

Georgie's Story: Choosing life when the prognosis is death

The ultrasound technician who gently swept a probe across my wife's gel-covered belly spoke hardly a word as she collected flickering images of our wriggling 20-week-old unborn baby.

"The baby definitely doesn't like fireworks," I offered, recounting how just a few weeks earlier our little one had demonstrated his disdain for pyrotechnics by giving some forceful kicks during a Fourth of July show.

The technician remained quietly focused on the monitor, analyzing tiny hands and feet, measuring limbs and listening to the beating heart.

A few minutes went by.

Then another two or three.

Then maybe five more.

The silence was excruciating.

"Have you had genetic testing?" the woman finally asked, not looking away from the screen.

"No," I said, my heart sinking.

The technician excused herself and was replaced by a fetal medicine doctor who stood at the foot of Treasa's bed.

Our baby's heart was not properly formed, the doctor said, and there were other anomalies. Trisomy 18, a genetic condition that occurs in one of every 2,500 pregnancies in the United States, was the suspected culprit. If the baby made it full term, the doctor said, he would likely live only a day or two after birth.

The weight of the pronouncement was crushing. I wept as I embraced Treasa, looked

into her eyes, and repeated again and again a phrase I felt more intensely than ever: "I love you."

My tears flowed not only for our baby, but in anticipation of the pain I knew would be Treasa's constant companion in the months to come.

In a reference to abortion, the doctor told us we had to make a decision.

No further discussion was needed. Treasa and I knew that life is a gift from God – and that it begins at conception. We would go forward with the second half of the pregnancy despite the many challenges we would likely encounter. We were determined to give our son every opportunity at life and not extinguish it because others may have deemed it less-than-worthy.

In choosing life, we chose sorrow.

But we also chose joy.

Power of faith

A few days after receiving the diagnosis, Treasa and I met with Monsignor Arthur Valenzano, rector of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore.

We knew that Monsignor Valenzano, a concelebrant at our 2012 wedding at the basilica, had faced difficult battles with cancer. We wanted to emulate his positive attitude and his trust in divine providence.

Monsignor Valenzano prayed with us and read the passage from Jeremiah, 1:4-8, that reminded us that God knew us before he knitted us in the womb. Never forget, Monsignor Valenzano said, that God chose us to be parents of this particular baby. Out of all the people in the world, he chose *us*.

The priest's words were uplifting, and over the course of the next few months, we found strength in our faith.

Several priests offered prayers and encouragement, with Father T. Austin Murphy Jr., pastor of Our Lady of Hope in Dundalk and St. Luke in Edgemere, giving Treasa

the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. Many others prayed for us, too, showering us with love.

Each night, Treasa tenderly placed on her belly treasured relics of St. Francis Xavier, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, St. Martin de Porres and St. Padre Pio, praying for the intercession of the saints.

Then, like a bolt from above, we received unexpected news. A blood test showed that our son did not have Trisomy 18. He still had significant cardiac issues and other anomalies, but he might at least have a fighting chance.

We transferred our care to The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, whose world-renowned medical experts were best equipped to treat our son. They explained that our baby's biggest issues were a rare heart condition called Double Outlet Right Ventricle (DORV) and a backflow of blood through the tricuspid valve.

It wouldn't be easy, but if our son could make it to birth, the cardiac doctors at Hopkins were confident they could surgically repair his weakened heart.

Author of life

As we approached our son's December due date, we became regulars at the hospital, visiting weekly and often twice a week. Doctors became increasingly concerned about what they saw during fetal monitoring in those latter days, keeping us overnight on one occasion as a precaution.

Dr. Irina Burd, a skilled Hopkins doctor who became our most trusted confidant, was with us throughout the many ups and downs.

Despite our high hopes and our son's fighting spirit, his heart couldn't hold out. On Oct. 31, 2013, six weeks before his due date, our baby's heart beat one final time in his mother's womb. He was gone.

Treasa gave birth to George Paul Matysek III on Nov. 2, 2013, eight days before our first wedding anniversary. The images of the first moments of the arrival of the little boy who shared my name and the name of his grandfather will forever be seared in my memory.

His little jaw fell open, but there was no cry.

His feet and fingers were long like mine, but they did not wiggle.

His eyes were closed, and they would never open.

Treasa, the woman whose courage and unwavering devotion to our son inspired me every day, was the first to hold our handsome baby; then she gave him to me. We did not cry, but together marveled at the 18-inch long miracle that was the product of our love.

What a gift it was to be able to see our son and feel the weight of his three pounds and two ounces in our arms. I later had the honor of carrying Georgie the final time on this earth when I lifted him in his tiny white casket to his burial spot at the cemetery.

“The gift of little Georgie’s life is something that will be part of you and everyone else for the rest of our lives because it didn’t go away,” Monsignor Valenzano said at Georgie’s memorial Mass at the basilica. “It just changed.”

The priest, who had blessed Georgie both in the womb and at the hospital after his birth, assured us that Georgie is our advocate in heaven. We have no doubt about that, knowing that he watches out for us and especially his beautiful baby sister who was born in October.

Though his life on earth was brief, Georgie’s legacy goes on. He drew Treasa and me more closely together than ever. He inspired his young cousins who never met him but who visit him frequently at the cemetery, speaking with him just like any other member of the family. He helped show the world that the value of life doesn’t derive from its utility or longevity, but from its very being.

The Author of Life blessed us with a child who would change our lives forever. How grateful we are to have been given that blessing.

Also see:

Praise Jesus for Monsignor Valenzano

Where to go for help

- Blessing for a child in the womb, bitly.com/childblessing
- Support for families facing difficult prenatal diagnoses, benotafraid.net
- Resources for bereaved families, heldyourwholelife.com
- Free remembrance photography for families experiencing the loss of a baby nowilaymedowntosleep.org

Email George Matysek at gmatysek@CatholicReview.org.