

A caring place for parents to grieve

ANTHONY McMAHON explains how John Paul Retreats helps parents trying to overcome the loss of a child

FOR many of us Christmas is whirl of materialistic temptations: shopping, entertaining, socialising and overindulging in food and drink. But for parents who have lost a child, the festive season is a poignant and painful time that brings home what they have lost.

John Paul Retreats, near Rothesay on the Isle of Bute, aims to provide grieving parents with a place of calm and reflection where they can begin to come to terms with their loss, and to find strength and solace through their Catholic Faith.

It is too easy to become focused on the glitter on Christmas trees in our homes, places of work and shopping centres as we eagerly await Christmas morning. But are we doing all we can to celebrate the day when The Word becomes flesh and our saviour Jesus Christ is born? Or have we, instead, been focused on our Christmas wish list? Christ—He is the reason for the season. Many times you can get caught up in the materialistic side of Christmas, which over-

shadows the joy. The fear of disappointing someone, hurting someone's feelings, or undercooking the turkey can take us away from what God intended us to celebrate: the birth of Jesus.

For grieving parents at Christmas, however, the season can be about how to 'do' Christmas without their treasured child. This can entail deliberately setting out to see people and be social. Or it may be the opposite. It can be a single parent sitting on the floor crying their eyes out, missing the physical presence of their child, as they figure out if it hurts more to put up their decorations, or to leave them in the box. How can we imagine how it must feel as a parent looking at the Christmas tree and remembering how their child used to help choose and put it up each year with the lovely angel at the top? How much do you think this would hurt to the very core of your being? Many parents have to flee to a private place, empty-handed and trying to keep their emotions and tears



in check, as they try to do the Christmas shopping. The festive season is hard for bereaved parents as the memories of 'what used to be' are ever-present.

John Paul Retreats is a place that focuses on what really matters. It is a simple place

of comfort with staff who care, listen to and respect grieving parents. Since opening in October 2015 we are often being confronted with—and asked to answer—the question 'Why?' Why did I lose my child to this terminal illness? To accidental death? To alcohol or drugs? To mental illness or suicide? In human terms we can never answer this question. The daily wish of a bereaved parent is to have their child back and sadly no one can grant this. What we can offer is a practical, peaceful place to give parents space to grieve.

At the Retreats we pray that grieving parents are able to make Christmas a special and meaningful day and season as best they can for those they love. Unlike many of us, it is harder for them to be caught up in the materialistic side of Christmas.

It's a place of peace and comfort that provides support for parents heartbroken by their loss

In the Holy Year of Mercy, Pope Francis gave us an opportunity to reflect on how our Catholic Faith allows us to carry out spiritual and corporeal works of mercy every day.

The Retreats aims to be a place of mercy, love, compassion and support for the emotional ups and downs, in grieving a son or daughter.

John Paul Retreats is run on self-funding and small donations. Let's pray that it continues to be a place of peace, comfort and hope to parents for many years ahead and that support will continue to be provided for us to continue God's work. At Christ-

mas we receive gifts but it is also an opportunity to think of others.

Many people help others at Christmas. People sing in nursing homes or perhaps help prepare meals in a soup kitchen. This selfless work portrays the image of God. The Retreats attempts to portray this same image of God as a place that will listen and does not judge, no matter what. We accept that a bereaved parent will never get over the loss of their child, but encourage that in time—lots of time—parents will get through the grieving process.

One question worth remembering at Christmas is simply, 'What do I contribute to the Kingdom of God in my life?' Let's consider this quotation from the Bible, in the Gospel of Luke 21:1-4: "Looking up, he saw rich people putting their offerings into the treasury; and he noticed a poverty-stricken widow putting in two small coins, and he said, 'I tell you truly, this poor widow has put in more than any of them; for these have all put in money they could spare, but she in her poverty has put in all she had to live on.'"

It is good to recall that Jesus noticed what the woman gave. This is important as in our own lives Jesus notices the opportunities we have to contribute and build up the kingdom. The question is, are we always ready?

My brother John Paul was sadly killed in an accident aged 16. The grief continued to grow in magnitude and my parents died in their 50s themselves. The emotional struggles I witnessed gave me the inspiration that if I was able to fund a place of support for parents after losing a child, then I would make it happen.

Thankfully, after working hard for 15 years in London, I was in a position to set up John Paul Retreats. More than 45 families from all over the United

The Retreats provides a break from the struggles of everyday life

Kingdom have attended a week-long, free stay at the Retreats so far. The stay offers a break away from the normal struggles of life. For some parents it is their first time away from home since losing their child. For others, they have never been able to return to work. For some, it is about learning to live with the medication which they need to help with the mental health problems brought on by their loss.

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More information, and testimonials, on the work of John Paul Retreats can be viewed on our website. May you have a peaceful Christmas and let us always remember Christ has been born for us. Let us always come to Jesus and his blessed mother Mary—who herself knew what it was to suffer the death of her child, Jesus—in both the happy and sad times that we encounter.

■ Anthony McMahon is the Founder of John Paul Retreats

■ For more info, visit: www.johnpaulretreats.org
To make a vital donation and help parents who have lost a child, visit John Paul Retreats Just Giving page at: www.justgiving.com/campaigns/charity/compfriends/johnpaulretreat

John Paul Retreats



www.johnpaulretreats.org