partners. Names of our parents and children were put into a vase on their altar, where they were prayed for throughout the day and will be perpetually. In addition, the 8am South Shore Virtual Rosary Prayer Group held our parents in prayer on Saturday morning.



The Diocese of Bridgeport, CT and Fairfield County Catholic Cemeteries donated holy water from Lourdes for peace and healing, courtesy of Dean Gestal and Carolyn Killion. Carolyn was a guest at this retreat in preparation for her diocese's first retreat in April 2023. She and her husband, Mark, also helped served on our much-needed cleanup crew!

The retreat began with a warm welcome from Liz Cotrupi and Emily Elliott. Charley Monaghan, our Parent Retreat Leader, reminded us that, in coming to this retreat, we are giving ourselves the gift of getting away from everyday life to focus on our spiritual journeys. Because this is not a seminar, workshop, or support group, we will not be going around the room to ask people to speak. Many people participate by listening. Nothing is required.

After a short break, we met in the Pastoral Center's beautiful chapel. Because this entire ministry is guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit, it was uniquely fitting to see that the beautiful tabernacle is in the shape of a dove.

During the poignant Opening Prayer Service, we focused on Christ as the light of the world and our children as the light of our lives. We lit memorial candles with photos of the children and sang "Go in Peace."

Afterwards, Fr. Joe gave a very moving reflection. "Working with the Emmaus Ministry is one of the most important things I do as a person and as a priest," he said, noting that he has been doing it for the past four years.

He talked about his mother's three miscarriages and how deeply they affected him as a young boy. "Your children will be the first to greet you in heaven," said Fr. Joe, "They will lead you to Jesus. Jesus is the Great Rescuer," he said. He brings all of us home. Our focus should be on his unconditional love for each of us and the fact that your child is very much alive.

"Coming to this retreat today, said Fr. Joe, "was not *your* idea, no offense. You are here because you were called here by the Holy Spirit and your child."

A vibrant discussion followed. Parents talked about being angry with God for what happened to their children and for not answering their prayers. This led to a discussion of prayer...what it is and what it is not. One parent cited Bishop Robert Barron's analogy of answered prayers to pointillism painting. If you are

very close to a Seurat painting, for example, all you see is a collection of dots. Once you step back and see the whole picture, you see that it is really depicting a picnic scene.

Another parent said many people see God as a vending machine. All you have to do is put in your prayers and he gives you what you want.

“God feels your pain,” said Fr. Joe. This is not the way he wants it to be for you. Things do not always work out because we have free will. Charley paraphrased Francis McNutt saying, “God did not take your child. Death took your child. With the conquering of death and the promise of eternal life, God gives you your child back. Someday you will be together again.”

A mother shared that since her son died, she has learned how to focus on what is really important in life. She is not afraid of anything anymore, not even death. She has found peace.



Another parent shared that she has found peace by giving all her burdens over to God, permitting him to work with and through her.

Many of us agreed that finding peace and purpose in our lives—and finding a mission after the death of our children—is one of our greatest challenges. “Your children want you to find your way to peace.” said Fr. Joe. An interesting discussion on heaven, hell, and purgatory followed.

After a delicious lunch, Fr. Joe had to leave because of a preplanned wedding, but we were joined by Fr. Michael who personally introduced himself to each of the parents there. Fr. Michael also offered to meet with anyone who wanted to talk or go to confession the entire rest of the day.

Then it was time for Parent Witnessing. This is when a parent who has participated in several past Emmaus Ministry retreats, reflects on his/ her spiritual journey after the death of their child.

Today’s Parent Witness talked about the searing pain and physical wrenching she experienced right in the weeks and months after her son died. But she also experienced the calming presence of the Holy Spirit. “For a long time after he passed, she said, “I was not a nice person. So, I prayed for grace. I prayed for what I needed, not what I wanted.”

After a short break, Charley led us in invoking the Holy Spirit as we drew names for small groups of mothers and fathers. One of the mother’s groups talked about how almost everyone in the group experienced the fact that God puts people in your life when and where you need them. And sometimes these people are not the ones you would expect.

Fathers commiserated on feeling powerless: powerless to protect their children from harm and powerless to “fix it” for their wives.

Parents were then invited to write letters—to God or to their children. They wrote about how they were feeling, things they wish they would have said, things they wish they had not said... No one on earth read these letters because later in the day they were burned. The ashes from the letter were mixed with incense during the Closing Prayer Service and parents could see their letters rising in prayer.

The Emmaus Walk is always a favorite part of these retreats. Once again invoking the Holy Spirit to pair people, parents walked (or sat) together one-on-one. It was a beautiful, sunny Indian summer day, so the chance to take a walk together appealed to many parents.

After the Emmaus Walk, parents had the opportunity to spend time in the chapel, go to Reconciliation or spiritual direction—or just have some free time.

Fr. Michael celebrated the Mass and Kelly and Ann provided the beautiful music. Kelly sang a poignant “Litany of the Children,” during which she sang the name of each of the children.

In his homily, Fr. Michael said that Jesus came to enter into death, to conquer it. He told parents to pray always so as not to lose heart.

Fr. Michael cited C.S. Lewis in his famous book, *Screwtape Letters*, which depicts Lucifer tutoring Wormwood, a neophyte devil. What you need to do, says Lucifer, is keep people out of the present. Have them always thinking about the past. Have them always worrying about the future. Keep them out of the present, so they cannot love.

One mysterious aspect of loving one who has passed, said Fr. Michael, is that it is possible to love someone even more now than when they were alive. He said he has experienced this himself.

Fr. Michael concluded by advising parents to have faith. “Out of faith will come hope,” he said. “And out of hope will come love.”



After Mass and a great meal, we had a very moving Closing Prayer Service during which we extinguished the wicks of the Memorial Candles. Charley reiterated that the light of Christ and the light of our children will burn brightly forever.

Although the retreat began almost nine hours earlier, many parents commented how quickly the day flew by. Here is what several of them had to say about it afterward:

*These retreats are so helpful. They offer comfort and peace and always exceed any expectations.*

*I found it spiritually enriching.*

*I was comforted and gained more faith.*

*It made me realize I am not alone in my grief. Jesus is with me.*

*This was a retreat worth experiencing again.*

*This was my third retreat. It has helped me beyond words.*

*Very helpful on so many levels.*

With that... another Emmaus Ministry Retreat ended. It was very special to be onsite at the Archdiocese of Boston in its Pastoral Center. We hope to come back soon. We also strongly encourage all RCAB parishes to consider bringing this powerful ministry to parents in your area. Our goal is to work with parents and parishes, who want to adopt this ministry, to eventually offer at least one retreat per year in each of the Archdiocese's regions.

Come, Holy Spirit!

For more information on...

- Adopting the Emmaus Ministry in your parish or area
- Overview of the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents
- Upcoming Emmaus Ministry Schedule (virtual and in-person Half-Hour, One-Hour, One-Day, and Weekend Retreats)
- Resources for Grieving Parents (video reflections from past retreats, words of comfort, annotated bibliography, help for prenatal and infant loss, news articles—and more)

See [www.emgp.org](http://www.emgp.org) or call Diane at 800-919-9332.

