

Acknowledgement

On Wednesday 15th May 2002, while sitting a gender-based exam in a final year exam for a degree in Social Science, I experienced what I can now only describe as a final awakening of my deep emotional distress at the lack of an acknowledgement to my much yearned for children. While sitting there with a blank page in front of me, I realised for the first time that I did not feel like a normal female, in fact I just felt gender neutral. I experienced severe heart throbbing, wanting to desperately get up and run away, shaking, and wanting to let the ground open up and swallow me. I cried down on to my exam paper and began to write disjointed sentences, describing how I did not feel like a woman, and how I still had to do the housework etc even though I had no children, it was a disaster, and I felt sure that I would fail the exam after my three years of hard work. It would be yet another failure. (By the way I passed my exams and graduated with honours in September 2002).

I knew the time had come to direct my energy very forcefully into acknowledging my grief and love for my longed for children into a public ritual. So on 15th May after that exam, I decided to hold a Mass in my local parish church to coincide with World Infertility Month (WIM). I was raised as a Catholic and until that day I felt there was no significant day in the church calendar to remember my unconceived children and I very much needed to feel part of my church from which I had become alienated. I rang my local priest and he could not have been more understanding and helpful. The day seemed to organise itself, I prepared invitations that I personally handed out to over 200 members of my family and friends. I received favourable response from all of them that was not patronising or pitiful, rather I received empathy and support from all of them. I began to feel my heart breathing and expanding deeply, from what seemed to me like a very, very long passage of isolation.

And so on Saturday 1st June 2002, I arrived at the Church at 11.30am to prepare for the Mass. I placed a large candle in the middle of a large table; on each side of the table I placed the reflection for lighting your candle. I placed the same reflection on the doors leading into the church. I wrote the poem about the "lighthouse" and had it framed, this I placed in front of the candle table with a plant.

At 12 noon I lit the nightlights for the people who requested them. I stood at the back of the Church to welcome my guests and gave them the Mass leaflet and offered them as many nightlights as they wished to be lit from the central candle at the Altar. All the people who attended lit a candle and I found this very moving, to see all the little candles lighting throughout the ceremony and their heat melted the central candle and the wax spilled over on the table and joined up, it was magical.

I asked my mother and my husband's father to bring up the gifts at the offertory, I told them that they were to have been the godparents of my first child, I have always wanted them to know that and was very proud to have asked them to be involved in a special way in the Mass. I asked my two nieces to bring up my dissertation that I had completed in April 2002 as part of my Degree, entitled "Infertility in Socially Constructed Isolation", this was a very special moment for me, I had spent the past two years formulating my theories and prescriptions for infertility in society, I also felt proud that my children were being presented to the Altar and acknowledged. My nieces also brought the wallet cards with a lighthouse poem on the front and the poem dedicated to "Michael and Maria" at the back, to the Altar in a little box. (I chose the lighthouse as my emblem for my dissertation, because it represents social construction and isolation, but ships (people) pass by and they can either stop and ask how we are feeling, they can ignore us, or we can stop them and ask for help).

The whole Mass was very special, the singing, the organ playing, the smell of the candles, the feeling of great love and prayerfulness for all our unforgotten dreams made the Mass an "unforgettable moment in time". At the end of the Mass I went to the Altar and took the box of wallet cards and presented one to each person who attended the Mass, most of the people who attended hugged me deeply and thanked me for inviting them, they expressed a feeling of deep emotion while attending the Mass. After the Mass we had tea and sandwiches at a local bar. We did some Irish dancing while my brother played the bagpipes. It felt like a celebration of life and an acknowledgment of special loved ones.

I felt several feet taller that day, and gained a wealth of love in my heart. I feel part of my Church again, and will for the rest of my life have a Mass said privately for all unforgotten children on the 1st of June. This is a wonderful privilege for me and my darlings who I feel tried their very best to be conceived in my womb, but for what reason they just could not succeed, however they live in my heart and I will always love them and feel them close to me, and I now smile when I think of them, my babies "Michael and Maria" who love me too.

I feel huge appreciation for the organisers of WIM, who facilitated me with an opportunity to raise awareness of infertility with my friends and family, I doubt it very much if I could have organised the Mass without the umbrella of WIM to shield my fears of looking like a fool