



September 5, 1996

A Publication of **Rachel's Vineyard Ministries**
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Post-Abortion Healing

Reconciling an Abortion in the Catholic Church

By: Theresa Karminski Burke, Ph.D.

Helen sits in the back pew on Sunday mornings. She positions herself strategically by the back door with a vigilant ear. If there is any indication of a pro-life message, she will make a quick exit from the church. "*I don't need to hear it,*" she says.

Debbie, on the other hand, becomes infuriated when the pro-life viewpoint is preached from the pulpit. She promenades up to the pastor with conviction and complains about the cleric meddling in a woman's personal right to choose.

National polls show that American Catholics are sympathetic, if not neutral to abortion rights. On any given Sunday, the Catholic church shelters men and women within their pews who have either had abortions, or encouraged someone else to have one.

How can the church gently unveil the wounds of aborted men and women which have been shrouded with anger, shame, pride, guilt, and despair? How can the church reach out to them, with the wounded hands of Christ and his prayer of salvation, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

If the Church is going to reach these individuals with the truth and mercy of the faith, we must understand the power of denial, as well as the depth of grief, depression, and spiritual alienation that abortion causes. Often anger or numbness is part of an elaborate armor of defenses which protects them from the reality of abortion.

Pope John Paul II, on his recent visit to America, never neglected an opportunity to proclaim the sanctity of human life. While the unchanging truth of the Catholic Church will persevere in its defense of life from the moment of conception, there is a deeper division which cries out to be reconciled.

This is at the very heart of the unbridled abortion debate. The bottom line is that there are so many people in this country and throughout the world who are wounded by abortion. Some are aware of the damage, others are in denial, while others fight vigorously to sanction and defend their choice by evangelizing the world and even the church with abortion rights. Yet, there are so many individuals in our church who need healing.

Among the faithful themselves there is a misguided notion which often prefers to focus on God's judgment rather than on his monumental mercy. Merciful compassion and forgiveness is of course the mission of the church and a fundamental reality of faith in Christ.

One woman who experienced an abortion and later traveled the road to reconciliation explains, *"If I were urging someone to reconcile her abortion experience, I'd tell her not to suffer in silence or to think she's unworthy of healing. I'd remind her that Christ came to save sinners, heal the brokenhearted, and to proclaim liberty to captives. I'd tell her how much I've learned about the love and mercy of God in this reconciliation process. I'm a stronger person because of it now."*

As one in ministry to women and men who have suffered from abortion, I have seen the courage, pain, struggle, and eventual liberation of individuals who seek to reconcile their sin with God. Over the years we have developed a model called *Rachel's Vineyard – A Psychological and Spiritual Journey of Post Abortion Healing*. (Alba House) This model was originally developed and continues to be used as a 15 step program. For women unable to commit to this time frame, we have adapted Rachel's Vineyard into a weekend retreat format. The comments in this article come from women who have made this rewarding journey to healing.

While the church offers sinners refuge and sacramental forgiveness, accepting God's forgiveness after an abortion usually requires a process. Repressed grief, anger, feelings of abandonment, ambivalent feelings about the aborted child must all be dealt with before an individual is read to receive and accept God's forgiveness.

One woman comments on this difficulty. *"I think the church community needs to know that women who have had abortions can't work through their pain alone. We need to do it in community with psychological and spiritual support. I'd like the church to know we can't just put the experiences behind us all be ourselves. We need concrete help and the company of others like ourselves and ministers of reconciliation on this journey."*

Her sentiments are echoed by many who, after much trepidation and fear, made the painful but rewarding journey to reconciling their abortion experience.

The factors which make the reconciliation process difficult are summed up by Diane: *"I don't think the church community knows how much pain we are in. Having an abortion has a strong stigma which inhibits the person trying to deal with it. I wish I had been invited into the healing process years ago."*

The Pro-Life movement itself is often considered a threat to individuals who have experienced abortion. While most pro-lifers consider themselves a peaceful prayer presence offering alternatives, they are experienced as the enemy. Media and newspaper reports contribute to this mentality by vilifying the presence of pro-lifers. Leslie explains, *"I hated pro-life. I thought these people are full of themselves. They said a lot and prayed a lot but didn't do anything for the many people who felt they had no where to turn, like give them a place to stay without expecting money, helping with the baby after delivery, helping the mother get on her feet to the point where she could go out on her own. Pro-life announcements in our church bulletin always drove me crazy. When I first heard about the retreat I was frightened, but then at the same time I saw a tiny glimmer of hope."*

A glimmer of hope is exactly what the church must reflect. Peggy shares her surprise and astonishment: *"When I first saw the announcement about the post abortion retreat in my parish bulletin, I was both shocked and pleased. It seemed that the church only published announcements relating to pro-life activities. I was relieved to learn about post-abortion healing. I thought it was a wonderful opportunity to make peace with God and reclaim my spirituality. I had never been invited to do this, and I never thought the Catholic church would want to help me. I figured they hated me for what I had done."*

Jessica also believed that the Catholic church and pro-lifers would reject her because of an abortion. *"If only I had heard someone get up in church and tell me that God wanted to forgive me for what I had done. If only someone had told me that God did not hate me. Just hearing this would have saved me 16 years of living hell. The church needs to advertise that such programs for us exist."*

How do we get the word out about programs for post-abortion healing when so many are afraid to even bring up the subject. Abortion is such a sensitive topic. For those involved with abortion, the mere mention of the word triggers a lot of emotional feelings which have been repressed. People instinctively repress memories about abortion because they are protecting themselves from spiritual and emotional pain. When this area of our conscience is disturbed reactions range from aggression and anger to depression, guilt and fear. The church consistently condemns the act of abortion, but certainly not the person. Shame often keeps an individual silent about their need to be reconciled because they fear judgment and condemnation.

Gina suggests that *"the church should know all the pain and suffering post aborted women feel. They should know how to communicate to the parishioners about programs for post abortion healing straight from the altar. The priest should be more informed as to how it effects women and how to deal with women who have been in that situation. Above all, they should never condemn us from the altar."*

Jennifer summarizes the need for a merciful response: *"I think the church needs to understand that what we did, as horrible as it is, was a mistake and that we need to be forgiven. We have such shame and Jesus wants us to be healed of that shame. The church hasn't in the past been very open about the misery and pain that we have lived with. They are open and responsive to other mistakes people have done. I never felt this way about the church and abortion."*

Another victim of abortion shares: *"As the Catholic Church has come to recognize the needs of those experiencing divorce and AIDS, so they must consider the aftermath of abortion and its effect on Catholic women. Women who choose abortion and later discover its impact on their spirituality need the support of the church. We long to be forgiven and not live as outcasts."*

Don't underestimate for one minute the fears people have about judgment. They are so strong and powerful, that many people will agonize for years, perhaps a lifetime, and never gain the courage to reconcile their sin with God. They fear judgment and a lack of compassion. Pam describes the trepidation she experienced concerning her abortion: *"I was terrified to take that first step forward to participate in Rachel's Vineyard. It seemed safer to remain hiding in the darkness, keeping the pain locked up deep inside rather than to risk exposing my shame to another soul. Now I am grateful to have experienced God's healing and forgiveness with other women in an atmosphere of complete acceptance and trust."*

There is such tremendous benefit to offering this process as a member of the body of Christ to another. One woman illustrates this point: *"The retreat for Post Abortion Healing has given me an opportunity to confess what I believe as a Catholic woman to be a sin. I was able to do this in a warm, supportive, and loving environment. Here I was nurtured and touched, spoken to and listened to. I was given hours to reflect and prepare for the sacrament and make peace. I have truly felt the power of reconciliation through this process."*

Another participant explains: *"The process of post abortion healing has saved my physical life and has resurrected my spiritual life which has been dormant and misguided, or even dead. It brought the secrets of abortion out into the open where the resultant extreme damage might begin to heal."*

The approach to be taken in reaching out to an aborted woman is described by Stephanie who suggests: "*As a post aborted woman, I am raw and vulnerable. Only gentleness and non-judgment should be offered. I found these things have helped me to look at what happened honestly.*"

While the Catholic Church offers forgiveness of sins through the sacrament of reconciliation, the sin of abortion often demands a process to internalize the word of God and permit the expression of grief. Many women and men believe that God forgives, but they cannot forgive themselves. One woman I know spent 28 years confessing her sin of abortion over and over again in the confessional. Others continue to punish themselves through self-destructive relationships and behaviors. Other men and women simply compartmentalize their abortions and seal the experience off in a dark corner of their memory and soul, never allowing the light of God to penetrate and heal the festering wound.

The church has established an outreach for post abortion healing called Project Rachel. This organizations is dedicated to education, counseling, pastoral concerns and ministry specifically for women and men who have been injured by abortion.

The National Office of Post Abortion Reconciliation and Healing offers training, education and research to professionals and clergy who have witnessed the need to address the emotional and spiritual pain that abortion often generates. The process of working through an abortion requires courage and tremendous amounts of support and love. An awareness of the specific concerns, denial, and grief likely to surface as an individual seeks reconciliation are important aspects to recognize when helping someone come to grips with their decision to abort and the impact it has had on their life.

Living in a world of unforgiveness is devastating for a Catholic because it is completely opposite the very special loving relationship that we are called to live with Jesus Christ. This loving relationship can be reflected by ministers of healing who do not condemn but accept the individual in her suffering, and accompany her as she carries the heavy cross of abortion, while proclaiming and leading the way to resurrection and new life.

Susan encourages others to open themselves up to the healing offered by Jesus Christ within the body of Christ and the Catholic Church. "*I experienced a great inner healing as a result of attending the post-abortion retreat. I highly recommend Rachel's Vineyard to any woman who has felt the void and shame of the abortion experience. It is a wonderful way to forgive yourself, find the unconditional love of Christ and grieve the loss of your little child.*"

Sharon also shares the relief she has experienced when she finally went to God with her abortion. *"For 18 years I have been haunted with heavy guilt that no-one could take away. I was tormented by thoughts of what that child would have been like. Through participating in a program for post-abortion healing, I was finally able to name my pain, forgive myself and reconnect with my child. I know that God has given me a peaceful mind, cleansed my heart and has washed away my guilt."*

Donna inspires other women to enter the healing journey. She says, *"To any woman considering the need to reconcile their abortion, the retreat is a wonderful gift you could give to yourself. You are able to experience the sadness, grief and shame in the company of other women feeling very much of the same. You are able to turn this pain into hope among nurturing counselors and supportive caretakers. You are not rushed or hurried, but given time to reflect and open to the healing process gradually. In the spirit of penance and reconciliation this retreat addresses the pain and suffering of women who feel their sin of abortion has outcast them from their church and their faith."*

For all those involved with an abortion, the church invites you back. With loving and open arms the Catholic Church welcomes you and wants to assist you on your journey to wholeness and reconciliation. Pope John Paul II encourages you in the Gospel of Life when he states:

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

Theresa Karminski Burke, Ph.D., is the founder of the Center for Post Abortion Healing. Together with her husband Kevin, they run a residence and job training

program for women in crisis pregnancies called Mother's Home. Theresa is also the mother of four young children.

*To order **Rachel's Vineyard: A Psychological and Spiritual Journey of Post-Abortion Healing** (A Model for Groups and Retreats) by Theresa Karminski Burke, Ph.D. with Barbara Cullen contact Alba House 1-800-343-ALBA.*

For additional information on Project Rachel, Post Abortion Resources or referrals near you contact: The National Office of Post Abortion Healing, P.O. Box 07477, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53207-0477, 1-800-5-WE-CARE.



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Article #30 (Abortion Trauma (AT) General Info)