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A Special Word to Women Who Have Had an Abortion

By: E. Joanne Angelo, M.D.

The Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, reaches out lovingly and compassionately to women who have had an abortion in his encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* (EV), the *Gospel of Life*. While condemning abortion as "an unspeakable crime", he acknowledges that "the decision to have an abortion is often tragic and painful for the mother..." (EV, 58)

The Holy Father understands that many factors influence the decision a woman makes when she is burdened with an untimely pregnancy:

As well as the mother, there are often other people too who decide upon the death of the child in the womb. In the first place, the father of the child may be to blame, not only when he directly pressures the woman to have an abortion, but also when he indirectly encourages such a decision on her part by leaving her alone to face the problems of pregnancy...Nor can one overlook the pressures which sometimes come from the wider family circle and from friends. Sometimes the woman is subjected to such strong pressure that she feels psychologically forced to have an abortion: certainly in this case the moral responsibility lies particularly with those who have directly or indirectly obliged her to have an abortion. (EV, 59)

The Holy Father also places responsibility for the tragedy of abortion on "doctors and nurses...when they place at the service of death skills which were acquired for promotion of life," on "legislators who have promoted and approved abortion laws," and, "to the extent that they have a say in the matter, on the administrators of the health-care centers where abortions are performed" (EV, 59).

A general and no less serious responsibility [John Paul II continues] lies with those who have encouraged the spread of an attitude of sexual permissiveness and a lack of esteem for motherhood, and those who

should have ensured – but did not – effective family and social policies in support of families. (EV, 59)

“Finally,” he concludes, “one cannot overlook the network of complicity which reaches out to include international institutions, foundations and associations which systematically campaign for the legalization and spread of abortion in the world” (EV, 59).

A Woman’s decision to have an abortion is made in the context of multiple personal and societal pressures in what the Pope has termed the rapidly accelerating “culture of death.” Although the responsibility for the abortion decision is not entirely, nor perhaps not even primarily hers, she must bear its burdensome consequences almost entirely alone for the rest of her life. The Holy Father’s pastoral outreach to women who have had an abortion is tenderly compassionate, forgiving, and hopeful in the *Gospel of Life*.

I would like to say a special word to women who have had an abortion. The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases I was a painful and even shattering decision. (EV, 99)

A woman’s decision to have an abortion is always a stressful decision, made under the pressure of time and often shrouded in secrecy and shame. Most abortions occur in the first trimester – only a few weeks or a few *days* after medical confirmation of the pregnancy. Women are urged to complete the “procedure” quickly, and are erroneously assured that what is to be removed is only “a blob of cells,” “some tissue,” or a “pre-embryo”. Yet, every woman knows that if nothing untoward intervenes, in a matter of nine months she would be holding a child in her arms.

She may believe that the birth of this child would threaten her relationship with the baby’s father, or her ability to complete her education or to achieve her career plans. She may be under intense pressure from the baby’s father, from her own parents and from friends to submit to an abortion. Conversely she may find herself alone, unable to share the secret of her pregnancy with anyone – afraid of losing their esteem and their love, or for fear of reproach or abandonment.

Often women present themselves for an abortion in obvious distress, tearfully signing forms they do not read, feeling emotionally numb and depersonalized. They get through the procedure as though it were happening to someone else, and parrot the rhetoric of the abortion industry when interviewed shortly thereafter: they are “relieved”; their “problem is solved”; they can now

"get on with life" as though nothing more significant than a tooth extraction had occurred.

In the days and weeks following an abortion a woman's defensive denial may be shattered, as pain and bleeding and emotional lability due to hormonal changes remind her of the assault on her body. She is poignantly reminded of the reality of what has happened – of her child that has died an untimely and violent death – as the date approaches when the baby would have been born, or when she sees other children the age her child would have been, or on the anniversary of her abortion, or on Mother's Day, or by the omni-present abortion debate in the media, or on hearing a pro-life homily at church. Flashbacks to the abortion procedure may occur at every visit to the gynecologist, or be triggered by the sound of the suction machine at the dentist's office or the vacuum cleaner at home, or by watching a violent film or TV news story. Graphic educational materials about prenatal development or about late-term abortion may suddenly bring the scientific truth of what has happened into clear focus, leading to overwhelming guilt and depression.

The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. (EV, 99)

Women who have had abortions are often haunted by the intrusive thought, "I killed my baby!" Nightmares of babies being sucked down a tube in pieces, or of finding themselves causing fatal accidents to children, make them fear sleep. Daytime flashbacks and intrusive thoughts interfere with work, study, and personal relationships. They may also turn to alcohol or drugs to get to sleep at night or to deaden the pain of their waking hours, or throw themselves into feverish activity in an attempt to forget their sorrow, guilt, and shame. Deep feelings of loneliness and emptiness may lead to binge eating, alternating with purging and anorexia, or intense efforts to repair intimate relationships or develop new ones inappropriately, or to an insatiable need to replace the lost child at any cost.

For some women the painful wound is due to a shattered sense of self. She may have always thought of herself as a good person – successful and admired at home, at school and at work. She may never have experienced a major failure, never made a serious mistake in life. She may be a product of an environment which applauds beauty, thinness, athletic and academic accomplishments, financial success and personal autonomy above all else. An untimely pregnancy may overwhelm her because it threatens to destroy her universe, and seemingly make it impossible to fulfill her expectations for success (and the expectations which others have for her). Abortion presents itself as an obvious, quick and easy solution to her "problem." However, the horror of what is happening may become apparent to her even as the abortion is taking place.

She may panic at the realization of what she has done: "How could I have done something like that?!"

The person she sees in the mirror is not the person she has known. Never having experienced unconditional love, never having had any experience of failure or any perceived need for forgiveness, she may be unable to accept her wounded self as real, to forgive herself or to ask for forgiveness.

The concept of a loving, merciful God presented by the Holy Father may be entirely foreign to a woman whose sense of self has been destroyed by abortion, and initially difficult to understand and believe. Yet, if she encounters the personification of this truly Christian love and esteem in priests, counselors, and fellow Catholic lay persons, this may be the beginning of her healing and a new stage in her development as a person and as a Christian.

Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. (EV, 99)

Paradoxically, the Holy Father's strong condemnation of abortion is helpful to women who have suffered through this tragedy in their own lives:

Among all the crimes which can be committed against life, procured abortion has characteristics making it particularly serious and deplorable... The one eliminated is a human being at the very beginning of life. No one more absolutely innocent could be imagined. In no way could this human being ever be considered an aggressor, much less an unjust aggressor! He or she is weak, defenseless, even to the point of lacking that minimal form of defense consisting in the poignant power of a newborn baby's cries and tears. The unborn child is totally entrusted to the protection and care of the woman carrying him in her womb. And yet it is sometimes the mother herself who makes the decision and asks for the child to be eliminated, and who then goes about having it done. (EV, 58)

Many women carry these sentiments in their hearts for years, but find no one who understands their profound sorrow and guilt. The denial of the scientific fact that a tiny person – their own child – was destroyed during the abortion procedure, a denial which permitted them to submit to the abortion when it happened, has crumbled over time. They have been left to confront the unspeakable horror of what has truly happened and their own responsibility for it every day and every night, perhaps for years. Doctors prescribe sleeping pills and antidepressants, or anti-anxiety medications without probing for the root cause of the symptoms. Psychosomatic illnesses, eating disorders, substance abuse, failed interpersonal relationships, inability to concentrate on school or

work, or suicide attempts bring women who have had abortions to endless health care workers and counselors without relief.

At least *here* is someone who understands the enormity of the problem! In fact the Catholic Church is perhaps the only institution which has never minimized the grave sin which is abortion. And yet, the Pope is saying, "Do not give in to discouragement, and do not lose hope." Is it possible that life can go on after such an "unspeakable crime?"

Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves 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. (EV, 99)

Women who have had abortions commonly believe that they have committed the "unforgivable sin." Some have stayed away from the Church and the Sacraments their whole adult lives after an abortion as a teenager. Those who have heard about the penalty of excommunication presume they have incurred it, and that it is irrevocable. Some long to go to Mass and receive the Sacraments, but are convinced that this can never again be possible for them, and never dare even to enter a Catholic church again. Others, equally sure that they have been permanently excluded from valid reception of Holy Communion and the other Sacraments, keep up a charade of participating in these and other parish activities for fear of giving scandal or of alienation from family and friends if they did not. They find themselves sinking deeper into despair because of repeated sacrilegious reception of the sacraments and duplicity known only to themselves. Each religious holiday, each wedding, baptism, first Holy Communion, Confirmation, or funeral in the family throws the problem into sharp focus, and no solution seems possible.

Profoundly sorry for what they have done, they may have given up hope of ever finding forgiveness and achieving eternal salvation.

For all these women, the "good News" – that the Catholic Church forgives abortion, and that the Pope is reaching out to them with an invitation to "come home" and be reconciled with God and return to full communion with their fellow Catholics – is truly astounding! The penalty of excommunication, if it has been incurred, *can* and will be lifted. Advertisements for Project Rachel – an outreach program to women and men who have suffered the tragedy of abortion, which is now available in well over 100 U.S. dioceses – are snipped out and tucked away until the women can summon up the courage to make the anonymous call which will put them in touch with a priest or a counselor who will walk with them along their journey home.

Some would say that the guilt which Roman Catholic women feel after an abortion is "Catholic guilt," implying that if the Church did not speak so strongly against abortion these women would not suffer from a lifetime of guilt. All to the contrary, Catholic women, and only Catholic women, after hearing the sin of abortion named in all its ugliness, are offered the Sacrament of Reconciliation, where they hear the priest say, in the name of Christ, "I absolve you of your sins. Go in peace." Not a few women have been drawn to the Catholic Church so as to be able to participate in the loving mercy of Sacramental Confession.

You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord. (EV, 99)

How beautiful and consoling these words are to a woman whose child has been destroyed by abortion and who believes that the baby is lost forever! In her new state of reconciliation with God and the Church she is now also "living in the Lord" and, therefore, able to communicate with her child, In God, through the Communion of the Saints. The Holy Father is inviting her to ask her son or daughter to forgive her, which perhaps she has already done a thousand times in her heart. Now, for the first time, however, she is assured of real communication with her child and of eventual reunion in heaven.

Many mothers of aborted children have developed mental pictures of their daughters and sons, having named them, and some have even watched them grow through the years in their imaginations. Now they have the assurance of the Pope that their children really do exist and that they are with the Lord. Their babies left this earth in total innocence and they now cannot be suffering in any way. While continuing to suffer the sorrow of loss, many mothers turn to their children as intercessors before God for large and small needs in life, for themselves and for others.

With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people, and as a result of your own painful experience, you can become the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life. (EV, 99)

The love with which the Holy Father reaches out to a woman who has had an abortion, and the unconditional love with which the Church and pro-life community surround her, may be her first experience of true Christian charity. If her wounded life is so profoundly valued and cherished, she can begin to perceive herself as having dignity and worth as a person. She comes to understand that every human person has the same dignity and value – each and every one has been purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ.

Her profound suffering has taught her that abortion is *not* a solution to the problem of an untimely pregnancy, but rather a transformation of a temporary problem into a potentially life-long tragedy. Some women who have had abortions – very few – will choose to speak out about their painful experience so as to help others not to make the same mistake. Most mothers of aborted children, however, will defend everyone’s right to life quietly and effectively, praying and working discretely, supporting pro-life efforts and advising those who ask them, giving positive solutions to the many life-threatening problems in our society.

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.

In time women who have had abortions and whose wounds have healed can broaden their loving concern for life to encompass all those who have need of someone to be close to them. They will be able to take up the challenge from the Holy Father to:

Transform culture so that it supports life...to promote a "new feminism"...[to] first learn and then teach others that human relations are authentic if they are open to accepting the other person: a person who is recognized because of the dignity which comes from being a person and not from other considerations, such as usefulness, strength, intelligence, beauty, or health. This [the Holy Father says] is the fundamental contribution which the Church and humanity expect from women. And it is the indispensable prerequisite for an authentic cultural change. (EV, 99)

At the close of the *Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II entrusts the cause of life to Mary, calling her “a sign of sure hope and solace,” the “bright dawn of the new world,” and “Mother of the living.” He asks her to “look down on the vast numbers of babies not allowed to be born” and implores her that the Gospel of Life be proclaimed, accepted, celebrated and borne witness to “in order to build, together with all people of good will, the civilization of truth and love, to the praise and glory of God, the Creator and lover of life” (EV, 105). May each of us make this prayer our own.



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