

New ministry aids families in healing after miscarriage

Last spring, Michelle Fischer and her husband, Philip, were looking to buy a larger car - and house - to fit their growing family: Joseph, 4, Damien, 2, and their unborn child. That changed March 28, when Michelle, then 12½-weeks-pregnant, learned at an ultrasound appointment that her baby had stopped growing.

“It wasn’t even a thought in my mind that I might miscarry,” Michelle said. “I didn’t cry right away because I was so numb.”

She delivered the baby the following day - Holy Thursday.

“I was able to walk the walk with Mary, of having lost her child and carrying her child and grieving with her,” Michelle said.

On Good Friday, their pastor at Catholic Community of South Baltimore, Father Patrick Carrion, visited their home. He is also director of the office of cemetery management and represents Holy Innocents, a new ministry that is a collaboration of the Archdiocese of Baltimore offices of respect life and cemetery management.

Its services include a pastoral visit from a two-person team, which may include a clergy member or volunteers.

The trained visitors offer prayer and materials for parents and siblings, and offer to take into their care the remains of the child, which will be kept at the Maryland State Anatomy Board until biannual burial and memorial services at Holy Cross Cemetery in Brooklyn Park.

“People want to have an opportunity to honor ... and bury their child,” said Father Carrion, who added that the ministry helps to build community among those experiencing loss.

Michelle Fischer’s due date was Oct. 8 – two days after Holy Innocents hosted its first burial.

“I have friends who have buried their baby in the backyard ... because Holy Innocents wasn’t an option,” Michelle said. “It’s concrete, it’s a comfort to know our child is respectfully cared for and will always be.”

“It seems like no one ever talks about miscarriage,” said her husband, Philip. “It’s part of the human experience. To have it not publicly recognized is a disservice to women and to men.”

The Fischers buried their baby, Drew Alexander, alongside three other families, including Maria and Steven Bartolac. It was the first family funeral for their three sons, Sebastian, 8, Lucas, 6, and Elliot, 2. The two older boys helped shovel dirt onto the casket that was shared by the children being buried.

“For them, it was something real,” Maria said.

It also provides a place that the children know they can go and pray, as the Bartolacs informed the boys they can ask for their younger sibling’s intercession.

“The smallest member of our family is our strongest advocate with the Lord,” Steven said.

After delivering their child at 12 weeks gestation at a secular health clinic in mid-August, Steven and Maria knew they wanted to take the remains of their child home, but were unsure of where to go from there.

“We had no idea what to do,” Steven said.

They had heard of Holy Innocents through their parish, Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Ellicott City.

“It was just such a relief,” he said.

The burial and memorial service, led by Bishop Mark E. Brennan, aided the grieving and healing process. Donations and partnerships had a hand in all aspects of the burial. A statue of Rachel stands at the site, made possible by the Knights of Columbus, Maryland State Council.

“It was a beautiful experience - very healing for (the life of our child) to be taken seriously,” Maria Bartolac said. “Even though he was very tiny, we were expecting him.”

Their child was too small to determine its gender, but the Bartolacs named him after an angel - Raphael.

“The meaning (of Raphael) is ‘God heals,’ ” Maria said. “It’s a reminder for us that God is going to heal us and help us through the process.”