



ST. JAMES CATHEDRAL
a catholic community



**EMMAUS MINISTRY ONE-DAY RETREAT
ST. JAMES CATHEDRAL
SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2019
RETREAT HIGHLIGHTS**

DEEP GRIEF IS THE PRICE OF DEEP LOVE

Children aren't supposed to die before their parents... whether they are 6 months old or 60 years old. But every day... they do. They die by murder, suicide, miscarriage, overdose, random accidents, unexpected diagnoses, —and in countless other horrific ways. If their parents are still alive, they leave behind devastated mothers and fathers, who have no idea of how to cope with the death of a precious child.



On November 23, 2019 Fr. Miguel Gonzalez and Fr. Michael Hawkins and the staff of St. James Cathedral in Orlando, FL, together with the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents, offered a One-Day Retreat designed to meet the spiritual needs of grieving parents whose children of any age (from conception to old age) have died by any cause, no matter how long ago.

The St. James Cathedral retreat was at capacity very early; consequently, registration closed 10 days before the retreat even began. Twenty-eight parents, including 21 mothers and seven fathers, participated. Most of the parents were from Orlando, but others were from Astor, Deland, Longwood, Deltona, Maitland, St. Cloud, and St. Augustine. One mother traveled to FL from her home in NY to participate in the retreat.

Parents honored 28 children (20 sons and eight daughters) who died from cancer, heart disease, accidents, addiction, murder, and suicide. Age at the time of death ranged from four years to 59 years old. Time since the time of death ranged from three months to 24 years ago. Six parents lost more than one child, with one mother, sadly, losing three children.

In addition to Fr. Matthew Hawkins, members of the retreat team included Michael Mokris, Christine Shields, Susann Engel, Sherry Krawczyk, and Diane and Charley Monaghan, as well as other St. James staff members.

Fr. Matthew gave a beautiful reflection on the spirituality of the grieving process for parents whose children have died. You are at the foot of the cross, he said, and Christ is there to meet

you. When Lazarus died, Martha asked, “Why?” Jesus didn’t give her an answer, but he gave her a response, said Fr. Matthew, “The response was... He will rise again.”

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul said, “We grieve, but not without hope.” Grief is the price we pay for love, said Fr. Matthew.



The love for our children has deeply penetrated our hearts. But we have hope. Without hope, grief has the last word, he said. But, with faith and hope, we turn our grief into unwavering peace. This is because of the eternal life given to us by the Resurrection of Our Lord, Jesus Christ.

In his movie, *The Passion of Christ*, said Fr. Matthew, Mel Gibson portrays the road to Calvary with Jesus passionately clinging to the cross in his brokenness. Why does he cling to the cross so fervently? The same reason we do. Because that cross offers all of us the sure path to eternal life.

The death of a child definitely *shapes* us, but it should not *define* us, said Fr. Matthew. Deepfelt grief can lead to avoidance and isolation—or excessive energy focused on ways to keep busy and harden our hearts to the pain. We need to allow the Lord to catch up with us, he said.

Sometimes it is good to pull off the scab of our woundedness by exposing ourselves to something like an Emmaus Ministry retreat, said Fr. Michael. In doing so, we come face to face with the Lord and allow him to speak words of comfort. We bring all of our pain and suffering to him as we not only cling, but clutch, the bottom of the cross like his beloved mother, Mary. He will come to meet us wherever we are.

We need to get rid of the toxins of grief, so that they do not permeate our minds and bodies, Fr. Matthew said. We can give them to the Lord. He can take our hurt, our anger, and even our blame—he will take anything to help us get rid of the toxins. He suffered. He died. He rose from the dead. And he is with you today, said Fr. Matthew.

C.S. Lewis suffered severe loss twice in his life, said Fr. Matthew. Once, as a child, when he lost his mother and, consequently, chose to become an atheist. And again, as an adult—when his wife died and, consequently, he became a Christian. Given the choice, he chose love because “grief is the price of love.” The more you love, the more you grieve, but the price of love is worth it, he said.

Parents had many reactions and comments on Fr. Matthew’s reflection. “I appreciated your observation on toxins,” said one mother. “Scientific studies document the fact that the DNA of tears of grief contain toxins,” she said. “It is good to cry these tears of grief to get these toxins out of our bodies.”

Several parents talked about their anger with God. Others said they never felt angry with God, but a whole lot of deep disappointment and anger towards friends and family who were not supportive.

Another mother shared that, after she suffered the deaths of two of her children, she used a journal to vent all of her hurts and frustrations every day to God. It helped a lot, she said. You can also use the journal to write letters to your child, another mother offered. Or draw pictures. For many people, this helps.

At each retreat, we invite a parent who has been to at least one previous retreat share where they are in their spiritual journey. Christine Shields graciously agreed to do this at this retreat. It was a [very moving description of her spiritual journey](#) after the death of her beautiful son, Ben, over the last 19 months. There is always the temptation to hide under the covers and seclude and isolate ourselves, said Christine. As grieving parents, we have to consciously decide to let people in—especially those who want to help.

I am still here for a purpose, she said. What would Ben want me to do? Instead of self-centered, I need to be God-centered, she said. I have a lantern that, when lit, not only gives off the light of my son, but also displays the message of *“Because someone we love is in heaven... a little bit of heaven is here with us on earth.”*

Christine challenged each parent there to do something—anything—in memory of our children that would make them proud.

With help from family and friends, Christine has built a memory garden in loving memory of her son, Ben. And she is working hard to help bring the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents to St. James Cathedral on an ongoing basis.



Throughout the day parents offered interesting insights...

- All suicides are accidents and should be classified as such. They are the result of something your child never meant to happen.
- In any death of a child, parents blame themselves, even if this blame is not rational. When we talk about blame and guilt, the devil is the real one to blame. The “evil one” is very much alive and well and at work in this world—especially in the lives of grieving parents. He is often called “The Great Accuser” because, in convincing us that we are the guilty ones in the death of our children, he is able to easily draw us away from God and closer to him and hell, because of our debilitating grief. Very scary.
- Hurtful comments can even come from other grieving parents, even though they may be well-meaning. To help avoid adding to each other’s pain, we agreed that, as grieving parents, we should definitely avoid comments, such as...
 - ***“My son wasn’t a drug addict or a criminal or a sociopath. I don’t understand why he had to die. All he was doing was driving a car.”***
Saying this implies that my (addicted, criminal, or sociopath) son did deserve to die, while yours did not. Just as the sun shines on all of us, so too does God’s love and mercy. He loves all of our children, with all of their challenges equally. It is not our place to judge who is more worthy to die.

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- ***“As soon as I told parents in a well-known grieving parents’ support group that I had lost more than one child, I immediately felt a sense of isolation. These parents did not want to hear my story or associate with me in any way. It felt like I had a contagious disease.”*** The only thing worse than losing a child is losing more than one. Even grieving parents, who are usually so much more compassionate than others, can unknowingly hurt fellow grieving parents, who have lost multiple children. We have all experienced the worst of the worst—the death of a child—and, above all, we agreed that we need to be compassionate to each other, no matter what.
- ***“A suicide. I can’t imagine. Your pain is so much worse than mine because your son actually chose to end his own life.”*** No, it is not. People who die by suicide do not rationally choose to end their own lives. They are impaired by an illness, just as real as cancer or heart disease.



One of the mothers’ groups talked about the fact that, after the death of a child, parents are not afraid of death. And that this is one of the few advantages of losing a child. Some of us may actually welcome death. For example, if we were diagnosed with a terminal disease, we question whether or not we would accept treatment.

This is very different from actually contemplating suicide so that we can be with our children, which would be very wrong—and definitely not a guarantee that we would be reunited forever. Our job here on earth is to make our children proud... to complete their work... to do whatever we

can do to carry them forward in this world.

[Parents who seriously feel tempted to complete suicide because of the overwhelming pain they are currently experiencing, should immediately seek the help of a counselor, a therapist or the 24-hour resources of the [Samaritans](#) or the [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#). Many other suicide prevention resources are also available online.]

Throughout the day, Emmaus Ministry retreat parents at St. James had the opportunity to interact with each other through large groups, small groups of mothers and fathers—and one-on-one Emmaus walks. Parent also had the opportunity to connect with their children by writing a letter. Letters were burned, then incensed during the Closing Prayer Service, symbolic of prayer rising to heaven.

The healing grace of the Holy Spirit was evident throughout the day. As the retreat drew to a close, a very strong feeling of peace seemed to settle over the group. Parents said,

- “For the first time... I felt hope.”
- “We found this retreat the most comforting of anything we have tried since the death of our son.”
- This helped me so much; I’ll be coming back to every retreat you hold in Orlando. When is the next one?”

St. James Cathedral and the Diocese of Orlando are currently assessing the need for, and locations of, future Emmaus Ministry retreats. Please contact diane@emfgp.org if you are interested in either participating in a future Orlando Emmaus Ministry retreat or serving on an Orlando Emmaus Ministry retreat team in any capacity.