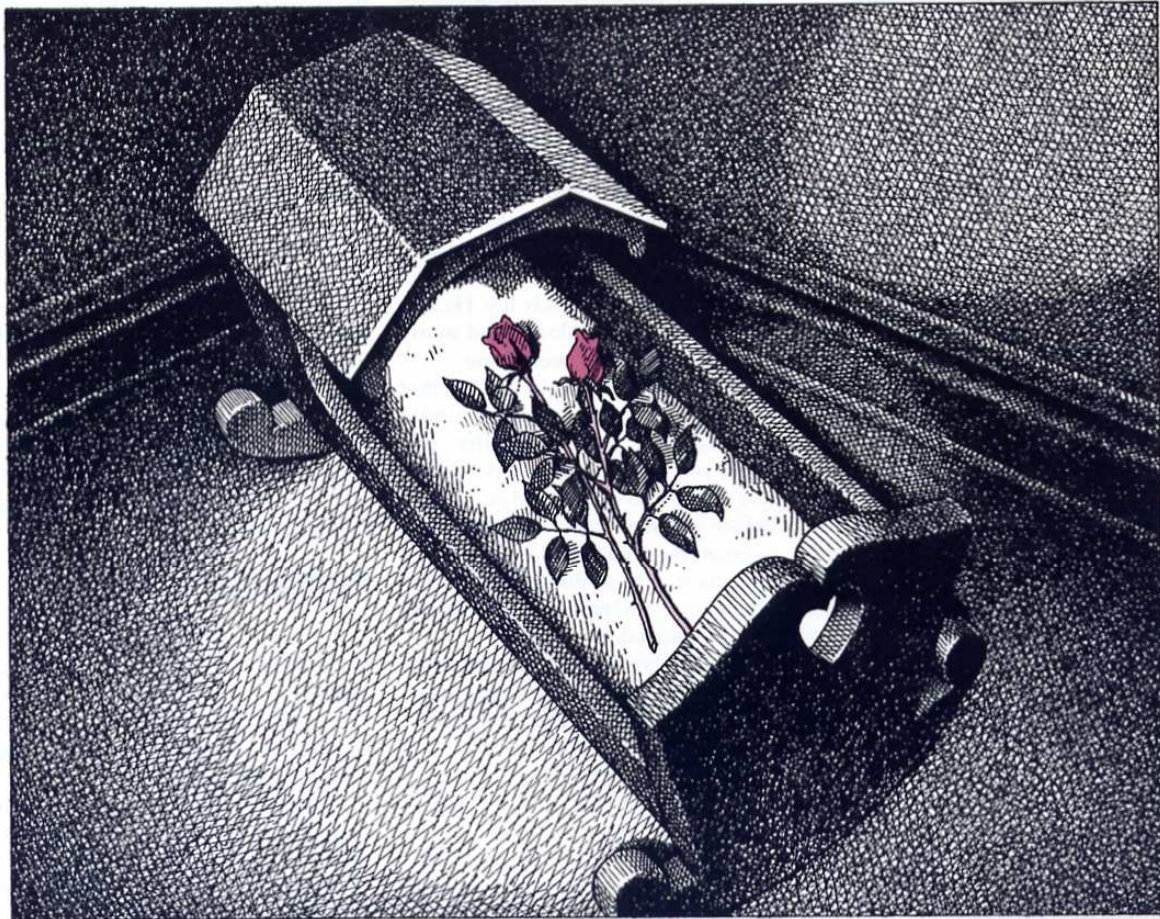


Meghan and Molly deserved a birth announcement



Victoria Ganz Ryan

When my father died at age 65, his death—like his birth—was announced in the local newspaper, in the church bulletin, and at Sunday Mass. Our pastor initiated funeral arrangements, and the bereavement committee guided my mother in her planning. The funeral was delayed four days to give my brothers and sisters time to travel. A priest prayed at the visitation, celebrated the Mass of Christian Burial, and led the grave-side services. It was a fitting protocol because my father's life, as taught by the church,

was sacred from conception and worthy of recognition.

When my identical twin daughters, Meghan Marie and Molly Eileen, died at about seven months' gestation, there was no birth announcement. Their death notices appeared in the local paper but not in the church bulletin—nor were they mentioned from the lectern. Our pastor visited my bedside, but it was my husband who initiated funeral arrangements. Remarks such as "You're going to bury them?"

and "Can't the hospital just take care of it?" were common.

From pulpit and pew we were advised to "keep it simple" and "keep it private." People were stunned when we delayed the service six days until my hospital discharge post-Caesarean delivery. My cousin, a priest, prepared a graveside service that he, our pastor, and a colleague, also a pastor, presided over. The funeral-home director gave us memorial holy cards, a precious detail we had overlooked. More than 50 friends attended the funeral, a sizable crowd for stillborns. We received hundreds of cards, flowers, and food trays. Yet we left the cemetery with a vague uneasiness, a sense of something left undone, unsaid; for the church, despite its prolife position, had viewed our daughters' funeral with less regard because of their place of residence and age at death.

Unlike my father's funeral, which was an anticipated, sanctioned rite of the church, there was no funeral rite for stillborns; and any observance was clearly a parental option. There was no Communion or music, candles or incense, no list of details to consider, no pattern for interaction. We were not in a familiar place (our church) or participating in a familiar ritual (the Mass). It's not that these were denied us blatantly; it's that the burden to recall and request them was plainly ours. My father's funeral was so far removed from the feedback we were getting that I questioned the appropriateness of my expectations; and, feeling intimidated, I kept silent.

Weeks after the burial, at a support-group meeting, I heard a couple say their minister had laid a rose on the altar—as was customary for newborns in their church—the Sunday after their child's stillbirth. I was impressed because I had looked forward to seeing my twins listed in our bulletin as "newly baptized," the birth-announcement equivalent in our parish. It was then I realized what was left unsaid: I never got to say, "I had twin girls!"

Childbearing Catholics grew up in the midst of an emotional, media-laden, abortion-versus-prolife controversy. They have been charged to champion a fetus over a mother's trauma of rape, a mother's terminal illness, and embryonic debilitating conditions. They have been heralded co-creators with God of human life. Yet, when that life is stillborn, they are denied an unequivocal reception of their offspring.

The church has a prolife doctrine dangerously skewed toward conception. The church fails to bring to fruition at the grave the theology it plants in the cradle. Promoting birth rights while minimizing death rites is a contradiction at the very heart of the church's prolife view and is of critical consequence to Catholic parents of stillborns.

When parents are discouraged from practicing customary funereal activities, they are in essence being told that their child is not as important at seven months' gestation as he or she would have been at seven weeks' gestation in an abortion clinic or at 77 years in a convalescent home. To be advised to "keep it simple" is at worst insulting, as if a garish display of sorrow were planned; at best, it implies that a formal effort is easily forfeited. When parents are told to "keep it private," they are being told to keep their grief private as well. Just as losing their child was against the natural order of life, a lack of death rites is against their natural expression of loss. It's the inconsistency between real loss and expressed loss that adds to their grief.

Nonobservance of stillbirths diminishes the sorrow to the public as well. Variations of "think how sad you'd be if you had gone full term" indicate that age flavors the understanding of what truly has happened. Do prolife Catholics really believe their doctrine? They're demonstrating at abortion clinics and being jailed for civil disobedience; yet they are astonished that we named our daughters, astounded that Meghan and Molly had eyelashes and fingernails, agape that we took photographs. The very people who were moved to tears when Jackie Kennedy kissed the President before closing his casket gasp when they learn we embraced our twin daughters.

Is it fair to hold the church responsible for insensitive comments and hurtful remarks? In part, yes; because as a recognized leader, the church has failed to fully give outward signs of acknowledgment. Perhaps if my daughters had been seen wrapped in their baby blankets or if their small, satin caskets had been in view, perhaps if the elbows and knees that kicked me from within for months had been noticed, their births—yes, births—and deaths would have had more credence.

Accepting the birth component of stillbirths seems difficult for even the staunchest Catholic; though, by definition, these mothers indeed give birth: "the beginning of life; the passage of a child from the uterus." They must endure labor

and delivery, often with greater pain from induced contractions or from Caesarean sections. Their bodies still need a six-week recuperating period, and their breasts still fill with milk. My babies were stillborn; but still, they were born.

Abbreviated funerals also limit spiritual involvement when a family needs it the most. It's phenomenal that any Catholic funeral excludes the hallmark of our liturgies, the Mass. A Mass of the Angels could support the parents with familiar surroundings, songs, prayers, and Communion. It could reassure them of God's love when it's the most difficult to believe. It would encourage reluctant supporters to acknowledge the loss simply by attending. A Mass would also mark the gravity of the situation for the surviving siblings who may not understand the emotional upheaval the end of the pregnancy has brought.

When could the Creed's "I believe in the communion of saints . . . the resurrection of the body and life everlasting" coupled with the Memorial Acclamation "Christ has died, Christ is risen . . ." ever be more poignant?

It can be argued that birth and death rites are problematic not because the church is uncaring but because it doesn't know how to help. I believe priests are compassionate. My pastor, for example, who learned of my feelings, responded immediately with an announcement in the bulletin. Our friends in religious orders and the rectory staff sent the cards we cherish most, those that mentioned Meghan and Molly by name. And among the kindest messages we received was one from our former pastor, who wrote, "Remember, they will always be your children." Yes! My children!

So why, if a life is a life, don't priests know how to help through a funeral? One reason they say is that it's an uncommon experience; my pastor had never been in this position, and my cousin only once in eleven years. They also feel there's an air of secrecy on the part of parents; and, consequently, they aren't notified until days or weeks after the fact. Perhaps the perceived secrecy is a couple's hesitancy related to the subtle message of "keep it private."

In the last ten years the emotional aftermath of pregnancy loss has been a frequent topic on television and in books and magazines. It's no longer assumed that mothers recover quickly or fathers are unaffected by stillbirths. The first condolence letter we received was from a Catholic we had never met, and it included a poem she was given when her daughter was stillborn—51 years ago. Most parents don't prefer secrecy; they just don't know with whom to talk.

The message of hurt has taken root in at least a few groups. The hospital chaplain and obstetric nurses, for example, were with us during the sonogram that confirmed fetal demise; with my husband during the delivery; and with me in recovery. When I was in false labor, my obstetrician, a member of our parish, invited me to talk into the night if I needed. I desperately wanted to confide in someone that a part of me was excited because I'd soon see my twins. He replied, "Of course, you are; that's only natural." How infinitely comforting it was to be surrounded by those men and women.

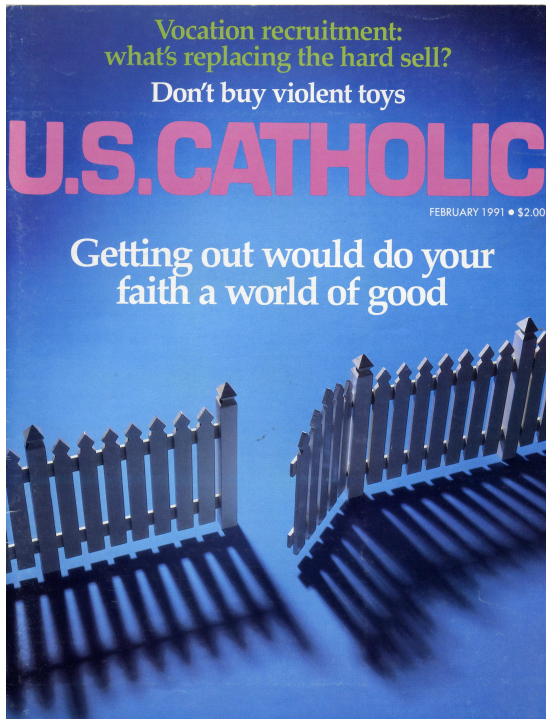
Parents of a stillborn baby need a church that will acknowledge their child's birth. Most need visitors at their bedside who will express an interest in seeing or talking about their baby. They need to hear their son's name from other voices and see their daughter's name in other's penmanship. They need the church to say hello to their child.

Parents need a church that will acknowledge the death of their infant as a human being. They need priests who are comfortable suggesting visitation, Mass, holy cards, and other traditions. They need a church that will risk establishing birth and death rites for stillborns.

The risk of formulating rites is the chance of discovering irreconcilable differences between logical practices and consistent theology. How will the church handle miscarriages when there is no body to view or bury? Will it be enough to suggest a memorial service to a couple who, after battling infertility for eight years, miscarry a third time? Are Catholics as a community prolife enough to endorse a birth-and-death announcement of an ectopic pregnancy, of a baby at six weeks' gestation born to newlyweds, of a presumed pregnancy with umbilical-cord traces but no fetus per se? Given that funerals are for both the living and the dead, won't the inevitable different-but-equal rites philosophy be a variation of the question: at what point after conception should a life have a funeral?

Although Meghan and Molly were stillborn and buried, the government issued green forms, not birth or death certificates. The I.R.S. would not count them as dependents. The insurance company covered none of their funeral expenses. They were literally one breath away from being real to the world.

But Meghan and Molly were real to my husband and me who held them, hugged them, and kissed them for the first and last time. They were as real to us as our breathing sons. Were they as real to the church? □



Note from Victoria: Since this was published, the priests and parishes that I know and have heard about have made changes that greatly enhance their effectiveness in comforting parents of stillborn children.