

## “... and God will make him a cake”

Tom Nolan

**W**e buried little Finn on Saturday. He's near Harpers Ferry on a hill overlooking the Shenandoah River. Above him is a Marine guard, a casualty of the response to John Brown's raid. (Why was Robert E. Lee, a Colonel of Army Engineers, commanding United States Marines?) Finally, I thought, our family ordeal is over.

Finbar William was my grandson. Finn was anencephalic, a rare condition where the brain fails to properly form in the womb. It is always fatal. Of course, we had known for months, thanks to sonograms and other wonders of modern medicine. Upon learning of his condition, I hoped for a swift miscarriage—making the best of a bad situation. I wanted “it” over and done with, so my daughter Meg and her husband Frank could get on with their lives. It was not to be. Finn went to full term.

I have always considered myself pro-life. I certainly vote that way. I distinctly remember my response when *Roe v. Wade* was announced. I was still in the Navy and the skipper encouraged discussions of current events. I argued against the Court's decision principally because it was not the Court's business to interfere with the states on such a matter. Secretly, I thought it was probably not right to kill a baby in the womb. My sole ally was Bob, the only Jewish officer in the wardroom. He forthrightly argued that abortion is the taking of innocent life.

When it became apparent that Meg would not miscarry early, I thought that in this circumstance, abortion was perhaps permissible. It would certainly be understandable in contrast to abortion for “convenience.” After all, I thought, we know the outcome, what's the point in prolonging the certain outcome? Then Meg gave me a printed copy of a “staff commentary” from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops which she found on the Internet. It addressed “Moral Principles Concerning Infants with Anencephaly.” Curse the Internet—I didn't want to read it. I forced myself to read the expected, but dreaded language—“*The Gospel of Life demands unwavering respect for the inherent dignity of babies born with disabilities or illnesses*” (emphasis added). Not only no abortion, but also palliative care. And baptism, confirmation, and a funeral. Fine in the abstract, but is it really necessary here, with us? Yes it is, or the teaching means nothing.

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I suppose I should mention that I am an Episcopalian. It will be no surprise that I increasingly find myself in disagreement with our bishops. However, the disputes roiling our communion have seemed “small beer” for the past few months. All the arguments seem irrelevant somehow. Do the bishops really consider their preoccupations to be pastoral care? While they display their trendiness to an approving world, real people quietly deal with real problems. I should quickly mention that our little church and its rector have been a rock of support.

Obviously, Meg was raised in our local Episcopal church. I believe that her solid character is due, in part, to her Episcopalian background. When she married Frank she converted to his Catholicism. I raised no objection. My “congenital” anti-Catholicism (what else does the word *Protestant* mean?) had long ago withered and died as I observed the pro-life movement, which in my case has “morphed” into a broader cultural concern. I greatly admire the Magisterium for its teaching and clear explication of dogma. It is notable that rationality is found in the Catholic Church, while secularists, the “Children of the Enlightenment,” are increasingly incoherent and tawdry (“Keep your rosaries off my ovaries”). In the months and years ahead I suspect that we will all come to value (and need) the counsel of the Catholic Church on matters literally existential.

**M**eg delivered by emergency Caesarean on Tuesday. Both families were present in the recovery room. I was ill at ease and tried to remain in the background. If conversation was expected, I retreated to “safe” territory, relating to the culture wars. Anything but “it.” Then Frank brought “it” into the room and told us “he” (Finn) didn’t have much time. I had no idea how to act or what to say. Then they started taking photographs! They wanted one with me holding Finn! To say I was uncomfortable is an understatement. Frank thinks my stilted pose in the photo is hilarious. All I need is a pitchfork to be the male figure in Grant Wood’s *American Gothic*.

Finn was with us for an hour and twenty minutes. His lungs did not form and he never drew a breath. His little heart was strong, but finally surrendered to the inevitable.

The next few days are a blur of family and friends arriving and departing. Then came the funeral and my first tears. When Frank and little Mikey (Finn’s brother) carried the miniature coffin to the front of Saint Bridget’s, my self-control dissolved. It just seemed so wrong. Meg and Frank shouldn’t have to go through this.

The reaction of Finn’s older siblings is remarkable. Little Joanie (age three) said “Finn is in heaven having a birthday party, and God will make him a cake.”

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Adding to the family's ordeal, Finn's aunt (my youngest child) Katie, had an automobile accident on the interstate, returning from college for the funeral. At high speed one of the wheels literally came off. She was uninjured and damage to the vehicle was minimal. I complimented her on her instinctive reactions and driving skills. Katie, however, is convinced that her miraculous preservation is due to Finn's intercession.

After the funeral, at the reception given by the Episcopalian side of the family, I talked with Father Jonathan, a Dominican priest. He is a gentle giant whom I have admired ever since we met. He finds significance in the fact that Finn was born (and died) on the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patroness of the unborn. I am not prepared to disagree.

On Sunday I went to Meg and Frank's house, where Father Jonathan celebrated Mass, and I received his blessing. As I drove home, I was composing in my head this missive. Without warning came a flood of tears for Finn. He was a little boy, not an it, and he's gone. There will be no go-cart rides or bottle rockets. No fishing the Shenandoah or potato guns. We did not get seriously acquainted and, this side of paradise, we never will.

I think the different reactions to Finn's short life have to do with our view of suffering. I recognize that suffering exists and cannot be avoided. It must be endured, but is to be minimized. Catholics embrace suffering. They call it "redemptive." They don't deny sadness and grief but see meaning in the suffering itself. As Meg put it early in our ordeal, "God doesn't make mistakes."

To Finn in heaven: Your life on earth was short. But you were a great teacher.

You certainly taught me. If Father Jonathan is right you will teach a host of others as well. If we measure a man's life by his effect on others, you were truly great.

I am afraid your grandfather is a weak reed. I am truly sorry and I humbly repent that I ever wanted anything other than what your mom and dad did for you. I hope you will forgive me.

Oh, and one more thing, Finn. I also hope you will save me some cake.