

# Pastoral Guide and Resources for Those Who Have Experienced a Miscarriage

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- Acknowledging a need to offer comfort to parents who have suffered a miscarriage.
- Prayer and Catholic rituals give solace and concrete remembrance for the child.
- Society has minimized losses from miscarriages.
- The stats for these losses are very high – so this issue needs to be addressed.
- Little known fact: parents are entitled to the remains of the child.
- Response from clergy helps raise awareness of the humanity of the child.
- Pass on this information to your deaconate community.
- Goal: Help families place infant's death in the context of faith and remind them of God's merciful love.
- Promote an annual blessing of the preborn child in the womb in your parish.
- Many parishes find an annual Mass scheduled for families who have lost children during the past year is a powerful and consoling experience of worship. The Mass may be scheduled at any time. Strive to make the Mass open to as wide a variety of needs as possible. Include families of miscarried or stillborn children and even families searching for spiritual healing after an abortion.
- Parish bulletins could regularly carry an invitation to parents of stillborn children or miscarried babies to contact the pastor, deacon, or pastoral minister and arrange for appropriate blessings.
- In the months following the loss of an infant or child, it is important to provide pastoral care. One can simply stay in touch by making a quick phone call, or sending a note of care, or providing resources to support parents in their grief. There may be times when parents do not wish to be reminded of their loss, and in this case, pastoral care ministers follow the lead of the parents.
- Consider a Book of Life Memorial – a place for families to pray and remember babies lost to abortion, miscarriage, stillbirth, illness or injury.

Sample letter verbiage for families who have experienced miscarriage

Dear Friends;

The loss of a child is a pain beyond measure, a sorrow unlike any other. However, we don't have to bear this burden alone. We have Jesus, the "man of sorrows" who lived and died in order that our "sorrow may be turned into joy," (John 16:20). We also have our Blessed Mother Mary who knows firsthand the agony of losing a child. Together, they bring us the Father's love that we need at this trying time.

God cares about your loss and so do I. That's why I want you to have the information in this folder. It includes prayers, suggested readings and answers to common questions. Review these materials when you feel ready and call me if I can be of help to you in the future.

In sympathy,

Father/Deacon \_\_\_\_\_

St. \_\_\_\_\_ Parish

# *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.

### *Parents Prayer*

Dear Lord,

We are saddened and hurt, and grieve the loss of our child. We miss being able to hold and caress our child. We will miss sharing the many experiences with our child that life on earth would have presented. We do not understand and yet we know that our child is also your child. Increase our understanding and strengthen our trust in you. We are comforted by your infinite love and mercy and we are confident that our child is now home and in your loving embrace. Please further comfort us.

Use our suffering to fulfill your will. Grant us peace. Strengthen our hope such that we can see past our tears and look forward with joy to that time when we will also be able to embrace our child and share the eternal joy which our child is now experiencing with you. Jesus I trust in you.

## *Resources for Parents*

### Miscarriage

Elizabeth Ministry International [www.elizabethministry.com](http://www.elizabethministry.com) Miscarriage delivery aids, burial vessels, booklets

Mommies Enduring Neonatal Death [www.mend.org](http://www.mend.org) Support group for women who have lost a child through miscarriage, stillborn, or infant death. Bi-monthly newsletters.

Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep [www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org](http://www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org) Remembrance photography to parents suffering the loss of a baby with the free gift of professional portraiture.

### Prenatal Support

Be Not Afraid [www.benotafraid.net](http://www.benotafraid.net) Offers support for couples who have received the news that their inutero child has a congenital defect from couples who have been there and chose to continue the pregnancy.

My Child, My Gift: A Positive Response to Serious Prenatal Diagnosis  
[www.mychildmygift.com](http://www.mychildmygift.com) Website is for a book filled with testimonies of parents that have received a serious prenatal diagnosis and decided to continue to pregnancy. Links to more resources.

Prenatal Partners for Life [www.prenatalpartnersforlife.org](http://www.prenatalpartnersforlife.org) Support information and encouragement for carrying to term a pregnancy with adverse prenatal diagnosis. Also includes support for raising your child with special needs after birth.

Little Hearts [www.littlehearts.org](http://www.littlehearts.org) Offers support, resources, and education for families with children with congenital heart defects.

Living with Trisomy 13 [www.livingwithtrisomy13.org/content.php](http://www.livingwithtrisomy13.org/content.php) Information and support for women facing pressure to abort their child with trisomy 13 and help for those who have aborted.

Anencephaly [www.asfhelp.com](http://www.asfhelp.com) Information on anencephaly and support groups.

American Journal of Medical Genetics <http://www.cmaj.ca/content/180/7/705.full> Article touching upon the dangers of prenatal diagnostics leading to eugenics.

## *Suggested Reading List for Those Who Have Lost a Child*

“After Miscarriage: A Catholic Woman’s Companion to Healing and Hope” Karen Edmisten

“An Empty Cradle, A Full Heart,” Christine O’Keefe Lafser 100+ short meditations

“Arise From Darkness – What To Do When Life Doesn’t Make Sense,” Fr. Benedict Groeschel – Ignatius Press. Thoughts and prayers for many of life’s trials, including death.

“Fertility Challenges From a Catholic Perspective,” Bernadette Zambri

“Footprints on our Hearts: How to Cope After a Miscarriage, Stillbirth or Newborn Death,” Paraclete Video Productions – 60 minute DVD

“Letters to Gabriel: The True Story of Gabriel M. Santorum,” Karen G. Santorum. Story of a child’s brief life set against the backdrop of the fight for pro-life legislation.

“Life-Giving Love – Embracing God’s Beautiful Design for Marriage,” Kimberly Hahn. Contains an excellent chapter on miscarriage and stillbirth.

“Mourning a Miscarriage”, “Suffering a Stillbirth or Newborn Death” from Elizabeth Ministries – booklets of prayers

Mulieris Dignitatum – Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, St. Pope John Paul II. Beautiful insights on the gifts of femininity, fertility, love, marriage, and more.

Our Babies are Safe With God: An Examination of the Limbo Question, Bernadette Zambri.

Stumbling Blocks or Stepping Stones, Fr. Benedict Groeschel-Paulist Press. Words of wisdom on keeping life’s trials in proper perspective.

Thy Will be Done- Letters to Persons in the World, St. Francis de Sales – Sophia Institute Press. Contains several letters to friends facing the death of a child.

## *Prayer Resources for Children*

“Sometimes Life is Just Not Fair” Fr. Joe Kempf – young children dealing with grief

“A Bunch of Balloons” Dorothy Ferguson – ages 5-9 focusing on what’s left, not just loss

“A Child Remembers” Enid Traisman – ages 8-12 grieving death of a loved one, area for writing about the person, favorite stories, art pages, etc.

“Children Grieve Too” Joy & Dr. Marvin Johnson – info for those working with grieving children from infancy to teen

*“Lord, from you every family in Heaven  
and on earth takes its name. Father, you are  
Life and Love. Grant that love . . . may prove  
mightier than all weaknesses and trials  
through which our families sometimes pass.”*

St. Pope John Paul II

*Lord, God of all creation  
We bless and thank you for your tender care.  
Receive this life you created in love  
And comfort your faithful people in their time of loss  
With the assurance of your unfailing mercy*

(Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers, USCCB, 2007)