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# Post-abortion ministry aims to help women overcome guilt

By **Richard C. Dujardin**

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Nicole Cunningham says she wasn't always a subscriber to the Saturday newspaper, so when an edition landed on her doorstep a year ago, she figured it was a mistake.

But looking back, the 30-year-old Cranston resident and native of Salt Lake City wonders if the "mistake" was part of God's plan to help her heal.

The paper that day carried an item announcing the Roman Catholic Diocese's sponsorship of a retreat for people in need of emotional or spiritual assistance after an abortion.

Having been diagnosed with major depression in 1997 and still haunted by thought of suicide, Cunningham says she immediately recognized it was something she needed.

More of a Christmas and Easter Catholic when it came to attending Mass, Cunningham has seen much of her world go awry after that first semester in college in 1990 when she became pregnant and, about six weeks later had an abortion.

She had been to confession and had been assured by the priest that her sins were forgiven. But 10 years later, doubts remained. Would a retreat assuage her feelings of guilt?

He wasn't sure. "I almost didn't go," she says. "It was frightening to face up to what I had done..."

But Cunningham, one of 20 participants who went to Watch Hill last year to participate in a Rachel's Vineyard retreat at the Sisters of Mercy Ridge End retreat house in Westerly says she's glad she went.

By the end of the weekend, the writer and proofreader observed that she still considered herself a feminist, still strongly suspicious of a hierarchical church. But she also felt like a new woman who was finally able to forgive herself.

“I think there was value in being able to talk to other people who had also gone through the pain,” she said. “It made me know I wasn’t alone.”

Author and psychotherapist Theresa Karminski Burke, 41, of King of Prussia, PA., established Rachel’s Vineyard as a nonprofit foundation in 1997, but its roots, she says, go back to when she observed the conflicted feelings about abortion among women who were part of an eating disorder support group she was facilitating for her internship. She established her first support group in 1986, for women who had abortions.

In an interview in Warwick, where she had come to speak at a conference for Catholic women, Burke disputed the notion that the retreats are an attempt to make women feel guilty about what they’ve done.

Quite the opposite, she said. “This is not about politics. Those who come to us are already hurting. We’re trying to bring them healing.”

According to Burke, 105 Rachel’s Vineyard retreats were held around the country last year, including two that were under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence.

Abortion has been a legal right in the United States since 1973. Nonetheless, says Burke, there is a great deal of ambivalence as to whether abortion is a simple procedure involving the removal of unwanted tissue or the taking of a life. Many of the women who seek the healing of a Rachel’s Vineyard Retreat, she says, are women who do feel there has been a great loss but who have been encouraged by friends and by the prevailing culture to bury those feelings –thus allowing the problem to fester.

“This is why there is such a need for healing. Even accepting Jesus Christ as your lord and savior, or even going to confession, sometimes won’t cut it,” she says. “You have to enter into a process of grieving, so you are able to detox all those feelings of shame, grief, anger and rage.”

On the Rachel’s Vineyard weekends – the name comes from the passage in the Book of Jeremiah, “Rachel mourns for her children and she refuses to be consoled because her children are no more” – participants reenact some familiar passages in Scriptures.

One such story is about the woman about to be stoned to death for adultery before Jesus stepped in. At the retreat, Burke says, the women pass around a rock that’s symbolic of the guilt they feel.

The Rev. Jude McGeough, pastor of St. Martha parish in East Providence, has been an active participant in all three of the post-abortion retreats that have been held in Rhode Island so far.

He says that in so many instances he was amazed by the way the women were able to open up, sharing their painful stories, including stories about how they had been abused.

“But when it was over, they went away healed. This has really been one of the most moving things I’ve had in my priesthood, to see the change in people who were hurting so badly,” he said.

Kathy Kushnir, director of community affairs for Planned Parenthood of Rhode Island, said that while counselors at her agency have not heard of the Rachel’s Vineyard program, “We absolutely support any woman’s need to feel whole, and encourage women to talk to whoever they need to, to be at peace with themselves.”

She added that it’s been Planned Parenthood’s experience that the stress that some women experience is largely based on societal judgments on women who have had an abortion, which encourages secrecy. “The stress comes from the feeling that they can’t address it openly, lest they be judged. We believe the answer is to have a more generous and loving society that accepts women where they are, so that this wouldn’t be a problem for women.”

A separate but related aspect to the post-abortion ministry in Rhode Island is the work being done by registered nurse Joan Pendergast and a dozen or so other trained volunteers through the After Abortion Help Line.

Pendergast, who started the Help Line 12 years ago, said there was a brief period in the line’s history when it was placed in mothballs while she and some of the other volunteers tried to help the diocese set up its own post-abortion program. But since last month, she said, the Help Line is once again functioning as an independent, nonprofit – and ecumenical – organization.

The volunteers who will deal with people of any religious background, operate from home, using an answering system that automatically transfer calls from the Help Line to their own private phones.

Isabelle Middendorf of Little Compton, a member of the Master Builder Ministries evangelical church in Fall River, has been part of the effort.

People who call, she says, are generally very needy. Our job really is to listen, and then if the person is receptive, we refer them to a priest, minister or rabbi. We give them the message that abortion is not the unforgivable sin.



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