

**DIOCESE OF ORANGE
EMMAUS MINISTRY FOR GRIEVING PARENTS
ONE-DAY RETREAT
SATURDAY, JANUARY 28, 2023
ST. ANNE PARISH, SEAL BEACH, CA
HIGHLIGHTS**

“Why did God take my child?”

A question many grieving parents agonize over every day

***“God didn’t take your child. Death took your child.
But Jesus Christ has taken your child away from death.”***

An answer from Fr. Al Baca quoting Francis MacNutt

On Saturday, January 28, 2023, the Diocese of Orange offered its first Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents One-Day Retreat at St. Anne Parish in Seal Beach, with Fr. Al Baca serving as Spiritual Leader.

Twenty-two parents from Laguna Niguel, Santa Ana, Garden Grove, Huntington Beach, La Mirada, Stanton, La Puente, North Tustin, Long Beach, Newport Beach, Downey, and Orange, in addition to Seal Beach, participated.



During the retreat, 23 children were honored. Their ages ranged from prenatal to 50 years old. Cause of death included illness (8); miscarriage (7); overdose (3); accident (2); suicide (2); and shot by police (1).

In addition to Fr. Al Baca, members of the retreat team included

- Vikki Lyons, Business Manager at St. Anne’s (Retreat Coordination)

- Mike S., Kaitlyn's Father (Parent Witness)
- Linda Ji, Nat and Tony's Mother, and Director of Family Life, Diocese of Orange (Retreat Coordination, Small Group Coordinator)
- Rebecca Freeman, Pastoral Care Ministry Coordinator, Diocese of Orange (Prayer Services, Hospitality Coordinator)
- Ismael Arbizo, Project Coordinator (Retreat Materials)
- Tiffany Do, Bernadette Tellez, Jennifer Dagarag, Cassandra Locano, Volunteers (Retreat Support)
- Deacon Roberto and Lourdes Hernandez, St. Boniface Catholic Church (Retreat Support, Guests)
- St. Irenaeus Parish Health Ministry (Rosaries)
- Finbar's Italian Kitchen (Dinner)
- Charley and Diane Monaghan, Paul's Parents (Retreat Coordination)
- Horace Tsu, Cathryn's Father (Memorial Candle and Comfort Cross Donation)
- Bishop Thanh Nguyen, Auxiliary Bishop, Diocese of Orange (Blessing of Memorial Candles and Comfort Crosses, Rosaries)



The retreat began with a beautiful Opening Prayer Service during which we prayed to be open to wherever the Holy Spirit is leading us through this retreat. We prayed:

**May I see what is important for me to remember,
What is important for me to hold to my heart,
And what I need to simply let go of in peace.**

We lit Memorial Candles in honor of our children, symbolizing how Christ is the light of the world and how our children are the light of our lives. The candles were lit all day in front of the Blessed Sacrament. Parents returned often throughout the day to spend time with them and with their God.

After the Opening Prayer Service, Fr. Al gave an insightful reflection. He talked about this retreat as offering a place of encounter with Jesus Christ. He said it is a myth to think that, after the death of a child, it is time to move on after the funeral. Grief returns



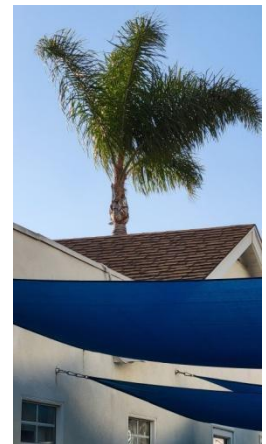
often, like an unexpected storm, said Fr. Al. It will return even if you are doing all of the right things.

Fr. Al talked about the piercing question that continues to plague many grieving parents: “*Why?*” Your children love you, said Fr. Al. They don’t want you to be in this pain. They want you to remember that they still love you. They want you to have peace because one day you will be together again. Talk to your children as if they were here, said Fr. Al. They are joyfully concerned with us here on earth. Christ doesn’t lie. Some day we will all be together forever in a place where there will be no more sadness.

The full answer to the question of *why*, said Fr. Al, is not available to us here. Some day we will know. If we can’t accept that in faith, we will constantly set ourselves up to relentlessly rip off the scab of healing over and over again.

Mother Mary brings us great comfort, said Fr. Al. She lost her only son to a terrible injustice. She knows how we feel—and shows us grace under pain.

In the Middle Ages, said Fr. Al, Mary was at times depicted as the “Swooning” or “Fainting” Mother who collapsed into the arms of John at the foot of the cross. So wrong was this image of Mary that the Pope at the time forbade its propagation. It is a fact, said the pope, that Mary **stood** at the foot of the cross and compassionately looked into the eyes of her son. She was not swooning. We know from the gospels that right before he died, Jesus looked down at her and entrusted her to John. Then he entrusted John (the church/us) to her. Talk to her, said Fr. Al. She will take you to her son.



Concluding his reflection, Fr. Al recommended that, for strength, we pray the “Surrender Novena.” Written by Don Dolindo Ruotolo, Padre Pio’s spiritual director, its mantra is “*O Jesus, I surrender myself to you. Take care of everything.*”

After a delicious lunch, we heard from Parent Witness Mike S., who lost his four-year-old daughter to cancer in 2000 and his wife to cancer in 2020. Mike described a long and circuitous spiritual journey that led him away from Catholicism towards all types of other world religions.

“However, they all brought me back to God,” said Mike. God alone is the reality. I was the prodigal son. At first, I was angry with God, but I came back to him and to my faith after I let the Holy Spirit enter my heart. Now I facilitate Catholic grief groups.

How do we honor our children? According to Mike, *have faith and believe.*

Typically, after our Parent Witness session, we have a short discussion and break. Other grieving parents at this retreat, however, really wanted to share their spiritual journeys, so we delayed our break and heard the moving stories of many parents.

Life is beautiful, no matter how hard it gets, said one parent. My 11-year-old daughter taught me that, even though she lived with unfathomable pain and discomfort at the end.

I know my son “has graduated” into heaven, said another parent, so how can I be sad?

When I had my miscarriages, said a thankful mother, there were no casseroles, sympathy cards, or messages of consolation. It is time for me to honor my babies here, at this time, at this retreat.

Often at Emmaus Ministry retreats discussions touch on whether or not we are receiving signs from our children. Many parents at this retreat said yes, we do receive signs. Others, however, said they don’t receive signs. The conclusion was that “*we get what we need, not what we want.*”



In response to one parent who said he constantly receives dimes as a sign from his daughter, another father said, “*Lisa, my child, if you’re listening, send me \$100 bills!!!*”

When they hear that these retreats last all day, many people think it must be a long day of crying and sadness. In fact, it is not. It is a day of joy and hope because we focus on the good news of eternal life and the certain hope that we will see our children again.

After these vibrant discussions, we separated into small groups of mothers and fathers, recognizing that men and women typically grieve very differently. Fathers, in particular, found it very comforting to learn that others in the group shared their unique difficulties in navigating life after the death of a child.

Next we invoked the Holy Spirit to pair parents for our Emmaus Walk, a special time for parents to interact one-on-one, should they choose to do so. (All Emmaus Ministry Retreat sessions are optional. Parents share as much or as little as they like. Many parents participate by listening only.)



Parents then had free time to talk with each other, go to Reconciliation, spend time in the church for reflection, or simply walk to the beach.

The pinnacle of every retreat is the Mass, which we attended with parishioners of St. Anne Parish. After a hearty dinner and more fellowship, we had our Closing Prayer Service.

The Closing Prayer Service was particularly poignant because Fr. Al gave us the Sacrament of Anointing, meant to convey strength in the face of adversity. As he invited parents to come to receive the sacrament, he invited each of us to let the oil of the Holy Spirit *seep* into our bodies and our lives. It was a reminder for all of us to let all of the blessings of the day *seep* into our souls.

And so...

Another Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents One-Day Spiritual Retreat ended. Parents who arrived with much trepidation in the morning left not only with many new best friends and lots of hugs, but also Hope. Thank you, Holy Spirit!

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

- *"This retreat greatly helped me in my healing process. It surpassed my expectations."*
- *"(This was an) amazing program that should be offered often. Comforting and reassuring."*
- *"Keep doing what you are doing. Many broken hearts need your help."*

- *“I found it very comforting being with other parents that have experienced the ultimate loss: the loss of a child.”*
- *“It was beautiful, meaningful and brought much comfort. I do hope that (the Diocese of Orange) is able to keep this moving forward here in Southern California.”*

Our hope and prayer is that the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents continues indefinitely in the Diocese of Orange. Several parents expressed the desire to ensure this happens. Because of this interest and the fact that there was a waiting list of parents who were unable to get into this retreat, we hope that plans for the next Diocese of Orange retreat, and a date, will be announced soon. Keep checking www.emfgp.org for our latest list of all upcoming retreats.

