

# *Challenging Questions — Faithful Answers*

## *For Parents*

The loss of a child is always difficult to understand, but it can be uniquely troubling when the child was a pre-born or recently born baby. Your loss may be due to a miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy, stillbirth, or early infant death. Society has often minimized or ignored the loss and grief that families have experienced. In the past, mothers and fathers were often expected to move past the experience and little attention was focused upon the fact that they had lost their child. Advances in medical technology, particularly sonograms, are helping to increase awareness of the pre-born child even at early stages of pregnancy. Cultural attitudes are now moving toward greater recognition of miscarriage losses. So much joyful anticipation surrounds the discovery that a new life has entered the world. When that life is cut short, sometimes after just a few weeks, questions arise that we alone cannot answer. The Church reminds us that God works through the natural sciences. Therefore, we must not feel ashamed to seek help from qualified professionals in dealing with our grief. As St. Pope John Paul II wrote, “Sharing in the joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties of the people of every age, the Church has constantly accompanied and sustained humanity in its struggle against pain and its commitment to improve health...the Church looks with admiration at humanity’s progress in the treatment of suffering and improved healthcare...”

Families are encouraged to speak to a priest for more personal guidance and further explanation.

## *Dignity of Human Life*

The Catholic Church has consistently affirmed the dignity of human life. At the moment of conception, a new unique human being is created. The Church has always proclaimed that each human being has inestimable value and dignity and is under our heavenly father’s loving care. In addition, God’s providential care for every person provides us with tremendous joy and hope.

These quotes from the Bible and Catholic teaching are a source of hope and trust:

“Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception.” (CCC 2270)

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.” (Jeremiah 1: 5)

“God created man in his image, in the Divine Image he created him.” (Genesis 1:27)

“By his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every human being. (The Gospel of Life, #2)

## *Baptism*

In many instances of early childhood loss there is no possibility to administer the sacrament of Baptism prior to the death of the child. If a child is alive, the child is to be baptized if this is possible. (CIC, Can.871) However, when the child has already died, baptism should not be administered, since the sacraments are for the living. What becomes of a child who dies in utero is a profound mystery rooted in the reality of original sin, Jesus' instruction to baptize, and God's desire to save all people. The Church's teaching is very consoling for parents who have had miscarriages or who have suffered the deaths of young children before they were baptized.

Paragraph 1261 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church addresses the status of children who die without Baptism:

As regards children who have died without Baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus' tenderness toward children which caused him to say: "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them" (Mark 10:14), allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism. All the more urgent is the Church's call not to prevent little children coming to Christ through the gift of Holy Baptism.

While Baptism is ordinarily required for salvation, the Church recognizes that God is not bound by His sacraments and can still bring about the salvation of the unbaptized. In this vein, the Church has recognized the desire for Baptism as having the same effects of sacramental Baptism when circumstances prevent the actual administration of the sacrament (CCC1258-60). Just as an adult who is invincibly ignorant of the need for Baptism may be saved through an implicit Baptism of desire, even more can we hope that an infant who died without Baptism may be saved.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a Doctor of the Church, said in response to parents asking about the fate of their miscarried child:

*"Your faith spoke for this child. Baptism for this child was only delayed by time. Your faith suffices. The waters of your womb – were they not the waters of life for this child? Look at your tears. Are they not like the waters of baptism? Do not fear this. God's ability to love is greater than our fears. Surrender everything to God."*

*Why did my child have to die? Why did God allow this to happen?*

God does not desire the death of any of His creatures. He desires that we live with Him in Heaven for all eternity. Unfortunately, sin entered the world through the free choice of Adam and Eve. The consequence of sin, as taught by the Council of Trent, is death. Therefore, all human beings are subject to death, regardless of age, stage of development, etc. However, God's

love for us is so profound and His mercy so complete that even death does not mark the end for us. “He abolished death, and He has proclaimed life and immortality through the Good News,” (2 Timothy 1:10)

God did not bring sin and death into the world, but He can derive a greater good from the bad things that happen to us. In fact, He sent His only Son to show us just how this is possible. On Good Friday, many of Christ’s family and friends must also have wondered how God could have allowed such a thing to happen. Easter Sunday contained the joyful, unexpected answer!

Contemplating these truths of the Catholic faith can help us begin to understand that God considers each life, no matter how brief, as precious and irreplaceable. St. Therese of Lisieux wrote in her autobiography, “The sun shines equally both on cedars and on every tiny flower. In just the same way God looks after every soul as if it had no equal. All is planned for the good of every soul, exactly as the seasons are so arranged that the humblest daisy blossoms at the appointed time.”

*Where is my child now? Are children who haven't been baptized in Limbo?  
Will I ever see my child?*

The Church teaches that after death souls go to Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory. “Limbo” was a theory put forth by medieval theologians to explain where unbaptized infants go, but it was never a formal teaching of the Church. While it is impossible for us to say exactly where each deceased soul is, we know that, “The Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partakers, in a way known to God, of the Paschal Mystery,” (Catechism of the Catholic Church #1260). Therefore, the Church entrusts unbaptized children to the mercy of God. “Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus’ tenderness toward children which caused him to say, ‘Let the children come to me, do not hinder them’, allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism.” (CCC#1261) This hope can be extended to the Church’s recognition of “baptism by desire” for those who meet death before having the opportunity to receive the sacrament. Catholic parents generally have this desire on behalf of their children.

Our great hope should be to someday obtain Heaven for ourselves and thereby spend eternity with God and our loved ones. As the Catechism states, “This mystery of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all understanding and description,” (CCC#1027). It was even beyond understanding for those who lived and worked with Christ every day. St. Peter asked, “Lord, where are you going? Jesus replied, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, you will follow me later. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God still, and trust in me. I will not leave you orphans; I will come back to you.” (John 13:36, 14:1, 28)

St. Francis de Sales was able to comfort many parents who struggled with the loss of a child. He once wrote to a woman whose child was close to death, "...my mother, let us leave our children to the mercy of God, who has left his Son to our mercy. Let us offer to him the life of our child, as he has given for us the life of his."

*Is God punishing me for something I did wrong by taking my child away?*

No. God does not bring harm to parents or children, regardless of their actions. Christ explained this clearly when he healed the man who was blind from birth. "His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, for him to have been born blind?' 'Neither he nor his parents sinned,' Jesus answered, 'he was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him.'" (John 9:2,3)

Life is full of trials and suffering and each person experiences them in varying degrees. "Earthly suffering," wrote St. Pope John Paul II, "when accepted in love, is like a bitter kernel containing the seed of new life...Although the sight of a world burdened with evil and misfortunes of every sort is often so wretched, nevertheless, the hope of a better world of love and grace is hidden within it. It is hope that is nourished on Christ's promise. With this support, those who suffer united with him already experience in this life a joy that can seem humanly unexplainable."

*My child's death has left me sad and angry. I don't feel like praying or going to church. Is this wrong?*

It's very common to have so many different feelings after the loss of a child. Sorrow, anger, fear and bewilderment are emotions that may be felt for some time to come.

These feelings of grief often make us want to avoid the very people and things we need the most. It is during such times of intense emotions that the constancy and love of Christ can come to us through his Church. St. Francis de Sales wrote to a man whose son had died, "The word 'dead' is terrifying, as it is spoken to us; for someone comes to you and says, 'your son is dead.' But if some remains of sorrow still oppress your mind for the departure of this sweet soul, throw your heart before our Lord crucified, and ask his help."

We may approach our Lord and pour out our hearts to him in prayer. This can happen in the silence of Eucharistic Adoration, during meditation on the Sacred Scriptures or the Rosary, while receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. All are tremendous sources of grace and renewal. We must resist the temptation to walk away from these avenues that can lead us to the eternal life our children enjoy. As Fr. Benedict Groeschel wrote, "We all must rely on the grace of God to rise up and press on. The Holy Spirit helps us when we have reached the end of our rope. The Holy Spirit enlightens our darkness and strengthens us."

## *What happens to the remains of a miscarried child?*

In many instances of miscarriages there are no remains of the child readily available. However, in the event that remains are available, they may have been procured by the parents, the doctor, or the hospital. The parents, at their option, may ask the doctor or hospital for the remains if they are not readily offered by the medical institution.

## *Burial with dignity and respect*

Parents are encouraged to call their parish whose staff can offer helpful pastoral support.

Catholic Cemeteries will assist parents with coordination of burial arrangements with a priest or deacon.

Mt. Olivet Cemetery information for early pregnancy loss:

All Denver hospitals know that there is a service available, which is: once a month there is a communal burial of children lost early in pregnancy with a graveside service. Plaques can be purchased at a minimal fee with the baby's name. If the loss occurs at home, the cemetery requests that a physician must be contacted, who writes a letter explaining the loss is by miscarriage along with the approximate gestational age. They require this letter before the child can be brought to Mt. Olivet. Call Laura at 303-425-9511 for more information.

## *Where should the rites be celebrated?*

Some rites can be celebrated in the hospital or in the family home. Other rites are better celebrated in a church, home or funeral home. The Funeral Mass is to be celebrated in a church or dedicated oratory or chapel.

The cemetery is the appropriate site for Rite of Committal (with or without the Final Commendation).

Where the Funeral Liturgy in the presence of the body is not possible, a Funeral Mass for deceased children is appropriate after burial.

## *Definitions* – National Institute of Child Health & Human Development

Miscarriage is the term health providers use to describe the loss of pregnancy from natural causes before the 20<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy. Most miscarriages occur very early in pregnancy, in some cases before the woman even knows that she is pregnant. Researchers estimate that, among women who already know they are pregnant, nearly 15 percent will experience a miscarriage.

There are many causes of miscarriage, some of them known and others are unknown. In most cases, there is nothing a woman can do to prevent a miscarriage.

Stillbirth is the loss of pregnancy due to natural causes after the 20<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy. It can occur before delivery or during delivery.

