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## After Abortion

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There are at least two victims of each induced abortion: the unborn baby and that baby's mother. Other victims can include the father of the aborted baby and anyone who encouraged the mother to have the abortion.

If anyone has any doubt about the horror of killing an innocent child, he or she need look no further than the psychological and spiritual aftermath of abortion. Abortion shakes the very foundation of one's soul and infects the core of one's being. Feelings of alienation, fear, anger, victimization, denial, despair, grief, and low self-esteem are common. Of those who have had an abortion or encouraged another to have one, some are aware of the damage, others are in denial, while still others fight vigorously to sanction and defend their choice by evangelizing the world and even the Church with abortion rights – another expression of denial.

The Church consistently condemns the act of abortion, recognizing it as a grave moral wrong. But the Church certainly does not condemn the person. Rather, it recognizes the damaging aftereffects of induced abortion on the survivors and reaches out with love and tenderness to those who suffer. Excommunication is not the end – the Church offers to all the sacrament of reconciliation, which restores full sacramental participation to those who receive it.

However, many who have had or encouraged an abortion mistakenly think they cannot be forgiven. Jessica's comment is a common one: "If only I had heard someone get up in church and tell me that God wanted to forgive me for what I had done. If only someone had told me that God did not hate me. Just hearing this would have saved me sixteen years of living hell."

For others, shame keeps them silent about their need to be reconciled; they fear judgment and condemnation. These fears are so strong and powerful that many people will agonize for years, perhaps a lifetime, and never gain the courage to reconcile their sin with God. Those who do recognize their need for forgiveness and healing often stay away from the sacrament of reconciliation

because seeking and accepting God's forgiveness after an abortion usually entails a painful process that is difficult to go through alone. Repressed grief, anger, feelings of abandonment, and ambivalent feelings about the aborted child must all be dealt with before an individual is ready to receive and accept God's forgiveness and sacramental healing.

In response to these needs, the bishops in the United States have established an outreach of post-abortion healing, Project Rachel. This ministry is devoted to helping women and men who have been injured by abortion. Through the National Office of Post-Abortion Reconciliation and Healing, those who work with post-abortive women become aware of the specific concerns, denial, and grief that are likely to surface as an individual seeks reconciliation. These are important aspects to recognize when helping someone work through the process, one that requires courage and a tremendous amount of support and love.

Post-abortion healing programs vary in name, format, and length of time. All, however, focus on helping the participants come to grips with their decision to abort and the impact which that decision has had on their lives. Finally, as Jennifer summarizes, they come to "understand that what we did, horrible as it is, was a mistake and that we need to be forgiven. We have such shame, and Jesus wants us to be healed of that shame."

Spreading the word about post-abortion healing programs must be done with sensitivity if it is to reach those to whom this healing ministry is directed. These programs are publicized through church bulletins, diocesan newspapers, and pulpit announcements. Because many who are in need of post-abortion healing have distanced themselves from the Church, diocesan agencies publicize these programs through local newspapers and radio and television announcements as well. Whatever the medium, the invitation should reflect the compassionate forgiveness of Jesus.

When Leslie heard her pastor extend an invitation to attend a post-abortion retreat, she had an intense emotional reaction. "When I first heard about the retreat, I was frightened. I began to feel paranoid...like everyone in the church knew I had an abortion. My face became flushed, and I wanted to run. But at the same time I saw a tiny glimmer of hope."

This glimmer of hope is what the Church wants to give, the spark of truth and love that invites a person to bring his or her pain before the healing light of Christ. Susan summarizes the experience of many who have responded to the Church's invitation: "For eighteen years I have been haunted with heavy guilt that no one could take away. I was tormented by thoughts of what that child would have been like. Through participating in a program for post-abortion

healing, I was finally able to name my pain, forgive myself, and reconnect with my child. I know that God has given me a peaceful mind, cleansed my heart, and washed away my guilt.”

In his encyclical “the Gospel of Life”, Pope John Paul II speaks to those who have had an abortion: “The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision...The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly...the Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the sacrament of reconciliation...With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people and as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone’s right to life” (99.3).

Two women describe the spiritual and emotional impact of post-abortion healing and reveal that what the Pope envisioned can happen. Mary says, “The process has given me the opportunity to confess what I know as a Catholic to be a sin. I was able to do this in a warm, supportive, and loving environment. Here I was nurtured and touched, spoken to and listened to. I was given hours to reflect and prepare for the sacrament and make peace. I have truly felt the power of reconciliation through this process.”

Pam adds, “I was terrified to take the first step...It seemed safer to keep the pain locked up inside rather than risk exposing my shame...I am grateful to have experienced God’s healing and forgiveness in an atmosphere of complete acceptance and trust.”



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