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After child loss, don't forget grieving dads

How can the church see, support, and stay with fathers after the death of a child?

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INTERVIEW WITH CHARLEY MONAGHAN OF THE EMMAUS MINISTRY ON PAGE 6

After the death of his son Eric in a mountain climbing accident, Nicholas Wolterstorff summed up the dilemma of the grieving parent in his book, *Lament for a Son* (Eerdmans): "I have no explanation. I can do nothing else than endure in the face of this deepest and most painful of mysteries. I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and resurrecter of Jesus Christ. I also believe that my son's life was cut off in its prime. I cannot fit these pieces together. I am at a loss."

The loss of a child is more common than many realize. According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, one in four pregnancies ends in miscarriage. Each year almost 45,000 babies in the United States are stillborn or die from infant loss, while close to 20,000 children and adolescents die from a variety of causes, reports the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Factoring in complicated griefs like infertility and the death of adult children means that grieving parents are within every community.

Yet fathers are often overlooked in their grief. Results from the 2020 study "Grief and Bereavement in Fathers After the Death of a Child," published by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), show that most research on parental grief focuses on mothers (who also receive the most attention from family, friends, and health care professionals), while fathers tend to cope by not talking about their children's deaths, returning to work, and keeping busy.

Kelly Farley, author of *Grieving Dads: To the Brink and Back* (Grieving Dads LLC), writes that men are "expected to toughen up, get back to work, take it like a man, and support their wives." But the AAP's 2020 bereavement research shows that such strategies are inadequate in helping fathers navigate their grief over time.

In a culture where men are socialized from childhood to be strong and stoic, how can the church reach out to grieving fathers?

The need for support

After the death of his son Frankie in June 2021, Alexander Pyles was surprised to find that most of the support he and his wife received came from the broader Christian community—not the Catholic Church. An organization called Abel Speaks provided grief support to their family before and after Frankie's death, connecting them to other couples who had experienced similar losses. It also sent a gift to Pyles on Father's Day, "which meant the world to [him] as a grieving dad."

"I understand that grief is hard to talk about," says Pyles. "No one wants to be in this position. But the fact is that we have to engage with people."

As he works to care for his wife, Katie, his older children, and himself through grief, Pyles has found comfort in visiting Frankie's grave when he takes his children to school. "We visit all the time, or say 'hi' when we drive by, which is a nice touchstone for us," he says. "It's been very healing in some ways."

But as a Catholic, Pyles has been frustrated by the lack of support in the church: "What I've been struggling with the most is that the church is so worried and focused about bringing in numbers or doing proper catechesis that we have missed out on the heart of what we're supposed to be doing. Yes, we're supposed to evangelize, but we're also meant to take care of each other. We're supposed to be loving our communities and fellow parishioners."

Drawing from his experience in working for a diocesan tribunal, Pyles has seen the positive impact in people's lives when hard situations like divorce are handled with care and compassion: "It's awkward, and it hurts to confront painful parts of your life. But this is another example of things we don't talk about. Our churches lack this engagement with the real, hard parts of life. Even the pro-life movement focuses its energy and resources on marches while real people are suffering."

"What I think a lot of the church doesn't understand when it comes to talking about grieving parents or grieving in general is that there isn't really an end to grief," says Pyles. "We can't just have a support group that meets for a year and then ends. It has to be a consistent thing that we do."

The Pyleses are looking forward to a retreat at Faith's Lodge in Danbury, Wisconsin, a retreat center that supports grieving parents after the death of a child—the only facility of its kind in the United

States. While they have found help from local friends and relatives, they have often thought about how difficult it must be for other parents without similar support.

“How do single moms do this?” Pyles asks. “Katie and I would love to get to a place where we can ask, ‘How do we make a real impact in our immediate community? How do we use this experience as a driver for good?’”

Pyles wishes the church would do more to offer spiritual help to the grieving: “It’s frustrating that so many people just tell you to pray or cling to your faith through it. But we have three vibrant parishes around us, and there’s not a single support group, nothing from the diocese.”

“As a dad, I don’t know where the support is,” he says.

Grieving fathers in U.S. culture

Dads are often seen as the rock of the family, the protector, or the fixer. Such cultural constructs around fatherhood profoundly impact men following the death of a child.

Fathers have to navigate their support roles and may neglect their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Research shows that a father’s grief is often minimized or dismissed, even by medical or mental health professionals who tend to focus on the mother. Yet studies show that men have significant risks for depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress after the death of a child.

As a grieving father and therapist, Tommy Tighe has witnessed such struggles firsthand: “In American culture we think we’re supposed to keep all of our problems inside and take care of ourselves, and that reaching out for help is a weakness. But that’s the opposite of Christianity, right? We need to talk about it. We need to share about this and learn how to support each other. We have lost any sense of what it means to be a community.”

When Tighe and his wife, Karen, learned in 2016 that their baby would not survive after birth, he reached out to several priests to ask them to baptize their son at the hospital. Each one told him no.

But when Tighe ended up baptizing their son Luke, it was a profound encounter with grace: “I’m so grateful for that because it ended up being one of the most important parts of that whole experience. [Baptizing Luke] was life-changing and faith-changing for me. It was a very powerful moment, like a thin place where we’re very close to the things that we can’t see.”

Yet grief has made Tighe wrestle with his faith in profound ways.

“For a long time after Luke died, I couldn’t pray at all,” says Tighe. “But people kept praying for us.”

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>
> Tommy Tighe

After Luke’s death, Tighe remembers fellow parishioners who prayed and fasted for them, brought meals, and paid for house-cleaning services. One family went to Rome on pilgrimage and made a photo book of all the places where they prayed for the Tighes.

The Seven Sorrows Rosary became an important prayer for Tighe as a grieving father. “What happened to the Virgin Mary helps me reframe things,” he says. “So many of us think, ‘I’m doing a good job being a Christian, and you still let this horrible thing happen to me, God!’ But then you see what happened to [God’s] mother. She walked the same journey that I walked; she held her son while he was dead in her arms.”

Tighe also found comfort in the story of Servant of God Chiara Corbella Petrillo, whose infant son died from a similar condition. One particular quote from Corbella’s writing struck him: “[Our son] knocked down our ‘right’ to desire a child that was for us because he was only for God . . . He knocked down the trust in the statistic that claimed we had the same probability of having a healthy baby as anyone else.”

“This experience—Luke’s death, his baptism, everything that’s coming after—has helped me realize that everything we believe is real,” says Tighe. “Now that he’s gone and in heaven, it becomes this tangible place. I have to get there; I have to get my family there. That revolutionizes your desire to do the right thing to be saved and get to heaven.”

“It’s colored my entire faith. I hear it in every passage. I hear it in every prayer,” he says.

Faith speaks to grieving fathers

Grief literature, support groups, and retreats are generally geared toward women. After the deaths of our twin daughters, I received stacks of grief books from friends, counselors, and health care professionals. My husband was given a pamphlet by a hospital chaplain with a quick aside: “Dads don’t really grieve.”

Yet even scripture bears witness to the deep grief of fathers. The Book of Job centers on a father who loses all seven of his children (1:18–19). King David grieves publicly for his young child (2 Sam. 12:16–23) and weeps at the death of his grown son Absalom (2 Sam. 19:1). Jesus speaks with compassion to Jairus when his daughter has died (Luke 8:40–56).

If God does not dismiss a father’s grief, how can we?

The church offers fathers the companionship of patron saints who also suffered the loss of a child. St. Augustine and St. Paulinus of Nola were friends and fathers who each lost a beloved son, a grief that changed both their lives. St. Louis Martin, father of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, wrote about the children he and his wife, St. Zélie, lost in childhood, noting in a letter to a friend, “I have another four children who are with their saintly mother in Heaven, where we hope to rejoin them some day!”

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Within a typical Catholic parish, pastoral ministries for the bereaved tend to focus on immediate needs: funeral planning, meals for the family, financial assistance for medical bills, or child care for siblings. Parishes can help grieving parents by providing information on grief counseling, local cemeteries, and funds to defray burial costs and grave markers. In the case of a baby lost to miscarriage or stillbirth, parents may not even know that the church offers special funeral rites for children and infants (whether baptized or not) as well as an order for the Blessing of Parents After a Miscarriage or Stillbirth.

Yet fathers also need long-term support. Over time many fathers do not report a decrease in the intensity of their grief (as mothers do in similar situations).

Grieving fathers often talk about the importance of finding small rituals like visiting the graveside and praying or speaking to their child during quiet moments or a daily commute. Fathers who find it more challenging to express their emotions may benefit from doing something active, like creating a memorial or fundraiser in their child's honor.

Friends, family, and parish staff can contribute to the well-being of grieving dads by continuing to offer prayers, giving them opportunities to talk about their child, and sending gestures of support. Even a quick text on the anniversary of a child's death can be meaningful for a father, especially when men are less likely to take the initiative in reaching out for social support.

Prayer and pastoral ministry

Out of his own experience as a father who suffered the loss of children to miscarriage, Timothy Putnam wrote a unique novena for parents, invoking intercessors like St. Louis of France and St. Isidore the Farmer. "There is nothing we can 'say' that will make things easier for [grieving parents], but perhaps there is something we can pray," he says in a post about the novena on his blog, *A Belief Observed*.

Prayer is an important way to support grieving fathers, whether with a Mass offered on the child's birthday or anniversary or during secular or sacred feasts. On All Souls' Day, parents can be invited to write their child's name in their parish's Book of Remembrance. Father's Day is another moment to acknowledge fathers' grief by including a petition for fathers who have lost a child, parents experiencing infertility, or parents who have suffered the grief of miscarriage or stillbirth.

Many dioceses offer an annual memorial Mass for babies who have died before birth, often held during October (as part of Respect Life Month) or November (the traditional month to pray for the dead). But a yearly Mass for bereaved parents can widen the welcome to include more who mourn, especially parents whose children died from addiction, overdose, and suicide—those whose grief may linger in the shadows because of shame or stigma.

One example of ministering to grieving fathers came from my own parish on the feast of the Presentation of the Lord. In a short reflection after communion, our congregation prayed a litany for the gift of children and the grief of parents when children return home to the Lord: those lost to miscarriage, illness, accident, or addiction. Not only did this prayer touch my husband deeply as a father, but it helped us both enter more fully into the feast, uniting our sorrow to Mary's at Simeon's prophecy: "And a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:35).

Yet the wider ministry of the church—through hospital chaplaincy, Catholic cemeteries, bereavement counselors, Stephen Ministers, and seminary formation—must consider when and where grieving fathers need to be seen in their grief. If we are called to be a church of compassion, to "weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15), as St. Paul writes, then we must care for all who mourn, especially those whose grief may be hidden.

Fathers supporting fathers

Some grieving fathers have started their own ministries to support their peers. After the death of their son Paul 19 years ago, Charley Monaghan and his wife, Diane, founded the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents, a Franciscan-inspired retreat ministry guided by the gospel story of two grieving disciples. The Monaghans have offered more than 100 retreats (virtual and in-person) in 11 dioceses across the United States, serving more than 1,000 parents.

Monaghan says the ministry, run by and for parents, addresses the anguish and loneliness felt by grieving parents: “You’ve got two people who think they should grieve together as a couple, but you can’t. You’re grieving as an individual, and you’re going to be at different places at different times. The marriage gets extremely stressed.”

Beyond what counseling or support groups can provide, the retreat model embraces the questions and crises of faith that arise after a death: “When it happens to your child, everything becomes real. You’ve got to figure out, ‘Do I really believe this teaching?’”

Often the companionship of others makes all the difference.

Monaghan describes the transformation that takes place during a typical one-day retreat, from parents’ initial reluctance to their eventual bonding: “Over the course of the day you can see the Holy Spirit build the camaraderie. By the end of the day, when people are sharing a meal, crying, and laughing together, they feel like they’ve got 20 new best friends. It happens all the time. Parents realize, ‘I’m not crazy for feeling what I’m feeling,’ and once they get that mental permission, the talking starts.”

As the Emmaus Ministry has spread across the country (at no cost to local dioceses), Monaghan has witnessed the power of peer ministry: “There’s plenty of work to be done for grieving parents, and there are faithful Catholics who could do the work. We all seem to point the finger at the priest and say, ‘Why aren’t you doing that?’ But no priest could bring to this ministry what I could bring to it.”

Ultimately Monaghan believes the church’s best gift to grieving parents is its witness to the resurrection: “What does every parent want to know? ‘Where is my child? When am I going to see them and hold them again?’ We have the hope. We have the Good News.”

“There’s plenty of room for innovation in the Catholic Church,” says Monaghan, “but what the church has to do is start dealing with grief. There are people broken and hurting all over the place. We need connection, companionship, and understanding.”

The ultimate connection with God

Over the years since my daughters died, I’ve heard countless men describe their struggles after their child’s death. Many say they feel alone or lost, overwhelmed by anger and helplessness. Often the companionship of others makes all the difference. Grieving parents often say this is the club you never wanted to join, but once you’re here, you’re grateful there are others.

“Whenever I have the courage to share about it, I find there’s another story waiting to be told,” my husband, Franco, says as he recalls conversations with other fathers from our parish about losses in their own families. “You just want to know you’re not alone.”

When parents ask why such suffering happens, even Pope Francis says he has no easy answer. “I just say, ‘Look at the crucifix. God gave us his son, he suffered, and perhaps there you will find an answer,’ ” he told a general audience on January 4, 2017.

In St. Peter’s Square on June 17, 2015, the pope reminded us that death will not have the final word: “For parents, surviving their own children is particularly heartbreaking; it contradicts the fundamental nature of the very relationships that give meaning to the family. . . . Every time a family in mourning—even terrible mourning—finds the strength to guard the faith and love that unite us to those we love, it has already prevented death from taking everything.”

At the heart of our faith is the love of a Father for a Son who suffers and dies. This truth urges all Catholics to consider how we understand grief, mourn with those who mourn, and remember men who are grieving their children.

This article also appears in the January 2022 issue of U.S. Catholic (Vol. 87, No. 1, pages 20-24). Click here to subscribe to the magazine.

Image: Jennifer Liv Photography. Taken outside their family home in 2017, Franco Fanucci and his son Thomas hold a teddy bear remembering Margaret who died in 2016 with her twin sister Abigail.