

Life Has *Changed*, Not Ended

--from the Mass of Christian Burial

Part of the Mass of Christian Burial and at the core of our Catholic faith, these five, very powerful words are particularly meaningful for grieving parents. They give us what we need most after the death of our precious children: certain hope that we will see them again someday.

On April 1, 2023, a beautiful early-spring day, 27 parents and four retreat team members gathered at the Archdiocese of Oklahoma Pastoral Center to focus on our spiritual journeys after the death of our children--and to focus on the fact that life has *changed*, not ended.



They came from Noble, Yukon, Tulsa, Piedmont, Edmond, Stillwater, Norman, Moore, and Hollis. Fifteen of them were mothers; 12 were fathers.

Together we honored 15 children; 11 sons and three daughters; Cause of death included suicide (6); illness (5); accident (2); overdose (1); and unknown (1). Age at the time of death ranged from seven years old to 45 years old. Time since the death ranged from four weeks to 28 years ago. Five of the parents lost their children in the past three months.

Members of the retreat team included...

- Fr. Price Oswalt, Spiritual Leader
- Dr. Alex Schimpf, Retreat Coordinator
- Deacon Joe Vandervort, Retreat Coordinator
- Gabriel Van Ness, Music Ministry
- Gracie, Comforter Dog in Chief
- Erika Martinez, Yuridia's Mother
- Ann and Mark Arra, Michael's Parents
- Deb and Steve Lewis, Casey's Parents
- Diane and Charley Monaghan, Paul's Parents

Beforehand, parents said their hopes for the retreat included the following:

- *To meet others who are faithful to our Blessed Lord and His Sorrowful Mother, who are also walking the same path we are.*
- *To have time to connect with God and to have him meet me where I am presentl*
- *Healing and peace*
- *I am hoping to get peace in my heart and in my soul. The pain is and will always be there, but this retreat will hopefully allow me to leave with her absence knowing she is in a better place.*
- *Unsure. Still trying to make sense of what happened.*
- *Rekindling of my faith.*
- *Comfort*
- *Understanding and healing.*
- *HOPE—reason to keep living*

After a warm welcome from Dr. Alex, the retreat opened with a moving Opening Prayer Service, during which parents lit candles bearing photos of their children. The candles symbolized Christ as the Light of the World and our children as the light of our lives.

We heard from Jeremiah (31: 15-17) when the Lord said, “The sorrow you have shown shall have its reward. There is hope for your future.” And Revelation (21: 1-4) when they heard the loud voice saying that “God himself will always be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away.”

Led beautifully in music by Gabriel, we proclaimed, “God, We Praise You! in our opening hymn. We prayed Psalm 139 in song, “Guide me, Lord, along the everlasting way.” And we concluded the prayer service with the always moving, “We Walk by Faith, and Not by Sight.”

After the prayer service, we gathered to hear Fr. Oswald’s poignant reflection. “I am not a parent, said Fr. Oswald, and I can’t even begin to understand your pain. However, I am a priest and I have ministered to many people who have lost loved ones. I, myself, lost 17 loved ones before I reached the age of 21, including my brother.”

“I don’t know what it feels like to be a grieving mother or father, said Fr. Oswald, but I do know how grieving a precious son profoundly affected my own parents.”



“And I do know,” said Fr. Oswald, “Someone else who knows your pain... Our Blessed Mother, Mary, who is depicted in the beautiful Pieta statue of Michelangelo.”

Regarded as Michelangelo’s greatest work of art, this Pieta depicts Mary as ironically content. There is no anguish in her face. Her hand is extended in an invitation to us to come to the Lord... to appreciate his sacrifice for us... and to understand how He can use the death of our child for good.

Having a willing, open hand is good, said Fr. Oswald, as opposed to a very tightly clenched hand unopened to others and willing to strike. Which type of hand do we have at this time?

Then Fr. Oswald said something very surprising....

“You can do more for your children now than you could do for them when they were alive.”

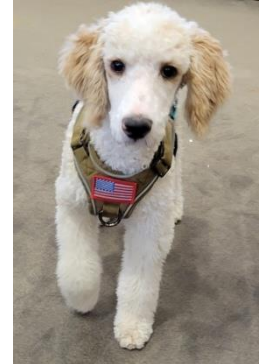
You can do three things, said Fr. Oswald: You can...

1. Pray for them (every day)
2. Sacrifice for them (offering up your daily suffering for them)
3. Have Masses celebrated for them (as often as you can)

We also talked about tears. “Tears are not a bad thing,” said Fr. Oswald. He referred parents to read “Permission to Cry,” an Emmaus Ministry handout by Elizabeth Kupferman. “Tears,” he said, “are nature’s way of healing us.”

A grieving father asked Fr. Oswald to explain why the Church changed its stance on suicide. “Science,” said Fr. Oswald. Research on mental health has informed the teaching of the church on this issue, he said. Since the beginning of the 20th century, especially after WWI and WWII, we have learned much more about how the brain works. In addition, we discussed the fact that God is outside of time and no one can be sure that the person was not reconciled with God before he or she died.

After a delicious lunch, we had something very unusual happen that has never before happened at an Emmaus Ministry retreat: We were joined by Gracie, Fr. Oswald’s comfort dog, who did her best to spread peace and comfort to all of the parents there throughout the afternoon.



GRACIE

Next on the schedule were four Parent Witnesses, who agreed ahead of time to share their spiritual journeys since the death of their children.

After the death of our son, Michael, said Mark and Ann, OUR lives were changed, but not ended. When it happened, we kept saying, “How could something like this happen to us?”

“I gave my children to God when they were born,” said Ann, “but I thought He would give them back to me.”

We finally stopped playing and replaying his death over and over when we turned to our faith, said Ann and Mark. When we focused on daily Mass, the rosary, the Divine Mercy chaplet, and adoration, we received the grace to fully surrender. Citing Psalms 88 and 34, they said that they learned that Jesus can’t heal us unless we give it over to Him.

Casey’s Mom and Dad, Deb and Steve, also offered words of encouragement. After the loss of so many family members and friends, I thought that I knew what grief was, said Deb. But I really had no idea until I lost my beautiful son. But I know he is here, she said. I find white feathers everywhere and I feel, without a doubt, that he is with me.

After Casey died, said Steve, I felt like I was floating above and watching my life unfold in front of me every day. I couldn’t focus on anything and didn’t care if I lived or died. There definitely is a “before” and “after” after the death of a child.

But one night everything changed, he said. I had a vivid dream of Casey saying, “I’m ok, Dad. Tell Mom that I’m ok.” (What a gift!) “My faith, more than anything, helped me,” said Steve. “Although I still have the guilt, my faith helps me to help others.”

After a short break, we broke into small groups of mothers and fathers. Several fathers told us that they talked more about their deceased child today than they had since their child died. For some, this was many years ago.



Emmaus Ministry retreats offer a safe place for parents to share, or not share, as parents wish. Other than a few people on the retreat team, everyone else at the retreat is a grieving parent. Unlike many other bereavement groups, grieving parents often feel an instant bond. It doesn't matter how old the children were when they died—or how they died—or even how long ago they died, parents feel an instant bond. It feels so good to be able to talk to someone who truly understands your pain.

In one of the mother's groups, the spiritual journeys ranged from having deep faith and trust in God and His reasons to those who were very angry with God and to those for whom the death was so new, they felt only numbness.

One mother told the beautiful story of how she agonized for a long time about not being there when her young daughter died more than 20 years ago. Eventually, she felt drawn to an organization that ministers to the dying. She now regularly accompanies those who are dying and honors her daughter at the same time in this way.

Jesus weeps with us as we mourn the death of our precious children. But He also walks with us now to turn the horrific into good, which is obviously what He is doing with this trusting mother.

After a short break, parents were invited to write a letter to their child or to God. Typically at an Emmaus Ministry retreat, the letters are viewed as prayers to the recipient. Consequently, they are burned, then their ashes are mixed with incense and offered, rising in prayer, during the Close Prayer Service.

Fr. Oswald gave parents the option of keeping the letters and, in a very generous gesture, offered to meet with them at a later date to talk about opening the lines of communication with the letter's recipient. One mother signed up to see him as soon as he made this offer! Parents are free to choose either option.

It was a perfect and very warm spring day at the Pastoral Center, so all of the parents appreciated the next session, which was our "Emmaus Walk" and the chance to go outside. Invoking the Holy Spirit, we chose names of people who would walk (or sit) together.

Just as Jesus walked with his distraught, grief-stricken disciples, we walked together with each other and with Him. This is always a deeply moving session at Emmaus Ministry retreats. Parents often tell us they know exactly why the Holy Spirit paired them with their Emmaus Walk partner. It is not unusual for deep friendships to eventually develop.

Parents then had the option of going to Fr. Oswald for spiritual direction or reconciliation, spending time with each other, or just relaxing.

Emmaus Ministry retreats begin with the large group of everyone attending, then move into small group activities, and then one-on-one and individual sessions. This is to accommodate the comfort-level of parents.

The Mass, however, is the most essential element of the retreat. It brings us all together to celebrate the promise of eternal life and the Communion of Saints. This particular Mass was extra special because it was a

Palm Sunday Vigil Mass. “We didn’t choose this weekend because it was Palm Sunday,” said Fr. Oswald, “but it is the perfect time to have an Emmaus Ministry retreat.”

Many of us feel like we are going through the Crucifixion right now with the death of our children. We need to remember that Easter Sunday is coming!

This beautiful retreat concluded with a poignant closing ceremony, during which we extinguished the wick of the Memorial Candles for our children. Only the wick. Never the light that they continually fuel in our hearts.

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

“It was beneficial to me in my grief and spiritual journey to be nourished by my Church and others in the faith to live this difficult journey.”

“It was good, in a safe environment, to speak with others who have had a tragic loss”

“Hearing others’ journeys helped me continue on and (be) hopeful that our remaining days here are fruitful, faithful, and intentional.”

“It is such a needed ministry, as I feel bereaved parents are sometimes the forgotten group.”

“Continue this precious ministry.”

The Emmaus Ministry serves the spiritual needs of parents whose children of any age have died by any cause, no matter how long ago. The Archdiocese of Oklahoma is committed to carrying the Emmaus Ministry forward with, hopefully, at least two retreats per year. The possibility of Emmaus Ministry Retreats in Spanish is also under discussion.

If you would like more information on these retreats—or if you would like to help make them happen—please contact the Archdiocese of Oklahoma Family Life Office at 405-709-2755 or Diane Monaghan, the Emmaus Ministry, at 800-919-9332.

