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Cultivating the Seeds of Trust

A Gentle Invitation to Healing in Marriage Preparation Programs for those who have suffered abortions

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One in three women and men who pass through Marriage Preparation programs will participate in at least one abortion in their lifetime. This may occur prior to meeting their future spouse, during the engagement - dating 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:

1. They want to bury abortion-related memories and run away from the feelings.
2. 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 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.

This reality creates a real dilemma for friends, family, and pastors who want to reach out to those hurting after abortion. The issue is so agonizing; there is marked sensitivity to the subject. Most women and men "don't want to go there." Many cannot even say the word! Often parents, boyfriends, husbands, counselors, and friends play a major part of 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 will 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."

How can we reach out with love and hope to those wounded by abortion?

Because of the deep wounds and sensitivity of persons who have experienced a trauma like abortion, many persons are fearful of aggravating their symptoms or causing more harm. They would prefer not to address this painful issue and avoid speaking 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. This comes at a very high cost to emotional, physical, spiritual health and to their relationships with spouse and family. Many marriages experience dysfunction and even divorce because of unhealed abortion pain.

So how can we reach these individuals and couples with the good news of healing in a sensitive and effective way?

- 1.** Everything we do must be a gentle invitation to healing offered within a message of love, hope, encouragement and non-judgment...**nothing should ever be forced.** At an appropriate time in the marriage preparation process, we suggest offering a brief gentle educational introduction to participants in Marriage Prep concerning the role that unhealed abortion grief can play in individual and relational difficulties. Most important, this message must be clearly one of hope and healing.

2. This information should be shared in a group format to protect the confidentiality and lower the anxiety of the participants when receiving this information.
3. Share Information about the counselors, clergy and retreat programs available in your diocese that are very effective in relieving the buried pain and anguish women and men can suffer after abortion. The Lord through His Church extends His love, mercy and forgiveness to all who have participated in abortion and seek reconciliation and forgiveness. Because abortion often leads to a complicated type of grief, a special healing process has been developed that responds to the unique nature of this loss.
4. Encourage them to contact the post abortion healing coordinator in your Diocese. She will be aware of any Rachel's Vineyard Retreats in your area and also have a team of Priests, counselors and lay volunteers who can offer a wealth of experience and support that you can call upon when needed. Reassure them that post abortion healing in the archdiocese is offered by professionals and laypersons many who have experienced their own abortion healing and understand the pain and fear of opening up this wound.
5. With healing, they will discover the deep peace and relief of symptoms associated with abortion loss that will bless and strengthen marriage and family relationships making them stronger and more intimate than ever.

Here are some other ways to reach out to those wounded after abortion:

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](#) by Theresa Burke, Ph.D. 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 have not done your own work. Perhaps you have lost a child or a member of your own family to abortion, a niece, a nephew, or a 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 hundreds of retreats in your region and across the country and lots of information on Rachel's Vineyard Ministries at 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. 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 them to receive information and referral for healing resources available in the Diocese.

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 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 they 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.

The Rachel's Vineyard Weekend Retreat, with more than 450 retreats this year in 46 states and 17 countries, is an integrated emotional and spiritual process for healing after abortion. As part of the suffering body of Christ, we travel through the paschal mystery of our own lives and 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.

We close with a brief account of a couple that recently attended a Rachel's Vineyard retreat during their engagement period. Each situation will be unique and this account does not suggest that all couples must follow this path. 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.*

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.

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 450 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 or call 1 877 HOPE 4 ME.

Footnotes

1. Garfinkel, et al., *Stress, Depression and Suicide: A study of Adolescents in Minnesota*, "Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Extension Service, 1986)



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