

Emerging Trends in Pregnancy-Loss Memorialization in American Catholicism

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Pregnancy loss (miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion) is an age-old, and typically hidden, part of women's lives, yet only in recent years has it started to receive recognition to match its prevalence. Based on ethnographic research, this article analyzes liturgical and memorial practices developing within American Catholicism to acknowledge and commemorate pregnancy losses. Growing efforts have emerged as parishes, dioceses, and other Catholic organizations across the country have developed rites and memorials that provide formal ways to attend to grief that often accompanies experiences of miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion. The memorials range from "miscarriage masses" to public monuments to postabortion ministry retreats. This article argues that these memorial practices seek to change how pregnancy-loss experiences are understood or "known" by ritual participants by reframing them within Catholic narratives of forgiveness and healing, thereby transforming situations of isolating loss into stories of grace, community, and shared sorrow.

Keywords: pregnancy loss, miscarriage, stillbirth, abortion, ritual, memorials, American Catholicism

IN cases of illness and death, the Catholic Church has rich and deeply rooted traditions in the sacrament of the anointing of the sick and the rites of Christian burial for addressing what are considered some of life's most difficult situations. But what about the other trying, if less visible, moments in life? Where is the communal recognition of the sad and painful dissolution of a marriage? Where is the blessing to reintegrate a soldier into a church community following service in a war? Where is the healing ceremony for victims of domestic violence? The same question can

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be asked for countless other circumstances of loss and brokenness, including the focus of this article: experiences of pregnancy loss (miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion). The lack of any sort of public acknowledgment of these losses could lead one to presume that these kinds of situations—occasions of distress and despair, affliction and alienation—are best dealt with in private.

For many women, a failed or terminated pregnancy is a traumatic, life-altering event. It leads some to feel betrayed by their bodies because of their inability to sustain a desired pregnancy. For others, it raises questions about their identity as a woman or as a mother. Yet, given the prevalence of pregnancy loss—it is estimated that from one in four to one in three pregnancies end in miscarriage, stillbirth, or abortion in the United States¹—there has been a marked inattention to this basic human experience in American culture. For some Catholic women, the silence surrounding these situations within the church itself only compounds their difficulty, even if the silence is rooted in ignorance, not malevolence. Christopher Pramuk's very personal short essay, "A Hidden Sorrow," describes the multiple pregnancy losses experienced by his wife, his sister, and his mother, and how "in Christian and Catholic circles ... the silence following our miscarriages ... felt like loneliness, death, crucifixion. It seemed to mock my wife and me and our desire for life, our trust in its elemental goodness."² Pramuk asks if there is a way for faith communities to reject that silence and be a part of pregnancy-loss grief and healing instead.

The silence surrounding pregnancy loss can be traced to factors like uncertainty about how to react to miscarriage, stigmas about induced abortion, and social reticence to discuss issues that are seen as falling within the private domain: sexuality, reproduction, death, and grief. Recent evidence, however, suggests the reticence within the church to address the sensitive subject of pregnancy loss may be easing. New and growing efforts to recognize pregnancy loss have emerged within American Catholicism as parishes, dioceses, and other Catholic organizations across the country have developed liturgical rites and memorials that provide formal ways to attend to grief that often accompanies experiences of miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion. The memorials range from "miscarriage masses" held at individual parishes around the country to dedicating commemorative plaques at public

¹ Linda Layne, *Motherhood Lost: A Feminist Account of Pregnancy Loss in America* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 11.

² Christopher Pramuk, "A Hidden Sorrow," *America*, April 11, 2011, 19–20. Pramuk's reflections draw attention to the toll that pregnancy losses can take on men as well as women, though the focus of my research remains primarily women's responses to losses.

monuments to healing rites that involve “mothering” baby dolls as part of postabortion ministry retreats.³ These efforts are the subject of this article.

Defining the language of this project has been a continual struggle for precision because of the biologically nuanced and politically explosive meanings associated with some of the key terms involved. I use “pregnancy loss” to name not only a physiological event (that is, the expulsion of embryonic and fetal tissue from the uterus) but also the emotional injury that the physiological experience often brings about.⁴ Specifically, I focus on instances of miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion that are experienced as *losses* and as *occasions for grief* by those involved. My use of the term “pregnancy loss” is somewhat idiosyncratic because I include unintended miscarriage and stillbirth within the same category as induced abortion. I do this for a few reasons.

First, many of the pregnancy-loss liturgies and memorials currently offered do not distinguish between the circumstances of pregnancy losses in practice, even though often one type of experience may be prioritized. Because spontaneous and induced abortion are undifferentiated ritually speaking, then, I group them together in my analysis as well. Second, drawing a firm line between unintended and intended pregnancy loss can inadvertently impose a simplistic understanding over the gray-scaled complexity of pregnancy termination decisions. Consider cases in which maternal or fetal health may be seriously compromised, for example. An abortion may be chosen in this sort of situation, but the notion of choice is an imperfect fit here, and the termination may be experienced as an unintended loss of a wanted pregnancy by the woman or family involved.⁵ Third, and closely related to the second point, examining deliberately induced abortion within

³ The “Blessing of Parents after a Miscarriage or Stillbirth” from the US Conference of Catholic Bishops’ 1989 *Book of Blessings* is not part of the purview of this article, though tracing the etiology of that rite would be an interesting project in itself. The rite is now available on the USCCB’s website at <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/bereavement-and-funerals/blessing-of-parents-after-a-miscarriage-or-stillbirth.cfm>.

⁴ This is not to say that all interrupted pregnancies are grieved or experienced as *losses*. Eve Kushner observes, “After an abortion, some of us feel no loss at all—only gains.” Eve Kushner, *Experiencing Abortion: A Weaving of Women’s Words* (New York: Haworth Park Press, 1997), 63. Likewise, not all spontaneous miscarriages elicit a sense of loss or sadness from the once-expectant mother. It should be noted that “pregnancy loss” as I use it does *not* include infertility struggles within its scope. While the anguish and grief that often accompany infertility are undeniable and also deserve acknowledgment, they are different in nature from the anguish and grief experienced by women who are able to conceive yet go on to lose or terminate a pregnancy, and therefore I exclude them here. For a theological treatment of infertility, see Kathryn Lilla Cox, “Toward a Theology of Infertility and the Role of *Donum Vitae*,” *Horizons* 40, no. 1 (2013): 28–52.

⁵ I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for raising this issue.

the same interpretive framework as unintended miscarriage and stillbirth challenges many common assumptions about abortion. In the United States today, there are strong stigmas associated with abortion, due in part to widespread stereotypes that women who terminate pregnancies do so casually or for selfish reasons (such as an unwillingness to care for a child or in order to conceal illicit sexual behavior). By seeing abortion and miscarriage as part of a single continuum of pregnancy loss, one may be able to forgo such stereotypes and be open to seeing abortion as the genuine occasion of grief that it is for many women, regardless of their reasons for terminating pregnancies. Thus, while I understand the perspective that spontaneous and induced abortions represent two different phenomena that should be analyzed separately, I believe that more is to be gained than lost by taking the broader perspective and examining them together.

The language challenges of the project in many ways point to the central ambiguities underlying experiences of pregnancy loss and its memorialization. What exactly is lost? A baby? Products of conception (as medical forms often indicate)? An idea? A hope? The potentiality either of a future child or of oneself as a parent? Should what is lost be mourned, and if so, how? Can a woman be a mother even when no baby is born? Just as no two pregnancy-loss experiences are the same, there is no one way to answer these questions, and the memorials I have encountered sit within the ambiguity surrounding pregnancy loss in general.

The breadth and diversity of memorials examined here point to the growing presence of pregnancy-loss memorialization today. While still far from ubiquitous, pregnancy-loss memorial practices are being developed by a wide range of communities throughout the United States. The goals of the individuals and groups behind the memorials vary greatly. Regardless of motivation, all are committed to addressing this long-overlooked part of women's lives, and they draw on the ritual resources of the Catholic tradition to do so.

In what remains of this article, I begin by examining writings of Serene Jones and Bruce Morrill on how Christian narratives of grace and redemption, mediated via ritual, can help wounded individuals heal from various experiences of trauma. Jones' and Morrill's insights serve as resources for understanding the work these new ritual practices have the potential to accomplish for memorial participants. I then consider Jones' feminist theological analysis of reproductive challenges and the ways it does and does not respond to the needs of women in the midst of such losses.⁶

⁶ Another resource that treats pregnancy loss from a theological perspective is *Hope Deferred: Heart-Healing Reflections on Reproductive Loss*, ed. Nadine Pence Franz and

From there, I devote the majority of the article to describing and analyzing the pregnancy-loss memorial practices I have encountered in my ongoing ethnography of American Catholic communities developing these rites.⁷ The memorials detailed here are not an exhaustive account but are representative of larger trends in these emergent practices. I show how these memorials confront the ambiguity that surrounds prenatal life and grieving death before birth by ritually recognizing both components of life and death. Catholic pregnancy-loss memorials first and foremost are aimed at what I call epistemological efficacy, meaning that they aim to change how pregnancy-loss experiences are understood or known by ritual participants. The memorials reframe miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion experiences within Catholic narratives of forgiveness and healing, and thereby hope to transform them from situations of isolating loss into stories of grace, community, and shared sorrow. The rituals enact a new form of knowing in which the hidden brokenness of women's bodies and absence of lost prelates come to light and are opened up to a healing imagination in ways that are meant to be therapeutic.

What all the pregnancy-loss memorials considered here have in common is the social construction and individualization of lost prelates through the act of memorialization. That is, through the memorial practices, lost fetuses come to be recognized socially and claimed as part of a family, and in that way, they are given individual identities as someone's absent, and beloved,

Mary T. Stimming (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), a collection of essays in which five female scholars reflect theologically on their struggles with infertility, miscarriage, and stillbirth. Articles in popular Catholic publications in recent years, like the Pramuk essay cited above, have broached the topic of pregnancy loss but rarely from the perspective of memorials and ritual remembrances unless they are making a direct reference to Japanese *mizuko* rites and the dearth of offerings like this in the Catholic Church. A number of other publications from the last thirty years do address ritualization following miscarriage, stillbirth, and infertility from the perspectives of different Christian communities; these publications include Melissa Miller, "When Miscarriage Steals Pregnancy's Promise," *Vision* 4 (2003): 41-47; Elaine Ramshaw, "Ritual for Stillbirth: Exploring the Issues," *Worship* 62 (1988): 533-38; Elette Gamble and Wilbur L. Holz, "A Rite for the Stillborn," *Word & World* 15 (1995): 349-53; Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, "When the Cradle Is Empty: Rites Acknowledging Stillbirth, Miscarriage, and Infertility," *Worship* 76 (2002): 482-502, for example.

⁷ My research in the area of American Catholic pregnancy-loss memorials is part of a larger comparative project that also considers Japanese Buddhist *mizuko* (water-child or water-baby) rites that memorialize pregnancy losses due to miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion. In both the American Catholic and Japanese Buddhist settings, my ethnography for the project goes beyond what is recounted here to include interviews with women who have taken part in these rituals.

child.⁸ Put differently, every lost fetus that is memorialized *becomes* a child by means of the memorial. While it seems redundant to say that a woman becomes a mother when she has a child, in cases of pregnancy loss, maternal identity is compromised and often remains ambiguous. Thus, in the construction of the lost fetus as a child, the identity of the woman as a mother is also constructed through the process of memorialization.

Renarrating Pregnancy Loss: Ritual and Theological Resources

In *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, Serene Jones challenges the notion that experiences of pregnancy loss are strictly personal, private matters. Rather, she argues, the community, the church, and God share in them, for neither God nor the church is a stranger to trauma. Indeed, according to Jones, the Christian faith was born out of the interstices of trauma and grace in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and reveals “the incredible insistence on love amid fragmented, unraveled human lives.”⁹ Perhaps victims of trauma reveal this fragmentation and unraveling most poignantly, though Christian teachings would insist that all are broken in some way.

Jones proposes that instead of suffering alone, the faith community engages in the individual’s recovery and in the mending of a violent, damaged world through the development of what she calls a “healing imagination.” She observes, “As human beings we constantly engage the world through organizing stories or habits of mind, which structure our thoughts. Our imagination simply refers to the thought stories that we live with and through which we interpret the world surrounding us.”¹⁰ In cases of trauma, the ability to imagine and narrate life stories in ways that are

⁸ By and large, I employ medical terminology in order to achieve a foundational level of precision and consistency in my discussion of the earliest stages of human life. Yet even the decision to refer to prenatal life in medical terms can be interpreted as a political choice. In the American antiabortion movement, for instance, the use of the terms “fetus” or “prenate” is often interpreted as a rejection of the personhood of the “child” in the womb. Or, my use of the term “unborn” might find resistance within the American abortion rights community for attributing too much autonomy to fetuses, thereby extracting them from the context of women’s bodies. I try to honor individual communities’ preferred nomenclature when discussing the different memorials. So, for example, I rely on the terms “children” or “the unborn” more frequently in this article, since that is the language most commonly used by the groups and individuals that facilitate Catholic pregnancy-loss practices.

⁹ Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), xiii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

healthy and promote flourishing can be severely impaired. By developing a “healing imagination,” Jones suggests, victims, individual and communal, have the potential to renarrate their traumatic experiences within the larger context of the Christian narrative of grace.¹¹ Her view of the Christian narrative differs greatly from the “*rupture* and *disorder*” of trauma narratives, which are characterized by “a loss of a sense of self, a breakdown in normal knowing and feeling, and a paralyzing lack of agency in the threat of the harm suffered.”¹² Renarrating one’s story through the lens of grace, by contrast, can bring a sense of reconciliation and wholeness to experiences initially marked by pain and destruction.

Bruce Morrill, in his emphasis on the power of the Christian story to impact how illness and affliction are experienced, echoes Serene Jones’ work on trauma from the perspective of Catholic sacramental theology. Morrill claims narrative, like Jones’ concept of imagination, “enables people to situate their experience of pain in a consoling, and at times empowering, company of voices, breaking the silence modernity has imposed on suffering.”¹³ For Morrill, this narrative is not strictly a matter of story and imagination, but comes through the visible and tangible signs of Catholic liturgical practices and offers a “comprehensive sense of meaning” capable of responding to those in need of healing. In short, it is not just about words and verbal expression; it is about ritual. In the face of “disorienting, alienating, and often life-threatening situation(s),” the liturgy and the sacraments, he explains, are “an encounter with the divine origin and final end of all creation, a real and nourishing foretaste of the fullness of life in the divine presence.”¹⁴ Through story and ritual, grace penetrates wounds—physical, psychological, spiritual—and gives a new way to imagine and to live amid pain and fragmentation.

Morrill’s perspective on suffering emerges in concert with reflections on the Catholic sacrament of the anointing of the sick and the rites of Christian burial (vigil service, funeral mass, rite of committal), and he deals with illness, pain, and death in very broad terms. By contrast, Jones’ accounts of suffering are deeply personal and are rooted in the specific details of her own, as well as friends’, experiences of trauma. Among the “everyday traumas” Jones identifies is the suffering of women struggling with reproductive loss.¹⁵ Whether miscarriage, stillbirth, or the even less visible losses of

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19, 15.

¹³ Bruce Morrill, *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 55.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵ Jones prefers the term “reproductive loss” to other similar terms for its ability to encompass infertility as well as problems during pregnancy. However, while still recognizing

infertility, experiences of reproductive loss are characterized by what Jones calls “the death of hope.”¹⁶ For many women, this grief is real and life altering, and yet socially, reproductive struggles are either cloaked in silence or ignored completely. Traditionally, neither feminists nor churches have attended to this often central, defining feature of a woman’s life. In Jones’ opinion, much of this silence is rooted in “the inability of feminists to think about this loss as real because of the constraints placed on our discourse by the abortion debate and by the failure of Christian communities to face what happens to a woman’s sense of identity when her body—her womb—becomes a living grave.”¹⁷ She sets out, with this in mind, to uncover a healing narrative capable of responding to the complex emotions and commitments that factor into reproductive-loss grief.

Jones seeks feminist as well as theological resources for understanding the experiences of women devastated by the inability to bring forth life from their bodies despite the desire to do so.¹⁸ Instead of focusing on the traditional maternal Marian image, Jones looks for what she calls the “antimaternal,” for an image capable of addressing maternal loss. For this she turns to the experience of the Trinity in the death of Jesus in which “God takes this death into the depths of Godself.” Jones contends that when Jesus dies, “death ... happens deep within God, not outside God but in the very heart—perhaps the womb of God.”¹⁹ She compares this experience to that of a woman in the midst of a miscarriage or stillbirth who “carries death within her ... but she does not die.”²⁰ It is a loss not only of another physical being, but also of an imagined future. In the wake of feelings of both guilt and helplessness, it forces the reimagining of one’s body and one’s plans, and it strikes at the core of one’s sense of self.²¹

that life is much messier than her neat categories imply, she opts to bracket cases of abortion in her discussion of reproductive loss, and instead focuses on situations in which she says the “hoped-for child” does not come.

¹⁶ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 131.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹⁸ In doing so, Jones rejects looking to Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a healing narrative resource for addressing reproductive loss. That is because, despite Mary’s role as the Christian archetype of motherhood and the fact that she experienced the death of her son, reproductive loss is a wholly different experience than that of maternity and child loss. Because “the mother’s barrenness and her bodily disintegration are not at issue” in child loss, the grief it produces has a very different texture than when pregnancies fail, bodies betray, and children remain unborn. Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 144.

¹⁹ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 148.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

²¹ More so than other health problems, reproductive troubles are experienced as an attack against one’s identity and sense of self. Janet Jaffe and Martha O. Diamond, mental

For the Trinity, miscarriage becomes an opportunity for redemption, and trauma is transformed through grace. For women affected by reproductive loss, however, their suffering should not be misunderstood as being redemptive. Rather, in drawing a comparison between the Godhead and women who struggle to conceive and give birth, Jones strives to establish a bond rooted in the shared experience of maternal loss. The image of the miscarrying Trinity addresses reproductive loss specifically and goes beyond the meaningful, if generic, image of a compassionate God who suffers with humanity in all its struggles. It is “an image of God ‘standing with’ ... the woman ravaged by grief at the loss of her hoped-for children.”²² According to Jones, knowing that God stands in solidarity with those affected by reproductive loss allows for the development of a healing imagination and permits grace to break into the innermost spaces of hurt and isolation.

Serene Jones’ work explores theologically how experiences of pregnancy loss can be interpreted. Yet her account of the Trinity experiencing death within its very being in the dying of Christ, while moving and theologically insightful, is significant for its intellectual rather than its pragmatic contribution to addressing pregnancy loss. In *Trauma and Grace*, Jones recounts a story of how on a rainy day, in the wake of her own failed pregnancy, she was called by a friend who was in the midst of miscarrying for a fourth time. She tells of how, in their grief and confusion, they longed for more than just a conceptual or intellectual way to understand their loss. She writes,

What we yearned for was more basic. We wanted images, a drama, a story, a vivid language that could draw together our strange experience in the rain and the faith and feminism, which have so profoundly formed us. What we sought, I believe, was the barest outlines of theological, visual poetry. We needed a form or a genre of knowing that, crossing the multiple borders of our complex lives, could give meaningful shape to this particular event.²³

While Jones’ notion of renarration implies a discursive response to the trauma experiences she identifies, her reflections on her own experience of

health experts in the area of reproductive struggle, observe, “If a patient had a broken arm or had to wear glasses, his or her reaction might be: A part of me needs mending, or a part of my body is weak. The client would go about correcting the problem, without feeling like something was wrong with his or her core identity. But with a reproductive trauma, patients tend to respond with statements that encompass the entire self.” Janet Jaffe and Martha O. Diamond, *Reproductive Trauma: Psychotherapy with Infertility and Pregnancy Loss Clients* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011), 60.

²² Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 146.

²³ *Ibid.*, 128–29.

pregnancy loss call out for a more embodied response that goes beyond literal, verbal discourse.

The rest of this article will examine emergent Catholic pregnancy-loss memorial practices and the extent to which these practices attempt to fill the gap Jones identified in the midst of her own suffering. I suggest that the new “genre of knowing” Jones sought is manifested ritually in Catholic pregnancy-loss memorials and their potential to be epistemologically efficacious. That is, these memorial practices, in their power to create and enact the healing imagination Jones proposes, are able to reframe loss experiences within the broader Christian narrative of grace and reconciliation. They employ the Catholic sacramental imagination, like that extolled by Morrill, to address situations of tremendous loss and fragmentation, and by bringing Catholic ritual resources to bear on pregnancy loss, these memorials have the potential to transform how memorial participants understand and relate to their own loss experiences. In contrast to discursive argument, ritual allows tension and ambiguity to be embraced rather than clarified. This feature of ritual is particularly important in the case of pregnancy-loss memorialization, since it is an area in which complexities—theological, ethical, emotional, and political, to name just a few—abound.

Ethnography of Pregnancy-Loss Memorials

In the absence of an official ritual for addressing miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion, individuals and organizations have taken it upon themselves to develop a meaningful Catholic response to the issue. Although Catholic acts of pregnancy-loss memorialization are not yet pervasive in the United States, there is an increasing awareness of the issue within Catholic communities, and widespread efforts are being made to draw on the symbolic and ritual resources of the Catholic tradition to promote healing for those suffering from miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion losses.

Conducting field research for this project was imperative, since these pregnancy-loss memorial practices have as yet gone largely unexplored by theologians and scholars of religion. In-depth interviews proved my most important source for gaining information about the history and thought behind various pregnancy-loss memorials that have arisen over the last twenty-five years. I interviewed a number of memorial or ritual facilitators, that is, those individuals responsible for developing or providing memorial practices. I also attended a liturgy commemorating miscarriages, stillbirths, and abortions as a participant-observer, visited a number of public memorials, and participated in a daylong training session for leaders of postabortion healing retreats.

Based on my research, I discern three main types of pregnancy-loss memorialization.²⁴ The first type is the integration of the theme of pregnancy loss into the mainstream, typical Catholic mass on either a large or small scale. These masses can be onetime or recurring events, and they frequently include miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion together as the special focus of the liturgy. Pastors performed these masses in response to inquiries from women who had experienced pregnancy losses. The second category of memorialization includes public monuments, memorials, or shrines. These structures can be found throughout the United States. Here I focus on two in particular: the Patron of the Unborn memorial at the Shrine of St. Joseph in Santa Cruz, California, and the Memorial of Mourning in Naperville, Illinois, which is a jointly sponsored project of the antiabortion organization Victims of Choice and the local chapter of the Knights of Columbus. Finally, the third major form of pregnancy-loss memorialization is programming sponsored by Project Rachel, the main Catholic postabortion healing ministry in the United States. With diocesan affiliates across the country, Project Rachel is a network of clerical and lay ministers engaged in providing spiritual and psychological counseling for women and men who have been involved with abortion in some way. They also host retreats throughout the country in conjunction with a related organization, Rachel's Vineyard, and work in conjunction with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and their pro-life activities. The work of these groups reflects a commitment to helping women heal from traumatic abortion experiences as well as a commitment to the antiabortion message integral to many Catholic pregnancy-loss healing ministries.

In each of the memorial settings I will describe, I found little concern on the part of memorial facilitators for the salvation of lost prenatals.²⁵ The

²⁴ A potential fourth category of memorialization could focus on feminist liturgical rites aimed at commemorating pregnancy losses and supporting abortion decisions. Examples of these sorts of liturgies include rites developed by Rosemary Radford Ruether in *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) or by Diann Neu, cofounder of Water: Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual, in her book *Women's Rites: Feminist Liturgies for Life's Journey* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003). Both Ruether's and Neu's pregnancy-loss rites are included in books of feminist liturgies designed to honor life-changing events in women's lives (e.g., menstruation, domestic violence, menopause, divorce, widowhood), but they are not tied as explicitly to mainstream Catholic theology and practice as the other categories of memorials I address.

²⁵ This is a marked difference from Japanese Buddhist *mizuko* rites, which purport to effect a change in the postmortem destiny of lost prenatals that helps them attain rebirth in the Pure Land. In my broader comparative project, I refer to this as "ontological efficacy" in contradistinction to the "epistemological efficacy" discussed in this article.

memorial prayers and activities reflect the belief that deceased children are already in the care of God. This marks a departure from the concerns of the infant baptism and limbo debates of early and medieval Christian history, as well as from the funeral practices of the same eras, in which there was great worry about the soteriological status of babies who died prior to baptism. The International Theological Commission's 2007 document "The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die without Being Baptized" suggests that this worry persists among those who have lost children in the contemporary era as well, yet the document tries to assuage this concern by firmly asserting that there is strong theological support for trusting that children who die before baptism are included in the salvific will of God.²⁶ Thus, neither current magisterial teachings nor emerging pregnancy-loss memorials imply that deceased prenatals require the benefits of ritual intervention on their behalf. I suggest instead that American Catholic pregnancy-loss memorials work by means of the active and tangible reimagination of loss by drawing on the liturgical symbols and practices of the church.

Masses for Miscarriage and More

An early example of an individual priest proactively responding to pregnancy loss can be found in Thomas Turner's short article, "A Rite for Miscarriage," published in 1987.²⁷ In the article Turner writes, "A child who is lost during pregnancy is grieved by the entire family, but especially by the mother. In many cases, the family has already named the child. Because this lost child is never directly seen by the family and friends, it is often presumed that the loss is not that significant. This is a false

²⁶ International Theological Commission (ITC), "The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die without Being Baptized," 2007, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_un-baptised-infants_en.html. Important in the document is the affirmation of God's justice and mercy, which it acknowledges are sometimes difficult to comprehend with child loss, particularly when there is worry about the eschatological fate of the infant (§2). The document assures parents who did not have the opportunity to baptize their child that "God does not demand the impossible of us" (§82), and hence, despite their child's not being sacramentally incorporated into the faith, hope for their child's redemption is not lost. Nevertheless, the ITC makes every effort to ensure that the significance of baptism is not diminished as a result of the admission that there is reason to hope that unbaptized infants will not be excluded from the promises of salvation.

²⁷ Thomas Turner, "A Rite for Miscarriage," *Modern Liturgy* 13, no. 9 (Dec. 1986/Jan. 1987): 18-19.

presumption.”²⁸ Turner’s article details a liturgy he developed in order to address and rectify this presumption.

The article and the rite it details grew of out a late-night telephone call Turner received a year or two earlier. In one of his first years as a diocesan priest in Kansas City, Turner received a call from a woman named Mary who was at a local hospital. Mary explained that she had just had a miscarriage, and she was wondering if the Catholic Church had any sort of liturgy or memorial service to honor miscarriages. Caught off-guard by the question, Turner replied that he knew of no such liturgy, he apologized, and the conversation ended. The next day Turner recounted his conversation with Mary to a religious sister who worked at his same parish. After listening to Turner’s story, the sister replied, “Next time you get a call like that, you make one [a liturgy] up.”²⁹

So that is exactly what Turner did. First, he placed an announcement in the parish bulletin saying that in two weeks a mass would be held to recognize “pregnancies that did not come to term.” Though the request for such a service that Turner initially received from Mary referred only to miscarriage, he intentionally left the wording of the announcement open so that it could include abortion as well.

As Turner prepared for the special mass, he set out to model it after the Catholic funeral liturgy with minor changes wherever appropriate. He chose readings that were designated for use in children’s funerals, and he altered the standard funeral prayers to make them fit the particular circumstances of memorializing pregnancy losses. Turner also asked a couple from the parish who had suffered a miscarriage to reflect on their experience before the congregation.

On the day of the mass, Turner arranged the church as he would have for a funeral liturgy. Instead of having a casket, however, he placed a long rectangular table draped with a funeral pall at the front of the sanctuary. In preparing for the liturgy, Turner planned to have several votive candles placed on the altar rail still present at his suburban church. He intended to invite those in attendance to place the candles on the pall-covered table, one for each child that they had lost.³⁰

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁹ Thomas Turner, interview by author, Kansas City, MO, August 26, 2010. Turner is no longer a priest.

³⁰ Turner initially planned to have a small number of votives available, but again, the sister working at his parish warned him that he would be surprised by the number of people in attendance and by the number of losses they had experienced. In the end, he placed 100 votives there just to be safe.

As the appointed time for the liturgy approached, the church filled with women seated alone and with couples sitting together, exceeding the usual attendance of the Saturday morning mass by about fifty people. Turner opened the mass by saying that the liturgy was intended “to recognize the presence of their lost children as members of our community.”³¹ He did this not only to acknowledge the grief and sense of loss that those in attendance felt, but also to remind those present that “the Catholic tradition has always emphasized that its community consists of both living and dead members, that is, the community of the saints.” In Turner’s view “affirming these two realities—the full church membership of these unborn children and the mothers’ pain—is at the heart of this ritual.”³² The prayers and petitions he developed for use during the mass all reflected these goals.

He asked those who were there to commemorate pregnancy losses to take candles from the altar rail and place them on the pall-draped table in order to represent children that had died in the womb. During my interview with Turner in 2010, twenty-five years after the original liturgy, he was still struck by the number of women and couples that came forward to gather the votive candles from the altar rail. He recalled that the candles came to cover the table completely and that many women were grabbing three or four votives at a time to commemorate multiple pregnancies that had ended in loss. Turner had incorporated this element into the rite very deliberately, wanting to make those in attendance “active participants” in the liturgy. He explained in our interview that it also served a secondary purpose. As women and couples came forward to take the candles, they began to see one another doing the same thing. Consequently, not only were their losses then made public, but they also became shared losses. It showed that others shared in the experience of pregnancy loss, and each individual loss came to be seen as a loss for the community. In addition, bringing the votives forward to the pall-covered table made it “the symbolic locus of the souls of the lost children,” whose absence was then manifested as candles sitting before the altar.³³

Turner went on to sprinkle the table and candles with holy water (just as the coffin is sprinkled during the Catholic funeral rite), saying that the water was meant to bless, not to cleanse, the spirits of the “most innocent” children. At the end of the mass, he returned to the table, this time with incense, to emulate the final funeral commendation by symbolically “sending up” the souls of the lost children to God. He also invited the congregation to extend

³¹ Turner, “A Rite for Miscarriage,” 18.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 19.

their hands and arms in blessing as he prayed, “Children, may you share your gifts of life, happiness, and peace with each of us as we share our pains and struggles of life with you.” When the service was over, he says, he received many “tear-eyed ‘thank yous.’”³⁴

During the course of my research, I had the opportunity to observe a pregnancy-loss liturgy firsthand in 2011, also in Kansas City, Missouri, that was based on the rite Thomas Turner developed. A few alterations were made based on the preferences of the presiding parish priest, Mark Gray, whom I also had the chance to interview before the liturgy took place.³⁵ Designated the “Memorial Mass for Our Unborn Children,” this liturgy was held on January 1, the Feast of the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, and just after December 28, the Feast of the Holy Innocents. The timing of the service was both deliberate and coincidental. Gray found significance in the fact that the mass was being held so close to these two particular days in the liturgical calendar, one honoring motherhood and the other commemorating the deaths of innocent children. Nevertheless, he attributed the real timing of the event to the fact that recently seven people (four women, three men) in a span of two weeks had told him about their past abortion experiences. He was also aware of a parish family who had lost a baby at thirty-eight weeks gestation in recent months. For these reasons, Gray felt as though the time was right for the parish community to recognize these losses and to try to bring healing to those suffering from them.³⁶

Before the service began, two opportunities were provided for participants to make their lost children present to themselves and the congregation. Following the model of Turner’s rite, a pall-covered table had been placed at the front of the church, and those who were commemorating lost pregnancies were invited to place candles on the table in honor of each loss. Around a dozen attendees took advantage of this and brought forward candles.

³⁴ Ibid. According to Turner, the mass was intended as an opportunity for healing and closure, particularly for those who had never felt as though they could mourn their pregnancy losses in the past. When I asked if attending this sort of liturgy should be a onetime event or an ongoing practice, he said he thought it would only need to take place once, just like there is only one funeral for a person. At the same time, he believes liturgies of this sort should become a part of the church’s regular practice so that they can be done on request (like a funeral) “instead of playing catch up” by offering communal services like the one he developed.

³⁵ I have changed the name of this priest.

³⁶ The fact that this special liturgy overlapped with the Solemnity of Mary made it difficult to discern precisely how many of those in attendance were there for the purpose of memorializing a pregnancy loss and how many were there for the holy day of obligation. My best estimate is that of the sixty-five attendees, at least half were there because of the special focus of the mass.

Attendees were also invited to write the names of lost children on small, purple cards provided at the church entrances. After being personalized, the cards were gathered in the “basket of remembrance,” which was later brought forward to the altar along with the bread and wine before the eucharistic prayer.³⁷

The liturgy’s scripture readings, petitions, and prayers all focused on the theme of pregnancy loss (rather than on the Solemnity of Mary), and the sermon combined doctrinal and pastoral insights on the subject. For instance, Gray reassured those in attendance that their lost children would be included in God’s plan of salvation even though they died without being baptized. He also described pregnancy as a unique relationship that embodies ultimate intimacy and the sense of presence, and thus, grieving the loss of that relationship is natural. In times of loss, confusion, and mystery, he said, we turn to symbolic action to deal with things for which we have no words or answers. Ritual action, he said, fits grief and loss into the broader context of God’s work and the cycle of life and death.

During the eucharistic prayer, Gray asked God to accept the spirits of the innocent children and gave thanks for their short lives. He prayed that the Eucharist would strengthen the bonds between the living and the dead and would make the unborn present as lost members of the parish family. Adding a poignant and visceral quality to this petition was the sound of a crying baby spreading over the congregation from the back of the sanctuary.

The language of the liturgy focused mostly on miscarriage rather than on abortion. Though Gray mentioned abortion in passing, he did not draw any special attention to it, which stood in contrast to how he focused on abortion during my interview with him a few days before the liturgy. In that conversation, his references to abortion were somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, he said that the liturgy was not meant as a statement against abortion or as an opportunity to condemn women who had had abortions. On the other hand, he spoke in a manner that implied great disgust when discussing a particular woman in the parish who had terminated a pregnancy for health reasons, even calling her a “flit” and “spoiled brat” and making reference to her “lack of generosity” and “irresponsibility.” Even without knowing the specifics

³⁷ When I had the chance to look at these cards after the conclusion of the mass, I found twenty-three cards placed in the basket. About half of the cards identified personal names (e.g., Thomas, Marie Ann Martin), and some even listed dates going back to the 1970s. Most of the other cards referred to specific losses but without individual names (e.g., Baby Girl Williams, Two Johnson Babies). One of the cards even listed “Anderson babies 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 lost through miscarriage.” (These names been changed from those written on the original remembrance cards in order to preserve the anonymity of the memorial participants.)

of the situation, it is hard not to feel a tension between Gray's responses to abortions in the abstract and in the concrete. That is part of the power of rituals, however: their ability to be effective amid tension and to be meaningful often because, not in spite, of paradox.

According to performance theory, it is the power of ritual to "create the very social realities they enact" that sets them apart from other sorts of activities, like theater performances or discursive communication.³⁸ The pregnancy-loss liturgies do this, first, by creating a community of support for those who have suffered miscarriages, stillbirths, and abortions. As anthropologist Linda Layne suggests, American social uncertainty about how to address pregnancy losses has left women feeling isolated and confused during times of great sadness and suffering.³⁹ Turner in particular sought to recognize and respond to these feelings during his liturgy. By inviting women to participate in the liturgy by bringing forward candles representing their losses, the ritual acknowledged lost pregnancies and created a community of shared sorrow rooted in shared experience. Additionally, in their liturgies Turner and Gray sought to reassure women who had suffered pregnancy losses that their lost children remained a part of the church community. But in doing so, they did more than just verbally affirm the general Catholic teaching about the communion of the saints. Rather, through the liturgical performance, they helped create and manifest that community between the living and the unborn dead by ritually interacting with the spirits of lost prenatals. In this way, they transformed loss experiences by reframing relationships defined by absence in terms of continued presence and by drawing the parish community into what are often individual, isolating events, thereby creating a sense of communal grief.

Public Shrines and Monuments

On the occasion of the dedication of the Shrine of the Unborn at the Church of Holy Innocents in Midtown Manhattan in 1993, John Cardinal O'Connor of New York recounted his own doubts that "the Church at large has fully appreciated the loss of babies through involuntary miscarriage and the loss of babies who are stillborn."⁴⁰ The shrine is one of several physical memorials dedicated to the unborn that have sprung up across the country over the course of the last few decades. These sites are part of

³⁸ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 42.

³⁹ Layne, *Motherhood Lost*, 3.

⁴⁰ Maria McFadden, "Holy Innocents," *Human Life Review*, Spring–Summer 2000, 54.

grassroots efforts by Catholic organizations (parishes, dioceses, and other independent groups) to recognize the lives of those who die before birth and to call them to the attention of the public.

The Shrine of the Unborn was dedicated on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, December 28. A small space within the larger church, its focal point is a Book of Life in which the names of lost children are written and remembered. On either side of the book sit statues of the Holy Family—Mary on her own and Joseph holding the Christ Child—and on the wall above it is a prayer and a picture of what also looks like the child Jesus, this time in a womb-like setting. The Church of the Holy Innocents spells out the goals of the shrine on its website, saying, “Often children who have died before birth have no grave or headstone, and sometimes not even a name.... Here, a candle is always lit in their memory.”⁴¹ For those unable to visit the shrine in person, the website contains an electronic form through which the names of the unborn can be submitted to be added to the Book of Life. Upon request, a Certificate of Life with the name of the child is emailed to whomever submits the initial request.⁴² As the name suggests, the Shrine of the Unborn focuses on lost prenatals, and through the act of memorializing the unborn, it endeavors to bring healing to grieving women and family members.

Though the use of the term “unborn” in some ways allies the shrine with the rhetoric of the antiabortion movement, the overall tone of the shrine and the language of Cardinal O’Connor at its dedication demonstrate that abortion is not the sole focus of their memorial. By contrast, abortion figures much more prominently in most other Catholic shrines and monuments dedicated to memorializing pregnancy loss. Indeed, several monuments have arisen across the country for which opposition to abortion is the focus of their mission. Technically miscarriage and stillbirth are memorialized at many of these sites as well, but spontaneous losses typically are not given the same priority as abortion. Two examples of this are the Oblates of St. Joseph’s Patron of the Unborn memorial in Santa Cruz, California, and the Memorial of Mourning in Naperville, Illinois.

⁴¹ Church of the Holy Innocents, “The Shrine of the Holy Innocents,” <https://shrineofholynnocents.org/>. “All day long people stop to pray. On the first Monday of every month, our 12:15 p.m. Mass is celebrated in honor of these children and for the comfort of their families. *We pray that you will find peace in knowing that your child(ren) will be remembered at the Shrine and honored by all who pray here.*”

⁴² This is meant as a substitute for a birth certificate, which is not always issued in cases of early pregnancy loss. It serves as tangible proof of life for cases in which there are often no other physical remembrances.

On the Feast of Saint Joseph, March 19, 2001, the Shrine of St. Joseph, Guardian of the Redeemer in Santa Cruz dedicated a special memorial on its grounds. The memorial declares Joseph, the husband of Mary, the Patron of the Unborn, and was established to honor lost pregnancies and to bring healing to those suffering from them. Visually, the Patron of the Unborn memorial is both striking and beautiful. The central focal point of the monument is a seven-foot-tall seated bronze statue of Saint Joseph holding what is meant to be a six-month-old fetus in his hands. The fetus' arms are stretched out reaching for a light hanging high above the head of Saint Joseph. The light represents the light of Christ as Joseph shepherds the pre-nate toward God. Next to the statue of Joseph is a bench where visitors may sit to reflect or pray, and a low wall surrounding the statue space helps maintain a sense of privacy and quiet. The wall itself is also part of the memorial; mounted along the outside are small stone plaques engraved with the names of pre-nates commemorated there—Aaron, Scarlett, the Two Babies of KP, the Fifth Moore Baby. In addition, a Book of Innocents containing the names of lost pre-nates is housed at the memorial for those unable or disinclined to purchase a stone for the wall.

A detailed description of the memorial and its purpose is given by Larry Toschi, OSJ, the shrine's founder, on its website. The description explains that while Joseph has long been understood as the protector of the child Jesus, he also deserves recognition for his role in protecting and accepting Jesus even before he was born. By looking to Joseph, the website says, "we may learn something about even the earliest stages of parenthood, prior to birth."⁴³ The memorial is open to all individuals who wish to commemorate a pregnancy loss, regardless of whether the loss came about naturally or due to abortion. It is clear from the online description, however, that the site is focused primarily on "post-abortion healing and reconciliation." For example, the website stresses that the model of Joseph caring for the unborn Jesus is "so crucial in this era of widespread abortion, denial of the humanity of the child in the womb and the consequent denial of parenthood." The importance of unborn human life is reiterated throughout the website's description, and the monument's lifelike image of the fetus

⁴³ Oblates of St. Joseph, "Patron of the Unborn," <http://www.osjoseph.org/osj/patron-unborn.php>. The website continues, "No one can be a better defender of the innocent, helpless life in the womb. No one is a better model of fatherhood to parents of pre-born children. No one can more fittingly aid in the process of healing and reconciliation for those who grieve and agonize over having committed the sin of abortion. No one is a better image for women who have been hurt by men unwilling to accept fatherhood of the child they engendered."

Joseph cradles helps make the connection between prenatates and newborns quite visceral.

Most visitors to the memorial learned about the Patron of the Unborn through the shrine's website, pamphlets, or at one of the four parishes run by the Oblates of St. Joseph in California.⁴⁴ In addition to the physical memorial and Book of Innocents, the shrine holds a special mass each month as part of its postabortion and pregnancy-loss ministry. It is at these masses that new commemorative stones are blessed and dedicated before being placed on the memorial wall. In the fifteen years since the memorial's construction, around twenty commemorative stones have been dedicated and roughly two hundred names have been entered in the Book of Innocents. According to a lay pastoral associate at the site, people attend these special masses and visit the memorial because it gives them a chance to remember and honor pregnancy losses in a religious way that was not available to them in the past. For some memorial participants, this means that they attend the pregnancy-loss mass and visit the Patron of the Unborn site on a regular basis. For others, they visit once, maybe even dedicate a commemorative stone, and then never return again. The Patron of the Unborn memorial and Book of Innocents are both part of the broader pro-life ministry of the shrine and its parish. At the same time, the pastoral associate insisted that their pro-life ministry is very conscientious about not letting their opposition to abortion translate into placing blame on women who have terminated pregnancies.

In addition to relating the Patron of the Unborn memorial to the broader pro-life message of the church, during the course of an interview I had with Toschi, the site's founder, he endeavored to connect the mission and form of the memorial to traditional theological beliefs as well.⁴⁵ He told me he trusts the unborn are taken up in "the merciful hands of God" after death, and thus, the prayers said at the Patron of the Unborn memorial are aimed at providing healing and reconciliation for women and families, not at interceding on behalf of the souls of lost prenatates.

⁴⁴ In the process of researching the Patron of the Unborn memorial, I had the opportunity to interview the lay pastoral volunteer Susan Vega, who, along with the memorial's founder, Toschi, helped run the memorial. At the time of our interview, Vega had been a volunteer at the Shrine of St. Joseph for ten years, and typically she dealt with visitors or parishioners who wished to enter a name in the Book of Life or have a stone dedicated to a lost child. She put me in contact with Toschi, whom she called "the visionary" behind the memorial. Susan Vega, phone interview by author, November 24, 2010.

⁴⁵ He also referenced statements about the destiny of those who die before birth by John Paul II and in the ITC document "The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die without Being Baptized."

In the text on the Patron of the Unborn website,⁴⁶ Toschi goes into detail about how this healing comes about through memorializing a pregnancy loss. Focusing on cases of abortion, he writes, “The process of spiritual healing involves coming out of denial and facing the reality of the humanity of her child. In order to reconcile with God and herself, she must reconcile with her child. Insofar as she is able, she must exercise now the parental role she had denied, and for which her motherly heart aches.” First and foremost, this involves naming the lost child. “Once the child has been named,” Toschi continues, “he (or she) may be memorialized, giving the parent a concrete, physical manner of honoring and remembering the child. The memorial validates her grief and gives her permission to grieve. That unique bond between parent and child may begin to grow.” Moreover, through the dedication of commemorative stones at the Patron of the Unborn memorial, “the children who were never buried or remembered anywhere now have a place where markers testify to the fact that they were individual live human beings brought into existence on this earth.” Thus, the process of acknowledging the prelates lost through abortion, as well as through miscarriage and still-birth, is at the heart of the mission of the Patron of the Unborn memorial. Doing so turns the lost prelate into a beloved child and transforms the woman who suffered the loss into its mother.

The Oblates of St. Joseph’s Patron of the Unborn memorial in Santa Cruz is at the forefront of Catholic pregnancy-loss memorialization, in terms of both the scope of its memorial activities and the centrality of the memorial to the shrine’s parish community. Yet it is certainly not unique in its efforts to respond to pregnancy loss through the establishment of a public monument. Smaller monuments can be found throughout the United States on Catholic church and cemetery grounds. Behind a great many of these memorials are local Knights of Columbus chapters.⁴⁷ Indeed, a plaque at the Patron of the Unborn memorial thanks the local Knights of Columbus for a generous contribution that made possible the construction of the memorial. Another such monument is the Memorial of Mourning (MOM) in Naperville, Illinois. Erected in 1996 as a joint project of the Knights and the Victims of Choice, a nondenominational Christian antiabortion organization, the monument sits in a Marian grotto on the grounds of Saints Peter and Paul Cemetery outside Chicago. I visited the MOM in the summer of 2010 and spent the

⁴⁶ All quotations in this paragraph are taken from the website Oblates of St. Joseph, “Patron of the Unborn,” <http://www.osjoseph.org/osj/patron-unborn.php>.

⁴⁷ The involvement of the Knights of Columbus in these sorts of memorials is an avenue of research I am currently pursuing.

day with Elizabeth Verchio, former director of the local Victims of Choice group and designer of the MOM monument.

Verchio's involvement with Victims of Choice and her opposition to abortion grew out of her own abortion experience in the early 1980s. As a "post-abortive woman,"⁴⁸ she tries in her ministry to be particularly sensitive to the feelings of women who have had abortions.⁴⁹ In Verchio's account of how the memorial came about, it is clear that the MOM as it stands today is a combination of Verchio's vision, the goals of the Knights of Columbus, and the pragmatic challenges of creating a public memorial. While the idea to establish a monument came from the local Knights, they left its design to Verchio.⁵⁰ She chose a three-foot-tall black granite oval as the focal structure of the memorial. It sits off to one side of the cemetery on a small concrete slab surrounded by greenery. A bench faces the monument, making the spot an inviting space for quiet reflection. The central feature of the granite monument is a fetal-shaped cutout near the top edge of the stone. Present through its absence, the fetus shows through on both sides of the monument. On the side of the stone that faces the bench, the cutout is cradled by a large hand etched into the rock, with the words of Isaiah 49:15–16 engraved below: "I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you in the palm of my hand." The side of the stone that faces the road has a small cross just below the fetal cutout and is engraved with these words:

MEMORIAL OF MOURNING

IN LOVING MEMORY OF THE CHILDREN
AND MOTHERS KILLED BY ABORTION

LEGALIZED

JANUARY 22, 1973

DEDICATED OCTOBER 19, 1996

KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS COUNCIL 1369

NAPERVILLE, IL

⁴⁸ "Post-abortive women" and the even less delicate "aborted women" are terms used by postabortion healing groups to refer to women who have had abortions.

⁴⁹ Though Verchio has retired as the director of Victims of Choice, she still spends time tending the memorial, particularly its overgrown ground cover. Watching her interact with the memorial is like watching someone tinker in her home garden. She looks at it as an insider who not only enjoys it, but also sees its flaws—dead foliage here, spotty soil showing there. As we spoke about the origins and design of the monument, she was constantly bending down to pick a weed or intercept creeping ivy.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Verchio, interview by author, June 3, 2010.

Taken together, the two sides of the stone offer an interesting demonstration of the intertwining of religion and politics in the American Christian antiabortion movement and in the memorialization of pregnancy loss. The inclusion of the date of the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision marks the monument as not only an act of memorialization but also a political act.

Verchio shared with me a story from her past interactions with the Knights of Columbus that points to the intersection of memorialization and pro-life politics in pregnancy-loss monuments. She sent me the following email just before our interview:

I don't know the time frame, but, when I learned about a KoC [Knights of Columbus] memorial being installed in Harrison, Ohio, I called and spoke with the man who chaired the committee. He related to me that shortly after the memorial had been installed but before the dedication, he discovered roses and a small toy laying atop the memorial stone.... He was perplexed as to why someone would leave the items. I suggested to him that the person leaving the items was the mother of an aborted child. The gentleman seem[ed] quite shocked and said, "Why would a woman who chose to have an abortion want to leave flowers at our memorial?" We talked for more than an hour and I believe I helped him better understand. This conversation also helped me understand better the KoC perspective in how they approached memorials and why they were designed as they were. It appears to me that KoC approaches memorials to the unborn from more of a political perspective. Most of the time they don't realize they are providing a place where mothers and fathers (and other family members) can memorialize a lost baby.⁵¹

Verchio's story raises questions about whether the Knights' monuments should be considered pregnancy-loss memorials in the same manner as the other memorialization efforts examined here—meaning they are aimed at memorializing lost prenatates or bringing about healing for those suffering from pregnancy losses—or if they are better understood as straightforward political statements.

Public shrine and monument memorials dedicated to pregnancy loss are generally more focused on individual acts of commemoration than on communal ritual performances. For this reason, they are better understood through Catherine Bell's category of "ritualization," which is meant to encompass a broader range of social actions than just official or formal ceremonial activities.⁵² These monuments attempt to foster a connection between visitors

⁵¹ Elizabeth Verchio, email message to author, June 2, 2010.

⁵² Bell prefers the term "ritualization" to "ritual" because the former encompasses a wider range of social actions within its scope. That is, it does not restrict ritual activities to an autonomous category of behavior. At the same time, "ritualization" does not go so far as

and their lost prenatates. At the MOM, a physical environment for recognizing pregnancy-loss grief and memorialization has been created such that, as Verchio attests, visitors are inspired to leave toys, notes, and flowers for lost loved ones. At the Patron of the Unborn memorial, lost prenatates are represented graphically in the tiny, struggling being cradled in the hands of the Saint Joseph statue. In both cases, these monuments inspire and facilitate interaction between the living and the dead. Through the act of memorialization, participants materialize lost prenatates and, in turn, come to form relationships with the children they never knew.

Catholic Postabortion Ministries and Retreats

The final type of pregnancy-loss memorialization under consideration here is the work of Catholic postabortion ministries, specifically Project Rachel and the affiliated organization, Rachel's Vineyard.⁵³ Informal conversations with American Catholics quickly reveal that most are unfamiliar with Catholic pregnancy-loss rites, and the very possibility of postabortion rites seems unfathomable to many familiar with the church's stalwart stance against abortion. To the individuals and groups developing Catholic postabortion services, however, this latter concern is a fundamental misunderstanding of their mission. Rather, organizations like Project Rachel and Rachel's Vineyard understand their work as supporting the antiabortion position of the Catholic Church. Their mission is to provide an opportunity for reflection and reconciliation for women who have, in their view, suffered the trauma of abortion. They see their healing rituals as in line with centuries of Catholic memorial practices, which they draw on in the development of their own rites.

Since its founding in 1984 by Vicki Thorn, Project Rachel has spread to over 150 dioceses across the United States and has become the primary

to imply that *all* activities are ritualized either. Rather, it gets at what is distinctive about particular social behaviors, especially in the minds of the actors involved. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 69–74. Bell explains, “In a very preliminary sense, ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane,’ and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors” (74).

⁵³ The Sisters of Life also sponsors regular postabortion retreats called “Entering Canaan” as well as monthly “Days of Prayer and Healing.” <http://www.sistersoflife.org/hope-and-healing-after-abortion>.

postabortion healing ministry of the American Catholic Church. It is made up of a network of clerical and lay counselors and volunteers committed to offering psychological and spiritual healing for individuals who have been negatively affected by abortion. While most of this work takes place on a one-on-one level, Project Rachel offices provide the training and resources necessary to support those engaged in postabortion ministry and to get the message out about this relatively new operation within the Catholic Church.⁵⁴

Rachel's Vineyard is an independent postabortion healing organization with close ties to Project Rachel. Established in 1995 by Theresa Karminski Burke, PhD, and Kevin Burke, the Rachel's Vineyard weekend retreat model is an outgrowth of Theresa Burke's previous work doing postabortion trauma research and counseling. In 2003, Rachel's Vineyard was incorporated as an outreach ministry of Priests for Life, Fr. Frank Pavone's umbrella organization supporting priests and a network of ministries engaged in pro-life causes. Retreat weekends incorporate individual- and group-centered activities aimed at helping women and men find healing for long-past or recent abortion experiences.⁵⁵

Both of these groups, Project Rachel and Rachel's Vineyard, focus on the emotional and spiritual well-being of individuals wounded by abortion. Their work is premised on the notion that abortion causes a form of psychological trauma that historically has been ignored or denied within American society.⁵⁶ Their counsel is meant to address that trauma as well as grief related to abortion experiences while also facilitating forgiveness and reconciliation by drawing on the teachings of Scriptures and the church.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), *Project Rachel Ministry: A Post-Abortion Resource Manual for Priests and Project Rachel Leaders*, 2009 edition, viii, <http://hopeafterabortion.com/wp-content/uploads/PDFs/ProjectRachelResourceManual2015.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Rachel's Vineyard Ministries, "About Us," <http://www.rachelsvineyard.org/aboutus/index.aspx>.

⁵⁶ The issue of postabortion trauma is a hotly debated topic. Those working within the postabortion recovery community fervently assert the existence of postabortion syndrome, which they liken to other forms of post-traumatic stress disorder. To date, however, the mainstream psychology community has rejected identifying a specific form of postabortion trauma.

⁵⁷ Promotional materials frequently quote John Paul II's "special word to women who have had an abortion" from *Evangelium Vitae*: "The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with

In addition to working to mend postabortion trauma through counseling, Project Rachel and Rachel's Vineyard turn to ritual to create meaningful opportunities for healing. With Project Rachel, these activities typically draw on the familiar symbols and customs of Catholic liturgical practice. Priests and dioceses are encouraged to offer a "Mass of Hope and Healing" one or two times a year, and Project Rachel's training manual suggests that the mass concentrate on grief and "speak about God's infinite mercy and the healing power of the sacraments." It recommends that a memento of some sort be available at the end of the mass for participants to take home—"a prayer card, a small crucifix, a votive candle in glass, or perhaps an attractive artificial flower that can be displayed without prompting others to ask what it means"⁵⁸—creating a physical remembrance of the healing experience as much as the pregnancy loss (or losses) itself.

In the spring of 2011, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities launched a website called Project Rachel Lenten Resources, which is no longer available online at the time of the publication of this article. The website included extensive notes for priests on how to incorporate the themes of postabortion healing into their homilies during Lent. It also contained a list of "Prayers of the Faithful" that focused on abortion for use during Sunday Lenten liturgies. The petitions prayed for "mothers and fathers who have lost a child in an abortion" as well as "parents who encouraged or coerced their daughter to undergo an abortion." They asked for forgiveness and healing for those involved with or wounded by abortion. One petition also prayed "for children who have died in an abortion: that their tireless intercession on behalf of their parents may bear fruit in their parents' salvation."⁵⁹ The implication of this prayer is that the unborn dead have no need for intercession on their own behalf, which is consistent with the International Theological Commission's document "The Hope of Salvation." They are called on instead to assist others who, as a result of their involvement with abortion, are presumed to need additional help in securing their salvation.

humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. To the same Father and his mercy you can with sure hope entrust your child," Pope John Paul II, *On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life (Evangelium Vitae)*, March 25, 1995, §99, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html. Pope Francis reiterated his predecessor's message in promoting forgiveness for abortion as part of his Jubilee Year of Mercy.

⁵⁸ USCCB, *Project Rachel Ministry*, 62.

⁵⁹ USCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, "Suggested Prayers of the Faithful for the Third Sunday of Lent," 2011, <http://www.usccb.org/about/pro-life-activities/> (no longer available).

Rachel's Vineyard retreats have ritualistic activities integrated throughout the weekend as well. They incorporate traditional Catholic practices, including the sacrament of reconciliation, opportunities for eucharistic adoration, and a "Mass of Entrustment" at the end of the retreat.⁶⁰ Furthermore, their retreats often employ new symbols and practices that have been designed specifically for use in the postabortion ministry setting. For instance, one exercise used during the retreat has the participants carry around a rock representing the emotional baggage they carry with them. The participant can discard the rock at any point during the weekend with an explanation of why they feel ready to do so.⁶¹ At the conclusion of each retreat weekend, a special memorial service gives participants a chance to grieve and "let go" of their losses. In its description of the memorial service, the Rachel's Vineyard website speaks directly to potential retreat participants. "Since your baby was lost because of an abortion," it says, "it's likely that you have never been given permission to grieve the loss of your child. Because of the nature of such a pregnancy loss, the tiny body of your baby was never held or buried. It is every mother's need to grieve the loss of her child." The website asserts that the aborted prenatals are already "in heaven" and explains that the memorial service is intended as "a unique, beautiful opportunity to give honor and dignity to [participants'] lost child[ren]."⁶² Thus, a link is made between grieving a lost child and giving that child dignity.

As part of the ritual, participants are invited to lay bereavement dolls in a cradle as a symbol of "placing [the lost] baby in the arms of the Creator." There are also opportunities "to read a poem, share a letter, or sing a song or any artistic expression you choose to commemorate and express your connection to your baby." These ritual activities help to manifest lost children and in the process, fashion a loving mother-child relationship as well. Ultimately, the memorial service is meant to mark a turning point in participants' lives, after which they stand in a new relationship with their abortion experience. Through the memorial, "it is [Rachel's Vineyard's] hope and prayer that as you go on with your life that this moment will mark a special place in your history, the day you gave honor, respect and dignity to your unborn child." During a training workshop in 2009, Rachel's Vineyard founder Theresa

⁶⁰ It should be noted that Rachel's Vineyard offers interdenominational retreats in addition to their Catholic retreats. In the last decade, Rachel's Vineyard has expanded its ministry internationally and now holds retreats in countries throughout North and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean.

⁶¹ Kevin Burke, "Pregnancy Loss, Sexual Trauma, and Unresolved Grief," Rachel's Vineyard Ministries training workshop, Timonium, MD, October, 9, 2009.

⁶² "Memorial Service," Rachel's Vineyard Ministries, last revised 2008, <http://www.rachelsvineyard.org/weekend/retreats/memorial.htm>.

Burke explained that rituals such as these generate powerful healing for victims of trauma. She argues that ritualized, nonverbal forms of communication are essential to the healing process because trauma experiences are typically nonverbal as well. If healing is achieved, participants still have wounds, but the wounds are no longer “toxic.”⁶³

Like the memorial practices examined above, the ritual practices of Project Rachel and Rachel’s Vineyard build on the liturgical richness of the Catholic Church. Their rituals are aimed at bringing about a new understanding of abortion experiences for ritual participants through stories, symbols, prayers, and liturgical actions that attest to God’s grace and mercy. Through the performance of these ritual practices, the hope is that a new narrative of forgiveness and healing is enacted, and abortion stories of trauma, sin, and shame are transformed according to a new narrative of redemption.

Conclusion: Reframing Pregnancy Loss and Epistemological Ritual Efficacy

Throughout my research, I uncovered a consistent concern among memorial facilitators (which was then reflected in the memorials they developed) for relating pregnancy-loss memorialization to the broader Catholic and American cultural discourse on the ethics and politics of abortion. In some cases, this connection was obvious. The postabortion ministries and the public monuments I investigated seem to be rooted as much in a commitment to the church’s stance against abortion as in a concern for the well-being of women who have suffered pregnancy losses. Consequently, one could ask how these ministries and monuments can also be interpreted as having the effect of *creating* (not just responding to) the need for such healing through their insistence that abortion is a sinful act that kills a human child.

In a less obvious way, Turner’s miscarriage rite also has implications for the ethics and politics of abortion inasmuch as it is intended to challenge what he sees as the standard American Catholic approach to promoting the so-called culture of life. During our 2010 conversation, Turner told me he sees pregnancy-loss liturgies as a way to affirm the church’s commitment to the pro-life cause without strictly dwelling on the issue of abortion, as is typically the case in the rhetoric of the American Catholic Church. He contends that by not recognizing the lives of the children lost through spontaneous pregnancy loss, a “logical disconnect” in the church’s teachings is revealed. Only by attending to miscarriage and stillbirth in addition to

⁶³ Theresa Burke, PhD, “Pregnancy Loss, Sexual Trauma, and Unresolved Grief,” Rachel’s Vineyard Ministries training workshop, Timonium, MD, October, 9, 2009.

abortion does a more consistent and compelling understanding of life come to light.

The different types of memorialization explored above represent diverse attempts on the part of Catholic-affiliated communities to attend to the reality of pregnancy loss in women's lives. Their forms vary greatly, yet they have much in common in terms of their function. In their own ways, each of the memorials considered above seeks to reframe experiences of loss, brokenness, and grief within narratives of grace and community, healing, and repentance. They aim to create that new type of "knowing" called for by Serene Jones that helps participants grapple with difficult, far-from-straight-forward situations. I suggest this reframing, or renarration, which takes place by means of the memorial, ritualized performance, can be a form of epistemological efficacy that goes beyond what can be accomplished through a strictly discursive approach. Acts of pregnancy-loss memorialization do not simply describe but rather *enact* the embodied framework of meaning they seek to communicate. This framework is tied to the ideas that the Catholic Church recognizes pain that accompanies pregnancy loss, cares for lost prenatals, and believes that the symbolic and ritual resources of the church can be brought to bear on loss experiences in ways that may facilitate healing.⁶⁴ Yet, because it is grounded in ritual, this framework possesses a dynamism that transcends discursive responses to pregnancy loss inasmuch as it is able to hold together ambiguities and tensions that discursive arguments seek to resolve. The hoped-for child who was never seen or held becomes known and cared for, and the woman who terminated a pregnancy or who never met her baby comes to see herself as a mother.

The memorials and the framework they enact gain their "performative potency" (to use Stanley Tambiah's phrase) by drawing on traditional Catholic symbols and liturgical practices in order to appeal to the ritual sense of memorial participants.⁶⁵ At the same time, the memorials are helping reshape the American Catholic tradition insofar as they attend to a phenomenon that has historically fallen outside the church's purview and

⁶⁴ Of course, one wants to be careful not to equate aims and outcomes with regard to the question of efficacy. For instance, a 2010 study published in the *Journal of Religion & Health* found that certain types of religious belief and "continued attachment" following pregnancy loss are correlated with higher levels of grief one to two years in the future. I am grateful to one of the reviewers for bringing this research to my attention. F. S. Cowchock, J. N. Lasker, L. J. Toedter, S. A. Skumanich, and H. G. Koenig, "Religious Beliefs Affect Grieving after Pregnancy Loss," *Journal of Religion & Health* 49 (2010): 485-97.

⁶⁵ Stanley J. Tambiah, "A Performative Approach to Ritual," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 65 (1979): 161.

that in many ways transgresses themes typically treated as taboo by the church. Their growing popularity suggests that memorial participants recognize emerging pregnancy-loss memorials as resonating with the broader ritual tradition of the church and are finding meaning and comfort in them. These practices aim to impact what were once individual, private stories of loss by reframing them in broader Catholic narratives that are both traditional and new, bringing hidden pregnancy losses to light, and drawing on the church's long-standing sacramental imagination to transform experiences previously defined by grief, isolation, and fragmentation.