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After the Choice

*Therapy can lead to understanding after abortion, but
healing requires spiritual renewal.*

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When a group of young professional women gathered to discuss a recent work on women's sexuality, each confessed her reasons for not having begun to read the agreed-upon work. Three of the four attributed their struggle to a particularly painful experience: They had had abortions.

All three women were Catholic by upbringing, if not according to their current spiritual practice, and all were college-age at the time of their abortions. While

they generally felt they had made the best decision they could at the time, the three expressed deep, unresolved pain over their abortions and said they struggled to find "forgiveness" for those decisions. Pro-choice rhetoric aside, they appear to have suffered in abortion a deep wound to their womanhood, a wound that also struck at the heart of their spiritual life.

In this era that daily broadcasts accounts of deeply personal self-revelation, it seems remarkable that none of these women had ever spoken openly of her abortion until that night. Our culture's pro-choice/pro-life polarization places them in a bind. Listening to one set of voices (which often, surprisingly, includes their own conscience) they may feel they have committed an unforgivable sin—an act that they perhaps have heard excommunicates them from the church. Many such women understandably fear judgment from pro-life circles both inside and outside the church, and they presume that they no longer are welcome in the Catholic community. From yet other voices in our culture women hear a vastly different message—an attitude of pro-choice dismissal that says they have simply exercised a basic freedom, legal right, logical solution to a difficult problem. Any understanding to the contrary is often characterized as oppressive, patriarchal, anti-choice and therefore

downright anti-American. In this sphere the message to women after abortion is "get over it and get on with your life." Good intentions aside, most giving this advice vastly underestimate what "getting over" an abortion entails.

Much of the ink spilled and the rhetoric employed in the contemporary abortion debate is wrapped up in antithetical bumper-sticker ideologies: "It's a child, not a choice," "U.S. out of my uterus," or even the seemingly moderate "Pro-child, pro-choice." The reality of how and why women make abortion decisions is vastly more complex than any such slogans. We don't hear much about the pressures and fears that lead them to exercise their "right to choose"; much less do we hear about what many women experience after the choice.

As they look back on their decisions, women often give reasons such as fear and isolation, trying not to let down others (parents, partner, spouse, even employers), economic insecurities, a feeling there is nowhere to turn and that life will be "over" or ruined if this child is born. In a word, they feel despair.

Their sharing often confirms the observation of the feminist pro-life commentator Frederica Mathewes-Green: "Abortion is not a sign that women are free; it's a sign they're desperate." Many women in fact realize that they are taking a life, but a process of rationalization allows them to go through with this choice. They are told, and repeat to themselves, that this child is just a piece of tissue, a duster of cells, a merely "potential life." As women find a safe place to work through healing, they come to recognize that the aborted child was more than a "potential life"; this was a life with potential lost. The need to grieve the loss of this life is an important part of the pastoral concern to which the church must respond.

Catholic post-abortion outreach began formally in 1983 when a laywoman, Vicki Thorn, shared her concern for a post-abortive friend with Archbishop Rembert Weakland, O.S.B., of Milwaukee. Thorn's high-school friend twice had become pregnant out of wedlock. In the first case the friend chose adoption. In the second she had an abortion. Thorn saw those two pregnancy outcomes affect her friend very differently. The grief associated with the adoption carried with it joy, hope and pride in having given life to another. One woman's loss was a couple's answer to prayer. It was not so with the abortion. Following that experience, Thorn's friend spiraled downward in self-destructive behaviors, left the church and became very depressed. Concern for her friend led to the founding of Project Rachel in 1983. This ministry, which now exists in varying forms in at least 100 dioceses worldwide, invokes the memory of the woman who wept for her children because they were no more (Jer. 31:15 and Mt. 2:18).

In Oakland we have adopted the name After the Choice for our post-abortion outreach. In a culture where the language of "choice" abounds, acknowledgment of the consequences of their choices resonates deeply with women who are drawn to the program. While most Catholic post-abortion ministries use a one-on-one approach, our program is based on a group model for psychological and spiritual healing composed by the Catholic psychologist Theresa Karminski-Burke. In her clinical practice Burke often worked with women struggling with post-abortion grief connected to past abortions. As is the case with any denied grief, unresolved post-abortion grief can lead to destructive, albeit often unconscious, manifestations such as substance abuse, panic attacks, promiscuity or disturbed relationships, and difficulty bonding with future children.

Burke came to recognize that many women's most significant difficulties after abortion are of a spiritual rather than a strictly psychological nature. Therapy could lend understanding, but healing would be possible only through spiritual renewal. Questions around sin, guilt, forgiveness, penance, one's image of God mid self-understanding before that God, and the whereabouts and eternal welfare of the lost child, are all crucial to the Catholic post-abortive woman. One of our participants expressed it in these words: "Before, I could not even tell myself that I had an unborn child. I was just overcome with fear and shame. I always cried when I thought about the abortion. No one knew but my husband. I felt unworthy of participating in Communion, and I felt I was a terrible person. I realized through After the Choice that God forgives and my baby is up in heaven okay. Finally I was able to grieve for the loss of my baby, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, I was able to give him a name."

In 1995 Burke published her curriculum, *Rachel's Vineyard*, which consists of 15 "steps" forming a healing journey after abortion. These steps correspond to 15 group meetings held weekly. Each week's small-group session lasts two and a half hours divided between personal sharing around a given theme (the psychological component) and the Scripture, with ritual and/or guided meditation (the spiritual component). The first five weeks offer participants the opportunity to explore family of origin and sexual identity formation. *Only* in week six does focused sharing around the abortions begin. As one woman reported, "After the abortions I trained myself to be strong. I did not even shed a tear. I went on with my life as if nothing happened. The sessions made me go back and uncover in depth all that I'd tried so hard to suppress.... Sharing with other women made what I'm going through easier to handle.... Forgiving myself and those who caused me pain was hard, but it came, slowly but surely."

These words witness to the experience that Pope John Paul II acknowledges in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*. He tells women who have had abortions, "The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your

decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly" (No. 99).

In helping women face their abortions through the eyes of faith, the Rachel's Vineyard program uses the Bible and the Ignatian practice of "living Scripture." This plays a significant role in helping women experience the "forgiveness and peace" John Paul II also speaks of in *Evangelium Vitae*. The Scriptures used are typically gospel encounters between Jesus and individuals seeking healing, such as the blind Bartimaeus, the adulterous woman and the hemorrhaging woman. The rituals corresponding to each Scripture passage are highly participatory. For example, the Week 8 ritual treats the raising of Lazarus, in which the women are "bound" with gauze and bandages on those parts of their body representing the wounds they have suffered through their abortions. They are then wrapped in a white sheet, and the facilitators say prayers of mourning over their sisters' spiritual death. Finally they are symbolically raised in the name and power of Christ. Many women find this among the most powerful of the program's rituals, for it represents the dying and rising they have experienced in connection with their abortions and the healing process.

Prayer and rituals like these led one recent participant to remark, "The best part of the program was the multimedia approach. Body relaxation, verbal sharing, music, art, living Scripture, sacred movement, prayer, reading supplements worked to open all my senses to admit the healing love of our God." While Burke's format is unique among Catholic post-abortion healing programs, it shares with Project Rachel and others the sacraments of reconciliation and Eucharist as key elements. These are central to the healing journey, and indeed for most women they are moments of special opportunity.

Priests who have celebrated the sacrament of reconciliation with women in the After the Choice program consistently report this to be a powerful experience of God's healing grace for both the individual woman and for the priests as ministers of the church.

One priest recalled that when he was a seminarian his moral theology professor, Mary Emil Penet, I.H.M., a wise and compassionate woman, spoke of how they should celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. She would list a number of highly improbable sins and situations and would



conclude each of these with the refrain, "You can always get there from here." Her point, that God's grace is greater in the concrete than any sin that a person might have committed or any sinful situation in which a person might find himself or herself, is borne out in the celebration of the sacrament with these women. It is clear that none of them has ever "chosen" abortion with malicious intent. Yet none has ever said that she was merely an innocent bystander in the event. They all are convinced that a grave tragedy has occurred and that they are not only "bound up" in that tragedy, but that they have played a part in the taking of their child's life.

The process of healing is a long one, and the sacramental experience reminds us in some ways of the ancient church practice of public penance. In the early church the sacrament of penance was considered to be singular, rare and grave - singular in that it was initially viewed as a once-in-a-lifetime sacrament, rare in that only a few would have recourse to it and grave because it was seen as a response to only the most serious sins, which had deeply affected the fabric of the Christian community's life together. The penitent might sit outside the doors of the church in sackcloth for an extended period of time (sometimes for years), while the community remembered and prayed for that person. Once the period of penance was completed, the penitent was brought back formally into the church and a special Eucharist of reconciliation was celebrated by the entire community. This public, ritual manifestation of repentance was called *exomologesis*, and from it the practice of "confession" evolved. The term, however, means first a confession of faith in a merciful God who forgives, which only then enables the confession of sins to occur.

Obviously the church's understanding and practice of the sacrament have evolved, but perhaps something of the pastoral wisdom contained in the ancient practice has been lost, namely the sense that a longer period of formal repentance and conversion may be required in a more serious situation. The first 11 weeks of the Rachel's Vineyard program initiate in a semi-public way this process of repentance, conversion and healing. Throughout the program, and surely in the celebration of the sacrament, participants experience grace, but they come to realize that it is a costly grace in the truest sense of the term.

An expression of this costly healing grace comes when the woman focuses on reclaiming her lost or rejected motherhood. The woman who has *suffered* miscarriage or abortion is, after all, still a mother; and like any mother she grieves for the loss of her child. A mother typically wants to know three things about her child: where the child is, with whom the child is and whether the child is all right. The aborted child is not forever lost, but is with God as a living member of the communion of saints and as a personal intercessor for the mother herself. Echoing this conviction, John Paul II affirms to women, "You will come to understand that nothing is definitely lost, and you will be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord" (No. 99).

Participants typically conclude their 15-week pilgrimage with a spirit of deep gratitude and great hope for the future. They leave the program eager and ready to live out the challenge of a life renewed by their deepened experience of God's mercy. As one recent participant concluded, "I was very hesitant about feeling close or attached to the church again, but After the Choice helped me to get close to my faith once again....I am not ashamed now to talk about the abortion, and I know I am loved. I can live on as I live in God's ways." The hope-filled possibility of such transformation is what the church can offer women after the choice.

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