

## **Traveling Companion: What is the hardest part of your job?**

### **Fr. Michael Tracey**

In a dialogue homily on Good Shepherd Sunday, one person asked “what is the hardest part of your job?” I shared some brief thoughts with the questioner.

On Wednesday morning, I received an emergency phone call to the hospital. I was asked to go to the Labor and Delivery unit where a young woman had given birth to a stillborn baby. As I left the rectory, our parish pastoral minister said, “Now that is one of the hardest parts of your job,” as I got ready to leave. I had to agree wholeheartedly.

I arrived at the Labor and Delivery unit where the hospital social worker was waiting to escort me into the young woman’s room. She lay in bed with an IV in her arm. A young man stood on the side of the bed, stroking her. I introduced myself and the struggling conversation began.

The young woman and her boyfriend moved into the area some months earlier. Twenty weeks along in her pregnancy, she experiences some cramps the evening before and was admitted to the hospital. The hospital staff tried to slow down the cramps with medication and were unsuccessful.

Then the doctor informed the young couple of the devastating news. She had known she was carrying twins but now, there was no heartbeat or sign of life.

When I arrived the first stillborn baby had already been born. He was a boy. As I stood by the bedside of the young woman, she indicated that the cramps had started again. Her boyfriend went to inform the nurse who arrived. I left the room and asked one of the nurses to lead me to where they had placed the stillborn boy. As I opened the door, his six inch long frame met me, wrapped in a blue hospital towel. I paused to reflect and pray.

I returned to wait by the nurses station until the second stillborn baby arrived. As I waited there, I noticed two new fathers, clad in their sterile robes standing in the nursery, getting instructions for a nursery worker on how to take care of their new charge. Noticing their elation at becoming new fathers, I remarked to the social worker that this unit could be both a happy and sad place. It was obvious to me as I stood there.

In the room next to the young woman I had come to see, another young woman was about to gift birth as nurses and staff rushed to her side. Her cries of pain echoed through the corridor. As I listened, I thought of the deeper pain of the young woman who had just given birth to the first of her stillborn twins.

Minutes later, a nurse exited the young woman’s room with the body, wrapped in another blue towel. Minutes later, I re-entered the young woman’s room and asked her boyfriend if he wished to see the babies. He did.

We allowed one of the nurses to clean them up. Then, a nurse ushered us into an empty room as we waited. Almost immediately, two nurses arrived with the stillborn boys wrapped up in tiny blankets, supporting little caps. They placed them on a towel on the bed, unwrapped the little blankets and allowed us some time in private.

The young man knelt down by the side of the bed, reached out his arms and encompassed the twins as they lay there, lifeless. For a few minutes, he was absorbed in his own thoughts and prayers. Finally, I led a prayer and he indicated that he was ready to leave. He thanked me for coming. I let the young couple know how I could be reached and left the hospital.

On the way home, I carried my own thoughts and questions with me in the silence. There were no easy answer; no magical wand that would take away the young couple’s pain; no quick fix. Instead, more questions than answers remained as one of the complex mysteries of life unfolded before us. Then, I realized that this is one of the hardest parts of my job as a priest.