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A priest blesses memorial candles lit at an Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents retreat held

A priest blesses memorial candles lit at an Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents retreat held in West Virginia. (Courtesy of Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents)

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For many Catholic parents who have lost a child, finding a spiritual way to handle their grief in our secularized culture is challenging. That's where Emmaus Ministry comes in — founded in 2009 in Boston — offering faith-based retreats to parents whose child has died, helping them to mourn their loss and seek hope in the promise of the resurrection of the dead.

High school sweethearts Diane and Charley Monaghan felt like they had a perfect life with their son and daughter, until 2002 when they came home late one night and saw men in military uniforms outside. Their son Paul, a U.S. Air Force captain, had died by suicide. "It threw a grenade into our beautiful life," said Diane Monaghan.

The Monaghans spent several years in deep despair, not knowing how to cope. One day, Diane was walking by the St. Anthony Shrine in Boston and saw a retreat offered for busy people, which got her connected with the shrine and with a spiritual director.

"I didn't even know what a spiritual director was," she said. The spiritual director told her that Paul was still alive and that she should ask for his intercession, and it gave Diane hope that she would see him again. She felt the peace and comfort she had been seeking since his death, and she wanted to share that with others.

'It doesn't really matter how your child died — a hole is ripped out of your heart.'

—Diane Monaghan

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With the help of the Franciscan friars at the shrine, in 2009 she began offering spiritual retreats for grieving parents. They are led by a parent who has experienced a loss, with a priest, deacon, or sister providing theological reflections.

And, as Diane is quick to say, they're not support groups. "They don't have to go around and share," she said. Many parents choose to do so, but it's not obligatory, nor is participating in all of the events. "It's about focusing on where God is right now, and where their child is right now," she said.

One important part of the retreat is the Emmaus Walk, where two parents are paired together. Initially, they tried to pair parents based on the cause of their child's death, but then decided to allow the Holy Spirit to choose.

"We learned very early on that grieving parents have an almost instant bond. The grief of a parent is very different than any other kind of grief. It doesn't really matter how your child died — a hole is ripped out of your heart," Diane said.

Memorial bells are rung in honor of deceased children at an Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents retreat.

Memorial bells are rung in honor of deceased children at an Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents retreat held in West Virginia. (Courtesy of Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents)

They also offer one session where mothers and fathers are in different rooms, which Diane sees as especially important for men. Her husband Charley, who died in 2023, had initially been extremely reluctant to get involved in any kind of spiritual direction related to his son's death. But after he did so, he realized how much it had helped him.

"Mothers and fathers grieve very differently," Diane said. "A lot of the time their wives do all the talking, and they feel like their role is to support their wife. They can feel like failures — they were supposed to be the protector." She said that for many

fathers, the Emmaus retreat is the first time they've been able to talk about their child's death with other grieving fathers.

Monaghan says that on the morning of a retreat, many parents are visibly uncomfortable and don't want to be there. But after a day of reflection, prayer, shared meals and Holy Communion, they leave changed. "Parents on the way out are very different than on the way in," she said.



Mass is celebrated at an Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents retreat in Boston.
(Courtesy of Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents)

Fr. Jürgen Liias, the Emmaus Ministry's chaplain, has served as the spiritual leader for numerous retreats in the Boston area. A former Protestant minister, Liias said the Catholic faith offers a great source of comfort for grieving parents.

"We have a profound understanding of the communion of saints and the relationship between the living and the dead," he said. He also draws on Scripture in his reflections, particularly Jeremiah 31, where Rachel weeps for her children and God tells her they will return from the land of the enemy.

"The goal of the weekend, and of the Christian life, is not just to look back. They're alive and we're alive in Christ, with the ultimate hope and expectation that we will see each other again," he said.

Emmaus offers both one-day and weekend retreats throughout the year in various locations. It also offers weekly half-hour online Saturday prayer gatherings, as well as once a month hourlong gatherings. For Diane, these online retreats help ensure that parents feel continually connected and are able to stay strong in their faith after the in-person retreat.

Part of the retreat involves parents writing letters to their child. The letters are then burned, and then ashes are added to the incense that will be burned during the liturgy, allowing the letters to rise in prayer.

Marianne Gouveia's son, Eric, died by suicide in early 2016. She attended counseling, but didn't feel like it was helping. A friend sent her a copy of Catholic Digest that happened to include a story about the Emmaus Ministry. That November, she traveled from Phoenix to attend an Emmaus retreat in Boston.

Afterward, Gouveia wanted to offer retreats in Phoenix. The Monaghans offered initial guidance and training. Gouveia and her husband have now offered over 15 Emmaus retreats, as well as additional retreats for those who have lost someone to suicide.

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Gouveia is a lifelong Catholic, and her father was a deacon who worked with the bereaved. But she realized she had never had a truly close relationship with God, and that was what she was missing.

"It's kind of freeing, when we know we can simply surrender all our pain and sorrow and recognize that God carries us and is our strength on the good days and the bad days," she said.

She now sees it as her calling to help other parents who are going through the same thing. This, to her, is one of the strengths of the Emmaus Ministry: It's parent-led. "Part of our healing process is giving back to others," she said.

Ultimately, however, the true peace and comfort will not come from other people, which is why she struggled with secular grief-support options.

"That help was going to come from God," Gouveia said.