

[MJTM 16 (2014–2015)]

BOOK REVIEW

Rosemary Morgan. *Living with Infertility: A Christian Perspective*. Montreal: Novalis, 2013. 130 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-2-89688-003-4. With an Introduction for Catholic Readers by Dr. Moira McQueen and Foreword by Veronica Zundel.

I will say immediately that I write this review from the perspective of a father of a daughter whom I have watched struggle with her own infertility. It has been agonizing to witness her struggle. Fathers are supposed to fix things. I cannot fix this. I have prayed for it to be different; we have all, in our family, prayed for it to be different. Indeed, the inner thoughts that Rosemary Morgan has shared in this book echo our own thoughts. That said, this book is for more than those who are living with infertility. I would offer this book to everyone who is experiencing sorrow, or who is called to bring pastoral presence to those who are experiencing sorrow.

Morgan points to a number of Scripture passages, such as the story of Rachel (Gen 30:22), where Rachel's prayer to become pregnant is answered, and a "Passage in 2 Sam in which Michal is punished with infertility because she mocks and despises David" (21). From these passages she expresses her deep anger and disappointment with God, together with a very real concern that infertility can be a divine punishment for sin. She writes, "I feel guilty when I go to church. I don't want to praise God at the moment; all I want to do is ask him to give me a baby" (7). She notes that Advent is a particularly hard time, and that "Mothering Sunday can be horrendous" (8).

Morgan writes of the devastating impact on her marriage as the awareness that she is infertile develops from fear into certainty. She states:

Advent is often hard, with all the sermons about waiting for a child.

When we first began our quest to become parents, my husband and I thought that was what we were doing—waiting for a child. As the quest became longer and the disappointments piled up on top of one another, waiting began to look like the wrong image. We are not waiting any longer. Now we are fighting, mourning, seeking, longing. Waiting for a baby is what we used to do (8).

This emotionally wrenching scenario becomes all the more poignant to us as we realize that among the very causes of the marital turmoil Morgan describes are events embedded in our liturgical calendar—events that for most are times of great joy and events that she would, as a person devoted to the church, feel compelled to attend. Morgan goes on to describe her sometimes overwhelming sense of anger and the need to find someone to blame. She writes, “I’m just furious all the time” (18); and “My Mother-in-law rang up to tell me that yet another cousin was pregnant and I threw the ’phone across the room. It hit the wall and smashed into pieces. Now I have no baby and a broken ’phone” (18). She speaks about despair, writing that, “each [menstrual] period feels like losing a baby” (42). She speaks about jealousy, writing:

I was out for dinner with some colleagues and one of them was heavily pregnant. She started boasting about how she’d got pregnant the first month they’d tried. Her husband sat there grinning from ear to ear and joked that he was “super virile”. I wanted to throw my salad at them (57).

In his book, *The Roots of Sorrow: A Pastoral Theology of Suffering*, Phil Zylla writes, “Acute suffering breaks down the inner confidence that we may have in life, leaving us feeling vulnerable” (Zylla, *Roots of Sorrow*, Baylor, 2012, 72). It is evident throughout this book that Morgan is describing a deep sorrow, a sorrow for which she can find no explanation, a sorrow that brings a sense of being completely outside the experiences of her community and from her and her husband’s own expectations. She writes, “I have a drawer full of gorgeous baby clothes. I just need the baby to put in them” (87).

Yet, from the depths of Morgan’s profound pain, her anger, jealousy, her need to blame, her confusion, we witness the

emerging strength of her self-awareness. We listen to her dialogue of hope, of letting go, and decision-making. Reflecting on the cleansing sacrament of Communion, she writes:

As an infertile woman, I have been deeply ashamed of my womb that cannot carry a baby to term and my breasts that will not feed a baby milk. I have considered all the parts that make me a woman to be dishonourable and un-presentable because they are dysfunctional. Reading Paul's words in 1 Cor 6 helped me to see how far away from a healthy body image I had allowed myself to get. I ought to be protecting and honouring the weaker parts of my body, not despising and rejecting them (70–71).

Morgan begins to contemplate the decision to be child-free rather than a person unable to have children. She states, "I must remember that the main task of my body has never been to make a baby; my body was made to honour God" (69). She also asserts, "Although we cannot pick the promises that we want God to make to us, the good news is that there are promises that God has made for each one of us" (55).

Morgan also reflects that, "In Christ, who became fully human with all the frailties of humanity, God experienced a longing that he could not fulfil. Christ longs for the children of Jerusalem, but he cannot make them his. He cannot force everyone to turn to him of their own volition" (15–16). This presents a poignant metaphor, which aligns Morgan's physical infertility with Christ's sorrow over the lost sheep of Israel.

It seems that in the depth of her struggle, Morgan turns to the enduring presence of the Holy Spirit who dwells in all who have faith. She writes most profoundly:

The Holy Spirit will intercede with us: if we run out of words to pray, the Holy Spirit will pray for us. If we cannot express our pain and sorrow, we can just sit in God's presence and the Holy Spirit will speak through our groans, our tears and even our silence (Rom 8:26). We can sit with God, with or without words, and know that he is fully in tune with us (16–17).

We also find that in the midst of her testimony, Morgan introduces a perspective on forgiveness, which, in all cases, must begin with forgiving one's self. Remembering the Gospel of

Mark's account of Jesus' own exhaustion and stumble on the path to Golgotha (Mark 15:20b–22), she describes her coming to terms with untying herself from self-blame, although it is clearly an arduous path. She writes, "A serious illness is a crisis of identity: it changes the way we see ourselves. It is hard to get used to our new image of ourselves as an infertile person" (13). In her discussion of forgiveness, Morgan also asserts a realization that I have personally come to understand, that is that forgiveness is not a once-and-for-all thing; it is a daily decision. We also learn that Jesus is our *Paraclete*; he walks alongside us and is our strength in making that daily decision. As Morgan reminds us, "Jesus knows what it is like to be failed by your own body" (13).

From forgiveness, Morgan moves to acceptance. As she states, "Acceptance is the moment of moving away from sin [of anger, blame, jealousy and self-loathing] and getting on with living. She writes of "Living without hope" (47), to "Giving up hope" (49), to "Growing a new hope" (51).

Morgan includes a critical perspective on mutual forgiveness in the marriage partnership. She reminds us that:

Unless you are a very unusual person, you did not choose your husband or wife because you thought they would be particularly fertile. You chose to marry that particular person because they made you laugh, because they knew how to comfort you when you were sad, because you made a good team, because you understood each other (95).

I have to confess that I wish that I had read the corpus of Morgan's work before reading Dr. Moira McQueen's Introduction for Catholic readers. Reading this introduction first had me more focused, for a while, on contemplation of the doctrinal perspective presented, and the extent to which I might have been expected to use this perspective as a lens through which to view Rosemary Morgan's testimony. That said I respect the views presented, even as I struggle with them. To be clear, regardless of one's doctrinal orientation, this is an important work, and should be read by all in ministry and especially by those called to a ministry of compassionate care. Infertility is not

an event such as trauma following injury, or the intensive nature of critical illness. It does not occur in the emergency room of a hospital or at a hospice bedside. In this book, we learn from Morgan that infertility is a slow awakening to a reality of circumstance that unfolds over months, if not years. It is intensified in the matrimonial bedroom, at the dinner table, watching a movie, spending time with family, and attending church on Mother's Day. Infertility rises to reality far from the view of the pastoral counsellor.

I wish to conclude by recalling Phil Zylla, who writes that "The divine call is to share the journey of solidarity with the broken-hearted" (Zylla, *Roots of Sorrow*, 67). At McMaster Divinity College we hold to the paradigm of *Knowing, Being, and Doing*. Morgan describes pain—groaning that is sometimes too deep for words. This reminds me that our pastoral effort must reach similar depths. We must be ready to be led by the Spirit into these depths, in the moment, completely, and to all our trust in God. As Morgan reminds us, "God loves us, so we receive love. Then we can love others, so transforming the love on to someone else" (118).

I have a profound admiration for the author of this book, although one further area which I would have welcomed would have been a chapter outlining Morgan's guidance for all engaged in ministry and pastoral counselling. As a woman of faith and a woman who has lived—is living—through this experience she is equipped to us in guiding us to invite dialogue, explore the emotions, fears, feelings of isolation that accompany infertility, both for the woman and her spouse. Such a chapter would, I am certain, become critically valuable. For example, how might we introduce this condition in our sermons? How might we broach the issue with someone in a counselling dialogue? How might we earn the right to build a counselling dialogue for a person in the various stages of discovering their infertility? In her book *Call the Chaplain*, Kate McClelland writes, "Sometimes people need permission to be weak: perhaps it is only in our weakness that we can find the strength to carry on" (McClelland, *Call the Chaplain*, Canterbury, 2014, 55). I wonder what advice and counsel Morgan would have for the community of care-givers as

they enter into dialogue with others in her circumstances. Notwithstanding this, I repeat that I recommend that this work be considered as essential reading for all in ministry. As Zylla notes, “Entering into the complex situations of the most afflicted will require a more fully developed framework of pastoral theology and greater tenacity in employing those practices that will foster and sustain hope in the lives of the most afflicted” (Zylla, *Roots of Sorrow*, 178). In my assessment, Morgan’s work here asserts that the perhaps overlooked sorrow and distress that accompanies a couple’s journey through their awakening infertility places that sorrow within the framework contemplated by Zylla.

Morgan finishes this moving and compelling book, which includes a useful summary of further resources, as she writes:

Remember that throughout their time in the desert, God gave the Israelites enough Manna to last them for a day at a time (Exod 16:4–35). When each next day came, he fed them again. So it is with us. We have enough strength each day to get through the day (127).

This book reminds me that, as a father, I too, must rest in the Lord, knowing that tomorrow is a new day, a day when he will move each of us closer to the culmination of the promises that he has made for each of us.

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