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# Ministry reaches out to heal mothers and fathers

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*Article courtesy of Fairfield County Catholic –Diocese of Bridgeport*

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BRIDGEPORT, CT – An abortion ravages three people: the child, the mother, and the father. While post-abortion counseling has usually focused on the mother, a Rachel's Vineyard retreat sponsored by the Diocese of Bridgeport offers fathers, too, a chance to experience healing and forgiveness. The next retreat will be held September 19-21. One married couple that attended a Rachel's Vineyard retreat together this year spoke recently with *Fairfield County Catholic*. For confidentiality purposes, in this article they are called Mary and Joe.

***Fairfield County Catholic:* Why don't you begin by explaining the circumstances that drove you to an abortion?**

**Mary:** Joe and I were both in college, and had been dating a couple of years. The first time we had intercourse, I got pregnant. I came from a large family and my parents, who were devout Catholics, made a lot of sacrifices for my education. I was too ashamed to tell them I was pregnant. There was no one to reach out to.

**Couldn't you reach out to your boyfriend?**

**Mary:** I told Joe I was pregnant, and that I would have to get an abortion. I was waiting desperately for him to say something, to tell me we'd manage somehow. It never happened.

**Joe:** I knew it was wrong, but I was silent. I never stood up for the baby. I prejudged her, and decided that her mind was made up. I was angry with her or choosing an abortion.

**Most couples break up after an abortion because the guilt and pain are so great. Yet you stayed together and got married. You were clearly very much in love. How did the aftermath of the abortion affect your marriage?**

**Mary:** We still loved each other, and we were committed to our marriage. My feeling of anger at Joe was pushed down for so many years that I didn't even recognize it. But it was there all the time. I took my anger out on him without ever recognizing where it came from.

**Joe:** There was a lack of trust in our relationship. I blamed her for the loss of the baby. I did things that purposely hurt her. I drank a lot, I gambled, I did a lot of things to escape into a private world where I wouldn't feel pain.

**You are both practicing Catholics, raising your children in the faith. Didn't you talk to a priest about what happened?**

**Mary:** After years of this, it became apparent that it was something I had to deal with. I had confessed my abortion to three priests over the years. After the fourth priest, I began to accept that God could forgive me.

**Joe:** There were years and years of anger and heartache and being distant from God. I did talk to a parish priest, a good man, about the abortion. But I couldn't go to God about it. I think men are so proud, they don't see what they've buried. It was all kept inside and it was destroying me. I deliberately did things to keep my own self-esteem down. I considered suicide. At one point, I remember walking downstairs with a gun and a suitcase; Mary stopped me.

**What happened when you went into the Rachel's Vineyard retreat?**

**Mary:** It felt confidential, safe, welcome. There was an overwhelming sense of peace knowing that so many people were praying for us. Everybody there, although each story was different, the pain was there. With them, we were able to let our guard down.

**Joe:** I didn't want to go to Rachel's Vineyard to begin with. I walked in there on a Friday evening thinking, "I'm going to re-live all this stuff I've been avoiding for so long." I think men are reluctant to go to these things openly and be part of it.

**Why was this retreat so effective, when you had both already been to Confession and received absolution years ago?**

**Mary:** My big breakthrough came when I was able to express my anger at Joe. He had never realized that the abortion had any connection to our behavior. We were able to forgive each other, and to have our baby forgive us.

**Joe:** I sat there and literally cried during some of the sessions. I was able to express my anger of myself at my total lack of courage. Once I released that, it's easier to accept and take ownership for the acts that I did. I came out completely exhausted, mentally and physically. It's given me confidence to be a person again. I still feel awful about what happened, still feel ashamed, still feel the guilt. But there are no deep-rooted vindictive acts occurring. I'm able to stop and think where I would instinctively go the wrong way before. I feel reborn. I've been accepted by God, by my wife, and, most of all, by myself.

**What would you say to married couples who have gone through an abortion, either before or during their marriage?**

**Mary:** Rachel's Vineyard gives you the tools to expose hurt feelings. It puts you back in contact, and you can go on from there. There's no need to suffer any more.

**Joe:** For married couples who are dealing with the aftermath of an abortion, if the man doesn't come on retreat with his wife, he won't understand what she's been going through. He just won't get that. And he will still carry around the shame and the guilt. It's a tremendous loss of opportunity for him.

**Where do you go from here?**

**Mary:** We're still in counseling. Rachel's Vineyard isn't a magic fix. It gives you the tools to heal, the tools to get back in contact. We can get angry when we talk about finances, or try to work out what to do with some problem with the kids. But it's not this deep, dark anger that comes from nowhere.

**Joe:** I'd like us to be as close as we can possibly get. I'd like to re-kindle a courtship, to walk hand-in-hand, spend more time together – and more time together in prayer.

*(The next Rachel's Vineyard Retreat will be held the weekend of Sept 19-21. For information and reservations, call the retreat director: 218-0291, or e-mail Jeremiah31v17@aol.com. All inquiries are kept in strictest confidence.)*