

PETER'S STORY:
DISCOVERING HOPE AND LOVE AFTER AN ADVERSE PRENATAL DIAGNOSIS -
Pamphlet Version
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“You need to have amniocentesis. These markers indicate there could be a chromosomal disorder ... one that's incompatible with life. We need to find out for sure, and soon, so you have more choices.”

These were the words of the specialist at my nineteen-week ultrasound.

“Do you mean abortion?” I asked. “We'd never consider that. As for amnio, isn't there a risk of miscarriage?”

“Yes, there's a small risk,” the doctor conceded. “But I highly recommend it, so you know what you're dealing with. These markers indicate trisomy 18. If the baby makes it to birth, it won't survive beyond two weeks.”

“Well, we won't take the chance of hurting the baby. We'll love this little boy no matter what he has,” I said through tears.

So began the journey with our son, whom we named Peter. Born at 34 weeks by emergency caesarean section, Peter was immediately baptized by the hospital chaplain and confirmed two days later.

After we learned that Peter had full trisomy 18, some recommended that we wrap him in a blanket and let him die. They said he'd never have any “quality of life” or be able to contribute to society. He'd never recognize us or interact with us. But Peter is now a giggling, smiling 2 1/2- year-old who, though physically limited, brings joy to his family every day.

In the year after Peter's birth, I thought often of the mothers and dads who receive adverse prenatal diagnoses, followed by grim descriptions of the genetic condition and

assessments of the baby's prospects that are inaccurate, incomplete and even outright lies. Overwhelmed with sorrow over their baby's health problems, fearing that he may suffer, and given only negative information about his life prospects, it is no wonder so many parents feel pressured to abort their child. I asked God how I could encourage these parents to make a life-affirming choice, one that would bring them peace, joy and more love than they'd ever thought possible. His answer was for me to start a support group for these parents called Prenatal Partners for Life.

Prenatal Partners for Life matches families who've recently received an adverse prenatal diagnosis with families who've given birth to a child with a similar condition. The experienced parents offer accurate information, support and encouragement – through e-mails, phone calls, letters or personal visits – for as long as the other couple needs help.

Many parents who contact us for information and support describe the pressure exerted on them to “induce labor early” (i.e., abort their baby) after they received an adverse diagnosis. These parents are sometimes made to feel guilty for wanting to carry their baby to term and to seek treatment for him after birth. With a false sense of compassion, abortion is sometimes urged on them as a moral obligation and the most loving choice for a child who may have special needs. Very often, medical personnel discuss only the negative aspects of having a child with disabilities; no hope or resources are offered. Frightened and vulnerable parents, given no offer of support, may make the tragic, life-altering decision to abort, and then live the rest of their lives with questions and regret.

HOW PRIESTS AND PASTORS CAN SUPPORT FAMILIES

God has given to priests and pastors the gift to touch people's lives in ways the rest of us cannot. They stand as a moral compass, giving direction, love and compassion to those in need. Priests and pastors play a crucial role in ministering to a family facing an adverse diagnosis. Loving, compassionate, life-affirming support is what parents need most at such a time. In light of pressure from many in the medical community to abort babies with adverse conditions, it is all the more critical that pastors and priests stand strong in the defense of life. Sadly, there is sometimes a misguided sense of compassion, a desire to avoid "judging" the decision of parents who have been told that their child's life may bring hardship and suffering and that the only solution is an abortion.

From a Catholic viewpoint, early induction of labor performed simply for the reason that the child has a lethal anomaly is direct abortion. Catholic parents have a right to know this. In addition, parents have shared with us many statements by priests and pastors which they found tremendously helpful in deciding to follow God's will for their child's life. We offer these suggestions for anyone whose advice is sought at such a difficult time.

- Every life is created by God and has a purpose.
- God has chosen you to be the mother of this special child.
- God will give you every grace you need.
- Name your baby, talk to your baby, and love your baby like any mother would.
- God hears your pain. He loves you and calls you, and all of his children, to embrace the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death. He will never leave your side.

- No matter how long your baby lives, he will be your child for all eternity.

- Create wonderful memories of this special time while he is still alive and protected in your womb.

- Remember that God can and does perform miracles. Don't be afraid to ask, and don't be afraid to hope.

- These special babies bring with them many spiritual gifts and graces.

Here are some suggestions on what not to say because these statements could lead to confusion and perhaps a decision to end the child's life:

- Only you know what is best for you and your family.

- This is between you and God.

- What do you think is the right thing to do?

- This is a complicated matter.

- Follow your own conscience.

- Listen to the doctors and do what you think your heart tells you to do.

- If your choice is made with love, it can't be wrong.

- In this case, it is okay to say good-bye early.

In our journey with Peter, my family was blessed by the support of a faithful pastor and associate pastors, caring religious, our extended family and many wonderful families from our parish. Their love and support still sustain us. They are a living sign of Christ's love, and we are incredibly grateful.

Above all, we are grateful for Peter, whom we call our "little teacher." Even though he may never speak a word, he has taught us

many important lessons about love, sacrifice, compassion, patience, hope and faith. He has transformed the way we look at life and has broadened our view on the deeper meaning of the sacredness of all human life. He is a sweet, happy little boy who knows and loves his family.

There is a place in the world for children with special needs. We all are differently-abled, with flaws and gifts. These children are teachers of our souls, and society desperately needs the lessons and blessings they bring.

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The full-length version of this article is posted at <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rlp/kellett.pdf>.