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Ripe for the Healing Harvest

By: Joseph Pronechen

"I'm like a little kid before Christmastime the week before our Rachel's Vineyard retreat begins," says Michelle Krystofik, associate director of the Respect Life Office in the Archdiocese of Newark, N.J. "With Rachel's Vineyard, I have seen the miracles happen."

Since 1997 in this archdiocese, more than 415 women and men have attended these retreats to ease the pain of post-abortion trauma. "The men and women say the least they get is a sense of peace," recounts Krystofik. "On the other end, I've seen lives completely transformed." When asked for examples, she mentions renewed marriages of previously uncommitted couples and conversions to the Catholic faith.

Catholic psychologist Theresa Burke has seen these miracles by the thousands since she co-founded **Rachel's Vineyard Ministries** with her husband, Kevin, in 1996.

"Rachel's Vineyard is a step-by-step program to help women and men journey into their grief," she says, "and experience the mercy and compassion of God."

So effective is it that, in one southern diocese, Burke saw 95% of attendees go on to accept leadership positions in women's Bible studies, Vacation Bible School and chastity education.

Which is exactly as it should be, Krystofik points out. For, in his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (The Value and Inviolability of Human Life), Pope John Paul II spoke directly to post-abortive women. He told them that, once they came for healing after their own painful experience, they "can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life."

"This is where you see a real new life coming that is actually a part of the New Evangelization," says Burke. "God brings life out of death, so there's a great reason for hope."

The hope has continued to abound since the movement's modest start 12 years ago. Today more than 600 Rachel's Vineyard retreats are held annually in 48 states and 27 countries around the world, including South Africa, Australia, Taiwan and Russia.

Rachel's Vineyard Ministries - not to be confused with the similarly named Project Rachel (see "Fighting 'Abortion Fallout,'" June 29) - is endorsed by numerous archbishops and bishops, not to mention Blessed Teresa of Calcutta and Father Benedict Groeschel of the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal.

Five years ago Rachel's Vineyard became a ministry of Priests for Life. Father Frank Pavone, that organization's national director, serves as pastoral director while the Burkes serve as pastoral associates.

Archbishop John Myers of Newark, N.J., believes the retreats are vital because "people don't realize the long-lasting effects and trauma on both women and men," he says. "I think it's just important people know they can be reconciled to God, and they can forgive themselves. This program helps that happen."

Getting Unstuck

Author of *Forbidden Grief: The Unspoken Pain of Abortion* (Acorn, 2002), Theresa Burke founded the ministry after working with a women's group on an entirely different problem: eating disorders. When she discovered the root of the disorder for some - abortion - her supervising psychiatrist told her she had no business prying into others' abortions. But the good psychologist couldn't ignore the deep hurt, much less the unmistakable pattern.

"I saw very quickly that abortion was such a shattering wound to the soul it required not just a psychological, but a spiritual approach, as well," she explains. "I could not touch the depth of it without a spiritual process."

After Burke wrote manuals for a weekend retreat, Rachel's Vineyard was born. The first retreats were held at Mother's Home in Philadelphia, a maternity home of which Kevin Burke was then director.

From those humble beginnings came an inspiring string of success stories.

"God delivered me from an enormous burden of shame," wrote one woman recently. "I know that there are many further steps for me to take, but I know now that I am no longer 'stuck' in the denial and sense of uselessness where I was before. ... As for our marriage, I think sharing this experience with my husband ... has opened a whole new entrance for God's grace in our relationship, as well."

Archbishop Myers, who makes an annual stop at a weekend retreat, says the most moving part of each weekend comes when the mothers and fathers give their deceased babies names, acknowledging the little ones' humanity. "They carry that name with them for the rest of their lives," he says. "That helps in the forgiveness process."

Burke adds that, before the naming, many haven't wanted to forgive themselves; their coping strategy had been trying to forget their baby.

"When they are given the opportunity to grieve the baby, name the child, and view the child as an intercessor before the throne of God, which is a turning point for a lot of people, they find new life in Christ and the promise of being reunited with their child after this life," she says. "God restores the spiritual relationship and the hope of seeing their child in heaven. Then the child is someone they reflect on with love and tenderness, instead of shame and pain."

The sacraments are always incorporated in the retreats, and scriptural exercises help participants see God's hand in the experience.

Krystofik finds much healing in the power of the Eucharist - especially as women quietly pray in the middle of the night before the exposed Blessed Sacrament.

Men at Work

Men benefit, too, from the ministry, says Kevin Burke, a licensed social worker. He co-authored *Redeeming a Father's Heart: Men Share Powerful Stories of Abortion Loss and Recovery* (AuthorHouse, 2007). Most affected, he says, are those who didn't want their baby aborted and those who remained silent in deference to the mother's decision.

He points to the research of the Illinois-based Elliot Institute: The man plays a key role in 95% of abortion decisions. "Sometimes not saying anything is a death sentence for the child," he says, when men physically or emotionally abandon women. Later, the men realize they also abandoned their unique role to defend the child.

"Rachel's Vineyard is having a huge impact relieving pain so that women and men can utilize their God-given gifts to build the Kingdom of heaven on earth," says Theresa. "God really does want to heal his people. He is the divine physician."

Staff writer Joseph Pronechen is based in Trumbull, Connecticut.

MORE INFO RachelsVineyard.org (877) HOPE 4 ME



HEALING AND CONVERSION. A Rachel's Vineyard team member prays before the Blessed Sacrament during one of the ministry's weekend retreats. The cradle beneath the monstrance encourages attendees to symbolically give their aborted babies back to Jesus.



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