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Garden of Healing Forgiveness

Rachel's Vineyard Helps Women and Men Deal with Emotions
Caused by Abortion
Rex Hogan

Oklahoma City – It's been just over 20 years since Catherine had the first of three abortions.

She believed at the time that her decision was best for everyone.

"At the time I got pregnant I felt like I had nowhere to go. I was ashamed. I didn't want my parents to know. I felt like I couldn't take care of this baby," she said.

"I knew it was wrong. I don't think I understood the impact of what I was doing until much later. I suffered from depression for many years to come," she said.

Catherine (not her real name) later met a Catholic man, whom she fell in love with and married. She converted to the Catholic faith. The couple has three children.

She made the best confessions she could, but she didn't receive the emotional relief she needed.

"I went on with my life. I received forgiveness from God, but I refused to forgive myself," Catherine said.

There were times when the feelings of guilt were overwhelming.

Often on Mother's Day, or when she heard a priest talk about abortion, her past decisions gnawed at her emotions.

"I knew at that point that I had basically committed murder," she said.

The problem became worse.

"I didn't recognize it until two or three years ago. I felt like I had no worth. It started having an effect on my family. I couldn't appreciate my husband or my three beautiful children," she said.

"At times I was contemplating suicide. I felt I could never be happy because of what I had done. I had this secret," she said.

She sought help from a psychologist.

One of her friends also suggested she think about Rachel's Vineyard.

Rachel's Vineyard is a national program that is designed to help individuals work through the emotional pain associated with abortion.

In the Oklahoma City Archdiocese, Susan Lepak of the Archdiocese Family Life Office coordinates the program.

"The church's teaching on forgiving is universal, but abortion is such a grave sin that sometimes the woman cannot feel OK just going to confession," Lepak said.

And the program is not just for women.

"We have men that come. We have married couples that have gone through the program and we have had divorced couples who have come through separately," Lepak said.

She said Rachel's Vineyard has been around for 20 years, but available in the Oklahoma City Archdiocese for about seven years now. The program is conducted during a weekend retreat.

Lepak said in many instances men and women who have been affected by abortion have never had the opportunity to go through the grieving process, as have parents who have suffered through the anguish of a child's death.

"If you would have had a baby in the hospital and it died you would have had a chance to name it and there would have been a funeral.

With an abortion there's no funeral, there's no grave, so some women get stuck in the grieving process," Lepak said.

Father Joseph Arledge, pastor of the Prince of Peace Church in Altus, has served as priest in several Rachel's Vineyard retreats.

The death of an unborn is something of which he has some personal experience. His mother suffered six miscarriages.

He said those who go through the retreat steps go through a transformation.

"They often felt disconnected from their church, for God," he said. By the time the retreat ends, he said, "They forgive themselves, they fell forgiveness from God and from their babies."

Catherine remembers the day she started the retreat.

"I pulled into the parking lot. It took me 20 minutes to get out of my car," she said.

There are certain steps an individual must take during the retreat. One of the steps is for each of the participants to talk about what led up to the abortion decision.

At another point, the child is given a name, a Mass of Resurrection, a memorial service is held.

Participants "acknowledge they have sinned," said Lepak.

Since the archdiocese has adopted the retreat-style program of Rachel's Vineyard, some 100 women have gone through the program, Lepak said.

"It was an intense weekend and it was both physically and emotionally draining," Catherine said.

"God is calling on you to be forgiven. To forgive yourself you need to let go and grieve. Many women have not told anybody about what has happened in their life, it's been held inside. I think you have to come face to face with that child and acknowledge with pain, love and tears what happened," she said.



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