

Choosing life

The Austin Swenby story

By Charmaine Barranco

Our Northland Diocese

FERTILE - For some, remembering the anniversary of Roe vs. Wade brings back memories of marching in picket lines outside the abortion clinic in Fargo.

People from several churches including St. Joseph Parish in Fertile were among the picketers.

“We would do that all the time,” remembered April Swenby.

“But now I’m more compassionate with moms. It isn’t that they don’t love their babies. I think it’s that many are told only what their babies don’t have instead of all the beautiful things their babies do have.

“If they were told about all the beautiful things, they would focus on those things instead,” she said.

“Even so, it can be a hard walk.

“I’ve always been pro-life.

“But I never really knew what that meant until I had to walk the walk myself.”

April Swenby had just 11 precious minutes with her newborn son, Austin John, before he died peacefully in her arms Dec. 7.

He arrived in this world and left it without taking a single breath.

Born with anencephaly, Austin had a neural tube birth defect in the same category as spina bifida. April and her husband, Aaron, knew for four months he would not survive.

An ultra-sound test, taken during the 20th week of pregnancy, revealed that the forebrain and the cranium were absent. The baby’s brain would not be able to develop without a covering due to the amniotic fluid.

With that crushing news came an equally crushing expectation – that the couple would immediately terminate the baby’s life, a pregnancy doctors termed “not viable.”

“The doctor said, ‘Your baby will die,’” remembered April of that bright September day in the doctor’s office, a day when it seemed that someone flipped a switch, turning off the sun and leaving everything murky and gray.

“They recommended that labor be induced as soon as possible. They didn’t call it abortion, but that’s what it was, even though it would be done at a hospital.

“Immediately, I felt uncomfortable,” she said.

Yet, as deeply felt emotions began to stir in April, a nurse was on the phone to the hospital in Grand Forks, then Fargo, to set up a consultation at the doctor’s request.

“But those hospitals couldn’t do it,” remembered April. “So they made an appointment for us in the Twin Cities.”

Yet while doctors assumed the expected decision had been made, April and Aaron did what some in the medical community would call unexpected – they chose life.

They chose to continue carrying and giving life to their baby, who they would later name Austin, as long as possible.

“Rather than see him as ‘not viable,’ they recognized him as a soul,” said Father Bob Schreiner, rector of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Crookston, a priest destined to work closely with the couple.

“They recognized him as a person.

“They recognized him as Austin.”

Prior to their appointment in the cities, where a 3D ultrasound test confirmed the initial diagnosis, the couple made a different type of appointment, not with a doctor, but with their pastor.

Msgr. Roger Grundhaus, of St. Joseph Parish, Fertile, spoke with the couple and quickly recommended they talk to Father Bob, known in the Diocese of Crookston for his studies in biomedical ethics and Church teaching on medical issues.

His first meeting with the couple, before they left for the cities, was heart-wrenching, he said.

“You could see immediately that here was a young couple who knew they were never going to be able to live out their life with their new child,” he said.

“And you knew that April particularly was in great pain about this.”

Yet, during their first meeting April was able to ask him point-blank what they needed to know - “What does the Church teach, and what does it expect?”

Father Bob replied, “Your baby is a gift and regardless of how long he has to live, he’s alive.

“He’s alive.

“He is living.”

And in those simple words April said she found strength. She found the ability to persevere. And because she did, much later she would also find grace.

Celebrating life

Researching anencephaly, Father Bob learned that at the 33rd week of pregnancy it was morally acceptable to induce labor.

“After 33 weeks there’s a danger of the baby providing complications for the mother, and even in a perfectly healthy child, 33 weeks is morally acceptable because at that point the baby can live on its own, outside the mother,” he said.

“That was painful for April because she was now looking at months of pregnancy, and she knew how this was going to end.

“And she really, really struggled with that.

“But I told her to maximize the time,” said Father Bob.

Drawing a parallel, he asked the couple if a beloved parent or grandparent had just been told they were going to die in four months, how would you choose to live those months.

“You maximize it,” he said. “You don’t miss an opportunity to celebrate, and explore and do things you always wanted to do. And I told them it’s no different with your baby.

“Maximize the time and teach your three young daughters, his sisters, to love this baby.”

Father Bob suggested the couple name the baby, celebrate his presence and have their daughters draw pictures for him.

“Then, when the girls are young adults and are going to be parents, present the pictures they drew so that they remember the sacredness of life,” he said.

“In short, I told the couple this is an incredible opportunity of grace, precisely because we know that every moment is more precious than you can imagine.

“Live every moment to the full.”

Leaving the priest’s office that night, the couple didn’t need to think about their decision any longer.

“We wanted to do the right thing,” April said. “And not terminating our baby was the right thing.

“I knew those months of pregnancy would be hard, sometimes they were harder than I ever could have imagined.

“At those times I would remember Father Bob’s words...and my mother’s intuition seemed to take over too, and I began guarding my heart, bracing it so when the time came to let go it wouldn’t be so devastating.”

During the ensuing months, Austin’s presence was celebrated. Pictures his sisters drew for him were put into albums along with April’s journal entries, which she recorded nearly every day during the pregnancy.

A shower of prayer in Austin’s name was organized by Kirsten Fuglseth, and hosted at St. Joseph Parish, where a standing room only crowd from all faiths gathered together to celebrate his life.

“It was a night of celebration, the celebration of a life, a life yet to be lived, no matter how short,” said Renee Rongen, a friend of the family.

“Some may think that we are in a throw away world. If it is not perfect or is not the way we had anticipated, we discard it.

“Austin’s life has perhaps given many a new insight into what and who deems perfection, and who decides what to discard and what to keep,” she said.

At the shower of prayers, just a couple of weeks before Austin’s birth, April said she could finally talk about her baby without crying.

“Time and lots of prayers have helped,” she said at the shower.

“We’ve accepted it. We don’t agree with it, but we’ve accepted it.

“We just knew that not going through with the abortion was a decision we could be proud of instead of always wondering what we had done.

“I wouldn’t have been able to hold my head up if I had done it the other way. And I don’t think it would have been any easier either.

“After, all I wanted my heartache to go away. I didn’t want my baby to go away,” she said.

“But I couldn’t understand what I wanted. But having him any earlier wouldn’t have changed anything.

“It wouldn’t have taken the problem away,” she said, watching the people celebrating in the church basement.

“I’m really floating on faith right now,” she added softly.

“If I didn’t have that, it would be a tough way to let the baby go.”

Austin’s birth

The baby shower, April said later, gave her the strength to continue the pregnancy beyond 33 weeks, giving Austin’s lungs more time to develop.

Labor was induced at 35 weeks, but it failed, making her miserably ill.

A week later labor was induced again at the Crookston hospital, and April delivered Austin within 24 hours, with about one hour of intense labor.

He was born at 10:44 p.m. Dec. 7 into a room full of people including his father, nurses, the doctor, and April’s sister.

But as April held him in her arms for the first time, she said, the room seemed to vanish.

And in those moments of distinct, peaceful quietness known only to her, there was no one else present.

“It was just Austin, Aaron and me,” she said, softly.

“Austin’s eyes were so big and wide, and they stared directly into mine.

“But not once did I beg him to stay. I knew he had to go.

“And every unforgettable moment we shared was precious.”

Aaron baptized his son at the urging of Dr. Kanten, who supported the couple throughout the pregnancy.

During the 11 minutes of Austin’s life, he never cried, blinked or even took a breath.

After he died, family members held him. Photos were taken.

About 1:00 a.m. two of the couple’s other three children came into the delivery room to see their baby brother. They stayed, looking at him and holding his tiny hands, for a couple of hours.

Later in the morning, after everyone had gone, the nurses who had taken Austin’s footprints and hand molds returned him to April and Aaron.

A funeral director was called and Aaron placed Austin in a tiny, white casket.

“I cried as he was wheeled away,” April said.

The couple had a small funeral for Austin with family and a few friends.

“I cried then too,” April said. “But it was nothing like the heartache I had when the doctor told me that Austin was ‘not viable.’”

“Now I knew I did not have to worry about Austin anymore, and my faith assured me of that.”

April and Aaron experienced the mystery of the cross in its fullest, said Father Bob.

“They didn’t deny the pain of Good Friday,” he said. “They sat in stillness with Holy Saturday, and they experienced the power of redemption and resurrection on Easter Sunday when Austin was born.

“And they embraced it as husband and wife in the sacrament of their marriage. And they embraced it as a family in the graced environment of their home.

“It is everything that we are called to be and live as Christians, and as Catholics in the sacramental life.”

For those who may face a similar decision now or in the future, Father Bob said, “my advice is to trust the wisdom of the Church.

“It’s true, and April and Aaron’s lives prove it,” he said.

“The wisdom of the Church in situations like this will stand in opposition to accepted medical advice, but just trust the Church’s wisdom.

“And to those who have already gone through this, and whatever decision they may have made, just lean into God’s mercy,” he said.

“The same gracious God who poured out blessings over April and Aaron and Austin and their family is the same God who is available to you.

“Our God, who is a God of mercy and compassion, is available to everyone.”