

Healing Abortion's Trauma And *Rachel's Vineyard Retreat*: From Three Participants

'Genevieve', Peter Maher & Tom Ryan*

During 2008, the Australian Catholic Bishops promoted *Walking with Love*. It is described as 'the loving gentle way in which we are called to support vulnerable pregnant women including their husbands, partners and families to choose life. It also involves the embrace and support of those who suffer the effects of an abortion.'¹ As part of this program, seminars were held in the various dioceses throughout the country.

This article aims to reflect on one retreat process available whose aims are consonant with the Bishops' concerns. It is the *Rachel's Vineyard Retreat* designed for women and men touched by an abortion.² Three of us who have participated in the weekend will present different angles on the experience: the

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1. See *Walking with Love* website www.walkingwithlove.org.au.
2. Website for *Rachel's Vineyard Retreats* is [www.rachelsvineyard.org.au]. *Rachel's Vineyard Ministries* was begun in the United States by Kevin and Theresa Burke and came to Australia in 2000. Theresa has a PhD in Counselling Psychology. With David Reardon she is the author of *Forbidden Grief: The Unspoken Pain of Abortion* (Springfield IL: Acorn Books, 2007). She also designed the *Rachel's Vineyard Retreat Manual* and support group models. Rachel's Vineyard is a non-profit organization funded by private grants, individual donations and the assistance of *Priests for Life*. The Burkes presently operate as a training resource for any group that wishes to offer this retreat for spiritual and emotional healing after abortion. The retreat has resources available such as a support manual, guidebook, videos etc. Integral to the retreat process is the presence of skilled and sensitive professionals and clergy (e.g., counsellor, psychologist, therapist, priests, or other ministers of religion). Currently, a new retreat is being developed for those who have suffered sexual abuse based on Theresa's book *From Grief to Grace: Reclaiming the Gift of Sexuality*. The *Rachel's Vineyard Retreats* are financially supported by the three dioceses in the Sydney region.

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first from a woman participant ('Genevieve' - not her real name), the second deals with the retreat as a transformational process (Peter) and some theological reflections from Tom bring the article to a close.

One Woman's Experience

In 1978, at the age of sixteen, I lost my first conceived child to abortion. The father was a young man who was a friend of my elder brother. I will call him John. He was twenty-three years old, and he began to pay me a great deal of attention. I was flattered that a man would be interested in me. I had been out with boys before, but this was a mature man and he seemed to really like me!

Just a few months after we began dating I became pregnant. I was so confused. I prayed and prayed that God would save me from the shame and anger of my parents if they found out. I told John that I thought I was pregnant and suggested that we could get married. He told me that this was impossible and he went to a pharmacist who sold potions to cause a miscarriage. He gave me tablets to take over the next four weeks. They did nothing. By this time I was about ten weeks pregnant, and really terrified.

My mother had raised me to believe that any girl who got pregnant before marriage was *bad* and I was not to have anything to do with someone like that – people might think I was like her! So it was obvious I couldn't go to her. I knew that if I did I would *never* be trusted to leave the house again.

John made the arrangements and he gave me an envelope. On it was an address and a time; in it, a great deal of money. He said, 'Go.' I asked if he would come with me, I was so afraid. I needed someone to hold my hand. I was only sixteen. 'No. I have to go to work. I don't have time for that.'

And then I was alone with the money, the appointment... and terrified. I waited in the ante-room. Then it was my turn. The nurse was rough and unkind.

The doctor was matter-of-fact – this was just a job to him. I remember an overwhelming smell of Dettol disinfectant – a smell that still causes a feeling of nausea and fear thirty years on. There was no anesthetic. The doctor proceeded to destroy my baby. And I was lost in the pain.

And then it was over and I was outside in the sunshine. I have no idea what I did over the next few hours. Eventually, I was home. My mother asked about my day. I said nothing special happened, just an ordinary day. I had dinner with the family and went to bed. 'It's all over,' I thought. But I had no idea. It would not be over until I heard about *Rachel's Vineyard* in 2002, twenty-four years later.

This healing weekend retreat had recently been brought to Australia and it seemed too good to be true.

Twenty-four years! A marriage. Four children. All those years I never even suspected that anyone else had a problem after an abortion. I thought I was the only one – I had never spoken to another woman who'd had the experience. In fact, I wasn't even able to tell anyone the whole story, as I have told it now, until I opened up to a dear friend, twenty years after the event. But when I read the

Rachel's Vineyard brochure and saw the list of post abortion stress symptoms I felt as if I were reading the story of my life.

One way I had responded to this tragic event was to become a Catholic. I was preparing to marry a Catholic man when I was nineteen years old – only three years after the abortion. I decided that I would like to be a Catholic, not only for the sake of unity with him, but also because I knew that, through Confession, I would finally hear the words of forgiveness. I believed in my heart that I was forgiven. I felt very close to God and had always known that His love for me was unwavering, but to hear the words from another human being were what I longed for. It was not the sort of thing I could have talked to my Anglican Minister about.

I embraced my new faith enthusiastically. Very soon I was a catechist and feeling as though I was doing some really good stuff! This was the beginning of trying to 'make up' to God for what I had done. I figured that if I could try to be the best wife, mother, daughter, sister, friend and Catholic, I might just be able to balance the scales and the 'Judge-God' might let me off the hook. What ever happened to that God of Unconditional Love I had known in my childhood? The abortion had affected the way I related to myself, to my God and to all the people who were closest to me – my husband and my children. My husband didn't even know anything about that most significant event in my life until we had been married over twenty years!

I busied myself with every kind of ministry in the Parish – playing the organ, leading adult faith education initiatives and directing the Parish RCIA for some years, before finally taking on a very high profile Church position in my diocese. The harder I tried, though, the worse I felt. What a fraud. 'Everyone thinks I'm really good,' I thought. 'If they only knew the evil I have done and who I *really* am.'

My self-esteem was so damaged by the abortion that I allowed myself to be abused in many ways. I couldn't expect anyone to respect me – I was not 'respectable'. I knew in my heart that I was basically *bad* and no one could convince me otherwise. I knew God could love me, even as despicable as I was, but that was only because loving is what God does. But I couldn't love or respect myself – that was asking too much – until a *Rachel's Vineyard* retreat in 2002, when my self-respect was restored again. I was able to stand up and face the world. I had found myself, regained my dignity as a loved child of God. I had found my long lost baby and had told him of the ache in my heart, how I loved him and how sorry I was.

I had always believed that any woman who'd had an abortion was 'bad' – just like me. But on the *Rachel's Vineyard Retreat* I was in the company of twelve women who had suffered in the same way as I had, and as their stories unfolded, I looked at each one and thought: '*You're* not bad.... Something terrible happened in your life, but *you* are not bad ... and neither are you... or you' ... and then I came to myself and realised, at last, that I was one of this group of wounded, courageous women. Through the beautiful healing process of the

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Rachel's Vineyard retreat I was able to recognise the incredible pressure I had been under. I could stop condemning myself for the horrific way I had allowed my baby to die. I knew that my baby had forgiven me, and now, at last, I could begin to forgive myself.

On the retreat I wrote a letter to my lost baby, I named him Anthony, and when I read it aloud to the group I wept for him for the first time. These were the tears I had bottled up for twenty-four years and the sobs came from the soles of my feet and wracked my whole body.

As I read this letter aloud to the other brave, wonderful, wounded women in that room, I realized that it was the first time I had really acknowledged what I had done, in all its horror.

The painful and shaming experience of my teenage abortion led to a lifetime of post abortion grief. This could only be healed by skilful intervention, such as *Rachel's Vineyard* retreats offer. My experience of the retreat was profound. The healing that began there continued over the weeks and months ahead.

I was so grateful that this beautiful process had been introduced to Australia. I knew there must be many women and men here who were suffering, as I had, in silent shame and who didn't know about this wonderful path to healing and wholeness. I vowed to learn more about this healing process so that, through my counselling practice, I could help others to find this peace and reconciliation and encourage them to attend future *Rachel's Vineyard Retreats* for themselves.

Since November 2000 this healing ministry has been introduced into almost every capital city in Australia. Given that the statistics now claim that one in every three Australian women will have an abortion in her lifetime, the chances are that in a typical parish church each Sunday there will be scores of women sitting in the pews, trying so hard to hold their lives together while living under a huge burden of shame and pain. It is imperative that all priests know and understand how deeply this pain can be buried, and how desperately these women need to hear words of understanding and hope so that they might find the peace and reconciliation for which they crave.

Recently I had begun to feel a longing to somehow unite all my children in one family. Anthony seemed so lonely and separate from his siblings. I often felt drawn to be 'with' him, in my mind and heart, which pulled me away from my living children. My attachment to and love for him also separated me, in a way, from my husband. One day I had a wonderful idea. I asked my husband if he would consider 'spiritually adopting' Anthony. To my delight, he said that he would be honoured! So now Anthony is a full member of our family – not just my baby but ours. His brother and sisters know about him, too, and are happy that I have finally found peace. God is good!

Story Giving Birth to Hope

In this section I discuss the spirituality and some learning methods found in

Rachel's Vineyard Retreat.³ I look at how *transformative learning* practices and gospel spirituality assist in healing post abortion trauma.⁴

Early in the retreat participants tell stories of the horror of the abortion event, what led to the abortion, and its effects and expressions of hopelessness. They also reveal low self-esteem and the inability to find healing, forgiveness and love in their lives and their relationships. In all cases, although to varying degrees, these factors in the stories were transformed in just a few short hours into stories that held out a hope for change, recognition of the reality of what had happened and a chance for healing from the debilitating grief and loss that had been a constant part of their lives.

What is it that brings about the change? The storytelling process is one that has the power to help retreat participants see the story again from a new perspective. They come to recognize who is suffering and in need of healing. They can then rewrite the story in a way that is more truthful. They now hear themselves describing the event and its effects with greater compassion for themselves and others.

Many events occur in our lives that disorient us. It might be falling in love or a car accident, taking an overseas holiday or losing a loved one – these events can have a transforming effect in our lives or leave us overwhelmed and unable to function. In *transformative learning* these events are referred to as *disorienting dilemmas*.⁵ The disorienting dilemma can be used to help someone grow or it can be a missed opportunity for growth. For many participants on *Rachel's Vineyard Retreats*, the debilitating experience of the abortion, can be turned around and become a moment of growth.

Rachel's Vineyard Retreat is healing through mutual nurturing by the use of rituals, prayers, the Sacraments and storytelling. These practices encourage healing in a gradual and gentle way. It is based on a carefully managed expression of pain and grief.

The retreat process draws on a number of educational methods. In this article I will look at two. The *autobiographical learning*⁶ perspective reascribes meaning to the story and thus learners find new ways of understanding their story. This can change meaning structures such as beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions.

Emancipatory learning is characterized by naming and renaming the learner's reality so they can go beyond the oppression of being overwhelmed and paralyzed. Newman sums it up when he notes that: '[I]n this process of naming

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3. T. Burke, & K. Burke, *Rachel's Vineyard Retreat, Rachel's Vineyard Retreat Ministries*, (King Of Prussia, PA, 1999).
 4. The full article for this section is available on the website www.rachelsvineyard.org.au.
 5. See J. Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1991).
 6. D. Boud, R. Cohen, & D. Walker, 'Understanding Learning from Experience' in D. Boud, R. Cohen and D. Walker, eds, *Using Experience for Learning*, (Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press, 1993), 1-17.

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and renaming, the learners come to know their world not in terms of givens to be uncritically accepted, but in terms of problems to be addressed. As the learners think, so they must act.⁷

Autobiographical learning is evident in storytelling, letter writing, poetry and music, while *emancipatory learning* techniques are at work in psychodrama, ritual, meditation reflections and anger letters. For example, when one writes 'anger letters', it enables the learners to articulate that particular emotion or to realize the power of anger in a relationship. It may also help them appreciate the need for forgiveness in the grieving process. Through coming to a greater clarity about reality, the learner is empowered to act in new ways.

Ritual engages the learner in seeing themselves differently in relationship to Jesus, God, others, and especially, in this context, the baby. Meditations after the reading of the Gospel stories engage the learners' imagination. They do so by inviting them to place themselves in the story. They may then see how they relate anew to a loving and compassionate Jesus. The ritual action and the debrief that follow allows them to do this. Then they are in a better position to reinterpret the meaning of their story or find the place where they are stuck in their lives. This opens up suggestions for them about how to change the way they act by increasing options for action.

The retreat is based on a firm spiritual practice of healing in a supportive community that is well expressed in the following quote from Sr. Joan Chittister. She recalls attempted methods of healing that have negative and positive results.

Strangers came together in weekly workshops to reveal to one another their most secret fantasies, their most shameful actions. They shouted one another down, gave way to inner angers a lifetime in coming, 'let it all hang out.' Satisfying the emotional demands of the moment, the gurus of the movement told us, is the measure of our humanity. It did not work.

Too often, people withdrew from the encounters more hurt, more rejected, more emotionally confused than ever. Now they knew intimacy but not love. Worse, now they were left with old wounds newly opened and not a clue about what to do with them in the future.

They had expressed their emotions but they had not struggled with them. They had revealed their hurts but they had not worked through them. They had exposed their agonies but had not put them down. They had lost control of themselves and gained nothing to put in its place. Feelings oozed out of people like oil, over everyone and everything they touched, but the pain remained and the soul stayed dry. There was

7. Michael Newman, *Macler's Regard*, (Sydney: Stewart Victor Publishing, 1999), 232.

clearly something missing. The expression of feelings was simply not enough to dispel the suffering.⁸

Richard Rohr⁹ notes the dangers of operating with what he calls ‘the dual mind’. He means by this that the mind that operates out of the ego and knows by comparison or differentiation. This thinking, he contends, leads to a dogmatism that separates not only the self from the self but the self from other selves. This kind of thinking leads to the rise of fundamentalism and fear bringing separation not only in the world and communities but also in the self. This, he contends, is not Jesus’ teaching. Jesus preached inclusion of all in God’s mercy. Rohr quotes Jesus saying ‘because (God) makes his sun rise on both evil and good people, and he lets rain fall on the righteous and the unrighteous’ (Matthew 5:45) to indicate Jesus’ rejection of the dual mind and thus postulates that a basic tenant of biblical spirituality is solidarity.

The idea that we share a common humanity at the very basic level of our relationship with God is also at the heart of the *Rachel’s Vineyard Healing Retreat*. The Retreat emphasizes the idea of solidarity in the work of healing. In a community of people seeking healing, the help is achieved through the connection of their stories to the gospel story. All share a vulnerability and a sense of hurt. All are equally in need of God’s love and self-forgiveness to find happiness and wholeness. The dual mind according to Rohr says ‘I am not like you’ while the mind focused on the gospel says ‘I am just like you’ and we can work together in a common search for life and wholeness.

Retreatants have often been torn within themselves in many ways that leave traumatic effects in their lives and relationships. These are addressed in the retreat processes in the practices that allow the retreatants to come in touch with their need for forgiveness and grieving. It is here that there can be a radical solidarity with one another in a non-judgmental climate of healing. It is the God presence in everything and everyone that is brought to consciousness through storytelling, ritual and prayer.

Often those suffering post-abortion trauma exhibit what Lynch describes as ‘abortion grief’ and its potential for ‘traumatic losses’ – of the sense of self, of self-esteem, of significant relationships, of partner support and ultimately of meaning and associated purpose and hope.¹⁰ There is an accompanying inability to understand why they are caught in a whirlwind of presenting symptoms such as anxiety, sleep disorders, denial, depression, substance abuse and self-harm.¹¹ With feelings of distress, frustration and of being trapped, it resembles a merry-

8. Joan D. Chittister, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 34.

9. Richard Rohr, *The Religion Report*, 15 November 2006, www.abc.net.au/rn/religionreport/stories/.

10. See Dr. Johanna Lynch, MBBS, FRACGP, Grad. Cert (Grief and Loss), *Abortion: Grief? Concepts for discussion*, (Research Paper, Private distribution, Brisbane, 2007), 3, 9-10.

11. Lynch, *Abortion: Grief?*, 6.

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go-round at a fair ground that is out of control. This interminable cycle can only be stopped by addressing the whole person as a bodily, psychological and spiritual being. When this is combined with a faith that enables us to see God's presence in everything including the abortion experience and its aftermath, then self-love is possible again.

The transformative learning methods of the *Rachel's Vineyard Retreat* are designed to identify the common ground of the human suffering. In other words, to help the participants recognize that the love of God is aching to enter every heart. These processes enable the storyteller to find a new language for herself or himself. At best, they flow from the process. We often say 'let's trust the process' when things seem to struggle during a retreat. The art of the facilitator or questioner is to enable the retreatants to find another voice inside themselves that they didn't know was there. It is an appeal to the authentic self - the voice they can trust. Here are people who have had a lifetime of voices they can't trust.

By contrast, the new inner voice which emerges from interrogating the story is actually their voice – the one they didn't know they had. It's the one that invites them to know – often for the first time – that 'I am just like you' all round the room. It is a sense of solidarity with others, rather than of isolation from them. They come to realize that 'I am not less than anyone else. I deserve love and healing like everyone else.' The non-dualistic mind, in the sense defined by Rohr, is engaged in rewriting the story as a person who is also a victim and who has a right to survive. Such a person is open to the God who says 'I have come that you may have life and have it to the full' (Jn 10:10).

These ideas help to show how *Rachel's Vineyard Retreat* ministries have firm foundations in good transformative learning practices. They are successful when they are practiced and celebrated in a supportive community with a sound Gospel spirituality.

Theological Reflections on the Retreat

So far we have seen something of the effects of abortion and the effectiveness of the *Rachel's Vineyard Retreat*. I would like to conclude this article by exploring briefly the theology underlying the healing process. What does it tell us about ourselves, about God, about sin and salvation, and finally about the Church?

The *anthropology* guiding the retreat is one that engages the whole person. A 'sacred space' is set up through an agreed understanding from the participants about confidentiality. Within that safe environment, we see at work a process that captures the Church's understanding of our emotions in that they 'form the passageway and ensure the connection between the life of the senses and the life of the mind.'¹² It is particularly our bodily and emotional responses that open the door to the deepest recesses of the human spirit and our most intimate contact

12. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Homebush, NSW: St. Pauls, 1994), #1764.

with God. As noted earlier, the retreat process is built on carefully designed meditations on Gospel scenes involving Jesus - as healing, forgiving, nourishing, giving new life. These are accompanied by rituals involving gesture or movement. The participants are helped, at a level they are comfortable with, to engage mind, heart, feelings and all five senses.

In many ways, there is a fourfold movement revolving around the emotions - from their destructive to constructive forms. It is consonant with relevant studies in the field, such as, for instance, that of James and Evelyn Whitehead.¹³ Emotions are *named* (what are they? what do they say?). They are *claimed* (owned by the person: 'I am ashamed', 'I feel guilty'); they are *tamed* (from their 'hold' on me in turmoil) to their 'being held' before me (with insight and peace); finally, the emotions are *aimed* (creatively directed towards action). The pattern is focused on the healing and forgiving Jesus of the Gospels still present amongst those who gather together in His name. It is a pattern of dying and rising, embedded in God's word, that seeks to enact Jesus words 'You will learn the truth and the truth will make you free' (John 8:32).

Who is *God* in the Retreat? 'Genevieve' has captured this in many ways. It is a God who, for so many of the participants, they desperately need. This is the God of the first Beatitude, the God of 'the poor in spirit.' It is a process in which participants are helped to open themselves to the gracious and boundless forgiveness and mercy of God. But it requires a deeper healing that is beyond the power of human beings. It can only be a gift. We can only open ourselves and pray to be released from the past and from distorted images of God and oneself. It is a God who can lift a crippling burden, bringing participants to a sense of peace that that has eluded them for so long.

The God pervading this retreat converges with the Church's worship, captured in the adage *Lex orandi lex credendi* - the Church's faith is mirrored in its worship. In the Prayer of the Church on the 26th Sunday of Ordinary Time, we pray: 'Father, you reveal your mighty power *most of all* by your forgiveness and compassion.'¹⁴

This same idea is found in Aquinas as part of his reply to the question 'Is mercy the greatest of the virtues?' He replies that mercy is what is most characteristic (*proprium*) of God.¹⁵ His fellow Dominican Meister Eckhart said the same thing: 'You may call God love; you may call God goodness; but the best name for God is Compassion.'¹⁶ It is in forgiving and pardoning that God is revealed most clearly. This is embodied in the *Rachel's Vineyard Retreat*: we come to know who God *is* through what God *does*.

13. James D. Whitehead & Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Shadows of the Heart: A Spirituality of the Negative Emotions*, (New York: Crossroad, 1994), especially Chapters 1 and 2.

14. The words 'most of all' translate *maxime* used in the (*Missale Romanum*, 2002). The italics are added to indicate this and the use of *maxime* by Aquinas himself in the body of the article below.

15. *Summa Theologiae*, 2-2. 30. 4.

16. Cited in Matthew Fox, *A Spirituality Named Compassion*, (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1979), 34.

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What does the Retreat tell us about *Sin and Salvation*? Peter Maher notes somewhere that he was once asked by a priest if, as God's ministers, we made sure the retreatants realized how wrong abortion was. He replied – 'we don't have to; they always tell us.' I would fully agree with that reply. As a priest, I found the ceremony of forgiveness and reconciliation profoundly moving. If anything could be described as a *moment of conversion* for each person on the retreat, this is surely one of those moments. For a number of those on the retreat, it will, like 'Genevieve', galvanize their energy towards helping others who have been hurt by an abortion experience.

But there are other reverberations about sin and salvation from the weekend process. It deepens our awareness of the harm, even profound trauma that can result from our actions. It makes us more sensitive to sin in the form of social and cultural biases that twist our attitudes and blunt our appreciation of what is truly good. Further, we are reminded, as Neil Ormerod notes, that 'sin distorts our living and imprisons our freedom in ways that our freedom is powerless to repair.'¹⁷ In other words, forgiveness and reconciliation is an initiative that can only come from God.

But the retreat experience uncovers something else. Many women who have an abortion are themselves damaged and abused beforehand. They are emblematic of the fact that all of us are, in some way, the victim of others' sins. The retreat, then, is a counter to a 'romanticized version of Christian faith and life, which never really touches the hard reality of human sin and the suffering of sin's victims.'¹⁸ Ormerod reminds us that this state of victimhood needs healing and compassion and that, citing Robert Doran: '[T]he victimized dimension of ourselves will not be met ultimately by judgment and condemnation, but by mercy and gentleness. Judgment may be delivered against our freedom, but not against what our freedom has victimized, even in ourselves.'¹⁹

In this context, Jesus, in his death, freely identifies 'with the most victimized, and most despised, part of ourselves.'²⁰ The retreat, then, is not only an act of solidarity of Jesus the Risen Victim with unborn victims. It is enacting our solidarity in Jesus with all those victims, especially women, who are caught in repetitive cycles of being maltreated, violated and rejected.

On the one hand, then, we must be conscious of Jesus' words 'If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her' (John 8:7). On the other hand, naming the truth within the context of God's merciful love brings healing and peace. We are reminded of C.S. Lewis' comment: 'It may be that salvation consists not in the canceling of these eternal moments [of sin] but in the perfected humility that bears the shame for ever, rejoicing in the occasion

17. Neil Ormerod, *Creation, Grace, and Redemption*, (New York: Maryknoll, 2007), 164.

18. Ormerod, *Creation, Grace, and Redemption*, 106.

19. Ormerod, *Creation, Grace, and Redemption*, 104 citing Robert Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 238.

20. Ormerod, *Creation, Grace, and Redemption*, 106.

which is furnished to God's compassion and glad that it should be common knowledge to the universe.²¹

Finally, what does the *Rachel's Vineyard Retreat* tell us about the Church? We have already noted how it reflects the Church in its prayer and worship. Again, from a sacramental perspective, the Church community, through a priest or minister of religion, is integral to the retreat.²² He or she is a representative of the believing community. But it is of a Church at once the mediating point of God's forgiving love while being a community of sinners needing purification, healing and reconciliation. Christians bear some responsibility for the evils of our time as does the Church in its solidarity with the faults of the past.²³ Hence, it is not surprising that the Church as an institution is, for many women, a source of rejection and pain. The presence of a minister can help women's trust in the Church to be restored. Trust also needs to be rekindled towards *men*. So often, they have been the perpetrators of abuse and violence for participants on the retreats.

But in terms of the Church as teacher, what is the Church's official comment on this painful reality? Again, it is compassion and forgiveness. It is beautifully summed up in the words of Pope John Paul II in *The Gospel of Life*. They capture the four stages of healing outlined above (name, claim, tame, aim). Most importantly, women on the retreat found these words both consoling and true to their experience of the weekend. The Pope says

I would like to say a special word to women who have had an abortion.

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. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You will come to understand that nothing is definitely lost and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord. With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people, and as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life. Through your commitment to life, whether by accepting the birth of other children or by welcoming and caring for

21. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (London: Fontana Books, 1965), 49.

22. *The Rachel's Vineyard Retreat* has two formats: one is Catholic and another is interdenominational.

23. See 'Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past' (International Theological Commission, 2000), no. 1.3.

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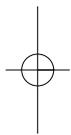
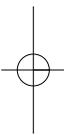
those most in need of someone to be close to them, you will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life.²⁴

What the Pope says could well have been written by him after being a participant in the *Rachel's Vineyard Retreat*.

Conclusion

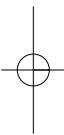
As three participants in the *Rachel's Vineyard Retreat*, we would agree with the earlier comment – ‘let’s trust the process.’ It is sensitively and prayerfully designed. It blends the best of psychological, spiritual and scriptural resources. It is under the guidance of skilled people and appropriately qualified professionals. But ultimately it is all God’s work. Perhaps it is best encapsulated in a line from the Psalmist: ‘The Lord is close to the broken-hearted, those whose spirit is crushed He will save.’

24. John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life [Evangelium Vitae]*, (Homebush: St. Pauls, 1995) n.99 (p183-4).



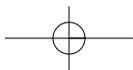
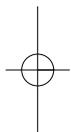


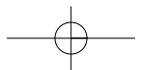
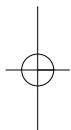
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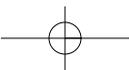
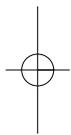
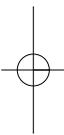
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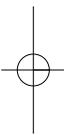
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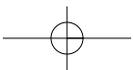
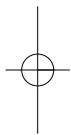






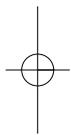
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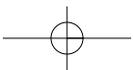
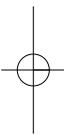






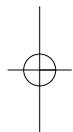
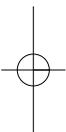
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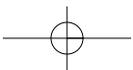
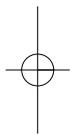
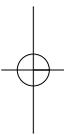






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