

Navigating the Burden of Infertility

Coping Tips for Catholic Couples

PAULA GALLAGHER

Founder of
Catholic Infertility Coaching LLC

catholicinfertilitycoaching.com

catholicinfertilityresources.com

Instagram @catholic.infertility.coaching



Infertility Is More Common Than You Might Think

“Be fruitful and multiply” – this Bible verse from Genesis, often read at weddings, is just one part of the Catholic Church’s reputation for large families.

The assumption that you will have children (and possibly many children) can cause couples who struggle to conceive to feel blind-sided by their infertility. The possibility of infertility is almost never considered beforehand – we think it will never happen to *us!* – even though infertility affects one in every six adults (men and women) worldwide who are trying to conceive (WHO).

According to the CDC, about 1 in 5 (19%) women of childbearing age in America are not able to conceive after a year of trying (infertile). Furthermore, about 1 in 4 (26%) women in this group have difficulty carrying a pregnancy to term (impaired fecundity). About 6% of women take more than a year to conceive a subsequent child (secondary infertility).

The concept of infertility is quite often automatically associated with the woman, but in nearly 30% of infertility cases, male infertility issues are the primary cause. 30-40% of infertility cases are due to a combination of female and male factors. While these numbers are discouraging, they also signal that you are not alone.



Tips for Coping with the Strain of Infertility

For many men and women, struggling to find the reason why you’re not getting pregnant or receiving an unexpected and discouraging diagnosis can feel like a major wrench was thrown into your life plans. You might feel like your hopes and dreams of a child or your dream life are being stolen from you and there’s not much (or anything) you can do about it. It’s often the beginning of months or years of searching for solutions and peace.

It can cause you to feel like you’re falling behind in life, as well as like you don’t have a place in the Church. Even worse, couples with infertility can suffer from the judgment and assumptions of their fellow Catholics. You might also struggle to find medical assistance that aligns with Church teaching, or not know what to say to family or friends or fellow parishioners who make less-than-tactful comments.

Living with infertility can be a very isolating, deeply personal, negative experience. One of the special aspects of womanhood – pregnancy – doesn't come naturally like you assumed it would, like it should have. You can feel betrayed by your body, broken in an intimate way that leaves a mark at the soul level. For the man, some feel (or were told) that they're not "really a man" unless they can get their wife pregnant or have a child to carry on the family name.

That feeling of brokenness and frustration, coupled with the gut-wrenching desire for a baby, and perhaps even a feeling of being abandoned or betrayed by God, can contaminate every aspect of your life and make hope and joy feel out of reach.

You might go through an emotional rollercoaster every month: the hope a new cycle brings, the pressure to have sex at the right times, followed by a stressful two week wait, the anxious watching of symptoms, and the pain of getting your period yet again.

Infertility might smite you with a painful awareness of how little control you have over your fertility and your life plans, which sometimes makes us try to grasp control in other areas of our lives, from our sex life down to how we load the dishwasher. It raises painful questions, ones that seem impossible to answer: Why has this happened to me? Why don't I get to have children when some who don't even want to be parents get to? Why would God give me a desire for parenthood and not give me children? How do I believe that God is good when I feel like he is denying me a good and natural part of life? How can a good and loving God allow me to suffer like this?

If we're not intentional, the deep pain of infertility and the intense desire to have a baby can overwhelm and negatively impact almost every aspect of our lives. The following tips will help you bear the emotional burden of infertility and protect your joy, your marriage, your faith, and your relationships.



YOUR JOY

- Don't give up activities that you enjoy: crafting, baking, traveling, sports, etc. Be intentional about keeping sources of joy in your life to offset the drain of infertility.
- Go outside every day. Take a few minutes to breathe in the fresh air and feel the sunshine on your face. It's an instant recharge.
- Know what helps you reset your mood: take a shower, exercise, have a glass of wine, listen to music you love, call a friend, take a nap, go on a walk, etc.
- Have something you're excited about to look forward to: time with friends, a day trip with your spouse, a new movie coming out, a home renovation project, etc.
- Cultivate an attitude of gratitude for the blessings you do have right now.
- Engage in meaningful work, whether it's at your day job, a church ministry, or volunteering in your community.

YOUR MARRIAGE

- Invest in your marriage outside your fertile window. Have sex, go on date nights, cuddle on the sofa and talk, give each other massages, etc.
- Practice vulnerability with your spouse. Tell each other what you're thinking and feeling. Let them know if you need help or a hug (or both) in the moment. Invite them to share with you too.
- Seek support from a counselor, either as an individual or as a couple.

YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

- Don't withdraw – make time for friends. If you need to set some boundaries, do that. But try not to drop people because they have children and you don't. If you need to arrange for a grown-ups only night out, take initiative and make plans for it.
- Have prepared answers for the inevitable small talk question "Do you have children?" Better yet, take charge of the conversation and get the other person talking about themselves. A great opening question is "What keeps you busy?" That should give you plenty of material for further questions.
- Lean into other aspects of your maternity or paternity – babysit, bring a meal to a new mom, teach faith formation, mentor, become a foster parent, get a pet, etc.

YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

- Focus on what you can control and let go of what you can't control. You can control your words, actions, self-talk, attitude, and lifestyle choices, as well as how you spend your time and with whom. You can't control others' words, action or beliefs, your genes, time, the past, or the future.
- Journal. Journaling can help you vent and purge your emotions, sort out your thoughts, and give closure. It helps reduce stress and internal chaos. You don't have to journal every day to get the benefits. Even if you just do a brain dump when you're upset, it will help.
- See a counselor. A wise counselor will help you sort out your emotions, internal narratives, faith struggles, and options. It's a safe space where you can talk through the deep pain of infertility.
- Move your body every day. It will help with every single aspect of your life.
- Learn about the grief process. Knowing what to expect and how grief is not a straight line will help you make sense of your emotions.
- Let yourself cry, especially when you've experienced a setback or an unexpected obstacle or even if you've just gotten your period yet again.
- Seek a support group. Some parishes and dioceses have infertility ministries, and there are online communities like [Springs in the Desert](#), [The Fruitful Hollow](#) and [Catholic Infertility Coaching Instagram account](#).



YOUR FAITH

- Keep praying, even if it's only to express your hurt and your anger and your confusion. It might feel like you're talking to your enemy, but keep talking.
- Learn what the Catholic Church teaches about sex, marriage, and reproductive technology. Understanding why the Church holds certain views on which fertility treatments are allowed and which are not and why will not only help you advocate for yourself in the doctor's office, but you will better appreciate the truth and beauty of sex, marriage, and new life.
- Unanswered prayers can feel like an unsolvable mystery. But God's "no" might be a "no for right now." Or it might be a way of breaking through to us, to change our hearts and mold us with His grace, inviting us into deeper relationship with Him and leading us to other life-giving paths and purposes.
- Learn about the patron saints of infertility, miscarriage, difficult pregnancies and adoption (there are many!) and ask them to intercede for you.
- Ask other people to pray for you and with you. That way, when you're feeling discouraged, you can be comforted knowing others are praying for you, even when you don't feel like praying.
- Work through an infertility themed devotional, like *Holding Space for Joy* by Mary Bruno or *Waiting in Hope: 31 Reflections for Walking with God Through Infertility* by Kelley Ramsey and Jenn Hesse.

THE FEMALE CYCLE

- Accept that there will be an emotional rollercoaster each cycle. It's normal to feel gutted by getting your period, grieve for a couple of days, then get hopeful for your fertile window, be anxious and hyper-analyze every symptom during the two week wait, and then be crushed again by your period.
- Learn about your cycle, your hormones, and your diagnoses. Even if you have an excellent doctor, you should still do your own research and advocate for yourself. Information helps you to be proactive and arms you with possible avenues of testing, as well as enables you to have more productive appointments with your doctor so you don't feel like you're wasting time.
- Find ways to love your body: Exercise and eat healthy. Wear flattering clothes. Do your hair and makeup. Receive compliments without resistance. Practice gratitude for the ways your body is healthy and functioning as it should.
- Know that you'll likely go through periods of wanting to attack the problem and periods of wanting to ignore it. It's okay to take a break from trying. It can be totally liberating not to chart for a few cycles and just put all the problem-solving on pause.



Infertility Resources

CATHOLIC INFERTILITY RESOURCES

A database of resources for Catholic couples struggling with infertility. This website compiles resources relating to infertility into one, organized place, including what to test, resources for men, information on Church teaching and IVF, miscarriage, Scripture and saints for infertility, podcasts, tips for coping, and more.

<https://catholicinfertilityresources.com/>

<https://www.instagram.com/catholic.infertility.coaching/>

SPRINGS IN THE DESERT

Springs in the Desert accompanies those struggling with infertility by offering a place of respite and solidarity where they can know God's love for them and discover His unique call to fruitfulness. Firmly rooted in the anthropology, ethics and spirituality of the Catholic Church, Springs in the Desert affirms the goodness of marriage, upholds the giftedness of the child, and advocates for a broader understanding of what it means to be life-giving. By keeping our focus on Christ, not on conception, they give witness to His Divine love and mercy and the goodness of His plan for our lives.

Springs in the Desert provides resources, including handouts for pastors and doctors. They offer in-person and virtual retreats, a virtual book club, small groups, a prayer and reflection series during Lent and Advent, a blog, and a podcast. T

<https://springsinthedesert.org/>

https://www.instagram.com/springsinthedesert_/

LILY OF THE VALLEY

Lily of the Valley is a Catholic lay ministry that serves families experiencing infertility, difficult prenatal diagnosis, postnatal medical challenges, and those who have had a pregnancy or infant loss. Through the communion of saints and a devotion to St. Gianna Molla, their hope is to provide prayer and support to those who carry this cross and to bring comfort to those who are weary, that they will come to find peace and joy amidst a time of sorrow and suffering.

<https://lotvministry.org/>

<https://www.instagram.com/lotvministry/>



THE FRUITFUL HOLLOW

The Fruitful Hollow is a Catholic resource and community for those who struggle with infertility. Here we hope you will feel heard, find understanding, dive into Church teachings, and be inspired by stories of fruitfulness in the wait.

The Fruitful Hollow publishes weekly blog posts, creates monthly resources, provides information on NaPro Technology, and hosts a mentorship ministry called the Sisters of Hannah Ministry.

<https://www.thefruitfulhollow.com/>

<https://www.instagram.com/thefruitfulhollow/>



Books

The Infertility Companion for Catholics: Spiritual and Practical Support for Couples, by Angelique Ruhi-Lopez and Carmen Santamaria

When Expecting Doesn't Happen: Turning Infertility into a Journey of Hope, by Marie Meaney, D. Phil

Twelve Stripes Deep: How Infertility & Other Suffering Delivered My Greatest Joys, by Mary Bruno

Under the Laurel Tree: Grieving Infertility with Saints Joachim and Anna, by Nicole M. Roccas

Waiting with Mary: A Seven Sorrows Devotional for Catholic Women Facing Infertility, by Kathryn Wood

Waiting In Hope: 31 Reflections for Walking with God Through Infertility, by Kelley Ramsey and Jenn Hesse

Holding Space for Joy: A Prayer Companion for Women Struggling with Infertility, by Mary Bruno