

# **Bearing the Unbearable**

**Coping with Infertility and  
Other Profound Suffering**

**By Karl A. Schultz**

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## Foreword

In my own family, and in my pastoral ministry, I have often encountered the deep suffering of those who desire to have children of their own and cannot. It is such an unexpected and unprepared for experience for married couples. Marriage preparations courses rightly spend much time on finances, fidelity, compatibility, dealing with in-laws and getting past the moonlight moments of being married. To my knowledge, however, little or no time is spent on what might be the most excruciating human experience—infertility. Whatever the accuracy of statistics, a surprisingly large number of couples have to face this reality with its accompanying pains: loss, expense of doctors, shame, embarrassing and intrusive questions from others, a sense of failure, anger, and envy to name just a few.

Karl Schultz convincingly depicts these and many more human sufferings caused by infertility. But his book differs profoundly in the ways it offers to transcend these sorrows—namely, by delving into the Bible and discovering how the inspired Word of God suffuses these sufferings with divine meaning.

It is this reflective, yet trenchant, inquiry into the riches of Sacred Scripture that separates Schultz's book from other works on the subject. Rather than look at infertility as a curse, the author places it among the many other human sufferings which afflict families and all humans. It is here that Schultz gives us a prayerful and knowledgeable reading of the history of God with humans. He shows the haunting language of love by which God woos and wins us. We reach the unbelievable love God found in the seeming failure of his Son, Jesus Christ. Innocent as he was, he learned obedience through what he suffered, and became the source of salvation for those who obey and follow him (cf. Hebrews 5: 8, 9).

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I am sure that this book, and the strength it provides in its insights, in its invitations to put hard questions to oneself, in its wisdom to see suffering as a new call, will be of immense help to all those who suffer infertility, as well as to those who surround and love them. At the same time, Schultz challenges every sufferer to unite her or his suffering to Christ.

*Reverend Timothy Fitzgerald, C.P., S.T.D.*

*Itinerant Preacher*

## The Inspirational Value of Artwork

Infertility, like all profound suffering, is a dimension of human experience in which actions can speak much louder than words, and a picture can be worth a thousand words. (However, some words must be said, hence the need for this book and communications between loved ones.) Accordingly, I have asked one of the greatest living religious artists, Nicholas Parrendo, President of Hunt Stained Glass Studios in Pittsburgh, to provide illustrations for the cover and each chapter.

Nick's pictures have an inspirational and catechetical as well as aesthetic appeal. Until the modern era, when literacy spread and books were more available, one of the main ways persons in the west received religious formation and education was through art. It remains an effective and pleasing mode of cultural and spiritual development in this world in which we are inundated with words and images designed to manipulate rather than uplift us.

The discussion of *lectio divina* in the Introduction also applies to art appreciation and assimilation. The reflections that accompany the pictures that precede each chapter are the fruit of my *lectio*, studies, and life experience.

Take in these pictures, observe how they communicate in images what the Bible describes in words and what you experience in life, and reflect upon the insights and emotions they evoke. Or, just enjoy them as a transition to each chapter or as works of religious art. Either way, art can be an edifying and elegant form of culture and communication:

“In approaching artistic masterpieces from whatever era, the mind is prompted to open itself to the mysterious fascination of the Transcendent, because a mysterious and unexpected spark of the Divine is present in every genuine artistic expression.” (Pope John Paul II, address for the Jubilee Celebration for Artists, Friday, February 18, 2000).

# Introduction

*Bearing the Unbearable* wrestles with two of life's most painful realities, the loss or diminishment of hope and the inability of human beings to fulfill their vocation, potential, and dreams. We will focus on perhaps the most poignant cause of this, infertility, but our discussion will include other major obstacles to fulfillment. There is an innate link between the futility of procreative and potential fulfillment efforts.

We will integrate western civilization's most famous infertility stories, those from the Bible, and particularly the Old Testament, with contemporary stories and your own.

## ***Why I Wrote the Book***

I wrote this book for two main reasons. First, I wanted to make the timeless insights and therapeutic applications of the Bible's infertility stories accessible to a wide audience. These can heal painful emotions and experiences, provide guidance on key decisions, and open up new ways of looking at your challenges and life as a whole. These stories transcend denominational boundaries and showcase universal emotions and experiences. They can truly be classified as world literature and every person's story.

Most books on infertility focus on emotional, social, financial, physiological, technological, homeopathic (natural remedies), and ethical issues. The spiritual aspect, which is closely linked to the others, has been largely overlooked, even though it is the aspect we have the greatest control over.

Second, I have dealt with infertility and other intimate suffering both personally and professionally, and have not found literary resources that addressed my experiences and concerns. I hope this book helps you to bear whatever is unbearable in your life, be it the lack or loss of children, setbacks, deprivations, or pain of any kind.

## ***Who This Book is For***

This book is particularly relevant for persons dealing with biological infertility, but it is also appropriate for anyone trying to bear up under other unbearable circumstances. It is meant for all persons struggling to give and affirm life in one way or another.

*Bearing the Unbearable* devotes attention to the most natural and literal manifestation of this challenge, infertility, in a way that encompasses other experiences of loss and deprivation. Both the Bible and our common language use infertility as a metaphor for the inability of persons and groups to achieve their goals.

The frustrations and challenges of infertility are similar to other intimate losses and deprivations, including various obstacles to living a full life. I refer to the latter as *functional infertility* because we're not able to function as we'd like.

For example, at fifty we are laid off and cannot use our talents in the workplace. A parent of three is abandoned by their spouse and has to raise and provide for their children largely by themselves. We graduate from college loaded down with student loans and are unable to get a job in our field. We'll discuss numerous common injustices in this book. By seeing the relatedness of different types of afflictions, we can be more understanding and compassionate towards ourselves and others.

## ***Personal Experience***

I approach the topic from the inside, quite aware of the subtleties and ambiguities involved. My struggles with life's deprivations have taught me that coping is more a matter of living the questions than of finding absolute answers.

No person's experience and perspective on such a subjective topic can be definitive. Because each person and situation is unique, I write in a dialogical, open-ended manner, offering familiar examples, customizable coping suggestions, and thought-provoking reflection questions.

Verbal and physical affirmation and poignant silence amid tragedy can speak eloquently. Through a balanced integration of stories, reflection, content, exercises, personal revelations, and humor, we can find meaning and direction amid the mystery of human impotence.

## ***Getting Real and Getting Results***

This book differs substantially from most self-help and inspirational books. It does not offer answers where there are none, nor does it paint a bleak picture rosy. It offers hope, inspiration, and practical guidance suited for the real world in which we live.

In this respect, it emulates the Bible, which approaches life in a realistic manner, unafraid to recognize its dark and gray aspects. Undeterred by sin and human weakness, the Bible emanates an underlying optimism and confidence in God and human beings, and a passion for life.

The Bible begins with the creation of life (Genesis) and ends with its consummation and perpetuation (Revelation). From beginning to end, it shows how to find joy, peace, and hope amid chaos. It is an ideal literary forum for confronting obstacles to fulfillment and discovering ways of transforming them.

We often hear the expressions “You can do whatever you set your mind to” or “You can get as far as you want in life.” These have a grain of truth in them, but need to be qualified. Sometimes we can achieve our goals; other times obstacles force us to lower our sights and take alternate routes.

Authentic fulfillment of any dream or endeavor entails controlling what we can (free will, responsibility), and leaving the rest to God (providence), others (free will), and life (nature). This book offers suggestions for responding optimally to these factors in light of our afflictions.

Trying to give life rather than grief to self and others doesn't always produce desired results in the present, but it remains a healthy and harmonious way to live. Through the grace of God, your own efforts, and the support of others, may you bear up under your unbearable pressures, and bear fruit in the paths you travel.

## ***Book Format***

This book is composed and structured according to the ancient Christian model of holistic reading known as *lectio divina*, a Latin term meaning divine reading. It has its roots in the ancient Hebrew oral culture from which the Bible originated. It was developed and adapted by the early Christians, adopted by the desert fathers and mothers and their descendants, the monastic communities, most prominently the Benedictines.

As both professed religious and laypersons rediscover this accessible spiritual model, it is experiencing a modern rebirth. As can be deduced from its composition, it is an inclusive model appropriate for persons of all faiths.

Because it is an intimate dialogical practice that could be described as a spiritual version of sexual intercourse--a fitting analogy given both the Old and New Testament's use of marriage as a metaphor for God's relationship with his people--in a very real sense it transcends description. The only way to truly understand it is through experience.

However, for purposes of education, formation, and handing down among the generations, the following stages have been identified over the course of its transmission:

*Reading and listening*, in which the five senses are actively engaged. We read slowly, aloud or in a quiet murmur if feasible, and continue until we reach a word, phrase, verse, or image that strikes us, or perhaps brings a significant life experience to mind. The opposite of speed-reading, we engage a relatively small section of text, as the purpose is not to plow through it, but to savor it, as one does a grape or other piece of fruit, a metaphor used by the medieval monks who practiced this model faithfully.

*Meditation* is constituted by repetition of and reflection on the personally meaningful message derived from the passage, including relating the particular words, phrase, verse, or inspiration to other biblical passages or life experiences. The conscious and subconscious mind is prominent in this stage.

*Prayer* is the active component of dialogue with God. We share our response with God or others if practiced in a group setting. This is the affective dimension in the sense that we express our emotions and thereby discharge any toxic feelings, memories, or impulses; we convey how we are *affected* by the text or a life experience(s) which it brings to mind.

*Contemplation* is the flip side of prayer and the receptive dimension of dialogue with God or others. Identified in Christian tradition as "simple presence", we wait silently on the Lord, opening ourselves to His message and the movement of the Spirit in our lives. In contemplation, the spiritual or unitive (the word religion comes from the Latin word *religio*, meaning to tie together or bind) faculty of human experience is most prominent, as we commune with God and perhaps others.

Historically, *action* was the last of the components to be explicitly articulated, though its role was implicit from the beginning. From the concrete, practical perspective of the Bible, it is the most indispensable component because it is where we practice our faith and bring it to life.

Further, since the traditional subject of *lectio divina*, God's word, cannot be identified exclusively with its normative expression (after Jesus, of course, cf. Jn 1:1-18; 1 Jn 1:1-4), the Bible, we should not make absolute distinctions between the practice of *lectio divina* on a written text or passage and *lectio divina* on a life experience. There is a natural fluidity and interaction between the two, as you will see in this book. I will frequently oscillate between life experiences and biblical texts as a way of grounding and balancing us in the truth of reality, found in both of the aforementioned.

We often discover biblical passages reborn in life experiences, as reflected in such vernacular expressions as the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son. We read and reflect on the Bible and other spiritual texts in order to bring them to life.

A theological term coined in modern times, *praxis*, i.e., faith in action, captures the essence of this stage, which completes the holistic model by grounding it in life experience, reality, and human responsiveness.

The whole process is holistic (organic and natural, involving the whole person) and interactive rather than compartmentalized or methodical. The

above descriptions are a map rather than a blueprint. Although the modular progression is descriptive of the typical way humans process significant stimuli and matters such as addressed in the Bible and this book, the process is ultimately spontaneous and natural rather than linear. Each time we practice *lectio divina* our experience (the process) may be slightly different, whether in direction, content / focus, speed, or intensity, which is natural and good because it is how we experience life, which is *lectio divina's* and the Bible's ultimate subject and context.

For further information on how the stages of *lectio divina* are played out in human interactions and communications and other activities (e.g., journaling, art appreciation and iconic devotion), see my books *The How-To Book of the Bible* and *How to Pray With the Bible*, both published by Our Sunday Visitor.

The ultimate testament to the efficacy of *lectio divina* is that we practice it naturally and experience its progressive, interactive stages even without cognizance of the terminology or model. Familiarity with its contents, flow, cohesiveness, and development over the centuries can only enrich and deepen our experience.

Perhaps the two words most descriptive of *lectio divina* are holistic and dialogue. It involves the whole person in an interactive, communication process, thereby helping us fulfill the first commandment (love of God with our whole self) and by relation, the second commandment, love of neighbor.

Although the activities comprising *lectio divina* permeate this book, they are communicated primarily implicitly, so as to facilitate a natural and fluid experience consonant with our circumstances and capacities.

Perhaps the most obvious manifestations of the *lectio divina* model are the reflection questions presented throughout the text. They are dialogical, open-ended prompts designed to stimulate personal application and assimilation, to make this book *your book*. You could spend the rest of your life contemplating the issues addressed in the questions and throughout the book, so don't feel obliged to answer them all. In the free-form, natural spirit of *lectio divina*, follow your reason, instincts, and the promptings of the Spirit in addressing them as circumstances merit.

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## ***Bible Translation***

Biblical quotations and references are presented according to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) because of its clarity, literal accuracy, and ecumenical foundation and usage. Of course, you can use whichever Bible you prefer, and because the differences between most modern translations are not dramatic, the NRSV rendering of a passage will likely be similar to that of your translation.

## ***Contacting the Author***

I am interested in your comments and stories with regards to this book and topic. It will expand my horizons and deepen my understanding as I give presentations on infertility and related topics in a variety of health-care, support group, religious, and association environments. You can contact me in the following ways:

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