



**FAIRFIELD COUNTY  
CATHOLIC CEMETERIES**



**ONE-DAY RETREAT  
SATURDAY, APRIL 29, 2023  
CONVENT OF ST. BIRGRITTA  
DARIEN, CT**

*“I’m always prepared for God to surprise me  
with the flow of His love and healing.”*

It was the type of morning when you just wanted to roll over and go back to bed... cold, dark, and dreary. And the sound of drenching rain outside. Thankfully, on that Saturday, April 29, 2023, 28 people fought this urge and headed to the Convent of St. Birgitta in Darien.

They gathered for the Diocese of Bridgeport’s first-ever Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents retreat, which was offered and subsidized by Fairfield County Catholic Cemeteries.

Thirteen grieving mothers and nine grieving fathers participated in the retreat. They came from Stamford, Greenwich, Old Greenwich, Norwalk, New Canaan, Fairfield, Ridgefield, and Danbury, as well as Ossining, NY and Waltham, MA.



Parents and Retreat Team members honored 17 children: 11 sons and six daughters. Age at the time of death ranged from pre-natal to 41 years old. Time since the death ranged from six weeks ago to 42 years ago. Cause of death included illness (5); prenatal issues (4); overdose (4); car accident (3); and suicide (1).

Members of the Retreat Team included:

- Dean Gestal, Executive Director, Fairfield County Catholic Cemeteries, Diocese of Bridgeport—Host
- Carolyn Killian, Director of Bereavement, Catholic Cemeteries—Retreat Coordinator

- Fr. Nick Pavia, Chaplain, Bereavement Ministries, Diocese of Bridgeport—Spiritual Leader
- Deacon Don Ross, Margaret and Kathleen’s Father, St. Pius X Parish—Homilist, Group Facilitator, Spiritual Director
- Marypat Hughes, Tom’s Mother—Parent Witness
- Nancy Bentley, Catholic Cemeteries—Retreat Support
- Patricia Woods—Retreat Support
- Lynda Withiam—Music Ministry

Before they came, parents were asked their hopes for the retreat...

*“I hope to grow in gratitude for my daughter’s life.”*

*“Peace. Acceptance. Forgiveness. I really haven’t grieved.”*

*“I hope to be there for others who have not yet learned how to ‘breathe under water.’”*

*“To restore my faith.”*

*“To be with others who understand.”*

We began the day with a warm welcome from Dean Gestal, Executive Director, and Carolyn Killian, Director of Bereavement, of Fairfield Counties Catholic Cemeteries, Diocese of Bridgeport.

“This day is all about healing,” said Dean, “This day is for you. We are happy to provide it for you. Welcome.”

“Whether you believe in God—or are seeking Him,” said Carolyn, “We are here to help.” Carolyn also mentioned two other initiatives of Catholic Cemeteries offering grief support: the New Day program and daily Healing Reflections sent via email.



Parent Leader, Charley Monaghan, reminded parents that this is a spiritual retreat, not a support group, workshop, or seminar. For this reason, we will not “go around the room” and ask you to tell your story. Throughout the day, you can share as much or as little as you like, Charley said. Many people participate by listening. This day is for you, said Charley. A day for you to concentrate on your spiritual journey and on your relationship with your child.

After the welcome, we moved into St. Birgitta’s chapel for our moving Opening Prayer Service, where we focused on Light... Christ as the Light of the World and our children as the light of our lives. Light that is eternal and will never die..

We closed the prayer service with the “Emmaus Song” by Monica Brown asking Jesus to “Come journey with us, walk with us, listen to our story... as we journey with you, Jesus, Our God.”

After a short break, we gathered in the Convent's beautiful sun room. Even though it was a dreary day, the views of the water and the grounds were calming and comforting.



Fr. Nick Pavia's reflection was heartfelt and authentic. He has two siblings who passed within six months of each other, and it was obvious that he had lots of talks with his 93-year-old mother in preparation for what he wanted to say to us.

Grieving parents want to know about heaven, said Fr. Nick. We are individuals, he said. Heaven is both beyond and within. Heaven is so much more than we are aware of. The delights of the next world are the glories that they (our children) now possess, he said.

Our love letter from God (the Bible) tells us that we don't go through anything in this world in vain, said Fr. Nick, either for ourselves or for others. He urged us to listen, just as Jesus listened on the road to Emmaus to His distraught disciples. The good news of Emmaus is that

Jesus is truly alive.

Fr. Nick then quoted from St. John Vianney, "The eyes of this world see no further than this life. But the eyes of a Christian see deep into eternity." There is hope for us and for our children. And from St. John Chrysostom, "We brought nothing into this world and we shall surely take nothing from it... Where two or three are gathered in my name (as we are here today at this retreat), there I am in their midst... Know that I am with you always, until the end of the world."

And, from Romans, Chapter 8, we are reminded that nothing will separate us from our God, who encircles us, as described in Psalm 139:

LORD, you have probed me, you know me:  
You know when I sit and stand;  
You understand my thoughts from afar.  
You sift through my travels and my rest;  
With all my ways you are familiar.  
Even before a word is on my tongue,  
LORD, you know it all.  
Behind and before you encircle me  
And rest your hand upon me.

Fr. Nick talked about a grieving mother he met years ago whose children have passed. To this day he still prays for them. Likewise, said Fr. Nick, I will pray every day for you and for your precious children. How beautiful.

After a delicious lunch prepared by the sisters at St. Birgitta's, we heard the very moving Parent Witness of Marypat Hughes, Tom's mother. It is an honor and a privilege to accompany each of you on your grief journeys, said Marypat.

I was very lonely early on in my grief journey after the horrific death of my precious son, Tom, said Marypat. I just wanted to be sad and alone in my grief. I was very angry and constantly miserable. Time stood still for me then. I couldn't even cry.

Eventually I decided to let it go, she said. It doesn't matter how or why he died, I realized. I just need to spend the rest of my life remembering and honoring him—knowing that there will be good days ahead. I finally found the God-given gift of forgiveness and the ability to not be consumed by anger.



Skipping over anger never works, she said. Finding good ways to deal with it helps... pounding on a pillow; screaming as loud as you can when you are alone in your car; taking a long run or walk, etc. are good ways of releasing the anger.

Anger leaves little room for grace, said Marypat. Give it over to God. It is the kindest thing you can do for yourself. He will help you heal.

Marypat's heartfelt Parent Witness seemed to validate many feelings parents had, but were previously hesitant to express.

In the discussion that followed, parents said that, in many ways, grief is a physical process that involves changes in the body. In the beginning we are protected by shock. Then, as the shell of the onion is peeled away, we gradually begin to feel real pain. One parent said, "As the shock gradually wears off, our inner strength grows." Not true of every parent, but very comforting.

A vibrant discussion followed. We talked about tears and how they are not a bad thing. The DNA of grief tears, said one parent, is very different from other types of tears in that it contains toxins that need to be washed out of the body. So... crying is good and therapeutic.

One mother, in particular, was very inspiring when she said, "I'm always prepared for God to surprise me with the flow of His love and healing." She is always looking for God and she is open to whatever gift He wants to give. How inspiring and profound! Her beautiful son was killed by a drunk driver on the streets of New York, but she has forgiven the killer and believes that there are no coincidences with God. "He shows up!" she said.



After this powerful Parent Witness and discussion, we broke into small groups of mothers and fathers, acknowledging the fact that men and women grieve differently.



One of the mother's groups focused on the value of forgiveness and how forgiveness can be the "greatest revenge." The other mother's group talked about signs as blessings from our children. They are real!

The father's groups talked about the pain of the loss of an only child compared to the pain of losing multiple children. The group included fathers in both segments. They also talked about the fact that very few people (on the outside) want to talk about the death of a child.

Two powerful Emmaus Ministry sessions followed: Letter writing to our children (or God) and the Emmaus Walk where we walk (or sit) one-on-one with another parent to talk about where we are in our own individual spiritual journey.

Many parents say that these two activities are critical to Emmaus Ministry retreat experience. The letter writing can be cathartic. And the Emmaus Walk can be reminiscent of Luke 24 when Jesus walked with his disciples. We walk with each other, just as Jesus walked with His disciples.

After a period of free time during which parents took a break, went to Reconciliation or Spiritual Direction, or just talked with each other, we entered into the pinnacle of the retreat: the Mass.

Fr. Nick celebrated a beautiful Vigil Mass with Deacon Don assisting. Deacon Don read the gospel for this Good Shepherd Sunday and gave a moving homily.

There is a connection we don't often readily see, said Deacon Don, between the horror of the cross of our crucified Lord and the joy of the Resurrection... the horror of the cross and the sheep gate role of Jesus.

As a shepherd, Jesus would have laid down the full length of His body for His sheep across the entrance (sheep gate) of the pasture. So too does Jesus for us, said Deacon Don.

Jesus described Himself in many ways... as the Light of the World, as the Bread of Life, and as the Good Shepherd. We need to be still and let God come to us, said Deacon Don. Hold the Comfort Cross you were given today, said Deacon Don, and you will find hope.



At the end of the Mass, we had a beautiful prayer shawl service during which Deacon Don and Fr. Nick enfolded us in prayer using the prayerfully-made prayer shawls knitted by several local parish ministries.

Afterwards, the retreat closed with a poignant Closing Prayer Service. We extinguished the wicks of our children's Memorial Candles, but acknowledged the fact that nothing can extinguish the beautiful, eternal light of our children who will live forever.

To our children, we sang, "Go in Peace" (Sarah Hart). Go in peace. Be at rest. With the saints and angels... Now you are free. Go in peace."

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

- *"I was filled with anger and disbelief before this. I feel different now.*
- *"Very comforting and spiritually enriching."*
- *"It's been some time since I lost my son, but this retreat was still healing and offered another level of deepening relationship with our astounding God."*
- *"Everyone was allowed to speak freely or just be quiet and soak it in."*
- *"The format of this retreat was perfect. Time to pray; time to cry; time to eat; time to listen; time to share; and time to grieve and begin to heal."*

Our hope and prayer is that the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents continues indefinitely into the future in the Diocese of Bridgeport with multiple retreats throughout the year in various parishes.

If you'd like to know more about this powerful ministry and how you can bring it to your parish or region, call Carolyn at 203-404-0023 or Diane at 800-919-9332.

by Diane Monaghan, May 1, 2023

