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Healing the Wounds of Abortion, Part III

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Editor's Note: Herewith is the conclusion of our three part interview with Father Blair Raum and Mrs. Vicki Thorn of Project Rachel, a ministry for healing and reconciliation for people suffering the wounds of a past abortion. Part one ran in our Issue of April 9, and part two in our issue of April 23. It did not run in the May 7 issue so we could denote all available space to the tragic bombing at the Murrah Federal Building.

Let me ask you, Father, about women in their 60s and 70s who are suddenly coming to terms with an abortion, or abortions in their life. This is interesting because all these sides of the story are coming forth, which we don't often think about, such as effects on the men involved. The stereotypical person traumatized by an abortion is a woman in her teens or 20s or 30s. We tend to forget about the men and the grandparents. Could you say something, Father, about the people 60 and over who are coming to terms with abortion in their lives?

Fr. Blair Raum: One of the blessings that has come out of the great tragedy of abortion is that we are gaining a great deal in our understanding of what happens to a person after an abortion. And also what some of the things are that need to happen for healing to take place. Take for example, the woman who is in her mid-60s, like the client I mentioned in my talk today, who had seven abortions in her late teens and early 20s. These were all pre-Roe v. Wade, they were all illegal abortions, they were all what we might today call "back alley" abortions, none of them were sanctioned and even when she began to feel some of the aftermath from the abortion, nobody had the slightest idea what to do with it, and in fact nobody wanted to hear that she had an abortion. Because it was thought of in those days as being such a horrible thing, that she would never think about telling it to anybody, other than a confessor in confession, much less somebody to help her for healing, because we hadn't a clue what to do with her.

One of the great liberations, if you will, for her is that now that we've come to this place where we do understand more and more about it...we still have a lot to learn, of course, and by the way, most of learning comes from the women who've had abortions. *They're* the teachers, and *we're* the learners here. We may have the degrees and look like big shots, but she's really the one who's the teacher. We always have to keep that in mind. But now that there's somebody who has some understanding of what has happened to her, and offers it to her, or she perceives that it's offered to her, she can come forward and begin to deal with it. She's not even sure what it means. She doesn't have the vocabulary about it herself, as do most post-war women. They don't know at first what it is they're dealing with. But she can come forward and say, "I've had these abortions and I hurt. Can you help me? Will you accept me? Will you hear my story?" We are now in a better position to help her. So we may see more and more post-abortive men and women in their older years coming forward. And now, we're seeing them for the first time, not because they've been resisting it all these years, it is just that nobody knew how to help them.

It was so unacceptable to have an abortion in those days she thought she would surely be judged and condemned. In those days she probably would have. In the example I used today, she heard a priest say that if you've had an abortion, we don't want you in the Catholic Church. Maybe in the 40s that was a prevailing opinion – that you were basically going to hell on a skateboard if you had an abortion. The idea for preventing abortions in those days was scare the hell out of people. Literally scare the hell out of people so they wouldn't do it. But now we're in a much different Church and we know a lot more. We go much more for understanding than intimidation. Now we are equipped so she might be ready to take that risk and come forward and say, "Can you help me? Will you listen to me? Am I really going to hell?" The answer is, "Good possibility you're not. Let's talk."

Vicki: I had a couple of people like that. I had one woman who wrote to us asking if there was a Project Rachel in the state where she lived and identified herself as being 70 some years old. She had carried the burden of this abortion for 50 years, so I gave her a referral for Project Rachel in her area. With some of these cases you don't know how it plays out, but this was interesting because a year later I got a letter from her thanking me for giving her this referral. But she had a final question. Her question was if I could please give her the names of some people who knew they were forgiven after an abortion and were going to heaven, because her husband had now died and her two sisters had now died along with her two children who had been aborted and she was looking for some reassurance that she might still have a chance of going to heaven to see them. Of course, that's a little bit tough because my communion of saints folks don't

write letters, you know? But for all those years she carried this incredible burden because she didn't know what to do with it until she heard about Project Rachel.

Another very personal story was of someone I had known for years in a working relationship. We had worked in a building together. She was retired at that point and knew everybody in the diocese and so she did fundraising. I went to her house one day and thanked her for doing this and she shared with me that she had had an abortion as a young woman in her late teens or early 20s, nobody in her family knew, this was her secret, but she had done her healing, she had gone to confession, but she had also found another woman who had had an abortion and together as younger women they had worked through this whole process. But her response was, "I'm so glad you're doing what you're doing." It's such an awful place to be. And that one was one of those situations that caught me completely by surprise. The important thing to remember is that we don't know who has had abortions, and sometime the most unlikely in our thought process are the very people who hurt the most. So we have to be very cautious – and conscious – of what we say about this issue because we don't know who's listening. We don't know that the person we're sitting at a table with, who seems like such an unlikely candidate, hasn't had an abortion. How do we love that person to wholeness and how do we come off as somebody they could share that story with so they're not alone?

Fr. Blair: I'm sure if that priest, many years ago, had known he was affecting this woman in that way for 45 years – living in condemnation for that long period of time, for what he probably thought was an offhanded remark was going to affect her that way he would probably repent in sack cloth and ashes to do whatever he could to release that. He probably had no idea.

Vicki: The other half of that is that, priests not understanding the severity of the aftermath, may in great compassion attempt to dismiss people's pain, not intentionally, but say, "go and sin no more." We had a case of that in our office, an old woman again, who identified herself as being an old woman, had gone to confession many years ago and had been dismissed. It wasn't that father said you're going to hell, he just said, oh well, okay, here's absolution, be on your way. All these years she had dealt with this pain which was much more severe than how he treated it. She called our office – there were two of us there that day – and I overheard the diocese, there was not a Project Rachel there, but I called the diocese while this was going on and asked for the name of a good confessor. They gave me the name of somebody they considered to be a good confessor. I gave it to the woman who was talking to her on the phone, she said we've called the diocese, here's a referral, and this woman said, "I wouldn't go talk to that priest if he was the last priest in the diocese because that's the priest who dismissed my pain all those years ago." Whoa, excuse me!

Maybe he had a reputation for compassion.

Vicki: Right. He was very gentle and he responded out of compassion, but his response did not match the seriousness of how she perceived it. We're not faulting him, he was doing his best pastorally, but he didn't understand that what she was telling him really needed some very serious attention.

Fr. Blair: She might have heard his response to mean that what she was saying wasn't being taken very seriously.

Vicki: I think that was it. What are the chances of that whole scenario playing itself out that way? I get the name of the guy she's telling us about. And she's seeking more help.

Maybe the priest in the 40s used the intimidation model trying to scare women away from an action that was contemplated, but didn't know that it had already taken place.

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We now have adults living who were born after Roe v. Wade went through. In other words people who would be 22-23 years old today. Do you see anything significant or different that stands out about this generation never knowing a time when abortion was illegal? Is this generation having abortions or is there a backlash against abortion among them? What are you seeing among this new young generation?

Vicki: I'm seeing both of those things, interestingly enough. I'm seeing that there's some incredibly wonderful leadership growing up among college students, so they'd be the next generation that grew up right after Roe V. Wade. I think they are very articulate pro-life leadership. And they're keenly aware that it's their generation that has been lost. And that's new. It wasn't the same a few years ago. The college students that were leadership people previously were coming out of a different place, more idealistic. With this group today, it's not the idealism, it's that they have been directly affected by this and feel they've got to do something about it. I'm also still seeing them having abortions though. But they are such wounded people.

There is a stereotype that there's a calculated decision and it's not a big deal. But when you talk to these young women what you discover is that this was a *horrendous* ordeal and they're very wounded. They tell you stories and your heart breaks. These aren't women just casually having sex and going about their lives with this as a form of birth control. They are in awful circumstances.

The women who are still choosing this are finding themselves in terrible, terrible circumstances. Just recently I went through this with a friend of my daughter's who found herself pregnant. My daughter and I both saw it coming like a freight train. She was pregnant. She withdrew from my daughter. My daughter attempted to talk her out of it. I reached out to her. But her mother got in the middle of this and her mother procured the abortion. I mean it was done right away. She was at the clinic and so now we have this 18-year-old who is now carrying this experience of an abortion. Well, she's still numb at this point. She says, "You know I know that was an awful thing but..." You can see there's this distance from it. She's sort of removed six steps from what happened to her, but she knew. She joked when she was pregnant about being with child, so you know at some point this thing's going to hit her – major league. But her story's awful and I don't know that if I were in her shoes I would have had the strength to withstand her mother's pressure. There's also a divorce in the family and she'd just been reconciled with her father. He was going to send her to Europe this summer; she was back to being daddy's little girl after having been rejected by him. What an awful place to be and to face this kind of circumstance. Am I excusing this whole thing? I'm not, I'm just saying that from my compassionate point of view this is an awful spot to be in, and that the amount of courage it takes to fly in the face of all this mom pressure, dad pressure and social pressure, is incredible. So I'm seeing these different things. I'm seeing this existential question of "Why did I survive when I know that other people of my generation didn't survive?"

As a spiritual director I see young people who carry incredible wounds because their parents have said in a fit of anger, "I should have aborted you!" We've got levels of woundedness here in terms of awareness of a generation of compatriots who have been wiped out. "Who died in that? Did my potential spouse die in that? Did my best friend die in that? Did my cousin die in that?" So you've got that other level of woundedness through rejection. "God, maybe I should have been aborted. Maybe they thought about that. If they say that to me maybe they thought about aborting me. Well then what? Now what does that mean to my life in terms of rejection?" So I see that this upcoming generation who are products of the abortion generation have some very unique wounds, and I think they will provide some very unique leadership. These young people are keenly aware of the cost that abortion has brought to their lives personally. And it's a different kind of leadership. There's a real passion there that says I've been affected and I need to do something about this.

Lest we leave anyone out, are you getting any calls from elderly men? Like we talked about the elderly women who carried the burden. Do you see much of that?

Fr. Blair: I've had several people that I've seen who were grandfathers of aborted children. When I see them I usually see them with their wives, they come as a couple. I don't think I've seen any older men by themselves. I find them incredibly angry, because it not only means the loss of a grandchild which they were looking forward to spending time with, but if they were very strong Catholics and raised their kids to be Catholics they see this as an attack on everything they stood for as parents. They're incredibly angry about that because it bespeaks to them their worth as parents and what kind of "job" they've done as parents. And that is an overlay of additional anger that they have. Losing the grandchild would be bad enough, but then they see it also as an attack on themselves and their values, so they're very hurt and very angry folks.

Like the woman you mentioned who was in her 70s who had an abortion 50 years ago, do you see any men who impregnated women long ago and are coming to terms with it?

Vicki: I've seen one and he actually turned up not specifically in a Rachel call but at a talk I had given. It was at a Christian therapists' gathering and I talked about the wounds of abortion and a group had spontaneously come and said, "Can we gather people who'd like to come and talk some more?" I was agreeable to that and it was very interesting because one of these men who would be in his 60s surfaced as an aborted father and talked about the pain that he felt and the awareness that his daughter, Sarah, had been lost in all of this. As I recall he was responsible for this abortion. He was part of the decision and was not opposed in any way. He's the only father I've found all by himself in isolation without his wife being a part of that. And that's 10-years worth for me. That's the one group you don't see on their own very often.

Fr. Blair: I find that women will tend to be much more in touch with, and much more honest about, their feelings, So when she hurts, she's very likely to come forward. Men tend to be more compartmentalized in their thinking. They will put it in a box and put a lid on it, and they rationalize. Intellectualization would perhaps be a better way of putting it. They talk themselves into and out of just about anything. So I have one person, one woman, that I'm seeing now who is in incredible pain and her husband doesn't even know she's coming to see me. She can't tell him. He's the father of the aborted child and for him it's no problem: "Why are you getting yourself all worked up over this? Forget it. Let's move on." That's what he did with it. How long that will last, how long his denial will go on, remains to be seen. She, however, is honest enough to say, "I hurt very badly. I'm going to get some help. He's not going to be any good to me. In fact he would be a hindrance to me." She sneaks out of the house and comes over to see me. And one day, particularly when she has her emotional catharsis and breakthrough and begins to perceive the light at the end of the tunnel in

terms of her healing, she's really going to be in pain for him because she's going to wish that for him. And he's miles behind her on the track and may never actually find it. And she's going to feel that very deeply.

Vicky: I oftentimes hear women saying, even younger women who are married to the fathers, "Why doesn't he hurt like I hurt?" The first wish is almost a self-punishment – "I wish he hurt like I hurt." But then there's also this "I'm going through this process; is he ever going to come to this?" And one woman I've been dealing with recently has a lot of anger toward her husband her mother-in-law because the mother-in-law pushed and the husband went along. And this woman's right in the midst of her healing. She's one of these people who's a fallen away Catholic and the Blessed Mother has led her right on down the primrose path to healing. It's just amazing how Mary's turned up in this whole thing. This woman returned to the rosary. There was a plate in her drawer her grandmother had given her, which started the whole thing. She was an evangelical Christian but she had been Catholic. Just this week her husband was speaking to some pro-life people, because she's done some things in the pro-life movement, and he broke down crying when he said what his wife did, which surprised the heck out of her. And then he shared with her and cried. And she said, "You know, I was able to comfort him." So that wall of anger here suddenly has a chink in it because, who knows, God suddenly brought him to this experience of sadness about the loss of his child at the time when his wife is going through some real cathartic sort of stuff too. So now he's kind of tracking this. I don't know if he's going to track the same way she does, but suddenly he's started his healing. But the difference is that women who happen to marry the men who were fathers of their children have a real problem with that. He doesn't do what she thinks he should do. But the other thing is that when you look at parental grieving you realize that men grieve very differently and they cope with it very differently. So even to be able to say if he's coping with it is a hard call, if you can't ask him. He might be a workaholic because he's coping with this and he's just shut that down. So that men's situation is one that needs a lot of exploration.

The other thing I'd like to say, because I see this as a very significant need, is that there's a need for people to fund some research in this area. Because the potential to do research is here, there are researchers out there who are gathering data and we can't find money anywhere to get the data to finish it, to do the kind of analysis that needs to be done and then to get it published. And that's very frustrating. There are wonderful people out there researching – top-quality researchers. I'm not talking about people who don't know what they're doing. And we can't get the money for the research, so that is such a frustration because this is a key in this whole abortion issue. To be able to talk about what happens to the other people and to say, "Look here, we know, we *know* this happens." That's one of the pieces that's missing.

Fr. Blair: I would only add that the challenge to the Church in post-abortive ministry – which is also the challenge to any individual, mental health professional, clergy, archbishop, volunteer, whatever – the challenge to all of us is to be open enough to be able to carry a woman’s heart, because that’s basically what it’s about. We have to carry it and reverence it so that it can be healed. It’s a great gift, although it’s a painful journey. It’s a great gift when she shares her heart with you. It’s one of the real blessings I think in the ministry. And it’s a great gift as you watch God’s grace heal that heart and bring it closer to the Sacred Heart, to bring it closer to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. These are just wonderful spiritual experiences, gained on a very painful road to be sure, but very, very inspiring and spiritually uplifting. I sometimes wonder after I’ve terminated with a post-abortive woman who got more out of that journey. I can assess pretty clearly what she got out of it. I’m not quite sure exactly all that I’ve gotten out of it, but I know I’ve been profoundly touched by it.

Vicki: One of the things that I’ve discovered in doing this ministry is that the priests are very touched by this. God uses this ministry to affirm priesthood and to remind priests what it is they were called for. Because so often in today’s society we don’t consult Father for anything anymore. He’s just kind of this nice figurehead over here but this is a place where Father comes face to face with the love of Jesus as well and the power of the sacraments and what this is all about in terms of ministering to people.

One last thing I want to say to someone who’s beginning their healing journey is that I have absolute confidence that if they embark on this journey they will be healed. It is a message of hope that God will touch them, that God will bring them to a new place, and while it looks terribly dark, and terribly frightening, indeed they’re in a tunnel and not in a cave. And it’s a question of turning a corner to see the light at the end. And while the healing journey is very painful, indeed the outcome of this, this healing experience, this encounter with God, this encounter with their child, will be a life-changing event and it will bring them to a totally new place, a place that’s filled with hope and with God’s love.



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