



Preface

In the Fall of 2008, while sitting at my office desk, I received an unexpected phone call from a parishioner. She asked me when grief support meetings were held at St. Michael Parish. Surprised, I replied that we didn't have a grief support ministry. After what felt like the longest three or four seconds, she responded with a simple but powerful question: "Why?"

That night, I couldn't sleep. Her question lingered in my mind, and I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something profoundly important about offering spiritual support to those who are grieving. It wasn't just a practical need; it was a deep spiritual one. I had never considered such a ministry before, but her question made me realize that something was missing.

The next day, I walked into my pastor's office and proposed that someone, anyone, start a grief support group. His response was brief but decisive: "Bene, you start it." I hesitated. I did not feel equipped; and I did not feel like I was the right person for the job. But I also knew that there was a need. I could not ignore it.

So, in 2009, with the help of parishioners who had experience in grief counseling and after completing several courses, I began offering grief support meetings at St. Michael. The group quickly became a place where people grieving the loss of loved ones could find solace and understanding. Over the years, I began to realize that the people who came to the group weren't just grieving the death of a loved one. Many were carrying other burdens—broken relationships, lost hopes, personal struggles—and the grief they experienced was often tied to more than one aspect of their lives.

By 2015, I felt more confident in the ministry and in my ability to offer meaningful support. At that time, I decided to open the group to anyone facing difficult challenges or deep loss, not exclusively those grieving a death, and to people of all religious affiliations. Since then, people from all walks of

life have attended: Catholics and non-Catholics, those struggling with terminal diagnoses, individuals recently released from prison, and many others who were grieving in different ways.

As I continued this work, I noticed that there were no existing resources that provided a clear, comprehensive, faith-based approach to grieving. So, I began writing my own guidelines. It was a long and sometimes difficult process, but over several years, I created a set of resources that I have used with the grief support group for several years now. The feedback from participants has been overwhelmingly invaluable. Many have shared that the guidelines have brought them tremendous healing. Several participants attended multiple cycles of meetings, and many found their way back to the Catholic faith through the support they received.

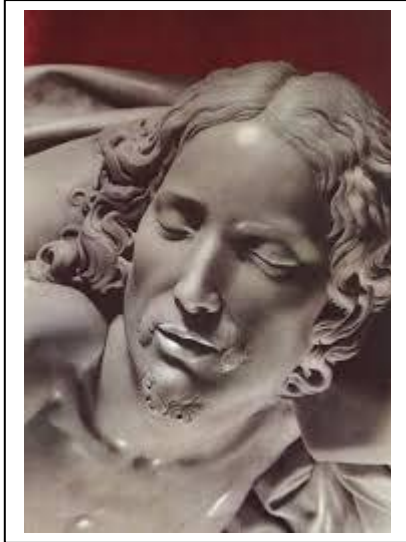
Over the course of the last 16 years, about 200 people have participated in the grief support groups. For some, the loss of a loved one was the reason they came. For others, it was the grief associated with illness, addiction, or even the pain of having hurt others. After COVID, I also began leading a suicide support group using the same guidelines, which has been another source of healing for those struggling with particularly difficult and often stigmatized losses.

In 2024, I had the privilege of attending the Catholic Association of Mental Health Ministers (CAMHM) Conference, where I met Dcn. Ed Shoener. He graciously reviewed my grief support guidelines, offering some suggestions for improvement and expressing interest in sharing them as a resource once they are published. His feedback gave me the encouragement I needed to take the next step in sharing these guidelines with a broader audience.

The positive feedback from both participants and professionals has encouraged me to share these guidelines, especially since there are few resources that address the deep spiritual and emotional needs of those who are not only grieving the loss of a loved one but also facing other life challenges. These guidelines are grounded in the Catholic faith, yet they are not imposed in a way that would exclude others, recognizing that not every participant shares the same beliefs. They aim to offer both spiritual support and practical tools for healing. By opening the group to anyone in need, regardless of religious background, this ministry has also become an opportunity for evangelization and a way to reach people who might otherwise never come into contact with the Church.

In closing, my hope is that by sharing these guidelines with a wider audience, more individuals may experience the healing, peace, and hope that faith offers. It is my prayer that all who carry a heavy heart and participate to a support group will come to recognize that the peace and strength found in these gatherings are reflections of God's love and grace—the true source of healing that only He can provide.

Many have asked why I chose Michelangelo's *Pietà* for the front page and as a recurring theme throughout these guidelines. The sculpture embodies tragedy and faith, sorrow and serenity, maternal compassion and divine love, and more. It is both heartbreaking and breathtaking, blending profound grief with a quiet, divine peace—a "beautiful sorrow." By portraying Mary as calm and young as she cradles her Son, Michelangelo emphasizes trust in God's will over despair, showing that even in the darkest moments, grace can transform sorrow into enduring beauty.



The word *Pietà*, meaning pity or compassion, reminds us that in the face of death and loss, no matter what causes our heart to be heavy, our response should be one of deep, tender compassion. Everything in this statue points at the power of faith: from Jesus' peaceful expression, to the delicate touch of Mary's fingers upon Jesus' body speaks of an unbroken bond, a quiet reminder that love endures. In the same spirit, this ministry seeks to reflect that divine compassion, offering comfort, hope, and support to all who grieve or face life's challenges, and helping them encounter the enduring presence of God's love even amidst sorrow. To conclude, this statue to me embodied the foundations of faith, the immense gift that God continuously pours on and wraps us in, when we abandon ourselves into His arms. "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love". (1 Corinthians 13:13 – NIV)

In conclusion, this statue, to me, embodies the words: "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13, NIV). Truly, the *Pietà* reflects the very heart of faith, the immense, tender gift that God continually pours upon us, enfolding us in His loving embrace when we surrender ourselves to Him. It gives us a glimpse of how our heavy heart, even in the darkest moments of our lives, can be held, transformed, and met with divine love, turning even the deepest sorrow into grace.



Short Biography

I am a lifelong Catholic, born and raised in Italy. I came to the United States in my 20s to pursue graduate studies in anthropology at Indiana University in Bloomington, IN, where I got my Master Degree. My undergraduate degree, equivalent to a Bachelor's degree, is in Ancient History. I have been married to my American husband (a Hoosier I met in graduate school!) and we currently live in Olympia, WA.

Although my academic background is not in theology, psychology, or counseling, I would like to share how I arrived at this point in my life. In Italy, I worked in a museum and regularly participated in archaeological excavations. After moving to the US and getting married, I found it challenging to continue in such a specialized field. Instead, as we relocated across the country, I worked for nonprofit organizations focused on the restoration of historical buildings and artifacts.

When we settled in Olympia, I began volunteering at our Parish, as I have done at every place we've lived. Since high school, I have enjoyed visiting the homebound and was trained to bring them the Eucharist. Over time, my involvement in parish life deepened, and my Pastor, Fr. Jim Lee, invited me to join the Parish staff as the Steward for Pastoral Care. At first, I hesitated, feeling I lacked the formal credentials for such a role, but my love for serving the Church led me to accept the position, knowing I had much to learn.

Looking back, I see a common thread in my professional life: a deep love for helping to repair what is broken and fragile. Initially, this passion focused on restoring objects, but working for the Church gave me the opportunity to do more. God gave me a chance to shift from restoring and revitalizing objects to having the opportunity to breathe life back into those who are sick, homebound, and burdened with heavy hearts.

From that day on, I feel humbled and blessed for the trust that God has put on me.

This transition began about 20 years ago, and my dedication to this work continues to grow as I strive to meet the needs of those I serve. From that day on, I have felt humbled and blessed for the trust that God has put on me. In addition to my work with the Parish, I have been a Benedictine Oblate since 2012. I've served on the international council for the preparation of the Benedictine Oblates' world congresses and am currently on the local council at St. Martin's Abbey in Lacey, WA. I do not have a personal website, but you can find more information about me and the ministries I lead on the parish website: <https://saintmichaelparish.org/smp-staff/>

Finally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to everyone who generously and patiently helped review, correct, and edit the guidelines—especially my husband, Andrew, as well as group participants and parishioners. I am particularly thankful to Deacon Ed Shoener, Founder and President of the Association of Catholic Mental Health Ministers; Erica Cohen Moore, Executive Director of the National Association of Catholic Chaplains; Professor Judy Witt, Immaculata University; Maggie Bagalot, who helps me lead support groups, and Chaplain Maureen Cleverley, whose help, trust, and support were essential to bringing these guidelines to completion. I could not have completed these guidelines without their assistance and support.

With Faith, Prayers and Gratitude,
Benedetta Mariotti Reece