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Rachel's Vineyard Lifts Veil on Post- Abortion Trauma

By: Laureen McMahon

"Rachel mourns her children; she refuses to be consoled because her children are no more. Thus says the Lord: cease your cries of mourning, wipe the tears from your eyes. The sorrow you have shown shall have its reward. There is hope for your future...." (Jeremiah 31:15-17).

Just because abortion is legal, everyone assumes it is also safe, says psychotherapist Dr. Theresa Burke, but if abortion really has no serious side effects, she asks in her book, *Forbidden Grief, the Unspoken Pain of Abortion*, why do so many women experience clinical depression or other psychosomatic illnesses down the road?

In the decades of debate in the public arena over abortion, the true story of the dangers the procedure poses to the psychological and physical health of women has been mostly ignored, Dr. Burke has warned.

In fact, she noted, research suggests that most women seeking an abortion are not told about any problems they may later face by either their abortion provider or other health caregivers.

While relief might be the first emotion a woman feels after an abortion, the procedure plants the seeds of future distress, said Dr. Burke. What is necessary, she added, is intervention based on tapping into God's mercy and compassion, which is why she and her husband Kevin, a social worker, founded Rachel's Vineyard Retreats nearly a decade ago.

On Nov. 24-26, the Vancouver Archdiocesan Office of Life and Family and Post Abortion Community Services, an arm of the Christian Advocacy Society of Greater Vancouver, will co-sponsor a Rachel's Vineyard Weekend Retreat at Rosemary Heights in Surrey for anyone in need of healing from a recent or long-past abortion.

Five years ago, Kelowna resident Marie Magirescu's life changed dramatically when she confronted three decades of post-abortion mental and spiritual anguish at a Rachel's Vineyard Retreat.

"It gave me a safe place to begin my journey of healing. For the first time, I could lay down my shame and grieve the loss of my child. I finally forgave: my parents for their unloving response, my church for not understanding the complexity of the situation, the doctor for making abortion so easy, and myself for not taking responsibility for the thing I had done."

Magirescu's story is a common one, said Dr. Burke.

"The pressures of unresolved memories and feelings may build up and erupt years after an abortion in unexpected ways. We see repeat crisis pregnancies and repeat abortions. Substance abuse, eating disorders, and broken relationships are common outcomes."

An integral part of the healing process, Dr. Burke explained, is recognizing that, although a woman has decided to abort her child, the grief accompanying that event remains present at a deep emotional level until steps are taken to find healing.

Magirescu, who now works as a member of a team promoting Rachel's Vineyard Retreats in different communities, said that the program is also for parents grieving the loss of a grandchild after a child has had an abortion, or for those whose mother had an abortion, and they lost out on knowing a brother or sister.

Praise for Rachel's Vineyard retreats has come from throughout the U.S. and Canada, with women reporting that they feel whole again, alive and capable of love.

Healing after an abortion can be a long road, said U.S. Priests for Life Director Father Frank Pavone, "but few steps along that road are more powerful than those taken during a Rachel's Vineyard Retreat."

Magirescu said she was impressed by the solid psychological and theological approach when she encountered the retreat program.

The memorial service which is always held for unborn children at the weekend's conclusion gave her, she said, "a sense of deep peace."

"I was invited to name my aborted child. Suddenly it came to me that her

name had to be 'Grace,' because grace means an undeserved gift, and that is exactly what she has been to me. My child is my guardian angel; she watches over me and prays for me to receive God's forgiveness."

Magirescu's story began in the 1970s, when she discovered at age 18 that she was pregnant. Deathly afraid of the reaction from family members, she took the advice of her family doctor who promised that her devout Catholic parents would never hear of the abortion.

Desperately searching for freedom from turmoil, Magirescu said, she ignored the tiny voice inside telling her there was another way. Instead, she became "consumed" with the abortion plan.

Then not only did the truth eventually come out, but her worst fears were realized when her parents told her, "We no longer have a daughter."

"They felt I had committed an unforgivable sin and deserved to feel pain and guilt and shame, although they did urge me to go to confession," Magirescu recalled.

Instead, she plunged into a self-destructive lifestyle in an attempt to numb her feelings. Two years later, she was again pregnant, but this time she found the strength to reject an abortion.

She wanted to keep her child, but in the end gave her baby to a couple unable to conceive whom she felt could provide a better home.

First, in the deep recesses of her mind, Magirescu reasoned that saving the second little life would atone for the loss of the first.

Reality soon set in, however, and she became "filled with a dark shadow of sadness and the painful realization that one life cannot replace another."

Years passed and Magirescu married and she and her husband Greg, a Catholic convert and professional singer and composer, shared a love of music and joined their parish music ministry. They were also blessed with the gift of a baby daughter.

"I hoped against hope that this new, 'good' life would pay for my old mistakes," Magirescu explained. "I liked being perceived as the 'squeaky clean' church lady ... singing and doing the Lord's work, but all the while my secret was buried deep inside me."

Fast forward to the spring of 1999.

While on a Cursillo retreat, Magirescu awakened early one morning and decided to walk to the chapel. Kneeling before the altar, she noticed a painting of Jesus on the wall and was struck by the compassion in His expression.

"I felt He was looking into my soul with a gentle, forgiving love. He knew all my mistakes and selfish choices, yet loved me and wanted me to be at peace.

"Immediately the abortion came to my mind, as though a wound was opening. Pain pierced my whole body. I stumbled towards a table where a Bible was open to Psalm 51, verses 16 and 17, '...for You have no delight in sacrifice. If I were to give you a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.'

"In a flash I understood that I didn't have the power to fix my relationship with God and that I couldn't undo the abortion with adoption or any other kind of sacrifice.

"At the same time, I knew there was hope if I was willing to receive God's forgiveness, but that it would require the hardest thing of all, humility. I had to let go of my prideful illusion that I was responsible for making it right and simply sit broken before Him."

Magirescu felt her pent-up emotions released as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I knew Jesus was pleading with me to accept His love and forgiveness. He was also asking me to forgive myself because He wanted me whole so I could reach out to other women who were suffering to bring them His message of healing."

Soon afterwards, Magirescu heard about Project Rachel, a program for anyone touched by abortion, and it proved to be another turning point. Right away she felt loved and accepted by the counsellors.

"No one condemned me. Their whole purpose was to offer love, support, and healing to me and women exactly like me!" she told The B.C. Catholic.

Soon after, Magirescu found her way to a Rachel's Vineyard Weekend

Retreat.

The program, she said, provides tools to process and release the hurts caused by abortion.

"The peace is beyond description. I found I could love myself again ... with God's help. Because of His grace in my life, the wall between the old/bad Marie and the new/good Marie is gone ... there's just Marie, daughter of God, who is loved, forgiven, healed, and set free!"

Information on Project Rachel is available from Vancouver Archdiocesan Catholic Family Services, 604-443-3220. Ask to speak to a counsellor on issues related to abortion.

For more information about Rachel's Vineyard Retreats or to register for the November 24-26 retreat weekend at Rosemary Heights, call in complete confidentiality to Post Abortion Community Services at 604-525-0999 or go to www.rachelsvineyard.org.



Rachel's Vineyard Ministries
808 N. Henderson Rd.
King of Prussia, PA 19406
610-354-0555—1-877-HOPE-4-ME