

A funeral for our little brother Daniel

Tonight I celebrated a funeral Mass for a 5-month old fetus. His name was Daniel. His parents and three brothers had looked forward to the new addition to their family. A week-and-a-half ago the mother, we'll call her Maria, began having complications. Four days later delivery was induced, but the child could not be saved. Expectation and dreams of a baby boy's future turned to the nightmare of heart-wrenching sorrow and funeral planning instead.

The experience also proved to be one the most profound of human warmth and faith I have ever had the privilege to participate in.

They wanted me soon at the hospital, I was on a visit to a parish family's home, and Maria had not yet come out of the very strong anesthesia. They hoped I would be there when she woke up. I knew it was going to be a long and difficult night.

The waiting area and the hospital room were full of family and parishioners. Visitors had kept silent vigil in the room as an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, understanding mother, surrounded by flowers and holy cards, blessed all with radiant countenance.

Maria had indeed not fully awoken by the time I got there. Her husband "Jose" and I were there, one at each side. When she came to she saw the expression on people's faces, and with me at her side knew that something had gone terribly wrong. I had to tell her "Daniel ya está con Dios, se nos fue." (Daniel is with God now, he's left us.) And then began the awful process of acceptance.

We placed the baby in her mother's arms. She kissed him, commented on how he looked like their middle son. She rocked him, cried, and begged God to be able to understand the incomprehensible why. She blessed Daniel, and after a time so did his father Jose and the two older boys, each taking turns cradling their newborn, stillborn brother.

The room filled quickly with children who curiously and sadly observed Daniel and

the ritual of grief engaged in by the adults and older children. We prayed the prayers after death and commended little Daniel's soul to the care of the most high and entrusted his distraught family to divine providence.

I made the call to the funeral home, since the parents had limited English and such doings are not something for Daniel's teenage brothers, all perfectly bilingual. We walked the family through the whole process and I watched with pride as parishioners lovingly surrounded the family during the days between death and funeral.

At church there were final goodbyes to Daniel as his little casket which looked more like an ice cooler than any kind of coffin was closed for the last time. The parish children asked to serve Mass, there was a full complement of altar servers ready with cross, candles, incense and holy water, eager to do their part to accompany another child in the rites that would send him home and bring consolation to his family.

The congregation that gathered, including many children, sang hymns, psalms and responses to the Mass (much of the Mass is sung in Latin American countries) and with their voices lifted Daniel to God's embrace and interceded for God's healing for the family.

Afterward the Baptist funeral director said to me, "Father, if I ever became Catholic that is how I'd want to be sent off. I didn't understand a word of it but it was all so beautiful."

And so it can be when we live the treasure of our faith to its fullest with deep trust in God and in communion with the saints and our sisters and brothers. Death is part of everyone's experience, but so often in our modern culture we try to sanitize it and wish it away. Loss and loss of children strikes everyone, regardless of race or culture. Sometimes other cultures can remind us that death is a very human and humanizing experience and that the song, tears, and touch of the whole community, toddlers to seniors, unites us with those who await us in heaven and strengthens us who remain.