

# Receiving a child with joy

Feast of the Holy Family (Year B) Dec. 29 (Texts: Genesis 15:1-6; 17:3b-5, 15-16; 21:1-7 [Psalm 105]; Hebrews 11:8, 11-12, 17-19; Luke 2:22-40)



## GOD'S WORD ON SUNDAY

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Several years ago, I learned of the burden carried by couples that had lost a child by miscarriage. The deprivation of a baby they had eagerly awaited left them grieving. For some, their sorrow was compounded by well-meant but hurtful comments from relatives and friends. As well, the faith community seemed to have little to say to their predicament. Mostly, their anguish went unseen, unheard.

I discovered an answer to the pain such parents suffered in Morning Light Ministry, a ser-

vice begun in Mississauga, Ont., by Bernadette Zambri, who had experienced a miscarriage and felt the lack of response to her situation by her church community.

Its reach now extends to other forms of loss of life in the womb. Morning Light Ministry is a Catholic outreach program offering information and support on many levels for bereaved mothers and bereaved fathers who have experienced the death of their baby through ectopic pregnancy, miscarriage, stillbirth or early infant death up to one year old.

Recently, the ministry has begun to help parents to bring their babies to full-term despite adverse prenatal diagnosis for such conditions as Down syndrome, spina bifida, anencephaly and Trisomy 18. For many parents are pressured to "terminate the pregnancy" through "medical termination," which is another word for abortion, either through "in-

duced abortion" or "early induction of labour." Sometimes the medical community uses other terms, such as "interruption of pregnancy" or "genetic termination."

While most Catholics understand and agree with the prohibition against elective abortions — abortions undertaken because the pregnancy is unwanted — many do not realize that a so-called selective termination of pregnancy or genetic abortion — undertaken because of the discovery of a fetal anomaly — is also a direct abortion and so prohibited according to Catholic teaching. This includes terminations undertaken for fatal conditions such as anencephaly and serious but not life-threatening conditions such as Down syndrome.

Some Catholics — including clergy — seem to treat genetic terminations as regrettable but permissible, but they are wrong to teach this. This is a major issue of pastoral concern because the pressure to abort once an anomaly has been detected is enormous. It is essential, for the sake of the child and for the parents, that priests and others, to whom they may turn at such a terrible time, be clear about Catholic teaching on this point and supportive of it.

This year's celebration of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph occurs on the day after the church observes the Feast of the Holy Innocents, when several dioceses honour those involved in activities that favour life and try to foster a culture of life.

In light of the complex challenges now facing family life, the readings for this year's Solemnity of the Holy Family invite disciples to reflect on the sacredness of life from the moment of concep-

tion to that of natural death. They tell of the joy of welcoming new life in a child.

Taken from several chapters of Genesis, the first reading introduces the elderly couple Abraham and Sarah whose life appeared to be meaningless because they were childless. God entered the scene and renewed the promise that they would have offspring as numerous as the stars in the heavens.

In the Gospel, an elderly couple encounters the Child Jesus in the Temple. We see in the meeting of Simeon with Jesus and His parents, the meeting of two generations, one declining, the other rising. Simeon represents the Israelite covenant that welcomes the coming new covenant.

Simeon summarizes his life and the expectations of faithful Israel in his prayer, known as the *Munc dimittis* (from the first words of the Latin version) prayed every evening at Compline.

Simeon's prayer is a swan song, that melodious sound which antiquity attributed to the swan as it prepared to die. For a fleeting moment Jesus brought deep joy and consolation into the hearts of many who heard of the happening, but especially to the seniors Simeon and Anna who had shared in the joyous moment.

Though Simeon foresees suffering in the futures of Mary and Jesus, the Holy Spirit also moves him to foretell the glory of Jesus' resurrection, which overcomes the shame of the cross, of loss. Anna, modelling hopes that God's promises would be fulfilled, shows that once the Child Jesus has been encountered one can't help but tell others.