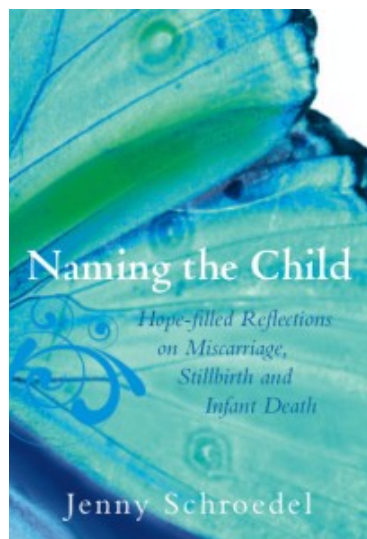


Enduring the Greatest Loss

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



On December 31 we remember Saint Melania of Rome, who offered wonderful service to God. Among other things, she was able to succeed where the great Saint Augustine had failed, converting a staunchly pagan uncle to the Christian faith. Melania also copied manuscripts, founded monasteries for men and women, and supported both the Church and those in need by donating the immense wealth she had inherited.

But Melania endured the greatest loss in human life: the death of one's children. Both the boy and girl to whom she gave birth died very early. This loss was extremely difficult for her to accept; she said to her husband that God had taken their little ones "at an untimely hour."

For people in our own day who face the same kind of loss, the 2009 book entitled *Naming the Child* by Jenny Schroedel is a wonderful resource. The book's subtitle is "Hope-filled Reflections on Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Infant Death", and that is exactly what the author provides. The book makes the central point that every child, no matter whether born dead or having only a very short life, should receive a name from his or her parents. Mrs. Schroedel writes, "Perhaps naming the baby is the most transcendent act available to us. Long after mementos from the pregnancy or birth are put away, long after the insanity and intensity that marks the first year of grief, the baby still has a name, and we can still speak it."

Giving a child a name also gives that little person a solid place in the family. When speaking to others, parents can talk about "our son Philip, who died" rather than referring to "the son we lost" or "the baby who died." The name makes the child's presence real.

The author also stresses the importance of parents of a very ill or stillborn child making sure that, if possible, they hold or touch their child, rather than allowing hospital personnel to whisk the baby away as a means of sparing the parents pain. Again, touching and holding makes the baby's presence real. As the author writes, "By holding their baby, the parents claim him or her as their own. In the chaos and confusion after [the baby's] death, against the stark backdrop of a hospital room with its beeping machines and fluorescent lights, the parents can say with their bodies—this precious baby is mine." She also writes about the value of keeping objects, such as blankets and hospital tags, that have touched or enwrapped the baby's body.



Troparion - Tone 8

The image of God was truly preserved in you, O Mother, for you took up the Cross and followed Christ. By so doing, you taught us to disregard the flesh, for it passes away; but to care instead for the soul, since it is immortal. Therefore your spirit, O holy Mother Melania, rejoices with the angels.

The book also offers practical guidance, with suggestions for handling many situations that grieving parents face, as well as addresses of organizations and support groups, and helpful written and visual materials. It ends with the author's statement of belief: "God is in the delivery room, in the stairwell, in the tomb, and in the womb. God is the one who holds every memory of every child tightly, tenderly against the backdrop of eternity."