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## Ministries for Grieving Parents



By Lori Hadacek Chaplin

After a schoolmate of mine recently lost both of his children in a car accident, I began to wonder what kinds of ministries were available to grieving parents who have lost a child of any age. I discovered that there is a dearth of ministries serving heartbroken parents, which makes Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents, the Angel Gown Program, and the Shrine of the Holy Innocents invaluable—and inspires individuals and parishes about the great need to minister to those who mourn.

### **Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents**

In 2009 Diane and Charlie Monaghan from Boston, Massachusetts, started the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents under the spiritual direction of the Franciscan Friars at the St. Anthony Shrine in Boston. Their ministry was born out of the tragedy of losing their son Paul.

Paul, 26, had a successful military career and had never shown any history of mental illness, depression, or drug use. However, on Thanksgiving 2002, he took his life at the Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota. The Air Force did a yearlong investigation to find

out why this spontaneous suicide happened, but they were unable to make any definite conclusions.

### ***Trying to heal***

The Monaghans, without even a suicide note to cling to, were left with unanswered questions, anger, and grief. Trying to heal, they explored everything from psychotherapy and support groups to self-help books, but nothing made a difference until Diane sought spiritual direction from a Franciscan sister. Diane Monaghan told *Catholic Digest*, “My spiritual director said over and over again: ‘With death life has changed, but it has not ended. Paul is very much still alive.’ That was the only thing that brought my husband and I any kind of peace and comfort—focusing on the promise of eternal life and the fact that Paul is still very much with us.”

She also told Diane that she needed to form a new relationship with her son. “We thought that if doing so helped us, then it would help other parents.” Consequently they started their nonprofit ministry for parents who have lost children of all ages from any cause. Their twofold mission is to serve the needs of grieving parents and to help other parents to start this ministry in their own area.

### ***The secret of consolation***

The Monaghans discovered that “it is in consoling others that we are consoled.” Along with Franciscan friars, sisters, and other Catholic clergy, they offer one-day and weekend retreats for grief-stricken parents. The retreats are held at the St. Anthony Shrine in Boston, as well as in other parishes and dioceses when invited. They are conducted in the Catholic tradition, which includes Mass and confession, but the retreats are open to all faiths. “We have had Protestant and Jewish parents come, and all of them have told us that it was very beneficial and beautiful,” Charlie Monaghan says.

The Monaghans aren’t licensed therapists, but they do know about the journey of grieving parents. Their retreats are about creating a safe place for parents—who often experience isolation—to feel comfortable enough to face their grief and come closer to God. Parents aren’t expected to talk or even share their names, but often talking about their child, crying, and sharing stories is exactly what those parents want and need to do.

### ***Emmaus retreats***

The retreat opens with a candle-lighting ceremony. “We provide candles with the child’s name and picture on the candle. In the Catholic tradition, a lighted candle is a symbol of constant prayer. We call upon parents to come forward and light their child’s candle. We try to set an atmosphere that is very meditative and moving,” he explains. The retreat also includes reflections by a religious, parent testimonies, small group discussion, Mass, and time for meals and relaxation.

In addition, the ministry also offers a phone number (800-919-9332) for grieving parents to call if they would like to be connected with other parents who share a similar circumstance. Visit [emfgp.org](http://emfgp.org) for more information.

## **Angel Gown® Program**

Lisa Grubbs started the Angel Gown® Program, based in Fort Worth, Texas, in 2013, because she wanted bereaved parents to be able to clothe their deceased baby in a gown as perfect as their little baby. She told *Catholic Digest*, “My belief is that we are wrapping this baby in love. The fact that this baby has died and the family is burying him or her doesn’t change the fact that this life happened, and it matters.”

Through her in-hospital program, Project NICU, Grubbs witnessed firsthand parents rummaging through baskets of donated clothing looking for something suitable for their infant to be photographed and buried in. She wanted to be able to help these parents honor the life of their baby.

Project NICU works with families that have lost a baby while in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), those who have miscarried, or those who have had a stillborn baby. The Angel Gown® Program was a natural offshoot of Project NICU, both of which are under the umbrella of Grubbs’ nonprofit, NICU Helping Hands.

### ***Donated wedding gowns***

Each precious angel gown is expertly crafted, with exact specifications, from donated wedding gowns. Since an unborn baby has incredibly fragile skin, a gown cannot be pulled over baby’s head. Consequently, the gowns are open in the back and are tied with delicate ribbons.

The Angel Gown® Program has over 600 professional, volunteer seamstresses that sew the gowns. Those gowns that pass inspection are individually wrapped in white tissue, with a poem card and an angel pendant, and are mailed at no charge to hospitals or individuals who request them. “We encourage hospitals that stock our gowns to offer the family several gowns to choose from in the size they need because we feel this is part of the parenting process. This family is never going to be able pick out a one-year birthday outfit. In many cases this will be the only item of clothing the baby will have, even a baby who has died after having been in the NICU for months.”

### ***Urgent gown request and custom gowns***

If their local hospital doesn’t carry angel gowns, parents who live anywhere in the United States, can go online and fill out an Urgent Gown Request. The smallest-sized angel gown is designed for a 24-week baby; for smaller babies, there’s the angel wrap. The gowns are free of charge and are sent via two-day shipping at no cost.

The Angel Gown® Program also serves families who know during pregnancy that their baby will die shortly after birth. “Sometimes those moms will send us their wedding gowns, and we have custom gowns made ahead of time. I think it is very meaningful for the family to be able when they can to have input as a parent.”

For information on how you can become involved in this program, visit [NicuHelpingHands.org/Angel-Gowns](http://NicuHelpingHands.org/Angel-Gowns).

## **The Shrine of the Holy Innocents**

Our culture is finally starting to realize that parents need to mourn the loss of their unborn children; they need tangible ways to remember and honor them. Often after a miscarriage parents don’t get a birth certificate, a proper funeral and burial, or even the

chance to name their baby. Located in the Church of the Holy Innocents in New York City, is the Shrine of the Holy Innocents—a shrine dedicated in 1993 by John Cardinal O'Connor on the Feast of the Holy Innocents to the memory of children who died before birth. Parents who have lost an unborn baby can have their baby's name inscribed in the Shrine's Book of Life. They will also receive a Certificate of Life in honor of their child.

At the Shrine a candle is perpetually lit to honor the children whose names are inscribed in the Book of Life, and on the first Monday of every month, a Mass is celebrated in honor of these children and for their grieving parents.

Parents who take the opportunity to have their child—or children—immortalized in the Book of Life find comfort. Tom and Claire's son, Austin, was just four weeks away from being born when he died. Tom and Claire not only grieved their son, but also the fact that they never received a birth certificate. Getting a Certificate of Life from the Shrine meant a lot to them. In a letter to the former director of the Shrine, Fr. Thomas Kallumady, they wrote, "We appreciate you taking the time to show that our children are important and should be remembered."

Vijay Wijesundera, the parish manager of Church of the Holy Innocents, says that, after the initial influx of requests, some 1,200 names of deceased infants are entered in the Book of Life each year. "It is fair to say that the book has over 25,000 children's names. Unfortunately the exact count is not known, as the surviving computer records do not cover the whole period. Aborted babies are also numbered among the names listed.

One mourning mother wrote, "I lost my precious baby when I was only 16, in 1980; she was taken from me by my parents, who would not let me have her. I was forced to abort her. It still haunts me terribly."

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