

## SOLACE AND STRENGTH IN THE SORROW OF MISCARRIAGE

*It is estimated that one out of four pregnancies ends in miscarriage. This loss can have a profound effect on the mothers, fathers and families of the children who pass away, and many of us may be unsure how best to respond to those who are hurting. Joanne\* shares a personal story of her experience comforting a family going through this heartache.*

While working in my parish office one day, I received a call from our local hospital, where a mom had been admitted with fetal distress. I was grateful that our parish priest, Fr. Thompson, was able to go to the hospital with me to visit this young mother, Amanda. Arriving in her room, we learned that labor was going to be induced because her baby had already died. My head was swimming as I was overcome with what Amanda must be feeling at this difficult time.

At first, I wasn't sure what to do. But then, as a mother myself, I knew how to respond. I stroked her hair and rocked her in my arms. Amanda's husband David, who was traveling, had been notified and was on his way. When he arrived we stepped back, giving the couple a private moment to cling to one another. Eventually, David turned to us and asked, "What do we do?"

Fr. Thompson's response was drawn from deep within the compassion of Mother Church. While the young couple's world was spinning out of control, he offered something they could hold onto—God's unconditional love. He opened the Bible, asked me to read Psalm 139, and offered prayers of blessing.

I also talked to Amanda and her husband about what might happen next, encouraging them to see and hold their baby, take pictures and create keepsakes. Fr. Thompson explained opportunities for a funeral and burial service. Burying those who have died at any age is seen by the Church as a corporal work of mercy. Therefore, the Church encourages a funeral rite for children whose baptism was intended by their parents, but who died before being baptized.

As the doctor came in, we prayed with Amanda and David, and then left the room during the delivery. We stood outside the door praying the Rosary. The stillness of the night was not disturbed by the joyful

sound of a newborn's cry. Instead, it was punctuated with a grief-stricken mother's sobbing.

The doctor spoke to us as he came out of the room with tears streaming down his own face. He said, "I can be the guide to physical healing, but their greatest need is spiritual healing. I am so grateful you are here." We stepped back into the room where we stood in silence and cried with Amanda and David, sharing a powerful moment of awe and grief.

After some time, I spoke to the parents of God creating this little one with them, and of how important their child was and would continue to be to us all. I spoke of God weeping with them, comforting them in the midst of their grief. I asked if they had named him. David's tears ran down his face and splashed onto the tiny baby as he whispered, "William." Fr. Thompson gently touched William's forehead and made the Sign of the Cross with the water of his dad's tears. We spoke of God's love for William, and we commended his soul to God.

Later on, we assisted Amanda and David in connecting with a funeral home and planning a funeral, graveside service and burial for little William. The family found comfort in traditional burial prayers adapted to fit a baby's life and death.

People often assume that the needs of a family in this situation are mostly medical, and that the hospital or medical staff will take care of things. However, miscarriage includes emotional, relational and spiritual suffering that requires assistance from family, friends and church leaders. The immediate need is to help the family become familiar with their options for providing a time and place to acknowledge the dignity and worth of their child. These include simple rites like naming and commendation ceremonies, funeral rites and burial or entombment.

Death may separate us physically, but it does not end the relationship; these moments help strengthen a relationship with the child in a way that will be helpful for long-term healing. They also give the broader Church a chance to grieve and remind others of the significance of this child, who is

entrusted for all eternity to the Lord. A parish community can also support grieving families and honor the lives of their little ones in other ways. Public support might take the form of an annual memorial service or a memorial plaque in the church with the names of the babies who have passed away.

Personal support is also essential. Some people become exhausted from their grief and are unable to maintain household chores. Their lack of energy makes it hard to keep up with everything, so providing meals or doing laundry or other chores can help the family meet their common daily needs. Other times, simply being present is what's needed. Another woman who lost her child through miscarriage said the best response she experienced came from a friend who said, "I came to cry with you" and presented her with a bag full of tissue boxes.

Many people in their grief have almost a compulsion to talk. They desperately want someone to know what they are going through, and repeating the story of their loss over and over can be part of the healing process. The role of the comforter is to listen and reassure them that their thoughts are normal, not to supply them with answers. Many console experience feelings of inadequacy when they have no answers or words of wisdom. They may make statements that are not meant to be theologically flawed or hurtful, but often are. While these comments are meant to take away the pain, simply saying, "I am deeply sorry your baby has died," might often be the best thing to say.

Although we may feel unsure how best to comfort those who mourn, we must stand with them in their

time of suffering. Miscarriage touches the lives of many people, yet all too often this tragedy remains unaddressed. This lack of response not only often leads to unresolved grief, but also fails to clearly manifest our belief that each person, from conception onward, is precious and unique. The death of babies through miscarriage is a time to honor their lives and to support their grieving families. Amanda and David were greatly assisted and comforted by family, friends and a parish community who helped them to memorialize and cherish William. As members of a community of faith ourselves, let us comfort those who mourn as we look forward together to a time when all tears are dried and our families are whole once again.

*\*The story of Joanne, Fr. Thompson, Amanda, David, and William (their names are changed for their privacy) is just one example of the many lives touched by a miscarriage. To find out what pastoral resources may be available in your local area, contact your diocesan office for more information. For liturgical resources, the Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers, Revised Edition (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2007) includes an order of blessing of parents after a miscarriage or stillbirth and The Order of Christian Funerals: Vigil, Funeral Liturgy, and Rite of Committal, Bilingual Edition (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 2002) includes prayers for a stillborn child and his/her parents.*



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