

Facing Infertility

A CATHOLIC APPROACH



Jean Dimech-Juchniewicz

WITH A FOREWORD BY PAUL CARPENTIER, MD, CFCMC

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Introduction

*Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,
whose trust is the LORD.
They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.
It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.*

JEREMIAH 17:7–8

My mother always said she wanted to have more children. For her, an Italian Catholic woman with five siblings and countless cousins, four children was simply not enough. I grew up with this same desire in my own heart. When the priest who would later witness our marriage asked John and me how many children we wanted, I undershot. I said “at least four” to John’s “at most two” so that he wouldn’t run out of the room screaming. (I figured God would settle it for us eventually.) I have always wanted as many children as I could possibly afford to feed. I have wished to be many things

in life, but my deepest wish was to be a mother. God had engraved that desire on my heart from an early age. I aspired to be the woman described in the beautiful psalm we chose for our wedding liturgy: “Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table” (Ps 128:3).

This strong desire for children continued to grow on our wedding day. Every time my father held a microphone that day, he mentioned his high hopes for grandchildren. I later learned that a small wager was even going on among the groomsmen. The most generous estimates gave us little more than a year before a child would arrive. Oh, how I wish they had been right!

We started trying to conceive in April 2003. I remember that cycle well. It was the last time for a long while that my husband and I made love without feeling stressed. Soon our most intimate moments were riddled with uncertainty, which later turned to fear, sadness, and doubt. I wondered if there was something we were supposed to do to conceive a child that we did not know about, something that everyone else knew. I would have stood on my head if someone had told me it would help us conceive a baby.

September came. I worked as a Catholic chaplain in campus ministry, and the students arrived full of idealism. None of it rubbed off on me. I was lost in fear. I told no one, not even my mother, of the tests that my gynecologist agreed to begin early, given my mother’s history of infertility. My oldest sister Martha accidentally discovered that we were trying to conceive when she spotted a basal temperature chart that I had left out. I was angry that she knew we were having difficulty conceiving, and I refused to discuss it with her. I was in denial. I thought that if I didn’t tell anyone, it

wasn't happening. In the beginning, I wouldn't even talk to God about it.

The infertility workup was such an isolating experience. I came to hate the purple folder that my doctor gave me with all the information about the tests they were going to do. I hated sitting in the waiting room with all those pregnant women, who—I was certain—knew exactly what was in my embarrassing purple folder. I couldn't even pick up a magazine without being accosted by pictures of bellies and babies. I hated my own body, which was mockingly getting larger month after month, not from pregnancy, but from the binge eating I surrendered to every time my period came.

And of course, I hated my period. The monthly cycle began with a glimmer of hope that grew stronger after ovulation and would build to the powerful light of near certainty toward the end of my cycle, only to be extinguished by the sound of the toilet flushing. It felt like a funeral every month, and I had little time to recover before I had to gather my wits about me and get ready to try again. I was so angry at life. I hated waking up in the morning to the painful reality that was slowly setting in: we might be infertile.

The stress on our marriage became significant. John and I began to bicker, usually about nothing. He didn't think we should worry yet, and I was already terrified. The quarrelling turned into a general atmosphere of short-tempered discord. At times our arguments were so tense they ended with doors slamming and one of us storming off. I began to fear we were irreversibly damaging our friendship.

I had time to be alone only while driving to and from work. My commute used to be my prayer time, but now I avoided talking to God. I had only one thing on my mind, and so far God hadn't granted my request. I went into the

chapel at work one day and sat in front of the Blessed Sacrament and said nothing to him. Nothing. I had faith that God was still there. I knew he loved me. I knew he did not cause my infertility. But I also knew that he could fix it if he wanted to. So far he hadn't, and that infuriated me.

The more my husband and I talked about our feelings, the less we argued. After I went to Confession, my pastor told me to set up an appointment with a spiritual director. The more I talked to her, the less I held on to my anger. She brought me directly to Christ, to whom I poured out my sadness. My husband began talking to a priest as well and found it very helpful.

Slowly, our anger gave way to sadness. Instead of silence, I spent my commute in tears. From the depths of my soul, I ached to be pregnant. A test showed that one of my fallopian tubes was closed. Around the same time, my husband's semen analysis came back with bad news: his sperm morphology was off. We scheduled a laparoscopy for me, and an appointment with a urologist for my husband.

Meanwhile, Christmas was coming. Christmas was difficult because I'd thought I would be getting ready to deliver my first child. In the secular world, Christmas is all about children. Parents buy pajamas or ornaments that say "Baby's First Christmas." On Christmas morning they record their children's reactions to the presents under the tree. For those struggling to conceive, Christmas often feels very sad. In the midst of everyone else's festivities, couples may privately mourn the passing of the holiday without a child. For Catholics, Christmas is all about a child—the Christ child. I fought back tears at Mass as I listened to the miraculous story of Jesus's conception and birth. All the manger scenes and Christmas cards made me ask: When would my child rest in

his cradle? Where was my miracle? Where was my baby? Why not me, Lord?

I couldn't look in the mirror without feeling like a failure. I felt like I was at war with my body, and losing. I loathed being around pregnant women, but I felt obligated to go to family baby showers. That seemed to be the year everyone else got pregnant. I made it through my cousin's shower only because I was sitting next to my sister Martha and my other cousin, who were also going through infertility. We had our own little private pity party, and we sulked together in envy, bitterness, and resentment.

One day during a meeting at work, a fellow campus minister announced that she was pregnant. After enduring a few painful minutes of feigned happiness and congratulations, thinking no one would make the connection, I excused myself, walked calmly back to my office, closed the door, sat on the floor, and wept. My phone buzzed. Our office manager, a dear friend and a voice of sanity, said she had just heard the news and was on her way up to comfort me. She helped me understand that my feelings were normal, that my colleague had no idea what I was going through, and that if I wanted to secretly dislike her for a while that was fine. But that was the worst part. I didn't dislike her at all. I just hated that she was pregnant and I wasn't. I couldn't stop thinking about my own feelings long enough to be happy for her. My feelings of jealousy made me feel horribly guilty.

Perhaps worse than envy was the guilt I felt for not being able to give my husband a child, and for not being able to give my parents and his parents a grandchild. I had nightmares about losing my parents before I had a baby, and raising a child who would never meet them. I was haunted by the fear that perhaps my in-laws would come to regret that their son

had married me instead of someone who could conceive a child with him. I felt like I had to apologize to them and ask their forgiveness. Of course, they didn't feel that way at all. But I did.

My priest co-workers agreed to celebrate the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick before my first laparoscopy. We gathered in the chapel and my husband and I prayed fervently for healing. I knew the theology behind the sacrament. During Jesus's ministry, he cured many people. When he established his Church, he gave the apostles the power and authority to do the same in his name. Their successors, our bishops, along with the priests of the Catholic Church, still share in Christ's healing ministry through this sacrament and the sacrament of Confession. I thought if God was going to heal me, this might be the way. I had clear intentions. I was not interested in what I mistook to be some vague spiritual or emotional healing. I wanted to be physically healed so that I could become pregnant. Sometimes the healing we want isn't the same as the healing we need. So I waited for God's answer.

It came one January morning when I awoke groggy from anesthesia. I'll never forget the look on my doctor's face after that first laparoscopy as she said, "I'm so sorry," and simply shook her head with watery eyes. Even in my half-conscious state, I knew it was bad. God had said no. John was at my bedside trying not to let me see him cry. One of my fallopian tubes was so swollen and twisted from a past infection that it was completely beyond repair. It was removed in a subsequent surgery. The second tube looked like it was taking the same path. She referred me to a reproductive endocrinologist, but offered little hope.

Later, as we sat in the waiting room of our new doctor, I looked around. There were no pregnant women, no pregnancy

magazines, and no babies. No one made eye contact. We were all lost in our own worlds of desperate sadness. To pass the time, my husband and I read another patient's discarded printouts from an online IVF forum. The people who posted were hurt and burnt out from the process, which seemed truly dehumanizing and heartbreaking. We quietly agreed it was not for us. Not only did it seem tremendously difficult and expensive, but we were already familiar with the Catholic moral guidelines on the subject and fully accepted them in our hearts.

After he reviewed our medical records, our new fertility doctor called us to his office to pronounce his sentence: "Your uterus is fine . . . IVF will work." With those seven words, our faith was tested in a way that it never has been since. We had just recommitted ourselves to following our consciences, and now we were being told that this one act would surely bring us the child we so desperately wanted. Silence reigned.

Not feeling the need to explain our theological and moral commitments, I finally stuttered, "Um, we're Catholic. We don't want to do IVF. Is there anything else we could do? Can't you try to fix my fallopian tubes? Would you be willing to do Low Tubal Ovum Transfer (LTOT)? We've been told that surgery may correct my husband's sperm morphology."

The look on his face as I mentioned these alternatives told me he thought I was crazy. He seemed to have no interest in actually healing the causes of our infertility. Then came his personal theology: "I know many of my colleagues think they are God, but I don't. I believe that the work I do with IVF is one of the ways God uses to make miracles happen."

This sounded so convincing. He tried to dissuade us from following our faith tradition, and he latched onto a very

popular and untrue notion that sounds plausible: “God loves babies and wants everyone to be happy, therefore God must be okay with anything we do to conceive.” By the grace of God, we didn’t bite. After hearing all about our doctor’s personal faith convictions, we eventually made it clear that we didn’t agree and wouldn’t consider IVF. In response, he told us that we should not expect to conceive a child any other way. If we wanted a family, he clearly told us, we would have to make other plans. We’d never conceive.

It felt like a death sentence. At that moment our world stopped spinning and time stood still. If I knew then what I know now about the miracles of NaProTECHNOLOGY—one of the best-kept secrets in the Catholic Church—our life would have taken a very different path.

Shortly after we accepted our infertile status and began the process to adopt, we received the wonderful news that my sister Mary was pregnant with her first child. I say it was wonderful news, and it truly was. Her son, my nephew and godson, is a blessed addition to our family and I love him deeply. But like a widow whose best friend announces her engagement, I was happy for my sister and sad for me. Her blessing reminded me of my pain. And of course, my natural but self-centered feelings brought guilt. After all, shouldn’t I feel nothing but utter joy? How insensitive was I? My sister Mary, in many ways my twin in life, was experiencing what I thought I never would. And I thanked God that we now knew that she would not experience my pain, a pain shared by our oldest sister Martha and my mother. All the women in my family seemed to have been stricken with this plague, and we all drew a deep sigh of relief that Mary alone had escaped it. Yet grief washed over me again.

Throughout Mary's pregnancy I imagined my future son's birthmother. My pregnant sister blessed me with a window into biological motherhood as I awaited my son's arrival.

The next few months brought more and more adoption paperwork and excited anticipation as we waited for news of our son. We had fully accepted the loss of our fertility and mentally moved on. We were thrilled to be adopting. Yet at the end of her pregnancy, when my sister called me on her way to the hospital to tell me her labor had begun, I echoed her joy and excitement, hung up the phone, and fell to my knees and sobbed. I learned then and there that adoption cures childlessness, but it does not cure infertility.

God has an incredible sense of humor. We received our son's referral and traveled to Korea to bring him home in September 2005. It was love at first sight. He was our first baby boy, and he finally made us parents. We couldn't have been more thrilled. While still floating on our new parental bliss, we learned that, against all odds and without consciously trying, I was pregnant. We were stunned!

Our sons are fourteen months apart. The first grew in my heart, and the second grew in my womb. They are the best of friends. My husband and I have had the blessing of becoming parents through both adoption and conception, and we know from experience that neither path is better than the other. They are both wonderful ways to welcome the gift of children into your family.

The realities of motherhood have taught me that suffering never really ends in this life. Though my infertility was apparently lifted for a while, my second son spent the last four months of his time in my womb holding on for dear life. I was in pre-term labor for three months and put on strict

bed rest. It seemed like we were rushing to the hospital every week on the brink of miscarriage. Those three months were darker for me and harder on our marriage than infertility ever was, and they were followed by several months of significant depression.

Wanting to avoid the heartache of infertility, and fearing another difficult pregnancy and possible miscarriage if we did conceive, we decided to return to Korea to adopt our third child. In November 2008 we brought home our sweet baby girl. We are truly blessed to have three healthy children, and through the grace of God we have a very happy family.

However, our family still did not feel complete. It felt like someone was missing. After careful prayer and discernment, John and I discovered that God was not done with our family. We began trying to conceive our fourth child in October 2010, and we are back on the emotional roller coaster of infertility. This time, knowing my history and being more informed about NaProTECHNOLOGY, we went directly to a doctor trained in this method. What a different experience! Not only is his bedside manner much more sensitive—he's the first doctor who ever said, "God bless you" after speaking on the phone with me—he actually diagnosed and is treating the underlying causes of my infertility.

This doctor cares about my overall health and is very holistic in his approach. Through careful testing, surgery, and treatment, he is helping me to deal with various medical issues that could prevent conception and a healthy pregnancy. He is trained to be a detective, looking for clues to the underlying causes of infertility where doctors who are not trained in NaProTECHNOLOGY do not look.

My first experience with infertility is a gift because it taught me so many lessons I can draw on now that I am

experiencing secondary infertility. In the midst of the ups and downs of every failed cycle, I know now that seeking God's ultimate will for our lives is more important than conceiving a child. I know that if God wants us to adopt again, then he will let us know, and that is what we will do. And if all this time God has had something else in mind and we do not have a fourth child, I know in my heart of hearts that he will allow us to be at peace with that.

I wish there had been a book about infertility written from a Catholic perspective when I was going through infertility the first time. I searched bookstores, Catholic gift shops, and the Internet for some type of support in my spiritual and emotional struggle. The only information I could find was written either by the Vatican or the U.S. Bishops Conference. While this was helpful for me in terms of understanding the Church's moral teachings about the medical treatments and reproductive technologies for infertility, it did not provide the support and comfort I was looking for. Also, even with my graduate degree in Catholic ministry, I found these documents difficult to understand.

So I began to write my story, and it evolved into this book. Through it I hope to become a guide and companion to Catholics who are beginning to suspect the possibility of infertility. Know that you are not alone, that help and support are available, and that your Catholic faith can be a wellspring of emotional stamina as you struggle to build your family. You will discover that help is available from doctors who share your Catholic faith and are at the cutting edge of infertility treatments with effectiveness that rivals if not surpasses IVF. While the pages that follow offer tremendous hope, I cannot guarantee that you will have a biological child. What I can guarantee is that God will remain with you on this

journey and that he has a wonderful plan for you that he will reveal in his own time.

I invite you to read this book with an open heart and a prayerful spirit. Each time you enter its pages, you may want to begin with a prayer in order to hear God's voice speak to your heart. Each chapter opens with a passage from Scripture and concludes with a prayer from the Book of Psalms—God's own poetry—so that you can reflect on how God's word relates to your life now. You will hear from many different women who have gone through infertility before you, whose stories will inspire and comfort you, and who will become for you a sisterhood of faith and strength. They have agreed to share their stories in the hopes of bringing some good out of their own experiences of suffering. Sometimes it is difficult for friends and family to know what to say and how to be helpful, so I have included some tips for them if you'd like to suggest that they read this as well.

Finally, I hope the questions at the end of each chapter help open communication between you and your spouse so that you can come to understand one another's experiences more deeply, offer greater support to one another, and allow this experience to strengthen your faith and marriage. God has called you both to this moment to bring about a great work in you. Though it may seem hard to believe, God longs for you more than you long for a child. If you allow his grace to bear fruit in your life through this difficult time, you will come to discover that God's ultimate plan for your life is to draw you closer to himself, where you will find an abiding love and happiness that even a child cannot give.

Chapter 1

Expecting Fruitfulness

*Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.*

PSALM 128:3

I always wanted to be a mom. I also wanted my career to be in place before I had children. Once my engineering career was established and my husband and I married, we thought everything else would fall into place. We wanted at least one girl and one boy. However many children we had in order to have one boy and one girl was fine with us, and any extra time it took to build this family would add to our happiness. At least that was our plan.

We started trying to conceive. After a year with no success we got concerned. My ob-gyn recommended going to a fertility specialist to find out why we couldn't conceive. After a few months of testing we were pinned with "unexplained

infertility.” This was not an answer, and it made the whole process so much more frustrating.

With the help of our fertility specialist, we conceived two times during the next year. Both pregnancies ended in miscarriage. The second miscarriage came with a six-month recovery. Once we hit bottom it seemed like it would take forever to begin to try again, but eventually we did. Every month I just stayed focused on the end result to keep me motivated and to try to stay positive. Each month it got harder and harder to be hopeful, but we had no other choice.

The past three years have been an emotional roller coaster ride. Finally, we conceived and I am now twenty-eight weeks pregnant—well past the point of our previous miscarriages. We’ve been walking on eggshells since we found out we were pregnant, but every day of this pregnancy has been such a blessing. All of the sadness was worth every second.

— M. C.



Many of us began married life with an exciting honeymoon—perhaps lounging on a Caribbean beach or trekking through Europe. Few of us expected infertility, yet more than one in ten couples will experience this pain and find themselves in this desert.

We may have spent our childhoods pretending to be mommies and daddies to our stuffed animals and dolls. As we reached adolescence, maybe we even began imagining our future children. Perhaps we chose possible names or envisioned future dancers and quarterbacks. As our relationships

with our own parents matured, we thought about what kind of parents we wanted to become one day.

Then we became engaged. If we married in the Catholic Church, we agreed to accept children lovingly from God and raise them in our faith. Many of us assumed that we would encounter no difficulties conceiving and delivering healthy children together. After all, we watched many of our family members and friends become parents effortlessly. We then entered one of the most exciting phases of our marriage. Desiring to become parents together, we began the journey anticipating success. Now our imagined future was just within our reach. We could almost taste parenthood. We may even have set aside a room for the baby, began painting, or day-dreamed about wearing the latest maternity clothes. But then, on this brink of excitement and hopefulness, disappointment deals its crushing blow.

Months pass without conception. Or perhaps conception ends in miscarriage. Or maybe there is a child waiting to become an older brother or sister, who does not understand why the wait never seems to end. However it comes, infertility involves a very real loss. Though couples certainly feel this loss on an emotional level, it sometimes can be difficult to pinpoint the source. The journey through infertility can be so infused with “if only” and “maybe” and “just one more cycle” that it may seem like it will never end. We wonder if there will ever be a time to move forward. It is hard to count the coveted goal as a possible loss when we are frantically clutching to hope.

Even in the event of a miscarriage in which a real living person dies, no matter how tiny, many couples struggle with the idea that they truly had become parents to that child. Their uncertainty is not helped when well-meaning but

misguided doctors tell them that “it wasn’t *really* a baby yet,” even though our Catholic faith teaches us that God creates a unique and irreplaceable human life at the moment of conception. Many Catholics who experience miscarriage take solace in their hope that they will meet their children in heaven one day.

Regardless of its underlying medical cause, infertility is perhaps one of the most painful examples of human suffering. Our present inability to conceive a child with our spouse, to maintain a pregnancy, and to deliver a healthy baby cuts to the core of our being. We are created to “be fruitful and multiply.” We are built to desire children. We are hard-wired to cooperate with God in the creation of new life. This is simply how God made us. When this does not happen, even if only for a time, it causes us to question our masculinity and femininity, which is at the very center of who we are as human beings. Infertility shakes the foundation of our vocation to marriage and family life. It causes us to question our own identity. If I am not a mother, then who am I? If I am not a father, then who am I?

As a couple moves into the painful experience of being unable to conceive, it can be helpful to identify the sources of their suffering.¹ Infertility takes away many things that other couples take for granted: the sense of control over one’s own body; the ability to plan for the future; the capacity to conceive a child with one’s spouse; for a woman, the physical, emotional, and social experience of a healthy pregnancy, labor, and delivery, and the ability to nurse her child;² for a man, the experience of fathering a child with his wife and journeying with her through pregnancy and labor and delivery; the continuity of family heredity; the opportunity to look into a child’s face and see a resemblance to one’s own; the

cultural trappings of entering parenthood the way most other couples do.

Spouses experience these emotional difficulties differently. Some men or women feel like they are somehow defective in their masculinity or femininity. They may feel like less of a man or less of a woman because they cannot conceive. They may wonder, *what's wrong with me*, and begin to feel like they are the only people they know who struggle with infertility. It can be such a taboo topic that they may not be aware of friends who have endured similar struggles.

A husband may silently fear the end of his family's bloodline more than his wife does, while a wife may yearn for the experience of pregnancy more than her husband. Neither spouse is right or wrong in their emotional reactions, simply different. Infertility also elicits unexpected feelings, like envy and shame, which can bring guilt and anger along with them. All of these feelings, and more, are normal. Spouses should contemplate their feelings individually and discuss each of them together. Identifying which aspects of your experience cause you the most pain will open up the lines of communication. Though it can be difficult to talk about these painful feelings and admit that you may be having trouble conceiving, the sooner you do, the better you will be able to support one another and reach out for the help that is available to you.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- ∞ What was your family like when you were growing up? How has this shaped your own desires for your future family?
- ∞ Have you always wanted to be a mother or a father?

Did that desire gradually build through adolescence and young adulthood, or did it come late and fierce? Describe that desire.

- ☞ What is the future that you hope for? Describe it in detail. How many children do you envision? Girls? Boys? Have you imagined what they might look like? Have you chosen names? What kinds of things do you dream you will do together?
- ☞ Of all the particular emotional difficulties associated with infertility listed above, which ones resonate the most with you? Why? Are there any other painful aspects of your experience that you can describe?
- ☞ What would you like to share with your spouse from your reflection?

FOR FRIENDS AND FAMILY

How can you support a loved one who has just shared with you that he or she may be experiencing infertility? First, please pray for the couple. This may help them, but it will also help you grow in your own awareness of and sensitivity to their experience. Try not to ask about their fertility issues every time you talk to them. Wait for them to bring up the topic, and then be a sensitive listener. Let them know you will be thinking about them and praying for them, but that you also want to respect their space. Then wait for them to bring it up again.

PRAYER

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

Lord, hear my voice! . . .

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope.*

Psalm 130:1–2, 5³