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Burial Shows Reverence for Miscarried Baby's Body

Miscarriage is often described as a pregnancy loss that occurs before twenty weeks of gestation. Many people assume that the death of a baby through miscarriage is rare. However, the number of babies who die from miscarriage every year is remarkably high. One out of four pregnancies ends in miscarriage. That means there are close to one million deaths of infants through miscarriage each year. Those statistics tell us many parish members sitting in the pews each Sunday are grieving a loss that calls out for the healing and comfort of the faith community.



Miscarriage has touched the lives of most people. Yet, all too often this crisis remains unaddressed. Not only does our lack of response many times lead to unresolved grief, it denies our belief that life begins at conception. We will only be credible in our fight against abortion when we acknowledge all unborn children have dignity and worth. It is time for church practices to match our respect life convictions. Pastoral care with families suffering miscarriage is greatly needed. A faith community's response will aid the parents in their bereavement and may influence whether their relationship with God deepens or becomes one of alienation.

For too many years both society in general and the faith community specifically have ignored the deep pain and grief families experience through miscarriage. It was believed if no one talked about the baby and removed all evidence of existence, the parents would quickly forget. We failed to realize that this powerful life and death experience had already left an impression in the parent's hearts, never to be forgotten. Death ends life, but not the relationship. Most experts agree that grief can be delayed, but it cannot be denied. Professionals involved in the death and dying movement speak of the importance of memories in the healing of the bereaved. In the case of miscarriage, there are few memories to cherish. The rituals, memorials, burial service and other support offered will provide families the opportunity to remember their child. Yet, few faith communities honor the unborn child, who died through miscarriage, with a proper Christian burial.

The Catholic Church's practice of burial can be traced to the early days of Christianity. Our belief in the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, and the belief in the resurrection of the body, forms the foundation of the Church's reverence for the human body.

Catholics believe the death of a baby through miscarriage is the death of a human being because we believe human life begins at the time of conception. We need to help families mourn their baby's death with proper services. The baby's body is to be placed in a "worthy vessel" and buried in a cemetery. In 1987, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued *Donum Vitae* (Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origins and on the Dignity of Procreation). It stated, "The corpses of human embryos and fetuses, whether they have been deliberately aborted or not, must be respected just as the remains of other human beings."

Cremation was forbidden by the Catholic Church until 1963. The Church continues to prefer and encourage the faithful to bury the bodies of their departed loved ones. Since the church wishes to support the faithful in honoring the life and memory of the departed, cremation is now acceptable if chosen for worthy motives. The cremated remains should also be placed in a “worthy vessel” and buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium. The practice of scattering cremated remains on the sea, from the air, or on the ground, or keeping cremated remains in the home of a relative are not the reverent disposition that the Church requires.

The instruction of the church also states that, if at all possible, the place of entombment should be marked with a plaque or stone memorializing the deceased.

When women miscarry at home, the baby’s remains are often flushed down the toilet in a overwhelming moment of grief and isolation or if in the hospital whisked away and disposed of by hospital staff, sometimes with hospital bio-hazardous waste. Later, some parents begin to feel guilty about the disposal of their baby’s remains. Father Peter West, a New York-based Priest for Life, says these parents shouldn’t blame themselves. Very little education about the dignity of the miscarried baby has made its way into the public forum. “There has been a lack of teaching in this area,” he explains. “Those who have disposed of their baby in a way other than burial should not feel guilty. They just didn’t know. But, in the future, we should try to show greater respect for the sanctity of life by our care for the child who has been miscarried and by making sure that they have a decent and proper burial.”

Today’s funeral industry does not provide many options of “worthy vessels” for a miscarried baby. All too often, no burial is provided or the only casket made available is made of styrofoam and looks similar to a fast food hamburger container. Some hospitals do mass common grave burials for miscarried babies and place many tiny bodies in a single inappropriate container. Proper individual burial vessels should be made readily available to families who need them.

In recent years, the secular society has begun to recognize the need to mourn the loss of miscarriage. Bereaved parents across the country have started forming support groups in an attempt to fill the void. Many hospitals are starting to provide miscarriage bereavement care. All of this is good, but it is now time for the church community to also express our care and act in accordance with our teachings about the sanctity of the unborn through presence, rituals, burial services and memorials. A farewell ritual and dignified burial is needed to recognize the life and death of a baby is not only appropriate but necessary at any gestational age.

**Contact Elizabeth Ministry International
to order appropriate burial vessels
and other resources for miscarriage.**

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