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Little David

by

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During my training in obstetrics, I met a mother whose baby had many birth defects, such that it would die shortly after birth. Some advise abortion in these cases as a "compassionate measure" for the mother. When the Pope says abortion is wrong, is he lacking compassion? I knew that I should not participate in abortion. I did not really know what would be a compassionate alternative. The way I learned was that a little man taught me. His name was David and this is his story.

The mother consulted with me about her fetus, which had five different major anomalies (birth defects). It did not closely simulate any known syndrome. Abortion had been offered by others, but was rejected by the mother. It was a long and agonizing pregnancy for this young couple, about to have their first baby. They were of modest means and had been referred from a rural locale. The father gave his name, David, to his firstborn son.

It was expected the infant would only live about twenty minutes when taken off the ventilator. After vaginal delivery, the child was on the ventilator for about eight hours while the pediatricians evaluated him. Everything which had been predicted from prenatal ultrasound was confirmed by the pediatricians. The father, mother, and half a dozen family members were present in the mother's room when the child was brought from the neonatal intensive care unit. Since the child's demise was expected imminently, he was quickly brought to his mother's arms so she could hold, kiss, and love Little David during his short life. The father, as well as various aunts, uncles, and grandmothers also got their chance to hold, kiss, and love the infant.

After twenty minutes, his cardiac and respiratory rate began to slow, but then unexpectedly returned to normal. This cycle repeated itself many times over the next twenty-four hours. Over the course of a day, a long

succession of near and distant relatives arrived from many corners of the state. So many came, the room could not hold them all. All got their chance to hold Little David. An incredible spirit of love and peace permeated the room. There was an explosion of love. It seemed to signify the presence of the Holy Spirit.

A funeral home donated the casket. One of the grandfathers was a preacher. Somehow God gave me the insight to know that I should attend this funeral. It was a two and a half hour drive very early in the morning through a beautiful section of the "boonies." When I got there, the mother said, "My doctor said he would come and I knew he would." There seemed to be about 100 people at the funeral. The grandfather preached a beautiful sermon. There were no dry eyes at the service.

When it was over, I took the mother by the hand for a walk across the adjoining empty field. As I walked north across the field I could see a beautiful blue sky, some trees below, a horizon in between. I thought back on the mistakes I made in life. For most of them there was a subsequent repair or remedy. For my life as a doctor, it was similar: someone brings me a problem, I develop a remedy. I was awed and humbled by how unchangeable and non-negotiable the outcome of death was.

I told my patient that this was a special and unique baby. His loss can never be replaced. No other baby would be or could be this baby. I was sorry that we shared the loss of this beautiful, incredible baby. Little David seemed to receive more love in a day than some babies receive in a lifetime.

I told her that my mother had two children who died. One died at the age of three and the other died at the age of five. I told her that as far as I could tell my mother thought about these two babies and remembered them each day of her life. Through the generosity of God, my father, and herself, she went on to have a total of eleven children. Thus, while no one will ever replace the baby that was lost, there is every reason to hope for the future and trust in God.

The outcome of this case illustrates that this method of pregnancy management is the treatment of choice. One would expect these parents to be devastated by this tragic turn of events and they were. Whenever I discussed the case with them, they always mentioned how hard and tragic the birth of their baby had been, but they never failed to mention what a wonderful, positive, warm and loving experience the explosion of love had been. In their minds, and everyone's mind, the tragedy of the baby's death was ever intimately wedded to and always inseparable from the explosion of love.

One might expect such parents would be hesitant to ever get pregnant again, or at least not any time soon, but they were trying within a couple of months. They were pregnant in a few more months and they delivered their second baby by the end of a year. This showed me that the method Little

David taught me helped his parents to heal from their terrible, painful experience.

Little David taught me the proper management of a baby with a lethal birth defect is usually expectant (i.e., non-intervention). Little David taught me that there is a tremendous amount of good which can come from such management. Little David showed me that every baby is created for a reason, and each has a special vocation. Little David demonstrated that even a baby who never spoke, could preach a powerful spiritual message to doctors, hospital staff, mothers, and readers.

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