



Published in *The Catholic Herald*
March 28, 2002

A Publication of **Rachel's Vineyard Ministries**
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Rachel's Vineyard Retreat: Facilitates a healing journey

By Beverly Hartberg

Madison – On one hand, society says that one has a “right” to choose to have an abortion. On the other, the Catholic Church considers it a grave moral wrong to terminate a life at any time following the moment of conception.

When one has chosen to have an abortion and comes to recognize the wrong one has committed, where does one go for compassion and understanding? When the guilt and shame of the decision are gnawing at one's emotional physical well-being, while remorse and sorrow and grief are eating at one's spirit and soul, where does one go to heal? Where does one go to deal with one's loss and begin to experience God's mercy?

An answer is Rachel's Vineyard.

Rachel's Vineyard, a weekend retreat designated for men and women who have experienced an abortion (or abortions), is designed to facilitate a journey of healing. Through scriptural exercises and communal sharing, participants are given the opportunity to acknowledge the burden of guilt and grief they continue to carry, to recognize the destruction their shame and regret has wrought on themselves and on those close to them, to be in touch with the child (or children) they have lost, and to seek forgiveness from God, from the child (or children) they have lost, and from themselves.

Through lived exercises and sharing, through an environment of communal support and acceptance, and through the sacraments of reconciliation and Eucharist, retreat participants are invited: to acknowledge that despite their wrongs, God is with them in the sorrow; to recognize that God's mercy is greater than their sin; and to discover the ability to receive God's forgiveness and to forgive themselves.

Although abortion is not a part of my personal experience, in anticipation of my role as coordinator and facilitator of Rachel's Vineyard retreats in the diocese of Madison, I was invited to attend and participate in a recent Rachel's Vineyard retreat, which appropriately concluded on "Transfiguration Sunday," the second Sunday of Lent.

What I witnessed throughout the weekend was beautiful, mysterious, and awesome, not unlike the response of the apostles to what they envisioned on the mountain. I saw a transformation – of broken, hurting, regretful, and pain-filled lives – to lives open to the possibility of being accepted, forgiven, understood, and loved by the facilitating team, by each other, and by God.

On the Rachel's Vineyard retreat, I believe I (and 11 other participants) found the answer to "Where does one go?"

In the Diocese of Madison, Rachel's Vineyard will be added to Project Rachel, a post-abortive referral ministry provided by the Office of Family Ministry.

A Rachel's Vineyard weekend will be held at the Bishop O'Connor Catholic Pastoral Center on Friday, April 12, through Sunday, April 14. The retreat will be facilitated by a counselor, a priest, and other peer ministers who have participated in previous Rachel's Vineyard retreats and have received training in the spiritual and psychological needs of the retreat participants.



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