

PAUL TURNER

Blessed before birth

Expectant mothers appear frequently in Scripture, not least Mary, whose feast of the Annunciation is marked this year on 8 April. A new rite of blessing is a way that the Church marks the gift of a child while still growing in the womb

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops takes a vigorous pro-life stance that ranges from opposing abortions to decrying the death penalty. Now, instead of making news for battling those opinions contrary to their own, the bishops are upholding the dignity of the unborn by joining the celebratory spirit of those anticipating a new birth.

As a pregnancy advances, parents are usually full of wonder and awe; they are looking forward to welcoming this child into a loving home. Even people who don't normally pray much will pray for the safe arrival of their baby. Now some parishes in the United States are offering parents-to-be an extra opportunity for prayer: The Rite for the Blessing of a Child in the Womb.

The booklet containing this rite is only 43 pages long, but it includes various options for the blessing: during or outside Mass, for several mothers or just one, with a priest or a deacon presiding, in English or in Spanish. In my parish, I recently designated a day to offer the blessing. We celebrate two Masses in English and two in Spanish each weekend. News of the event appeared in the parish bulletin, which the secretary prints and posts online, and I included it in the spoken announcements the weekend before.

The parish Masses in English draw some of the older members of the community. We do have young Anglo couples but not many. Still, on a given weekend, any expectant mother may walk into any church. At one Mass, at the time for the blessing, a couple came forward and surprised everyone. Although they are regular participants, they had not yet broken the news that they were expecting their first child. The blessing changed the whole character of the Mass that day, lifting higher the spirits of the whole community. The Spanish Masses draw a number of immigrant families of all ages. Most are from Mexico but other nationalities are represented. Many live in the neighbourhood but others travel some distance because the options for praying in their own language are few. As expected, several couples came forward – many with

children. The Hispanic community here loves the custom of blessings. The parish will have many baptisms in the months ahead.

When the rite is celebrated at Mass, the presidential prayers and readings of the day remain in force. If it is a weekday on which other options may be used, the rite suggests something from the Masses for Various Needs and Occasions. It does not suggest which, but there are many possibilities, including one for the Church, 10 for the laity, 12 for the family, 41 for relatives and friends, and 49 for giving thanks to God. In the United States, the Missal also includes prayers for giving thanks to God for the gift of human life. The rite includes several recommended petitions for the Universal Prayer, including examples for civic leaders, all expectant mothers, all families, and for all children. The prayer of blessing concludes these petitions.

The mother, father, and other family members may come forward. As the priest or deacon says the prayer for “constant protection” and “a healthy birth”, he makes the sign of the cross over the unborn child. The blessing includes the mother, asking God to “grant her comfort in all anxiety and make her determined to lead her child along the ways of salvation”.

The prayer may be extended with a blessing for the father, that he may have “courage in this new responsibility.” It may be extended further to include other children, with a request that the family be endowed

“with sincere and enduring love”. The priest or deacon may sprinkle the family with holy water. For the Procession of the Gifts, the rite suggests including “other gifts to relieve the needs of families in difficulty”. Here, a community could bring the fruits of a special collection of funds or products for organisations helping women through a pregnancy that is causing more stress than joy. A solemn blessing may conclude the Mass, including petitions for God’s protection; the gifts of faith, hope and love; and children who are “strong in body and in spirit”. A colleague in a much larger parish than mine tells me he offers this blessing four times a year. These are joyful occasions for his community.

In a different venue, I asked some friends if we could share this prayer in their home. They are expecting their third child, whom, they admitted, was a surprise to them. When I arrived at their home, the older son was in boisterous play, and his brother’s runny nose required frequent parental attention. But these parents are skilled at prayer so the distractions did not obstruct. Father and mother each gladly took turns with scripture readings and petitions.

Outside Mass, recommended readings include Luke 1:39–45 (the Visitation); Genesis 18:1–15 (the prophecy of Sarah’s conception of Isaac); 1 Samuel 1:9–20 (Hannah’s conception and birth of Samuel); Ruth 2:1–3, 8–11; 4:13–17 (the birth of Obed, father of Jesse, father of David); and Luke 1:26–38 (the Annunciation). Psalm 34 is also suggested, with its opening line, “I will bless the Lord at all times.”

The Rite for the Blessing of a Child in the Womb has already proven to be a practical prayer for a pivotal moment in the life of parents. Sadly, some women today are made to feel awkward because they are pregnant – as if they should have been more careful. I’ve even heard complaints that, in some parishes, when parents call for baptism information, they are asked whether they live in the parish, if they are registered parishioners, part of the planned giving – and what the requirements are to attend preparation programmes. What they don’t hear is the word, “Congratulations!”

Some children are unwanted. Some are fathered by careless and now-absent men. Others are conceived under force, rather than love. Some are brought into homes where parents are unprepared to care for them. Some become pawns in a battle not their own. But it’s never the child’s fault. Every child is a gift – and this ceremony offers parishes another way to celebrate the gift of life. The blessing gathers the parents together with a community to greet the unborn child.

■ Paul Turner is a pastor of St Munchin parish in Cameron, Missouri, and its mission, St Aloysius in Maysville. Copies of the Rite of Blessing of a Child in the Womb can be found on: <http://www.usccb.org/about/pro-life-activities/prayers/upload/Rite-for-the-Blessing-of-a-Child-in-the-Womb.pdf>