

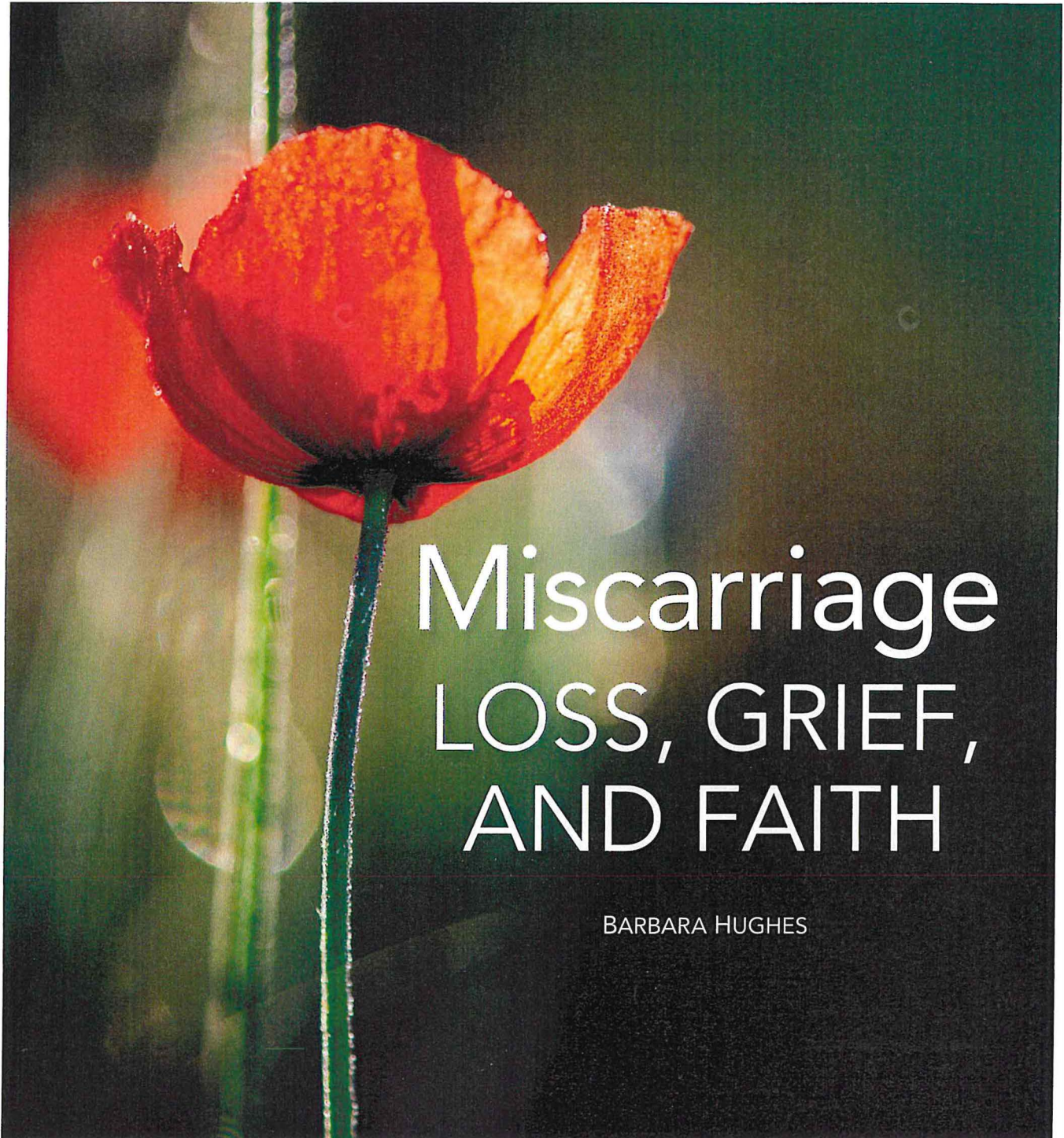
# Catholic

## UPDATE

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## Miscarriage LOSS, GRIEF, AND FAITH

BARBARA HUGHES



## BEARING A LOSS ALONE

Following the death of a loved one, family and friends gather to offer condolences. A funeral service where the deceased might be eulogized amid tears and smiles can help carry the bereaved through the initial stages of grief and loss. However, when a couple experiences a miscarriage, which is the spontaneous loss of a fetus before the twentieth week of pregnancy, the absence of neighbors and church members who drop off casseroles and ask if they can do anything can leave couples feeling very much alone.

In our culture, a miscarriage tends to be treated as a private matter, so it is understandable that without communal support, couples may be reluctant to verbalize their pain. Well-meaning family or friends who lack first-hand experience of the grief that accompanies a miscarriage can unintentionally minimize the emotional pain of the couple. “This may be a blessing in disguise” and other platitudes like, “You’re still young so you can have other children” tend to worsen and intensify rather than soothe a couple’s heartache by denying the void created by the couple’s loss.

## A MOTHER’S GRIEF

To lose an infant through a miscarriage presents a unique set of circumstances. Prior to death, the fetus has no personal history. The changes that took place within the mother’s body were mostly invisible, as were the hopes, dreams, and even fears that she carried deep within her heart. Beyond what could be seen on an ultrasound, this little miracle of life became living proof of a couple’s love for each other. However, the finality of this hidden but very real life inside the mother’s body can give rise to relational discord among even the most loving couples. Although it has become more common to include the father by announcing, “We’re

pregnant,” it is the woman who physically experiences changes within her body. Therefore, when a miscarriage occurs, it’s quite natural that her experience of the infant’s demise becomes all-encompassing, particularly during the days and weeks that follow. Her body remains a continuing reminder of the tiny life that is no more, yet continues to wound her heart.

During such conflicted times, the words of the prophet Jeremiah may shed light on what is taking place: “Why cry out over your wound? There is no relief for your pain” (Jeremiah 30:15). Not unlike the women in Scripture about whom was written, “A voice was heard in Ramah / sobbing and loud lamentation, / Rachel weeping for her children, / and she would not be consoled / since they are no more” (Matthew 2:18, see Jeremiah 31), the mother’s loss is very real. As an archetype for Mary, Rachel invites grieving mothers to turn to our heavenly mother who weeps with all who know the pain of holding in their heart the death of a son or daughter.

## EVERYONE GRIEVES DIFFERENTLY

Grief is a personal thing, and every person who experiences it should feel free to decide when she or he is ready to engage in outside activities. Despite a woman’s best efforts, and perhaps just when she feels she is able to move on, waves of sorrow may engulf her with little or no warning. I recall going out to dinner with my husband following such a loss. I thought I was ready, but as soon as we sat down, the clamor of conversation and laughter in the restaurant came down on my heart like an anvil. I realized immediately that I was not ready for casual encounters, and I told my husband I had to leave. There is no hard-and-fast timetable for grieving the death of someone we love. Sharing feelings with a compassionate friend can be helpful, but if grief becomes debilitating, professional help may be needed to aid the healing process.





## THE ROLE OF FAITH

When pregnancy results in the death of an infant beyond the twentieth week of pregnancy, the death is regarded as a stillborn, and a graveside service and interment in a cemetery is always an option. Depending on the circumstances and the viability of the infant at the time of delivery, death may occur before or after an infant leaves the mother's womb. Whether the death is sudden or has been expected because of an early diagnosis that makes a miscarriage likely, the grief and sense of loss can be devastating, yet not without hope.

I know of one expectant couple who was told that a severe chromosomal deficiency made it unlikely for their infant to be carried to full term, and that even if the child was viable at birth, he or she likely would die shortly after...which is what happened. As painful as knowledge of the impending death was for them, the information helped them prepare for the worst, but it was their faith and God's grace that revealed a beautiful example of the presence of God even in the direst of circumstances. In the weeks leading to the birth, the couple named their infant *in utero* Rua, which means "breath of God." In doing so, they were able to immortalize her soul in their hearts and give thanks for every moment their baby, though sight unseen, was with them. In their minds, they visualized God waiting to embrace their baby girl because he loved her even more than they did. Yes, their hearts were broken when she passed from their hands into the arms of God, but they also felt a sense of purpose as they knew without a doubt that little Rua was even closer to God than they were. In fact, so heroic was their love for their little girl that the mother continued to pump milk from her breasts to donate to the neonatal intensive care unit at a hospital for children.

My own experience of giving birth to a stillborn infant was unexpected and quite different. Due to intrauterine decomposition, even the gender of the infant had been indistinguishable. However, knowing that regardless of the baby's physical condition, my child will one day be perfectly restored and glorified was comforting. As members of the body of Christ, we believe "God in his almighty power, will definitively grant incorruptible life to our bodies by reuniting them with our soul through the power of Jesus' resurrection" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 997). As people of faith, we believe our life on earth is a temporary pilgrimage to a life that will never end. "God's creative and sanctifying action culminates in the proclamation of the resurrection of the dead on the last day and in life everlasting" (CCC 988).

## GOD IS MERCIFUL

Regarding unbaptized infants, there is no mention of "limbo" in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In 1984, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (who would become Pope Benedict XVI) wrote that the concept of limbo should be abandoned because it was "only a theological hypothesis" and "never a defined truth." In 2005, the International Theological Commission concluded, "There is greater theological awareness today that God is merciful and wants all human beings to be saved. Grace has priority over sin, and the exclusion of innocent babies from heaven does not seem to reflect Christ's special love for the little ones."

Some parishes have annual memorial services for couples who have lost an infant, regardless of the circumstances. This can be a great source of comfort to parents who have lost a child, but it is also a testament to the esteem that the Church holds for the unborn. If your parish or diocese does not have such a celebration of life, perhaps you or someone you know could be instrumental in helping to establish the practice.

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## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

**All Embrace** (Archdiocese of Atlanta), a ministry for families who have experienced the loss of a child from miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant death, says, "We revere your pain and want you to know" you are never alone. "We...support, guide, offer resources and comfort you through this time as well as help you with burial. Please feel free to contact us; we would love to hear from you and pray with you."

**Holy Innocents** (Archdiocese of Baltimore) is for those who have lost a child to miscarriage. A helpful Q&A and contacts for direct live support may be found at [archbalt.org/respect-life-2/pregnancy-loss-2/](http://archbalt.org/respect-life-2/pregnancy-loss-2/).

**Rachel's Vineyard** notes it is dedicated to "healing the pain of abortion one weekend at a time." A list of retreats and more is at [rachelvineyard.org](http://rachelvineyard.org).

**IRIS (Infants Remembered in Silence)** [Diocese of Winona, Minnesota] helps families dealing with the loss of a child during pregnancy or infancy.

**God's Children** (St. Paul/Minneapolis) offers support for those who have experienced the loss of a child through miscarriage, stillbirth, and infant death.

**A Mom's Place** is a nonprofit Catholic apostolate whose mission is to bring peace by supporting mothers with burial, bereavement, and remembrance programs.

**National Share Office** ([nationalshare.org](http://nationalshare.org)) is a Catholic-based support group for those who have suffered pregnancy and infant loss.

Organizations such as **Compassionate Friends**, **Faith's Lodge**, the **Fletcher Foundation**, **Missing Grace Foundation**, and **Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep** offer services that help grieving parents on a variety of levels, providing hope, healing, and sometimes financial assistance. All can be accessed online.





## A BLESSING

Compassionate God,  
soothe the hearts of N. and N.,  
and grant that through the  
prayers of Mary, who grieved  
by the Cross of her Son,  
you may enlighten their faith,  
give hope to their hearts,  
and peace to their lives.  
Lord, grant mercy to all the  
members of this family and  
comfort them with the hope that  
one day we will all live with you,  
with your Son Jesus Christ,  
and the Holy Spirit,  
forever and ever. Amen.

SOURCE: PRAYER SERVICE FOR THE UNBORN,  
US CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

## STRUGGLING WITH GUILT

Some infants pass away during an unplanned pregnancy. Couples who have either experienced a miscarriage or lost a child from such a pregnancy may struggle with misplaced feelings of guilt, wondering if their negative feelings about the pregnancy may have contributed to the loss. The flood of emotions, perhaps including regret or guilt, may be the source of long-term strife. However, couples who share their feelings with a compassionate professional or a priest in confession may help bring peace and reconciliation to their individual lives and their relationship with each other.

As the Church becomes more sensitive to the plight of men and women who have chosen abortion, many dioceses have programs in place, such as Rachel's Vineyard, that have facilitated hope and healing to thousands of people. The weekend retreat provides a supportive, confidential, and nonjudgmental environment where women and men can express, release, and reconcile painful post-abortive emotions. The weekend is a way to begin the process of restoration and renewal by redeeming hearts broken by abortion. The retreats are held in more than 375 locations. For more information, visit diocesan websites. Many people have been healed through these programs and also have felt called to become active in the pro-life movement. Their life experience may better equip them to be a compassionate, empathetic presence to those who are considering an abortion. Their healing is a living testimony to God's mercy and the many ways that God transforms hearts to help build his kingdom on earth.

Jesus calls all sinners, so we can take comfort from knowing that "peace lies in turning with trust to God's mercy" (*Diary of St. Faustina*) and from the well-known words of wisdom of Jesus: "Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14).

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"The feelings experienced after an early pregnancy loss are often more intense than most people, including you, expect. If those closest to you do not acknowledge the sorrow you are feeling, you may think your reactions are irrational or abnormal. However, the death of a baby at any stage is a very real loss. The physical healing of your body from an early pregnancy loss may occur rather quickly, but the emotional healing can take much longer for both parents."

SOURCE: WHEN PREGNANCY ENDS IN MISCARRIAGE, A PAMPHLET ABOUT FEELINGS, SELF-CARE, AND MEMORIALIZING; IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH (© 2007 LIGUORI PUBLICATIONS, 816611)

*Imprimi Potest:* Fr. Kevin Zubel, CSSR, Provincial, Denver Province, the Redemptorists

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