



HOPE AFTER LOSS

The Church and loved ones can support grieving parents following miscarriage, stillbirth or infant loss

By Laura and Franco Fanucci
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The authors spend final moments with their newborn daughter Abby in 2016. Abby and her twin sister, Maggie, were born at 24 weeks and died within two days. *Photo by Jennifer Liv Photography/Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep*

"How many kids do you have?"

The simplest question is still the hardest. Do we give the easy answer or the honest one?

Eight years ago, we lost a baby to miscarriage. Five years ago, our twin daughters died days after birth. Even though we have a busy home today, their absence has redefined our family. "We're raising five boys" or "We have five children at home," we often say. Both are true, yet incomplete. The truth is that we have eight children, and three of them are gone.

Miscarriage, stillbirth and infant loss are more common than many realize. As many as 1 in 4 pregnancies ends in miscarriage before 20 weeks of pregnancy. Stillbirth (the death of a baby before birth, after 20 weeks of pregnancy) and infant mortality rates vary by country, but in the United States, about 24,000 babies are lost each year to stillbirth and the same number die in infancy.

Odds are that you know someone who has suffered this great loss – or you have grieved for your own child. How can we as a Church support grieving parents in their pain?

SPIRITUAL CONSOLATION

The Catholic Church honors each child from the moment of conception – and also mourns with those who mourn. Scripture tells us, "God did not make death, nor does he rejoice in the destruction of the living. For he fashioned all things that they might have being" (Wis 1:13-14). Yet God sometimes permits suffering to happen, while still vowing to "destroy death forever" at the end of time (Is 25:8).

The mystery of God's will in allowing suffering and death, especially of children, is often hard to understand and accept. But parents can find comfort in God's promise of eternal life. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we read: "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" (1261).

The Church offers a "Blessing of Parents after a Miscarriage or Stillbirth," as well as official funeral rites for infants, whether they were baptized or died before baptism. But many parents still find themselves feeling isolated or adrift after the loss of a baby.

Finding support is crucial for the grieving process, even after the physical experience of loss ends. Spiritual comfort can be found in Scripture, the sacraments and saints who have mourned the death of their own children, including Sts. Zélie and Louis Martin, St. Gianna Beretta Molla and St. Paulinus of Nola. Counseling and peer support groups provide ongoing help to couples, especially in navigating relationships after loss.



Franco and Laura Fanucci are pictured with their sons outside their home in St. Michael, Minn. *Photo by David Ellis*

Families often create ways to honor the life of their child – choosing a name for their baby, remembering them on anniversaries and holidays or asking their intercession in prayer. Some parents describe feeling close to their children during Mass, when heaven and earth join together in the communion of saints, rejoicing in the Eucharist.

Every parish can offer practical and pastoral support for couples and families as part of the pro-life witness of the Church – for example, praying for grieving parents in the Prayers of the Faithful and remembering their children on All Souls' Day. Parishes can also gather local resources for newly bereaved parents (including Catholic cemeteries, counselors and financial assistance for burial costs) or hold an annual memorial Mass to remember babies who have died, whether recently or years ago. Such liturgies can be especially powerful for parents who were not able to bury their children.

KEYS TO COMPASSION

Loved ones often want to reassure parents that “God has a plan” and “You can try again.” But well-meaning encouragement falls short in the face of devastating grief. Instead, friends and relatives can offer concrete support – like dropping off a meal or helping with household chores – and continued prayer, such as remembering their child on the anniversary of their loss.

Often the simplest statements of care mean the most: “I love you. I’m here for you. You and your baby won’t be forgotten.” Sitting with parents in their grief and listening to their story is a powerful act of compassion, offering comfort without trying to fix their pain or minimize their loss.

Many couples do conceive again. But pregnancy after loss can bring anxiety, as both mother and father face their greatest fears. The spiritual challenges of pregnancy and parenting after loss are real, and couples need the compassionate care of loved ones and health care providers.

Not all couples go on to have living children. They may face recurrent loss or secondary infertility, discern not to conceive again, or choose parenthood through fostering or adoption. Each situation deserves sensitivity and prayerful support – an opportunity for the Church to bear witness to Christian hope and minister to those in need.

While we have welcomed more children after miscarriage and infant loss, grief remains a part of our family’s story. As a couple, we have found new callings born of grief, but we still hold the wound of sorrow within our hearts.

Ministering to others who have experienced loss has taught us how the Christian community is called to grow in compassion toward those who mourn. Whenever we draw close to Christ in suffering, we can learn how God works to raise us from death to new life.

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A Mother’s Perspective

Losing our baby to miscarriage was a complete shock. I felt helpless, guilty, angry at God and overwhelmed with questions of “Why did this happen to us?” Only after our baby died did I hear story after story from friends and family who had experienced miscarriage, too. What helped my grief were loved ones who were willing to sit with me in my pain and not try to fix it – the faithful few who acknowledged our baby’s life, prayed for us and remembered our child on the anniversary of our loss.

The deaths of our twins, after pregnancy complications and their premature birth, was even harder. To hold your children as they die in your arms is a deep trauma. We were grateful for help from counseling and support groups as we grappled with our grief and tried to help our living children cope with theirs.

Losing a baby is no small grief. It cannot be brushed aside with cheery hopes of “You can try again!” The physical, mental and spiritual suffering is real and devastating. God has been present to us in our pain, but it has been a long journey to find hope and healing again. — *Laura Fanucci*

A Father’s Perspective

As a husband and father, our miscarriage was bewildering. I’ve always wanted to care for and protect my family, but through miscarriage and infant loss, I felt powerless. I didn’t have the same physical experience of loss as my wife, but the grief was still huge. I could only be present to Laura and our children and grieve with them.

The memory of telling my parents we were having a miscarriage has never left me. I hadn’t yet shared that Laura was pregnant, so they didn’t know we were expecting until I called to tell them of our loss. Going forward, I promised myself I’d never wait to share the joy of a pregnancy with those I love.

The deaths of our twins brought even more intense anger, sadness, denial, fear and doubt in unexpected moments. I found it hard to pray but took comfort in the community of the Church that honored the lives of our children.

I came to understand that we grieved deeply because we loved deeply — and that our grief could never be greater than our love. Holding onto that hope helped me to keep going on the hardest days.

— *Franco Fanucci*

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