



How to Baptize in Case of Miscarriage

By

By Alana M. Rosshirt

Courtesy Of:

St. Philippine Duchesne Latin Mass Community

Low Mass – Every Sunday at 6:30 a.m.

High Mass – Every Sunday at 11:00 a.m.

Confessions – One Half Hour before Mass

Blessed Sacrament Church, Kansas City, KS

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“In every case of miscarriage, no matter at what stage of pregnancy, the fetus must be baptized; absolutely, if it’s certainly alive; conditionally, if the presence of life is doubtful.”

This quote from Canon Law could not be clearer and yet many Catholics are ignorant of the Church's teaching in this matter. My husband and I were made aware of it almost by accident.

Shortly before we were married, we stopped at St. Peter's Church in Chicago's Loop for confession. When I mentioned to the priest that I was about to be married, he told me I should know how to baptize in case of a miscarriage. He suggested my asking a Catholic doctor or nurse how to recognize the fetus and how to baptize it. He told me to be sure my husband knew too.

I followed his advice and explained the procedure to Jack. We supposed that every couple received the information much the same way, as we had. It was only after we had lost a baby that we found out how few couples know what to do in such a case.

After my first miscarriage we told our close friends how happy we were that Jack had been able to baptize the fetus. The amazed looks of our friends made us wonder. We decided to mention it to more of our friends and see what their reaction would be.

Many young couples who had never lost a baby actually thought it was a rather rare occurrence and that it always happened in a hospital. Others never thought of the fetus as a real person until the very late stages. Still others assumed a layman would never be able to recognize an embryo or fetus.

A few thought we were rather silly to make such a production of it, because the fetus was undoubtedly dead. Only a small number realized too late that they should have attempted baptism and felt badly that they hadn't known what to do.

What surprised us most were the couples who had had several miscarriages and never thought of baptism. If all these had been uneducated Catholics, we would have understood how such a thing could be, but they weren't.

Everyone we talked to wanted to know how Jack found the fetus and what he did. Even some of our non-Catholic friends who feel that baptism is only ceremony to officially name a child, were interested because they didn't like the idea of their baby being disposed of in any disrespectful manner.

Some of these views became even more amazing when we looked up the frequency of miscarriages - about one out of ten pregnancies, and some reports estimated as high as one out of six. Most of us know from our own experience and that of our friends, that it is not a rare occurrence, and that it doesn't matter how many children a woman has carried successfully, the next one might be a miscarriage.

It is, then, the responsibility of every adult Catholic, and especially every husband and wife, to know how to administer baptism in such a case.

Theologians say the fetus can and should be baptized even if it appears to be dead since the soul can remain for a while. It is best not to take any chances since actual decomposition, which is the only certain sign of death, is difficult for the layman to determine.

Since about three-fourths of miscarriages occur during the first three months, it is necessary to know what the embryo looks like as well as how to administer the sacrament.

Many doctors give expectant mothers pamphlets on pre-natal and baby care which have descriptions of the size and weight of the fetus at various stages. These can help immensely in knowing the general size, but there isn't time to run to the book when a miscarriage occurs. These pamphlets also give danger signals which can alert the husband and wife to a possible miscarriage and give them time to review the baptismal procedure. In a Catholic hospital when miscarriage occurs, the fetus is baptized immediately by trained personnel. At home it is a different story. Any emergency is complicated by lack of trained personnel and even further by emotional involvement.

The mother is generally in no condition to help, and the father is faced with what seems to be a million things to do at once. The fetus should be baptized, the mother made comfortable, the doctor notified, and then whatever else seems necessary, in that order. The most important thing to remember is that speed is essential. The embryo or fetus does not have much time. It is not equipped to live outside the womb and it has just experienced a violent entry into the world.

Most of us know the essentials of emergency baptism: the intention; the water; the direct contact of the water with the person being baptized by pouring it over the head in a flowing or washing manner; and pronouncing the words aloud while pouring the water.

It is the same for baptizing the fetus except when it is not sufficiently developed to pour water on the head. In such a case it should be immersed in a pan of tepid water while the words are said. It is very important that the fetus itself be touched by the water, and not just the membranous sac that surrounds it. This sac must be broken before baptism or the sacrament is not valid.

The water must touch the "person," The big problem in the baptism of a miscarriage is finding the fetus. A membrane surrounds the fetus, but both may be enclosed in a blood clot. The membrane can be distinguished from the blood clot by touch. If not, the whole can be placed in a loop of gauze and lukewarm water run over it which will remove the blood.

After the membrane is broken so that water can touch the fetus itself, it should be immersed in the lukewarm water and gently moved around while the words, usually of conditional baptism, are said: "If you are capable of being baptized, I baptize you in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

After the fetus is baptized, the mother made comfortable, and the doctor notified, then call your pastor or a Catholic undertaker and he will tell you what to do with the tiny remains. If possible, they should be placed in the consecrated ground of a Catholic cemetery, usually in the family lot if there is one. Catholic cemeteries also have sections for un-baptized babies.

In no case can the remains be disposed of in any disrespectful manner. The fetus must be considered a person and be treated with the same respect and dignity any human being is given.

When a fetus dies without baptism through no one's fault, it is not a great tragedy. It will live forever in Limbo and have every ounce of natural happiness of which it is capable. Parents who have failed to baptize miscarriages are not guilty if they simply didn't know any better. But for the good of such souls, this ignorance should be eliminated.

Parents can tell sons and daughters who are about to be married, and, after news of an expected grandchild, they can ask if the parents-to-be know how to baptize should a miscarriage occur. High school and college marriage courses can make the students aware that such a thing can happen and what their duty is. Priests can mention it in their pre-marital counseling and even when the couple comes to set a date for the wedding.

It is not necessary to go into all the details with young people. If they are just told to ask a Catholic doctor or nurse to explain the procedure at the first opportunity, or at least when pregnancy is suspected.

Baptizing a fetus is not a pleasant task, but the rewards to the parents, to say nothing of the eternal gratitude of their child, are immeasurable.

Our first baby was baptized by a priest in our parish church with all the splendor of the liturgy ten days after he was born. Our second baby was baptized by an anxious and perplexed father in the bathroom sink scarcely three months after conception. The glory of it is that the sacrament was the same, making them both children of God.