

The Role of the Priest with Those Who Aborted After an Adverse Prenatal Diagnosis

There is absolutely no controversy about the psychological devastation of abortion for a “wanted” child, particularly one with a fetal anomaly. The scientific literature is universal in affirming the trauma of abortion in these circumstances.

Individual women (or couples) who have succumbed to medical persuasion to end their disabled child’s life experience a complex array of feelings, including anger (at self, God, and others), disbelief, ambivalence regarding the doctor, hurt that God abandoned them in their hour of need, confusion about the abortion decision, and shock waves of emotional numbness. Clearly, what happened was wrong, but gentleness is the key to helping these mothers (or couples).

Consider offering a prayer service for the baby to help the mother reach closure. She may not know where the child’s body is buried, if it is buried, or if it has been disposed of as medical waste. In many of these circumstances, the pregnancy was desired. She and the father of the baby may have been living in a state of terror and grief throughout the diagnostic process. Offer to speak to the couple together and speak about how men typically process grief differently than women. Reach out to the father when the woman is not present and ask him how he is doing. If she is present, he may cover his feelings and focus only on protecting and caring for her. Privately, a man may speak to another man and be willing to acknowledge his loss.

You may be approached to be pastorally present in an uncomfortable situation. In light of the increasing tests now available to determine the health of the unborn child, you may find yourself dealing with parents who were caught in overwhelming situations and made tragic decisions.

Clearly, in the Scripture stories of Jesus with women, his response was always gentle; he healed them and called them to a new life. Nothing is gained for anyone when our response is harsh or judgmental. This can drive people away from the Church instead of calling them to conversion.

Often couples whose doctors have recommended terminating pregnancy due to a grave prenatal diagnosis seek the advice of their pastor *before* deciding whether to abort or to carry their child to birth.

Suggestions on how to counsel such couples are given in Appendix A in this manual, beginning on page 83, along with resources helpful to all parents of children with life-threatening or severe disabilities.

Appendix A

The Role of the Priest with Those at Risk of Aborting Due to an Adverse Prenatal Diagnosis

Today, nearly every pregnant woman is exposed to a number of diagnostic tests designed to discover problems with the baby or pregnancy. A problem diagnosis will usually cause the doctor to recommend a termination of pregnancy. The doctor may honestly believe that it is “easier” or less risky to end the pregnancy early. He may state that it is more compassionate to “let the baby die now.” He’ll assure the parents that no one has to know. Often though, in reality, his advice may be motivated by the fear of a malpractice or a “wrongful life” lawsuit, in which the parents seek lifetime support from the doctor’s insurer, claiming that the doctor failed to advise them fully about the extent of their child’s disabling conditions.

Working in conjunction with your diocesan Project Rachel office and respect life office, it is advisable to develop a list of parents who have endured early infant loss, completed a pregnancy with a poor diagnosis, or are parenting a special-needs child. These parents can be valuable resources for other parents who are facing the anxiety of a poor diagnosis and are being pressured to abort. It is also wise to have contact information handy for pro-life obstetricians, as well as the specialists in high-risk pregnancies.

Advice to Priests

Mary Kellett, a Catholic mother of eleven, who founded Prenatal Partners for Life after her youngest child was diagnosed *in utero* with trisomy 18, offers this advice to priests in counseling parents:

Ending the life of a child by early induction is an abortion. Every mother grieves for the loss of her child she aborts. Then she grieves the unknown and the “what ifs.” By allowing God to decide the fate of her child, a mother heals more fully, and in the end, after all the pain heals, she is joyful. There are no regrets. Carrying that child to term doesn’t harm the family or inflict pain upon the pre-born child. What it does is teach the virtue of patience and dependence on God.

When a couple comes in search of answers in their sorrow, it is crucial to do the right thing by counseling them to love that child for as long as God wills it. Such parents come in search of God’s love and God’s truth and God’s will. Priests are the pillars that make the world strong. Stand strong for life.

Helpful Responses

Parents who were given a negative prenatal diagnosis offer the following suggestions as helpful comments in accepting their situation with trust in God:

- God will give you every grace you need.
- I hear your pain. God hears your pain. God loves you and calls all of his children to embrace the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death. He will be with you and never leave your side.
- You are united to Christ through your suffering.
- God has chosen you to be the mother of this special child.
- Go to our Blessed Mother. She knows your pain and will wrap you in her mantle.
- Name your baby, talk to your baby, and love your baby like any mother would.
- Create wonderful memories of this special time while he or she is still alive and protected in your womb.
- Remember that God can and does perform miracles. Don't be afraid to ask, and don't be afraid to hope.
- Every life is created by God and has a purpose.
- These special babies bring with them many spiritual gifts and grace.
- If your baby doesn't make it to term, there is a Baptism by desire.
- No matter how long your baby lives, he will be your child for all eternity.

Hurtful Responses

Parents also offered suggestions on what not to say (things that may cause confusion and lead a woman to end her pregnancy):

- Only you know what is best for you and your family.
- This is between you and God.
- You need to keep your own health in mind.
- This has got to be hard on your body.
- What do you think is the right thing to do?
- This is a complicated matter.
- Follow your own conscience.
- I'm worried about your mental health.
- Listen to the doctors and do what you think your heart tells you to do.
- If your choice is made with love, it can't be wrong.

Additional Resources

In addition, you can recommend that the parents visit these Web sites:

morninglightministry.org

Morning Light Ministry is a Catholic ministry for bereaved mothers and fathers who have experienced the death of their baby through ectopic pregnancy, miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant death up to one year old. This ministry also welcomes bereaved parents of other Christian denominations, bereaved parents of other faiths, and bereaved parents of no religious affiliation who are struggling with the very notion of faith.

The Hope in Turmoil section of the site provides information and support for those struggling with a poor prenatal diagnosis.

Morning Light Ministry offers help via telephone across Canada and the United States. All telephone help is provided by bereaved parents who have been trained over the course of many months.

www.benotafraid.net

Benotafraid.net is an online outreach to parents who have received a poor prenatal diagnosis. The family stories, articles, and links on this site are presented as a resource for those who may have been asked to choose between terminating a pregnancy or continuing on despite the diagnosis. The *benotafraid.net* families faced the same decision and chose not to terminate. By sharing their experiences, they offer encouragement to those who may be afraid to continue on.

www.childrensmemorial.org/depts/fetalhealth/overview.aspx

The Institute for Fetal Health in Chicago is a national resource. It provides an opportunity to speak to world experts and obtain good information on anomalies and treatment strategies. The Institute's Web site states, "Using a multidisciplinary approach, the Institute for Fetal Health provides prenatal consultation and pediatric care planning for pregnant women identified as carrying babies with birth defects or medical problems." Parents can self-refer, or their physician can make the contact.

www.prenatalpartnersforlife.org

This site, developed by Mary Kellett, offers support, information, and encouragement for carrying to term with an adverse prenatal diagnosis, as well as support for raising a child with special needs after birth. Parents whose children have been newly diagnosed with a birth defect are put in touch with parents of children with a similar birth defect so the experienced parents can offer support, information, and advice on caring for their children until the day God calls them home.

www.elizabethministry.com/prenatal.html

Elizabeth Ministry International offers families who have received a poor prenatal diagnosis spiritual and compassionate support through mentoring companions, development of birth plans, labor and delivery presence, memorial and burial services, retreats, prayer, blessings, support groups, community assistance referrals, and an extensive collection of additional resources.

Information about perinatal hospice can be found at the following sites:

www.choicesmc.org/pages/pregnant/perinatal.php

www.aaplog.org/PositionsAndPapers/PerinatalHospice.aspx?fileID=1

www.perinatalhospice.org