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## Retreats Offer Spiritual & Psychological Help

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Sixteen years ago when psychologist Dr. Theresa Burke was a graduate student running a support group for persons with eating disorders the topic of abortion came up. "It was kind of like a bomb going off," she recalls. "There were people in tremendous amount of pain." About half voiced their experiences; some got angry with the topic, and others found it so painful they had to leave. Of the total group 80% had had abortion.

However, when Burke told her supervisor about response, he told her, "You have no business prying in people's abortions." He added that "abortion was a personal thing," and that she was not allowed to bring it up in their group. So, after she left there, she started the first therapeutic support group for abortion healing and from its curriculum established Rachel's Vineyard, now an international ministry.

Rachel's Vineyard is "a very comprehensive, very in depth, therapeutic process or journey that women and men anyone involved in abortion is invited to enter and find healing and peace to reconcile that experience," explains Burke.

Rachel's Vineyard uses two models, a retreat and a support group. The retreats are held from Friday night through early Sunday evening. Burke says, "It is like entering the paschal mystery of your own life. You re-experience the passion, the death of your child and by Sunday you will experience resurrection." This is "Because we unite our pains to the suffering of Christ with the hope that when we're done this journey of passion-death that there would be new life at the end of it. And there is!"

The retreat process uses rituals, meditations, a memorial service and a Mass of Resurrection. Though Scriptural the retreat is different than a Bible study or other programs. The reason for this is that "you really enter deeply into the grief of a past abortion." Relates Burke, "so that you can detox and empty the

grief, because, until the grief is completely and totally empty, there isn't room for forgiveness of yourself or anyone else involved."

Retreatants have included women, men, teens, couples, partners, non-parents (who spiritually adopt the child), abortion providers, parents who forced their daughter to have an abortion, families, siblings of aborted children, and grandparents. It would even be possible for a counselor to attend with a client, serving as a support for the client.

In order to recover Burke points out that post-abortive women need support, counseling and comfort much like the 9-11 victims: "Abortion happens like a bomb going off in their life and there are few people around who help them sift through the wreckage."

Rachel's Vineyard Retreats are held by dioceses, individual churches, crisis pregnancy centers, pro-life groups offering an outreach, or retreat houses. Its annual international leadership training retreat will be held on July 10-14 in New Orleans.

Burke also offers one-day clinical training seminars for mental health professionals, diocesan personnel, clergy, physicians, crisis pregnancy center workers, hospital staff, and interested lay volunteers. The seminar provides knowledge of post-abortion trauma, pregnancy loss, and unresolved grief, as well as an overview of the Rachel's Vineyard Retreat process.

Rachel's Vineyard ministries offers its second model in book form for a support group that can be run by a facilitator for ongoing growth or to examine some issues that can't be addressed in a weekend retreat.

Last year 105 retreats were held from Alaska to Florida. Dallas, Austin, Corpus Christi, and Lubbock are among the Texas cities that have hosted them. In Dallas Mark Hennes, a Licensed Master Social Worker and his wife Barbara, the co-directors of Abortion Aftercare-Healing, are the contracts for Rachel's Vineyard. The pair have been involved in 15 retreats since 1997.

Mark says, "There really isn't any more effective way that we know of [for] meeting this need than by the group approach, where many people gather together and become supportive of on another."

He adds "We don't presume to do therapy in a retreat, but the effect is a very healing one...because of the bonding that takes place with all of the participants."

“We just simply take the participants through all the exercises, the Scriptures, the meditations in the manual, and God does the rest” explains Barbara.

Even though the retreat is given in a Catholic context, the Hennes say that persons from different denominations attend and do well. To Barbara the reason is that the program is “so Scripture-based,” and “we have that in common with all Christian people.” Retreatants are also not required to participate in the worship aspects, if they feel uncomfortable.

A team of five persons run each Dallas Rachel's Vineyard Retreat: a priest, licensed mental health worker and facilitators who assist with activities and food. The site within the Dallas area is confidential and the cost for the weekend is \$130.00 for room, board and handouts. The retreats are held every other month. The Hennes also have the capacity to train people to do the retreats. The Hennes can be reached by email at [mbhennes@wt.net](mailto:mbhennes@wt.net) or by phone at 972-785-2273.

Dr. Burke's initial experience with post-abortion trauma has also led her to write a book with David C. Reardon, Ph.D., Director of the Elliot Institute, entitled *Forbidden Grief: the Unspoken Pain of Abortion*. The book, with the forward by Dr. Laura Schlesinger, is meant to help therapists, persons with post-abortion trauma, people trying to help a loved one with post-abortion trauma, and others.



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