

# Openness to Life

by Ellen Hrkach

'Openness to life' is often a term that is used to describe those using Natural Family Planning, whether they are using NFP to avoid or plan a pregnancy. However, when it comes to anticipating a pregnancy, another form of 'openness to life' comes into play. I like to call it 'openness to God's will.' For, in this openness, a couple truly become vulnerable -- naked, in essence -- before God, exposing themselves to whatever God allows.

As we have discovered with ourselves and with other couples, this type of openness can mean dealing with a whole range of possibilities: infertility, miscarriage, a baby with abnormalities, a pre-term delivery, a stillborn baby, or a healthy, full-term baby. But, in a sense, it's the same openness that Mary embraced when she was informed that she would be the mother of our savior, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord..." (Luke 1:38)

My high school friend and her husband have been trying to conceive for 24 years. They have seen all kinds of specialists and have endured various tests. The doctors have told them that they will not be able to have a baby without some sort of assisted reproductive technology, which they do not believe is moral. Although disappointed, they have accepted the fact that they will be unable to conceive a child. They have not allowed their infertility to prevent them from becoming spiritually and emotionally closer.

In our own case, James and I have had to endure the loss of seven babies before birth. Some of those pregnancy losses entailed major surgery and, in two instances, I almost hemorrhaged to death. During one miscarriage, my spiritual director offered these consoling words, "Perhaps God is asking you to sacrifice the joy of holding this child in your arms so that *He* may quickly hold your child in heaven." His comments were a tremendous comfort at a difficult and heart-wrenching time.

Several years ago, a couple from our homeschooling community were expecting their sixth child. At 19 weeks gestation, the wife began exhibiting signs of early labor. Hospitalized for a week or so, it became evident that there wasn't anything the doctors could do to stall labor. Their son was born and only lived for a short time. However, she has expressed to me that, as difficult as it was to hold her dying son in her arms, she truly felt blessed. The moment her son died, filled with God's grace, she more clearly understood in a small way what Our Lady had to endure by holding the crucified Jesus in her arms after His death.

Two years ago, our close friends welcomed a new child into their family. At birth, their son appeared normal, but as she held onto him in those first few moments, she was infused with the knowledge that he had Down Syndrome. When she called me later, her voice was so full of love for her child that it was as if she was sharing with me that her baby had brown hair instead of blond. Her “openness” to the wonderful gift that God had given to her was a testament to her trust and acceptance of grace in her life. This may not seem like a big deal, but a few years previous, she had confided in me that she would never be able to ‘handle’ having a baby with Down Syndrome. And here she was, not only “handling” her baby, but offering unconditional, abundant love to this unique image of God.

Four years ago, while I was at the hospital waiting for my youngest son to come out of minor surgery, this idea of total openness/acceptance was illustrated more fully to me. I watched a mother come into the nurses’ station with her year old toddler (who, in my eavesdropping, I had learned spent a long time in the special care nursery). Unable to get a glimpse of her son, I watched from a distant position as many nurses gathered around the stroller to see the baby. Every nurse who walked by giggled in delight at this child and I could hear his sweet laughter as he reacted to the different nurses and to his mother.

Finally, my curiosity could not stand it any longer. I moved closer to see what this baby looked like. As the child came into view, I’m sure I let out a quiet gasp. His skull was misshapen, his forehead gigantic compared to the rest of his head. Immediately, I felt tremendous pity not only for the child, but for his parents. And then, one of the nurses tickled him under the chin and he let out a squeal of laughter, a high-pitched, sweet sound. In that moment, I no longer saw someone who was deformed. I saw a little person who was radiantly beautiful; a representation of innocence and goodness. My heart melted and I felt an overwhelming urge to embrace him.

In our own human weakness, sometimes we forget that we are not in control. However, being open to life means accepting God’s will for us. If our baby has disabilities, it is important for us to pray for the grace to deal with it. If we must endure the loss of a child through miscarriage or pre-term birth, it is essential not to give in to hopelessness. God has a plan for each human being he creates. In some cases He sends us a child, a baby which perhaps we see as imperfect, because He knows those children are perfect for us.

It is challenging for a couple to be vulnerable and naked before God, to surrender their life-giving capabilities to His design and to accept whatever comes from that. True openness to life means being ‘open to God’s will,’ being a “handmaid of the Lord” (Ancilla Domini). It not only means accepting a healthy full-term child, it also means embracing whatever God chooses for us, whether it’s infertility or a child with disabilities, whether it’s a healthy baby for us to raise, or one for Him to hold.

Ellen Hrkach is the author of the novel "Emily's Hope." She, and her husband James, have been a teaching couple for 22 years and they live in Pakenham, Ontario. They are raising five sons ages 7 to 19. God holds seven of their babies in heaven.

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