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Rachel's Vineyard offers spiritual transformation

By Mary Duffy

As a Jesuit priest interested in the pro-life movement, the Rev. Will Prospero tried praying the rosary outside an abortion clinic, but admits his heart really wasn't in it.

Then Prospero discovered Rachel's Vineyard and knew he'd found the pro-life work he was called by God to do.

Rachel's Vineyard is a post-abortion outreach ministry of the Catholic Church designed to help people deal with the aftermath of an abortion. It was developed by Catholic psychologist Theresa Burke in her clinical practice of treating women struggling with post-abortion grief. The ministry takes its name from the Bible, Jeremiah 31:15, where the inconsolable Rachel was heard lamenting and weeping for her children who were no more.

Burke came to believe that many women were in need of spiritual, as well as psychological, healing after an abortion. She developed a three-day, intensive weekend retreat that does both, using a group model that combines therapeutic techniques with spiritual exercises.

The first local Rachel's Vineyard retreat, held in January in Rapid City, drew four participants, including Carol Kling and Sherry Coffing, two West River women who plan to become facilitators for future retreats. The retreat aims to identify the grief surrounding an abortion with a psychological component and then transform it through a spiritual component.

"The mystery of a Rachel's Vineyard retreat is not so much that it uncovers the emotional pain of an abortion but that it manages to transform it," says Prospero, who called the first retreat an "experience of liberation" for each of the four women who attended. "It was the most tangible experience of the Resurrection that I have ever had in my life," he said. "These women are set free."

"The retreat is an amazing weekend in so many ways," says Kling. "I can't think of a word that's big enough to describe it. It's so overwhelming, it took my breath away

sometimes...More than a month later, I'm still absorbing stuff that happened during the weekend."

Participants are encouraged to share their stories during the retreat, which begins on a Friday evening and ends Sunday afternoon. Activities are designed to build trust and expose long-buried feelings. In the process, the women uncover a lot of other losses in their lives, Prospero said.

"They're given permission to get in touch with all their losses. There are a lot of hurting women out there who need to be healed of past abuse and the self-destructive behaviors it caused," he said. "In the ugliness and the pain and the suffering of their lives – that's where God meets them. That's where I was supposed to be."

The retreat takes its format from the practice of "living Scripture." Using an experiential approach to biblical passages in which Jesus Christ heals people, the exercises employ rituals, meditations and ceremonies designed to heal through faith. The activities are highly symbolic, and the sacraments of Eucharist and reconciliation play an important role in the weekend. For example, the weekend begins with a ceremony in which participants share a "cup of bitterness" with each other. By the end of the retreat, they drink from the "cup of blessing" during a mass of Resurrection.

"The exercises let Scripture come alive from these people," Prospero said. "It's a very hands-on experience that gives them things to do, to say, to touch and to hold that helps heal their grief over their child."

For Kling the living Scripture exercise of the Samaritan woman at the well helped her come to terms with how unworthy she had felt in God's presence and then to realize she was worthy simply because of God's love for her. "It was very releasing to live that Scripture," she said.

The actual exercises aren't revealed in advance of the retreat, partly to guard against diluting their powerful effect on people.

"I've been through some other retreats where the exercises seemed sort of silly, but these were just powerful," Kling said. "You're directed inside yourself and God speaks right to you. The exercises were an awesome display of God's love."

Coffing and Kling both began their personal journeys of healing long before they'd even heard of Rachel's Vineyard. But, Kling says, the retreat offered things she could never have found on her own. "There are so many different aspects of healing from an abortion, and the retreat explores them all. In three days, it concentrates on so many different areas of how the abortion affected you that it would take you a lifetime to figure it out on your own."

While it is geared to the post-abortive woman, Rachel's Vineyard is also open to men, grandparents, siblings, and others affected by abortion.

“Around the country, there are men who have been affected by abortion who are making this retreat,” Prospero said.

Organizers want to offer the weekend retreat twice a year or perhaps more often, depending upon demand.

“I do worry that it might be underutilized because of denial and fear,” Kling said. “It’s a hard thing to advertise. The people who need it and might seek it are probably the same people who are hiding from it.”



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