

Catholic women reflect on pregnancy, childbirth during the pandemic

PORTLAND, Ore. (CNS) – At 8 a.m. on Easter, two days before giving birth, Jennifer Ratigan pulled into a hospital parking lot and waited for a physician’s assistant – donning full protective garb, including a face mask and shield – to reach through a rolled-down window to swab her nose for a COVID-19 test.

The hospital was preparing for a potential surge in coronavirus cases and was testing all mothers who’d likely deliver soon. Medical staff wanted to allocate equipment and health care workers properly.

Ratigan, whose test results were negative, understood the precaution. But the contrast between the strange early morning outing and her soul’s desire was acute and painful. She longed to be at Mass, to be among friends, to be watching her five children gleefully scramble for hidden eggs.

“It was emotional,” said the 42-year-old, a member of St. Rose of Lima Parish in Northeast Portland. “I felt sad and lonely.”

For pregnant and postpartum mothers, the pandemic has upended birth plans and altered expectations. It’s caused heightened uncertainty and twinges of fear. At the same time, many women, Ratigan included, say it’s intensified their awe of life and reliance on God.

“This Easter I needed the surrender prayer, ‘Jesus, I turn it over to you,’” Ratigan said.

On April 14, the Ratigan family welcomed child No. 6, a boy they named Luke. “It means ‘light,’ and he’s our light right

now,” said his mother in a recent phone interview, the cries and coos of the newborn interrupting periodically.

Ratigan’s husband, Mitch, is a baseball coach, and before the virus, the couple wondered how the family would juggle baseball season with four sons who play and a baby on the way.

“When the pandemic started, it was a jolt into reality and the realization of how silly our little frets were before,” said Ratigan. After her previous births, she’d stayed in the hospital a few days. With Luke, it was a mere 24 hours. “It was very quick; they want to get people out,” she said. When her muscles ached, she reminded herself she wasn’t usually out of a hospital bed so early.

There have been many moments of pregnancy, pandemic and birth that she’ll never forget.

En route from the hospital, she texted Father Matt Libra, their pastor, asking if they could get a drive-by blessing. The priest came out of the rectory mask-clad and prayed over the family.

“That felt so very special,” recalled Ratigan.

A few nights ago, close family friends dropped off pizza on their doorstep and then stood across the street as Luke was held up and introduced.

“We are being really diligent and following social-distancing recommendations,” Ratigan said.

“No one wants to be responsible for getting anyone else sick. But that night I started to tear up. We will not ever underappreciate friendships.”

Prayer, thankfully, pays no heed to physical distance. “The many prayers of others have strengthened us through all this,” she said.

Because the coronavirus new, it's not yet clear if pregnant women have a greater chance than the general public of contracting COVID-19 or if they're more likely to have serious complications. The CDC says pregnant women seem to have the same risk as those who are not pregnant.

There also currently is no evidence that the virus is transmitted in utero or through breast milk, said Dr. Judy Marvin, medical director of Providence Health and Services women's clinics in Oregon.

Another impact of the virus is this: No doula in the delivery room. No post-birth hugs from her parents. No tender hospital moment of grandparents meeting their freshly arrived grandson.

"You have these expectations, and then – surprise – a pandemic is here and everything looks different," said Angie Kelly, whose first baby was born on Palm Sunday.

She said of all the changes to her birth plan, keeping the baby, Tano Lorenzo Thomas Kelly, and her parents separate has been the hardest. First it was because of hospital limits on visitors, now it's due to social distancing.

The lack of her anticipated support at the hospital meant "it was all the more meaningful to have such caring nurses," said the 29-year-old.

Right now, Kelly and her husband are savoring this time with their son. "We'd be in the house all the time anyway," she said with a laugh. "Instead of needing to turn down events or showing up late, we are able to just be with each other."

The couple has tried to limit their news consumption, while staying mindful of the suffering caused by the pandemic. "I want to soak in this awesome, wild, new-parent time," said Kelly, cradling her baby. "From where I sit, the world looks beautiful."

Christina Fordyce, a member of St. Joseph Parish in Salem, is having a home birth for her second baby, due in August.

“It was such an amazing experience with our first that we wanted to do it again,” said Fordyce, 25. Now she feels especially relieved at the decision, which a growing number of women nationwide are making during the pandemic.

Some women have concerns about their own and especially their babies’ potential vulnerability to the virus in hospitals.

Though Fordyce’s birth plan may remain in place even if the pandemic lasts through the summer, her visits with the midwives have changed. The last prenatal appointment was over the phone, and for the previous one the midwife wore a mask and gloves and stayed just long enough to check her vitals.

“The visits usually feel so intimate and personal,” said Fordyce. “Both their experience and mine were so different.”

It’s also been a bit tough to parent a toddler while pregnant without the in-person practical and spiritual support of her parish community.

Lent as a “big part of the pregnancy was providential,” she said. “It’s a time to get on your feet spiritually and pick up prayer routines you may have dropped. I needed that more than ever.”

“Trust” is a word that keeps coming to mind, she added. “There are so many unknowns right now. It’s an opportunity to place more trust in God.”

Olivia is an Oregon Catholic who’s three months pregnant with her third child. She’s keeping her name private so she can share the news in person with her extended family, now separated by social distancing.

“We are close to a lot of my family, and we really miss seeing them, our kids really miss seeing them,” said Oliva, who is in

her late 30s.

She's not due until the fall, but public health experts, including the head of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, have warned a second wave of coronavirus cases could appear around then.

"If we have to do social distancing and no one can come over, my husband may have to stay with the kids while I give birth," Oliva said. "That's a tough, sad reality to consider."

"Even in the midst of these trials and the unknowns and the world changing so fast, life is a gift," Olivia said. "I can celebrate the life in my womb in this moment. This baby in me is a source of joy in a strange time. This baby is a source of hope."