

**5th WORLD-PRAYER-CONGRESS for LIFE in ROME
October 5 – 10, 2010**

“And the Light Shines in the Darkness”

Talk No. 28

held on October 8, 2010 by

Anne Lastman

“The Taboo Connection: Sexual Abuse and Abortion”

organized by HLI Austria: www.hli.at Talks available at: www.pro-life-congress.com

Two types of traumatic pain, which render the world of the victim asunder, are the pain experienced from sexual abuse, specifically incest, and pain of induced abortion. The population experiencing this pain is different, that is, one is a child and the other is generally (though not always) an adult woman. Yet the trauma and grief experienced by both of the types of population share more than a connection of pain but perhaps more sadly a connection in perpetuating both types of pain.

Both sexual abuse and abortion introduces into the ontology of the human person a new and alien imprint. Indeed this can be called a death imprint because this death speaks of death of “innocence.” Both these two forms of “death,” that is, death of a foetal child (innocence) through abortion and death of innocence (through sexual abuse) have within them a high degree of unacceptability of death and its grotesqueness.

BEING A VICTIM OF SEXUAL ABUSE AND VICTIM OF POST ABORTION GRIEF AND TRAUMA

Sexual abuse can be defined as any contact or interaction (visual, verbal, physical or psychological) between a child/adolescent and an adult, when the child/adolescent is being used for the sexual stimulation of the adult. It is thus defined because cognitively, emotionally and physically the child is immature and cannot make an informed decision to consent or not to consent.

Sexual abuse is generally (though not always) perpetrated against a female child and usually by another person well known to the child. This type of abuse is systematic, and ongoing, though occasionally it is an isolated event. Sexual abuse is most damaging both psychologically and spiritually because the child is unable to protect him or herself, and further, because of the fact that a known and trusted person in the child’s life is the one who carries out the abuse. Psychologically the child is unequipped to handle an adult activity (sexual act or stimulation) and her belief in her place of order in the family (child) becomes

confused and distorted. Spiritually, sexual abuse sets the pattern for disbelief in a God who could not or would not protect her.

The most destructive element of the sexual abuse is that trust is destroyed. From the time of the first violation, trust is “seized.” Erikson’s (1963) ideas about *trust* emerging as a consequence of safe and friendly world and *mistrust* as a result of experience of betrayal, rejection, hostility, hostile place, resonate in this experience of abuse. Sexual abuse, especially by a trusted and loved individual introduces into the ontology of the child a deep sense of betrayal from which thereafter the child is unable to trust because she cannot trust herself or another person.

Development of trust was arrested at the moment when sexual abuse began, therefore she has no schema on which to develop her trust. The child remains suspended within a time frame and whilst in other ways her physical and even cognitive development proceeds, her affective and her spiritual domains remain frozen at the time of abuse and thereafter.

Where the abuser was a father, stepfather, brother, grandfather, or relative, (intrafamilial) this further contributes to the “trust” factor being affected with trust of any males being challenged. This loss of trust becomes difficult because it distorts the ability to see males as “friendly” or adults or authority figures worthy of trust and respect.

Sexual abuse is a crossing over of natural invisible boundaries. This confusion of boundaries occurs because the child is forced to comply with the abuser because of his/her position of power within the relationship and this leads to a real loss of the sense of knowledge of what is right and wrong. Thus her wounded and confused schemata will govern future decision-making, which includes loss of a sense of right judgement.

BEING A VICTIM OF POST ABORTION TRAUMA

Post abortion victims experience psychological sequelae following her having undergone an induced abortion. This victim may exhibit any or all of these symptoms.

Post Abortion Distress.....The symptoms include “emotional distress...a perception of loss from the abortion ... and some conflict in personality, roles, values and relationships that results from a changed understanding of the appropriateness of the abortion decision

The symptoms of post abortion distress appear almost immediately or within three months of the abortion and continue for about six months and thereafter cease. More importantly for a diagnosis of Post Abortion Distress there has to be no re experiencing of the stressor.

Post Abortion Syndrome...is understood to be a type of post traumatic stress disorder that is characterised by chronic or delayed development of symptoms resulting from impacted emotional reactions to the perceived physical and emotional trauma of abortion. Some features of post abortion syndrome include flashbacks, nightmares, anniversary symptoms, depression, suicide ideation, continual weeping, sexual dysfunction, violence to self and other, eating disorders, substance abuse, multiple relationships, self defeating rumination.

Post Abortion Psychosis....This is a severe and generally rare condition following induced abortion and is characterised by chronic and severe symptoms especially if disorganisation and significant personality and reality impairment occurs which includes hallucinations, delusions, and severe depression.

A victim of post abortion trauma will experience loss of sense that “I am a good person” and the assumption that the world and her life is good. There will be loss of self trust and the belief that she is capable making good decisions. She can experience loss of control, especially where she did not want to have the abortion but is forced into the procedure by a significant other.

There is a loss of reverence for one’s own body and bodily integrity. Post abortive women have expressed the belief that “an awful violation of my body occurred” (Sara). This can then lead to future promiscuity, eating disorders, depression, substance abuse and self destructive behaviours. A further sadness is the loss of sense of being a future good mother and loss of sense of being a good protector and nurturer.

Abortion trauma deeply wounds the feminine spirit, the essential feminine genius

SOCIAL CONTEXT OF ABORTION AND SEXUAL ABUSE

The context in which elective abortion is performed has widened. Where past societies “whispered” about abortion, present society has slowly accepted, condoned and enshrined in law the “right” to the procedure, indeed to the degree that the facilities for such procedures are openly available and can now be accessed with ease and some governments even fund the procedure. Where in the earlier days stricter measures were in place so that the procedure was not abused, over time these measures were not policed and the law which required that abortion could be carried out only if the mother’s life was in danger, was soon overlooked. Today most countries around the world offer facilities for termination of pregnancy for any reason or none.

Abortion has found root within society

Sexual abuse (incest) is different. The social context of this type of abuse is microscopic (usually family or friends) but the ramifications are far reaching. Where the abuse begins from the child's early age, then the scope of her/his possible escape is significantly diminished because he/she is dependant both physically and psychologically on others for her maintenance.

Whilst the original abuse occurs within a limited space, that is, family or friendship circle, the effects spread wide into society because the victim then takes into adult life, the psychological, emotional, at times physical and spiritual ramifications of that abuse.

RANGE OF REACTIONS TO ABORTION AND SEXUAL ABUSE

The range of reactions to abortion go from disquiet through to depression, guilt, shame remorse, eating and sleeping disorders, substance abuse, anxiety attacks, emotional withdrawal, future relationship difficulties, memory loss, flashbacks, isolation, avoidance, tendency towards violence, sexual dysfunction, frequent and at times unexplained and uncontrollable weeping, suicide ideation and at times suicide attempts.

Range of reactions to child sexual abuse (incest) range from depression, guilt, shame, learned helplessness, powerlessness, unnameable sadness, loss of self esteem, loss of or never learned sense of judgement, self mutilation, multiple abortions, pervasive sense of being dirty, self abandonment internally and externally, confusion, isolation, aversion to intimacy (frigidity) or alternatively promiscuity, pervasive unhappiness, uncontrollable weeping, anger, distrust, rage, flashbacks or alternatively deep forgetting, sleep disorders, eating disorders.

The range of reactions to the trauma of sexual abuse and elective abortion are myriad, and these effects have the capacity to produce significant disruption in the living of one's day-to-day existence. Indeed the disruption and disorganisation occur in all areas of the individual's life, functioning, beliefs and understanding about self and world around him/her.

The Link between Early Sexual abuse and Multiple Abortions

As a post abortion grief counsellor of many years, I first noticed the link between sexual abuse in early life and multiple abortions many years ago. In the course of counselling of post abortive women I noticed certain ambivalence in relation to multiple abortions.

In my practice I have encountered women with 11 abortions, 7 abortions, 5, abortions, 13 abortions, 6 abortions and the list continues.

When I first encountered (about 14 years ago) a client who in passing said that she had had 6 abortions and was not feeling sad or remorse about her abortions but feeling a deep sadness with the miscarriage of one of her pregnancies (and this is why she contacted me) I asked her to speak a little about all of her pregnancies so that we would establish a pattern of conception and then abortion and then why different feelings about her miscarriage.

She spoke about controlling her life, and her body and her career and her boyfriends, and her pregnancies. Her miscarriage she could not control.

Control was important to her - As I listened I realised that there must have been a time when she could not control some situation and was a victim of force whether physical or psychological or both. So I asked further questions about her much earlier life and after many sessions it emerged that she had been sexually abused by her older brother over several years (with threats) and she said she had vowed ***“nothing will ever happen to me again unless I say so”***.

When asked why so many boyfriends and abortions she replied ***“because I cut out a bit more of men every time I have another abortion. They’re not babies they are bits of men who I hate”***.

Multiple abortions for this woman are “cutting out” of bits of men and eventually the perception of removal of all traces of sexual abuse. It is being in control of her body where once she could not control what happened to her body.

Much experience has clearly shown that the woman who has multiple abortions does not see the abortions as her children and does not believe that she is aborting children but rather taking control of her body and cutting out undesirable elements.

Perhaps further reasons can be cited for multiple abortions following abuse, and some of these reasons can be the early and over sexualisation of the child leading to promiscuity from a young age and the

ramifications of this lifestyle including allowing herself to be used and abused by men because she is dirty and is not worth much.

Sexual abuse of anyone is loathsome, but sexual abuse of a child is particularly so because a child is unable to process the sexual information. Most damaging is the abuse which occurs during the formative years, because during these years is the time when the developmental processes are active in the developing of personality, trust, strength, courage, self esteem. During the developmental years is the time when boundaries which begin to be established in childhood, in loving environment, for the future self protection and judgement formation, become strengthened and developed further in readiness for healthy, functional adulthood.

Where sexual abuse has occurred these boundaries do not exist, thus leaving the adult victim vulnerable to more abuse.

Sexual abuse during the formative years, imprints within the psyche of the child, distortions about the self, their place in life, their idea of or lack of trust, a sense of valuelessness, a sense of deep loss, fear and an interruption of progressive emotional development thus leading to future adult emotional stuntedness.

Sexual abuse especially of the incest variety always touches society in a place of unease. It is the last remaining taboo. Yet it must be visited because the suffering is real and lifelong and this abuse sets up the groundwork for other self destructive life events including abortion and multiple abortions (up to 13 abortions one of the women)

Again, why multiple abortions? Anecdotal evidence seems to point to abortion as a replaying of the earlier trauma. The similarities between sexual abuse and abortion are eerily similar. It appears that traumatised individuals expose themselves almost like a compulsion to situations where their original trauma or semblance of that trauma is repeated. Freud posited that the reason for repetition of trauma is to gain mastery over the situation; however, I believe that this does not happen but instead is a retraumatisation of the victim. A further thought could be that in the reenacting of the trauma there is a desire to self harm or even to achieve pain threshold of the originating trauma.

The Abortion also means the death of an innocent child growing deeply within her body and is a repetition of the slow death of her little self or “little person who was young and innocent too” (Andrea).

Multiple abortions following early childhood sexual abuse is also indicative of deep secret which the victim is not permitted to tell or speak about. It is the hope of the victim that someone will ask the right

questions so that she can tell that secret to someone so that in the telling that little child who was being hurt can be comforted and escape the downhill spiral of loneliness.

In the incidence of “Helen” (29 years-7 abortions), she was coerced into a pact not to tell of her abuse under threat of harm to a younger family member if she told. “Helen” kept the promise “not to tell”, but the promise resulted in scrupulosity and self mutilation via the medium of abortion. Freeing “Helen” from the deep secret and the fear that if she told, harm would come to her family, was necessary before being able to help her. “Helen” did not see her abortions as babies but as “bits of flesh” which could be discarded. Healing work with “Helen” requires first helping the child within her inner being to painfully recover a sense of integrity and honour and a sense of love and security. Only then can one begin the work of humanising her aborted children and thus begin the healing of the multiple losses she will feel when she recognises that her abortions mean death of innocent babies. Helen’s healing must first take into account the healing of the inner “Helen” before she can begin to work through the losses which she has experienced as a result of her childhood sexual abuse.

Healing

Many losses are suffered by those sexually abused and slowly *one loss needs* to be recovered in order for a healing to begin and that loss is the looking for and finding and then beginning to like and love that little girl/boy within the inner being - the child who survived through all the pain, humiliation, abandonment and losses. Finding this hurt child can be difficult because most often she sits hunched up in a dark corner in the recesses of her mind. She/he sits in terror.

But most importantly what helps in the recovery is to help her to fall in love with her own inner little girl, the child who was abused and hurt and with no one to comfort and protect her. To love this little child who is a brave survivor and not a worthless being (which is the self belief of the sexually abused).

This little girl who could not process the events and when she did so processed them as a frightened confused child, and which would be later accessed and interpreted by the adult in a manner not conducive to healthy emotional life. It is in the loving of this inner child, in the loving of that little courageous girl that we return to her, her rightful needs to fulfil her mandate to grow.

There can be no movement forward whilst the emotional life remains stuck at the abuse age (childhood age) - the emotional life of a child in the body of an adult. This adult then needs to make sense of the awful things that have happened to him/her because without meaning making or sense making for him/her suffering it is difficult for her to “mature”.

The love and work needed to reach the “meaning making” is intense but important, otherwise what happened to him/her is accepted because it has happened, but not why it happened. There is a sense of terrible injustice when no meaning can be found for a cruelty. Coming to a point of some sense and be able to live with that meaning enables him/her to begin to look forward rather than backwards.

Among other things it was in the depriving of the child’s inner being of love, security, trust and honouring of his/he innocence which wounds most deeply and which is felt most deeply, and leaves the individual with a sense of being emotionless, divided and alone, always still looking for that sense of being loved and wanted and protected. Having come to this understanding of the nature of the losses, we begin our work of “going home” (rebuilding where there are losses).