

# INTRODUCTION

*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted.*

—Psalm 34:19

The hard reality of losing a child in miscarriage, stillbirth, or during infancy teaches us about ourselves and our social systems, values, and priorities. It also can teach us much about our Catholic faith and, perhaps most of all, about our God. This includes what we learn from our bodies and from our experiences in relationship to one another. It can be tricky to discern where truth and experience overlap sometimes, and where they don't, but the overlap is where we grow deeper in our relationship with God. And often, especially for those of us who are early-loss parents, those experiences are the negative experiences. Because of this, I have occasionally described myself as a theologian, not of academic training but of hard knocks. After all, as Dorothee Soelle writes, "Theology originates in pain."<sup>1</sup>

Our pain is often our point of departure for understanding ourselves, God, and the world around us. And, as St. John Paul II wrote in his 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (*Faith and Reason*), "The chief purpose of theology is to provide an understanding of Revelation and the content of faith" (93). So, we start with a question, often a question deriving from pain, and we search in scripture and in tradition to find the answer. Short of an answer, we may search for a metaphor that furthers our understanding, an image that gives us a way to grapple with mystery without solving it, or a prayer that communicates our confusion to God.

The emphasis that traditional theology has placed on perinatal loss has been limited. And yet for Catholic loss families, questions that emerge from perinatal loss may fundamentally define their understanding of revelation and the content of their faith. They, too, often become theologians of hard knocks out of necessity. A crucial lesson I have learned from many of them is that there is a special kind of courage required to engage theology and ask difficult questions about who God is and who we are as God's beloved people in the very difficult moments of most intense suffering. The concept of God's comfort is one thing; the idea of trying to find God, especially in truth or in beauty, in something as horrible as the death of a child requires bravery. I'm grateful to the many loss families and theologians—those born of academic training and those born of pain and necessity—who have modeled that bravery for me over many years.

Since you have picked up this book, I imagine you have questions: *What are Catholics supposed to do after the death of a child? Where can I as a loss parent find support from the Church, or how can the Church better support loss parents? How can babies die and God be good?*

I've been there. And with some of these questions, I'm still there. As a Catholic bereavement doula who walks with families through miscarriage, stillbirth, and infant loss—and as a loss mom myself—I have daily moments of sorrow, frustration, exasperation, or confusion about the existence of early loss. And this is very normal; loss and grief often make us think about or even reconsider the foundational beliefs on which we build our lives.

In particular, perinatal loss—the death of a very young child—can threaten our understanding of who we are and what we are meant to do in this world. Even without experiencing perinatal losses, just the fact that they happen may prompt us to ask, “What is the point of life if someone is created just to die so quickly?” or “How does God feel about suffering and death?”

*Perinatal loss* is the term used to describe three types of death for very young children. *Miscarriage* is the unintended loss of a baby between conception and twenty weeks' gestation. *Stillbirth* is the unintended loss of a baby between twenty weeks' gestation and birth. *Infant loss* is the unintended loss of a baby before their first birthday.

To the best of our knowledge, a miscarriage occurs in one of every four pregnancies; a stillbirth, in one of every one hundred; and an infant loss, in five of every thousand. Given these statistics, most Catholic communities

include parents who have experienced an early loss. These loss parents may be desperately seeking answers to these same questions but in a way that is specific to their own experience and their own baby. This book will provide information across a multitude of experiences, so not all of it will apply to any one family's experience. But every early-loss family will find some connections with the information offered here. I hope you also find consolation.

Because the age of a baby can make an important difference in someone's lived experience of miscarriage (and can help medical teams make better decisions), you may hear references to the baby's age, calling a baby an "embryo" or "fetus." Miscarriage can happen to a human being in four growth stages: zygote (from conception to a few days old), blastocyst (from a few days old to ten to twelve days old), embryo (from ten to twelve days old to nine weeks old), or fetus (from nine weeks old to birth). For the purposes of this book, I will refer to the baby as a baby and give a specific marker of age when helpful.

## Practical Help and Guidance

Early loss highlights fundamental realities about life, death, and suffering that are crucial to our relationship with God. But Catholic teaching on early loss is not easy to find. For example, there is no encyclical—official letter from the pope on Church teaching—about perinatal loss. Miscarriage and stillbirth are not mentioned in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. A quick search can leave loss parents and those supporting them confused and empty-handed. However, beautiful teachings, stories, and resources exist throughout Catholic theology. These can bring comfort and hope in challenging situations.

While there are many wonderful Catholic books on early loss, most of them fall into the categories of devotional, journal, or memoir. While these can be helpful, what has been missing—until now—was a compilation of those resources. That's what this book is: a compassionate guide to Catholic teaching about perinatal loss, focusing on the baby, the family, God, and the Church.

I wrote this book because, like many other loss parents, I needed this book. When I had questions that tore at the very fabric of who I understood God to be, I needed an accessible, compassionate, realistic resource. And, as

a sociologist who studies family formation and a bereavement doula who walks with families through early loss, I saw this same need reflected in many of the Catholics I encounter on a regular basis. I hope this book will be that starting point resource for those who want or need to understand Church teaching.

I also wrote this book to help make supporting others easier. As a doula and an educator who trains others to support through loss, I know that loss parents are not the only ones suffering from the lack of easily accessible information from the Church. Those who support parents (friends, priests, fellow parishioners, ob-gyns, midwives, doulas, etc.) often do not have the spiritual tools or resources to walk alongside them through a loss. I hope this book provides a basic overview of Catholic teaching and offers help for accompanying those who mourn. I hope this book helps make supporting others easier.

## Who Should Read This Book?

This book is designed for parents who have experienced an early loss and for the people supporting them. If you are a loss parent, this book will accompany you through questions you may have about your baby, yourself, God, faith, grief, and Catholic teaching. Some of you will struggle a great deal because of your loss and the grief and confusion it may bring. Others of you may be less changed or affected by your loss and perhaps feel discomfort or even guilt because of that. Please know there is no one right or wrong, better or worse, way to respond to the loss of a child. Each of us needs to attend to our particular journey.

If you are a Catholic support person, this book will give you strategies for understanding, communicating, and living out Church teaching as you comfort bereaved parents and families. This book can serve as a guide for all members of the Church—laity and clergy alike.

If you are a non-Catholic support person—such as a birthworker with Catholic clients, or a friend of a Catholic family who just experienced a loss—let this book be your handbook for cultural and religious understanding as you accompany Catholics through a loss.

Finally, if you are simply curious about what the Catholic Church teaches regarding perinatal loss, this book will introduce you to core principles

that shape Catholics' lived experience and offer you resources for further study.

## Toward a Catholic Understanding of Perinatal Loss

A Catholic understanding of perinatal loss, or, in other words, a Catholic *theology* of perinatal loss, is like a theology of disability, a theology of development, or a theology of liberation since it is a study of, or effort to understand, how we can better seek, know, and love God in this world (CCC 1) given a particular lived experience shared by a particular group of people. Sometimes this may take a very abstract and philosophical tone—when we ask questions such as, “What is God’s relationship to suffering?” And sometimes this takes a very practical tone—when we ask questions such as, “Why won’t my priest baptize my baby?” But both kinds of questions are crucial to ask and understand in order to know, love, and serve God when babies die yet we continue to live.

Despite the tragically common nature of perinatal loss, there are many practical and theological questions about loss that have not yet been answered in a systematic way. In this book, we will address those questions that loss families have while also attending to the questions of support people, especially representatives of the Church, family, friends, and acquaintances, and birthworkers who want to better understand how the Catholic faith offers comfort, encouragement, and hope to those facing these losses. While we cannot know with certainty who God is, considering different imperfect and incomplete metaphors can give us new insights on God and on our relationship with God. Contemplating what our experiences as loss parents teach us and teach others who yearn to know God more deeply can be a beautiful and educational work of contemplation or reflection.

Woven throughout this book are five themes for reflection that come from my work with loss families as well as my own loss experiences. I share these with you here at the beginning in the hope that these help you frame your own questions, learning, and integration of experience and faith more easily.

## Five Themes for Reflection

### THE RELATIONSHIP OF SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY

As science has advanced, we have become better able to identify pregnancy with certainty. This makes a massive difference in the pastoral needs of families. Infant death has decreased significantly over the centuries due to scientific advancement in how we can care for small children who are in danger of death, and our understanding of loss has expanded into mere weeks after a child's conception. These amazing developments prompt me to wonder if and how Church teaching will reflect the realities we now better understand. For example, the language the Church uses about original sin slips back and forth between "born" and "conceived," yet we know that scientifically these are very different moments with significant pastoral implications for families who experience miscarriage or stillbirth.

Even beyond Church teaching, I wonder about theology. If I could ask Thomas Aquinas one question, it would be whether he is alright with in utero Baptism now that we know what amniotic fluid is and how we can affect children in utero. As we continue to learn more about how the human body works, I hope theologians continue to engage with medical and other scientific discoveries. Truth must point to God, and theology based on misunderstandings about the human body cannot draw as near to truth as can theology that carefully interfaces with the wondrous realities of the human body, which continue to be uncovered by the sciences.

### INTERDEPENDENCE

While a significant amount of theological ink has been poured over the topic of babies' helplessness as a metaphor for our dependence on God, such a metaphor is incomplete without considering its implications regarding perinatal loss. While our dependence on God is set within the context of God's omnipotence, parents are not omnipotent. Even when parents work desperately to procure the best for their child, the worst can still occur.

We are all interdependent. But some human bodies show interdependence more than others. Young bodies, old bodies, disabled bodies like mine—any body that places demands upon the people around it is likely to be seen by many as a menace or, as Dr. Amy Kenny so aptly puts it, a prayer request.<sup>2</sup> Bodies can make visible the demands personhood makes

upon us all. Just so Pope Benedict XVI proclaims in *Caritas in Veritate*, “As a spiritual being, the human creature is defined through interpersonal relations. The more authentically he or she lives these relations, the more his or her own personal identity matures. It is not by isolation that man establishes his worth, but by placing himself in relation with others and with God. Hence these relations take on fundamental importance” (53).

## HUMANITY IN HEAVEN

Consider how inhospitable our fallen world is to human beings with certain genetic makeups, how quickly it fails to support life. This is one of the most commonly known causes of perinatal loss: genetic mutations that are “incompatible with life”—that is, life here on earth. I’ve often wondered what humanity looks like in heaven. This earth cannot sustain all of the genetic variation that humanity has produced, which means that the representations of our beings that you and I see each and every day are just one small bit of the broad range of human beings that must truly exist. I often wonder about the diversity of the bodies once inhabited by those now in heaven that aren’t represented here on earth: What do our brothers and sisters and parishioners and children look like there? How do they see the image and likeness of God in each other in ways that are obscured to us by our fallen world’s inability to provide life compatible with all humankind?

## PARENTING

One of my favorite questions to ask my clients is, “What does parenting your child look like today?”

There is often a cultural assumption that if your child has died, you’re no longer a parent, or at the very least, you are no longer parenting. As a sociologist who studies parenthood, I fully believe this is inaccurate. We do parent our deceased children, but it looks so different than we expect. It can look like the vase of flowers refreshed every week in honor of Baby February; it can look like the whispered prayer at night, “Baby J, pray for us”; and it can look like a donated bike rack at an elementary school or a quiet annual donation of diapers to the local women’s shelter. Ritual is a fundamental aspect of grief, but it’s also a fundamental aspect of parenthood.

“What does parenting your child look like today?” Sometimes it looks like an emptiness. We parent our children across the divide of time and

space, and such parenting is fundamentally defined by that separation. As C. S. Lewis wrote, “The act of living is different all through. Her absence is like the sky, spread all over everything.”<sup>3</sup> It’s a gone-ness that permeates each second of our existence, whether we’re considering it or not.

“What does parenting your child look like today?” Sometimes it looks like desperation. It looks like the cry echoing from Kate Bowler’s book: “Don’t go, don’t go, you anchor my life.”<sup>4</sup> It looks like Hagar, so overwhelmed by her sadness and guilt over her son’s imminent death that she sobbed a ways away from him, unable to bring herself to watch him die (Gn 21). And, on the healthy days we deal with that desperation, it looks like accepting the help from friends—or in Hagar’s case, angels—who want to make sure that through all the pain, you know that you and your child are loved.

What does parenting your child look like today? It looks like participating in creation with God. St. John Paul II wrote in *Evangelium Vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*), “We wish to emphasize that God himself is present in human fatherhood and motherhood quite differently than he is present in all other instances of begetting ‘on earth.’ Indeed, God alone is the source of that ‘image and likeness’ which is proper to the human being, as it was received at Creation. Begetting is the continuation of Creation” (43). None of that cocreation is negated by a child’s death. No love of God or father or mother disappears because of his or her death. And your parenthood does not die even when your child does.

As Catholics, we believe in an afterlife, which means we continue to exist in relationship with our children. And while that relationship is much more unclear than it would have been had they survived or was when they were alive, that relationship exists. In *Spe Salvi* (*Saved in Hope*), Pope Benedict XVI directly addressed this reality: “The belief that love can reach into the afterlife, that reciprocal giving and receiving is possible, in which our affection for one another continues beyond the limits of death—this has been a fundamental conviction of Christianity throughout the ages and it remains a source of comfort today. Who would not feel the need to convey to their departed loved ones a sign of kindness, a gesture of gratitude or even a request for pardon?” (48). And this connection goes even beyond expressing love for another to include the type of guidance and protectiveness that we may have expected to give our children through different means. One of the duties of parents of living children is to raise them to



grow closer and closer to God. *Spe Salvi* continues, “In the interconnect-  
edness of Being, my gratitude to the other—my prayer for him—can play  
a small part in his purification. And for that there is no need to convert  
earthly time into God’s time: in the communion of souls, simple terrestrial  
time is superseded. It is never too late to touch the heart of another, nor is  
it ever in vain. In this way we further clarify an important element of the  
Christian concept of hope. Our hope is always essentially also hope for  
others; only thus is it truly hope for me too” (48).

Each prayer for our children, each loving thought of them, each work  
of mercy in their honor is a way that we parent them and they call us closer  
to the God in whose lap they play.

## THE VALUE OF OUR LIVES

In a world that demands that I make more money or babies or both to prove  
my worth, God’s call is clear. My worth is simply in my existence. Wisdom  
1:14 reads, “For he fashioned all things that they might have being [that is,  
exist].” And then they do not simply exist; they exist entirely surrounded  
by the love of God. *Evangelium Vitae* reads, “There too, when they are still  
in their mothers’ womb—as many passages of the Bible bear witness—they  
are the personal objects of God’s loving and fatherly providence” (61). God  
loves each person who has ever existed, and this love will never end. I take  
solace in a vision that Julian of Norwich records on God’s love: “At the  
same time, he showed me something small, about the size of a hazelnut,  
that seemed to lie in the palm of my hand as round as a tiny ball. I tried  
to understand the sight of it, wondering what it could possibly mean. The  
answer came: ‘This is all that is made.’ I felt it was so small that it could  
easily fade to nothing; but again I was told: ‘This lasts and will go on lasting  
forever because God loves it. And so it is with every being that God loves.’”<sup>5</sup>  
I often imagine each child whose family I work with being held in the palm  
of God’s hand. And they will go on existing forever because God loves each  
of them, and God could never stop loving them.

These five themes form something of the backdrop for the questions  
and concerns I address in the chapters of this book. I share some of my own  
story; insights, sorrows, and questions shared by clients over the years; and  
the wisdom, comfort, and hope I have found in our Catholic teaching and  
tradition. I also address some lingering and particularly painful questions

that for many of us loss parents remain not entirely answered. Such is the nature and beauty of the Church, whose doctrine continues to be made clearer as we grow in faith within a world that also continues to yield new information, new understandings, and new truths.

## Chapter Overviews

In chapter 1, “Understanding Perinatal Loss,” there is an expanded description of perinatal loss, including the definitions of important medical, bereavement/grief, and theological terms. Some of the language will be already quite familiar to some of you, but other terms are more obscure. There is a wide audience for this book, and so I want to begin by helping everyone to share the same understanding of various aspects of the medical, spiritual, and theological matters at play in perinatal loss.

I note some considerations that families and support people may have at different points in the timeline of loss and based on the age of the baby at the time of death. We will then explore answers to basic theological questions about what perinatal loss is. We conclude with my suggestions for support people regarding companionship someone through the loss of a child before the first birthday.

In chapter 2, “Baby,” we will explore Church teaching about the baby who dies, especially before birth or Baptism. We will discuss what the Church teaches about the souls of these children, where babies go after death, and what our relationship to them is now, as parents and as members of the Church. The suggestions for support people include preparations for meeting a baby who has died or will die soon and advice for talking about the baby from a theological point of view.

Chapter 3, “Those Who Mourn,” provides key information about normal and healthy elements of grief for different bereaved family members and loved ones. We particularly address questions about parents, mothers, mothers who give birth, fathers, siblings, and other family members. Support people can find helpful tips for supporting each individual within the section that answers questions about their role.

In chapter 4, “God,” we explore questions of God and perinatal loss. We consider theological views of God’s relationship with suffering: *Does God create it? Does God condone it? Does God permit it?* We consider what death and grief teach us about God’s nature and God’s love.

In chapter 5, “The Church,” we will explore the guidance and prayers provided (and not provided) by the Church in cases of perinatal loss. We will answer the most practical questions loss parents often have—those regarding remains, sacraments, and other rituals (by which I mean other prayers and ways of commemorating their child). We will then address these same questions but from the perspective of Church representatives. And finally, we will conclude with some suggestions for how other support people can participate in different Catholic rituals, whether these people are Catholic or not. Throughout this chapter, we will also highlight a few particularly comforting prayers for loss parents and those around them.

In the epilogue, we seek comfort in some of the beautiful prayers and saintly companions the Church offers loss parents and their support people.

This book is designed to help meet your needs at various points along your specific path. You can skip directly to the chapter you need today, or you can work through the book sequentially. Either way, as you work through these questions, remember you are not alone. In your grief, support people, loved ones, and the Lord are with you.