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## **Cultivating the Seeds of Trust Healing the Relational Wounds of Abortion**

-An Excerpt from "**Sharing the Heart of Christ.**"

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According to recent statistics, when a priest looks out on his congregation, he can safely assume that one in three women and men in his congregation will participate in at least one abortion in their reproductive lifetime.<sup>1</sup> This may occur prior to meeting their current spouse, during the dating/engagement period, or after they are married. As we reach out to those who have suffered the loss of a child through abortion, it is important to understand a paradoxical tendency common among these individuals:

- They want to bury abortion-related memories and run away from the feelings.
- They have a desperate hunger to find an outlet for their pain, to find reconciliation, understanding, peace, and healing.

Those suffering after abortion will struggle to stuff their painful feelings and put the event behind them. This complicated and buried grief finds self-destructive outlets in private addictions and compulsions, eating disorders, the abuse of drugs and alcohol, promiscuity, anxiety, depression, acting out, and becoming workaholics to provide a shield against feeling pain or to create a private fortress against future intimacy. However, these symptoms of post-abortion loss do not occur in isolation. They can and do significantly impact marriage and family life. Abortion creates a relational and spiritual wound. A healthy marital relationship is marked by a deep bonding between husband and wife with a foundational trust that leads to vibrant and satisfying emotional, spiritual, and physical intimacy. Abortion is a traumatic death experience that is closely associated to relational/sexual intimacy, creating a profound fracture of trust that strikes at the heart of a relationship. Because of the nature of this wound, secrets and extra marital affairs are not uncommon for persons with abortion in their history.

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<sup>1</sup> "About half of American women have experienced an unintended pregnancy, and at current rates more than one-third (35%) will have had an abortion by age 45." From [www.guttmacher.org/media/presskits/2005/06/28/abortionoverview](http://www.guttmacher.org/media/presskits/2005/06/28/abortionoverview)

In the past, some clergy counseled women in the confessional to keep their abortion(s) secret from those they loved, including spouses and fiancés. There can be good reasons to delay or carefully discern if and when to share about a previous abortion. Marriage counseling and spiritual direction may be necessary to help discern if this can be safely done. However, to refuse to acknowledge the role of abortion in marital difficulties can have serious repercussions. If at all possible, we should work to engage the spouse to participate with the husband or wife on the healing journey.

### **Post Abortive Relationships**

Even when one is not the parent of the aborted child, they are often deeply affected by the post-abortion issues of their spouse.<sup>2</sup> Sadly, they may not understand that their marital problems are rooted in a previous abortion loss as they struggle with intimacy, trust, communication, sexuality and parenting issues. A post abortive individual can struggle to feel worthy of the love of another person, to fully trust and accept that love because of previous relational wounds in the areas of sexuality and abortion loss. Without a healing process, couples can experience serious dysfunction, and even divorce. For couples who have an abortion in their dating and engagement period, or when married, the abortion is like a radioactive seed that is planted deep in the heart of their relationship. In time, it will yield its toxic fruit in the marriage.

### **Post-Abortion Healing is for Couples Too!**

A trauma-sensitive healing process like Rachel's Vineyard is so important to treat the complicated grief, shame, guilt of abortion, so an individual is healed and free to fully trust and embrace the love of another. Couples often attend the healing weekend together and, those that do, report a significant increase in communication, trust, and intimacy. Often a spouse will attend a retreat, though not a parent of the aborted child, as a support to their spouse. This experience bonds them deeply with Christ as they go through the healing experience together. The spouse is invited to spiritually adopt the aborted child, embracing the child as a member of the family at the Sunday Memorial Service. This is a beautiful healing opportunity for the couple.

Keep in mind that for some couples, particularly those that both participated in the abortion of their unborn child, the retreat may be an important first step in their healing. The damage to relationship runs deep, as do the feelings of anger, resentment and grief. It may be necessary to encourage couples that while they have done some important healing work around the abortion loss, more growth is needed in their relationship. You can suggest that they would benefit from individual and couples counseling. Offer a referral to a counselor sensitive to their post abortion issues that can help them rebuild their relationship, deepen their intimacy and improve their communication skills.

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<sup>2</sup> See *Redeeming A Father's Heart* Chapter Three; "I Married A Post Abortive Woman."

## **Marriage Preparation and Abortion**

Given the number of couples impacted by abortion, it makes good sense to find ways to reach out with the good news of healing in our marriage preparation programs.

Encourage those involved in marriage preparation in your diocese to consider the possibility of including post-abortion healing information and resources in the marriage preparation process. This can be done with sensitivity and respecting confidentiality if this is made part of the overall program that all participants learn about.

Here is a report from a Retreat Facilitator from the Midwest on a couple that recently attended their Rachel's Vineyard Retreat:

We had a couple attend the retreat that truly touched everyone who attended and served on the team. The girl had an abortion before she met her fiancée. On their engaged encounter weekend she felt a strong desire to share this with him. He was absolutely wonderful to her. The priest gently invited them to consider attending our Rachel's Vineyard retreat before they got married the following month, and they immediately signed up. It was so beautiful to see how supportive this young man was of her throughout the weekend. But it was also touching to hear some of his own story. They will have such a beautiful and holy marriage because it is rooted in the love and spirituality that they now share together.

Each situation will be unique, and this account does not suggest that all couples must follow this path. But because they were aware of the healing resources available, they were able to respond and seek healing. We must always respect that God will move people in His own time, and we simply can share the good news of healing and entrust them to the Lord. Remember that in working with individuals that have experienced trauma, everything we offer is a gentle and hope-filled invitation--nothing is ever forced.

## **Reaching Out To Those Wounded By Abortion:**

It can be difficult to know how to introduce the issue in counseling and ministry settings or with friends and family who we suspect may have an abortion in their history. Most women and men "don't want to go there." Many cannot even say the word (abortion)! Often parents, boyfriends, husbands, counselors, and friends played a major part in the decision to abort, often encouraging or even forcing abortions. They too will be reluctant to listen to the suffering individual because of their own unresolved feelings of guilt, which are activated when their loved one is hurting. They may minimize their pain, telling them, "it's time to move on," and "you made the right decision," or "there is no need to talk about this."

Because of the deep wounds and sensitivity of persons who have experienced a trauma like abortion, many clergy and counselors are fearful of aggravating their symptoms or causing more harm. They would prefer not to address this painful issue and avoid preaching about the topic. However, this silence serves to only abandon them in their suffering. If we do not reach out with education and resources for healing, we leave

many wounded persons to live in isolation with their pain and the myriad of symptoms associated with abortion loss. Where to start?

- **Educate yourself** about the symptoms and life experiences of those wounded by abortion. A good place to start is to read *Forbidden Grief: The Unspoken Pain of Abortion*. For the effects of abortion on men, read *Redeeming A Father's Heart*. (Both books are available at [www.rachelsvineyard.org](http://www.rachelsvineyard.org)) You might also consider attending a seminar on post-abortion trauma and healing.
- **Explore your own involvement in abortion.** You won't be able to recognize this issue and address it effectively if you have your own unresolved issues with a previous abortion. It is difficult to give people permission to talk about their grief if you haven't attended to your own need for healing. Perhaps you have lost a child or a member of your own family to abortion, a sibling, niece, nephew, or grandchild. Dealing with your own emotions first will put you in a much better position to reach out to others. Rachel's Vineyard Weekend Retreats for Healing after abortion are open to women and men, couples, grandparents, and even siblings of aborted children and persons involved in the abortion industry. You can learn more about retreats in your region and across the country and lots of information on Rachel's Vineyard Ministries at [www.rachelsvineyard.org](http://www.rachelsvineyard.org)
- **Listen.** As a Christian community, we must reach out with love to those mothers and fathers who are grieving the loss of their children. Remember that the wounds of abortion are imprinted upon the heart and soul, and then quickly sentenced to a secret prison of isolation and grief. They are silenced by shame. They are silenced by the belief that they are alone and that no one can understand their pain. They fear being judged by others. Even more than this, they judge themselves. They are assaulted by their own self-condemnation, and have difficulty trusting.
- **Acknowledge their pain/Help them to seek recovery.** If someone says, "I've had an abortion," simply reply, "That must have been very difficult for you." By saying this, you give the individual permission to acknowledge their pain. It can be helpful to invite them to share how they felt after their abortion and share how they believe that event is impacting them today. By our awareness of how difficult it is to deal with a past abortion, we can respond with sympathy, patience, and understanding, and thereby open the door for healing.
- **No judgments.** It is important for them to know that you will not judge them. Be careful not to communicate any condemnation. Regardless of their public statements or personal opinions about abortion, be assured that beneath the surface there is often great shame and fear of being judged. Make sure your

heart is filled only with love and a clear desire to listen, to support, and to encourage when the time is right.

- **Understand the fear.** Many fear that if they open up the door to their abortion experience and face their deepest feelings, it would be overwhelming or even destructive. We need to acknowledge this fear and assure them that help is available. It also lets them know that they are not alone. Many others have successfully made the journey to reconciliation and healing. This reality gives great hope.

- **Encourage** them by expressing God's love for them. No matter what we have done or who we are, God loves us. If another person views you as compassionate, they will be more likely to open up to you. If they think you will only criticize and condemn, they will continue to feel shame and fear. One's sense of goodness and trust is colored by memories of feeling unspeakably alone. Without encouragement, the post-abortive will guard their wounds in secret silence. Genuine encouragement will help break this vicious cycle. Keep their confidence and continue to be supportive. If they can trust you, they will listen and count on your suggestion for help.

- **Be a light in the darkness.** Abortion serves to cut off avenues of love before they are fully traveled. By grieving the loss of life, we open ourselves to being comforted by love. Through effective post-abortion ministry, we can light the pathway to Christ, the Healer who binds up the bleeding wounds in our throbbing souls.

### **United in Christ as One Body**

In Rachel's Vineyard, we gather as the suffering body of Christ, and experience the paschal mystery of our own lives as we unite our suffering with Christ. On the third day, out of the trauma and the many tears shed in grief work, we discover resurrection and new life. Those who could barely lift their heads from the weight of shame on Friday night are transfigured into radiant faces on Sunday of the retreat because of releasing their grief and experiencing a profound encounter with the Living Lord.

Here is a report from a Retreat Facilitator from the Midwest on a couple that recently attended their Rachel's Vineyard Retreat:

*We had a couple attend the retreat that truly touched everyone who attended and served on the team. The girl had an abortion before she met her fiancée. On their engaged encounter weekend she felt a strong desire to share this with him. He was absolutely wonderful to her. The priest gently invited them to consider attending our Rachel's Vineyard retreat before they got married the following month, and they immediately signed up. It was so beautiful to see how supportive this young man was of her throughout the weekend. But it was also touching to hear some of his own story.*

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As we enter a process for healing, we travel into the heart of the fiery blaze of our own passion...the abandonment and betrayal, recognizing the death in our own hearts caused by sin, and express the grief caused by relinquishing our children to the cross of abortion. Yet when it is finished, and the cup of grief is emptied to the bitter dregs, we rise up from the ashes into a world of grace and a new identity in Jesus Christ. Our heart and soul are now free to fully embrace our loved ones and accomplish the Lord's will as it mysteriously unfolds in our lives.

Theresa Burke, Ph.D., Kevin Burke, MSS/LSW are the founders of Rachel's Vineyard Ministries. Theresa is the author of Forbidden Grief: The Unspoken Pain of Abortion. Rachel's Vineyard will hold more than 600 retreats this year in 46 states and 17 countries. In addition, Rachel's Vineyard provides leadership and clinical training for CE credits and treatment models for groups who seek to minister to those suffering after abortion. For more information on this powerful ministry of Christ, visit [www.rachelsvineyard.org](http://www.rachelsvineyard.org) or call 1 877 HOPE 4 ME.



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