

5th WORLD-PRAYER-CONGRESS for LIFE in ROME

October 5 - 10, 2010

“And the Light Shines in the Darkness”

Talk No. 42

held on October 9, 2010 by

Victoria Thorn

“Project Rachel and the Church Response”

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

Project Rachel is the official post-abortion healing ministry of the Catholic Church in the United States. This pastoral response supports the Church's unequivocal prophetic stance that abortion is wrong and never good for children, women or men who participate. This pastoral ministry is the embodiment of the promise of Pope John Paul II when he speaks in *Evangelium Vitae* to the women who have had abortions near the end of Section 99 “*With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people*”. These are the priests and caregivers of *Project Rachel*.

Project Rachel was founded in 1984 in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA, and it is now in almost every diocese in the United States. It is in New Zealand, Guam and the Bahamas, and Slovakia. The ministry continues to develop in Canada, Mexico, Australia, Hong Kong, China, Ukraine, Poland and Romania. There is great interest in French and English speaking Africa, The Philippines, Singapore, India, many countries in Latin America as well as in Eastern and Western Europe.

Those who have experienced abortion live in despair. It is necessary to have a name for the ministry that clearly communicates what was to be expected. The name *Project Rachel* comes from the Old Testament, Jeremiah 31: 15-17. The message of is one of hope for the future.

Thus says the Lord: In Ramah is heard the sound of moaning, of bitter weeping! Rachel mourns her children she refuses to be consoled because her children are no more. Thus says the Lord: Cease your cries of mourning, wipe the tears from your eyes. The sorrow you have shown shall have its reward, says the Lord, they shall return from the enemy's land. There is hope for your future, says the Lord.” (The New American Bible)

Project Rachel is a diocesan network of specially trained priests, mental health professionals, deacons, spiritual directors, Sisters and other caregivers who provide one on one care to those seeking reconciliation and healing. It is always operated within a diocese with the blessing, support and agreement of the local Ordinary. The ministry serves the entire diocese so that there is easy access to caregivers. There is a central contact point in the diocese, usually within an existing office, where people can receive referrals to priests or caregivers. It is helpful to have one person who accepts the calls so that when someone calls back, there is continuity of care. The person seeking help is given the referral and is responsible for making the contact for care when they are ready. It is important for them to make this step in healing. The person seeking help may choose to begin with a priest or with a caregiver. The referral will be to a specific priest or two or to a specific caregiver/counselor. The whole list is never made available. The person is told that if they can not make contact for some reason, they should call back.

Abortion is epidemic in the world. No country is untouched, even if the law still prohibits abortion. Determining the exact number of abortions in the world per year is a bit of a challenge. It is safe to say that between 42 million and 50 million occur each year. One source says that one in five pregnancies worldwide end in abortion. It seems to be the case that the largest number occur in developing countries because of population disparity. We must remember that the fathers of the children and other family members may also be impacted. Clearly the numbers are of epidemic proportions.

I began *Project Rachel* in response to the call the Bishops of the United States issued in 1975 as *The Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities*, published by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The Bishops laid out a strategy for dioceses to organize respect life offices to confront the advent of legalized abortion. This document called for education on the sanctity and protection of all life from conception to natural death; involvement in the legislative process and called for a pastoral response to aid women in a crisis pregnancy as well as to minister to those who have lost children to abortion.

My awareness of the need for such a ministry came from a friend who had an abortion forced on her by her mother. She already had placed a baby for adoption prior to that event. Over the years that followed the abortion, she shared her pain with me and she always ended our conversations by saying “I can live with the adoption. I can’t live with the abortion.” When I became Respect Life Director for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, it was clear to me, as I heard the stories of other women who had had abortions, that the Church was the place where women could be helped. The woman who had had an abortion experiences the human pain of a mother who had lost a child and she believes that God could not and would not forgive her. The wound of abortion is both spiritual and human.

In developing a plan to minister to those touched by abortion, I approached priests and asked if they had encountered women who had had abortions in Confession. I also asked them if they felt confident that they had truly been able to help her to heal. Every priest had heard the confessions and each one of them shared that they were not sure they had known how to really help her. I asked the same questions of mental health professionals who worked for Catholic Charities and received similar replies. In response, I designed a training seminar to help them understand the aftermath of abortion as well as the components of human and spiritual healing. A Canon Lawyer explained the Code of Canon Law as well. The priests and the counselors attended the same seminar, which gave them a common base of understanding and allowed them to come to know each other, so that a network of caregivers could develop.

As Church, we can offer her spiritual care through priests and the sacrament of Reconciliation and we can offer her companions on her healing journey through spiritual directors and other specially trained caregivers as well counseling through our mental health professionals when necessary to deal with psychological wounds. The role of religious women in providing compassionate care in countries where access to mental health caregivers is difficult, is beginning to develop.

The network of priests throughout the diocese makes it possible for her to contact someone physically close to her or to see someone away from her community. The shame of abortion may make it difficult to approach a pastor, assuming she is actually active in a parish. Many who seek help are currently unchurched and the network of caregivers, who are geographically scattered throughout a diocese, makes it more convenient to seek help. The one on one care is crucial because it honors the unique spiritual journey of each woman. It provides for confidential care and makes no demands that she enter into a group setting. There is a great deal of shame attached to abortion and women are often very afraid of exposure and judgment. We need to assure the woman that the ministry is confidential and that she can choose to remain anonymous. The sacrament of Confession with its anonymity is a perfect place for her to begin. The knowledgeable and compassionate confessor can help her address the spiritual pain and either journey with her through the human healing part of the process or refer her to someone else in the network for additional care. Mental health professionals who work in the Church as well as Catholic counselors in private practice can be part of the network. Sisters are the ideal companions because of their spiritual wisdom, active prayer life and accessibility. In the United

States, the Sisters of Life are actively involved in this ministry and in the Bahamas, the ministry is housed in a Benedictine convent where the retired sisters answer the telephone, work and pray with the women. In some parts of the world, it is impossible to gain access to mental health professionals because of cost and stigma. Convents provide the perfect safe haven where a woman can go for help. In many countries sisters are working with women already in other capacities and this ministry is an extension of care they are already providing. As the ministry becomes established, days of reflection, support groups and retreats can be helpful. The network of trained caregivers always remains a critical extension of these one-time activities. It is important to recognize that the wound of abortion is deep and that these one time events can open up new areas of wounding that will need attention. We as Church are obligated to provide holistic care that provides the framework of spiritual and psychological care that enables her to accomplish deep and authentic healing.

The list of priests involved in the ministry is kept absolutely confidential for several reasons. First, if abortion providers have access to the list they use it to convince women to have abortions because here are priests that will forgive her. One of the first calls I received after the founding of the ministry was from a local abortion clinic asking for the list of priests. Secondly, if it comes to the attention of the director of the ministry that one priest is not a good fit, referrals are simply not made to him. There is no need to remove his name from the list. Thirdly, priests are more willing to become part of the work because they know they can simply call and tell the referring individual not to refer anyone for a while because he is working with several people at the moment, or he is ill or moving. When he is ready, he can come back onto the list. This eases the fears of the priest that he may be too busy to do this ministry. Fourthly, staff of parish centers may make assumptions that if any woman calls to meet with the priests she must have had an abortion and gossip and rumors can ruin reputations.

In providing a network of caregivers who can journey with the woman at her own pace, we are being respectful of her and respectful of God's timing. The wounds of abortion take time to heal and often are linked to other wounds that also need God's attention and human counseling. For example, many women who have abortions have a previous history of sexual abuse. We need to always keep this in mind. We are sometimes tempted to think that that everyone heals at the same pace and that we can fit everyone into a model for healing but that is not true. Saint Francis De Sales said "*The soul which rises from out of sin to a devout life has been compared to the dawn, which does not banish darkness suddenly, but by degrees. The slow cure is always the surest, and spiritual maladies, like those of the body, while they are apt to come on horseback and express, tend to depart slowly and on foot.*" He warned that slow progress may discourage some, while the sense of immediate purification causes others to leave their physician too soon and risk a relapse. Like St. Francis De Sales, we must be patient ministers, neither rushing them to a sense of immediate healing nor letting them despair at slow progress.

It is critical to train as many priests as possible to understand the problem of abortion. As a confessor, he will be confronted with the penitent who has been involved in an abortion. His response to her can bring her back to the merciful embrace of God or drive her to despair. Some of these priests will feel called to be part of a formal network, accepting referrals from the diocesan ministry, but all priests as confessors, are likely to encounter abortion. Usually about 10% of the priests in a diocese become part of the active referral network. The inexperienced or unprepared priest can do grave spiritual harm by telling her that she has committed the unforgivable sin, that she is damned and going to hell or in some cases, by seeming to dismiss the seriousness of the offense. He is the gateway back to the Church for her. **The Catechism of the Church** in section 1465 says that "*When he celebrates the sacrament of Penance, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, of the Good Samaritan who binds up wounds, of the Father who awaits the prodigal son and welcomes him on his return, and of the just and impartial judge whose judgment is both just and merciful. The priest is the sign and the instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner.*" He must understand her pain and her shame. He must understand the need for a reasonable penance. A bishop

from an Eastern European country recently shared his dismay in finding out that some priests in his country impose on women who confess abortion, a penance of 7 years without the Eucharist. This denies her the very grace she needs to heal. This is a harsh public and punitive sort of penance and will not bring her to the Church, but will drive her away.

Over the years since the founding of the ministry, I have spoken to thousands of women in the United States and other countries. Women tell me that they are drawn to the Church and the sacraments, and at the same time, they are afraid to approach, inhibited by their shame and guilt and by a perception that the Church is unforgiving. The woman who has chosen abortion believes that she has committed the unforgivable sin, the sin that God will not forgive, the sin that flies in the face of the Creator by destroying a life God created. Women share that they have a desperate need to make sense of this experience in light of their spirituality but are terrified to approach the confessional for fear of retribution and shame. They were frightened that the Church, through the priest, would affirm that they were indeed unforgivable. The strong pro-life stance of the Church heightened their fear. As God continued to call them, some overcame their fear only to encounter a priest who chastised them or excused them. Many speak of returning to confess over and over, trying to rid themselves of the guilt they felt, sometimes to be told by an unenlightened priest that they were crazy and should find a psychiatrist or that they couldn't be forgiven. And yet they persevered, knowing that they needed to encounter God to be healed. Men, who are the forgotten partners, share that they don't know where to go with their pain. They've been told it is a woman's issue. They've been told they have no right to feel pain. They speak of how a homily that mentioned men and abortion or a talk on a retreat or a newspaper article, opened their eyes to the fact that help is available for them.

Priests need to recognize the power of their preaching to speak the prophetic truth about abortion, but also to proclaim the message of healing, mercy and forgiveness. In preaching the priest does not always have to directly address the issue of abortion, but he can often include abortion when speaking about God's love and mercy and the power of the Sacrament of Confession. Priests sometimes express a reluctance to speak about abortion because they are afraid that they will hurt people in the congregation with harsh words. However, there are many ways to speak about abortion and making a point of always including the information that abortion hurts everyone and that God's mercy is available for all who come seeking it, makes it possible for people to hear the message. Some priests have found that reading a letter written by a woman or man about their abortion pain and the peace they found through God's mercy can be a wonderful way to begin speaking about healing after abortion.

Abortion is still a reserved sin in some countries. The priest must approach the Bishop for permission to forgive the sin or the woman is sent to the Bishop. Confessors have shared that this may be a question of undue burden and that women seeking absolution simply do not return, convinced the Bishop will refuse. In places where *Project Rachel* has been implemented around the world, Bishops have granted general faculties to the priests so they can grant absolution to her. In training the confessors, it is important to review Canon Law as it pertains to excommunication for the sin of abortion. There are misconceptions about what the law really says and the confessor needs to be able to address these questions with the penitent. It is important to also recognize that the question of excommunication may apply to others involved in the abortion decision, such as her parents or the father of the child if they force the abortion.

Project Rachel is a powerful evangelization tool, making it possible for those who have left the Church to return. The outreach invites those who are culturally Catholic and not catechized to approach the Church and learn more about Catholicism while being cared for with compassion and wisdom. Project Rachel is also available to help those who come from a different faith tradition or no tradition at all to experience the love and mercy of God through those who care about her. This in turn often opens the door for her to consider coming into the Catholic Church. Men who resolve their abortion loss

through the love and mercy of the church also embrace their faith in a dynamic way. There are many converts because of the ministry of *Project Rachel*.

Post-abortion reconciliation always has critics. Critics within the Church have argued that post-abortion healing ministry somehow sanctions the sin. They say we do not need a special ministry for a set group of sinners. Other critics express concern about the sort of Church we will become if we have aborted parents in it. Those who support abortion rights and promote legalized abortion find *Project Rachel* to be a dangerous sort of outreach. The Church is accused of inducing guilt. In the United States and Britain, abortion advocates, trying to counter the work of healing within a faith-based setting are now providing outreaches to help women resolve their feelings about abortion while avoiding the hard moral questions and human questions at the core of the pain. Some critics try to dismiss the aftermath of abortion by saying that it is caused by the Catholic Church and the pro-life community. However, non-Christian countries such as Japan and Taiwan have ritual grief ceremonies to help alleviate the guilt of abortion as well as to appease the spirits of the aborted children. In Japan these ceremonies began in the 1950's.

The wounds are both spiritual and human. She believes that she has committed the unforgivable sin. That is the core of the spiritual wound. She is a mother who knows she is responsible for the death of her child; a child she never got to birth, to see and to hold. That is the core of the human wound. Recent scientific findings indicate that mother's carry cells from every child she ever conceives for many years, possibly the rest of her life. The phenomena is called microchimerism. She is biologically changed whether she gives birth to the child or not. Society, which supports and promotes abortion, does not acknowledge that abortion is a pregnancy loss. It is labeled a medical procedure. The process of healing enables her to claim the truth of the experience. She lost a child and needs to grieve for that unique human being.

The process of healing involves spiritual healing and human grief. Forgiveness and reconciliation are at the core of the healing. She moves toward forgiveness of the others involved in her abortion. She chooses to forgive these others with the help of God's grace, but she may not ever be able to reconcile with these people because of distance, lost connection or even death. Reconciliation is about restoring relationships that have been deeply damaged. She needs to experience reconciliation with God, her child and herself.

Practically speaking, the process of healing involves telling her story with all its pain and anger, forgiving those responsible for and involved in her abortion. This is an act of will on her part, done in concert with the grace of God, which empowers her to do this. Forgiveness has now been studied and there is an understanding of the human process that allows us to move toward forgiving. In forgiving those involved, she comes to understand that forgiveness from God, from her child and for herself might be possible.

The caregiver will assist her in approaching God. She must hear often of God's love, forgiveness and mercy so she can be led to accept that forgiveness and celebrate it in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. She is often very afraid of God. She judges herself harshly. Introducing her to the stories of Jesus dealing with women in the Scriptures can facilitate her spiritual growth. These stories include the woman with the hemorrhage, the woman at the well, the woman who washes Jesus feet with her tears and the woman caught in adultery.

The caregiver helps her to process her grief as a mother who lost a unique child. She must put closure on her relationship with the aborted child/children which includes grieving her loss, determining the sex of her child/children and choosing a name for her child. She is invited to write a letter to her child to speak the things her heart longs to say. She needs to memorialize the dead child, establishing a new spiritual relationship with the child in light of the Communion of Saints and having a Mass celebrated for the child and the healing of the family. In the healing experience God restores her identity as mother to her.

The final step in the process is forgiving herself. This is often the most difficult part of the process, especially if she has a history of abuse in her life. In the abortion, she may have gone from being the abused one to being the abuser. In closure, she is made aware that new life circumstances may remind her of the abortion; that her mother's heart has been restored to her so at times she will grieve for her lost child, and that on-going sacramental participation is critical to her spiritual well-being. She is helped to discern what activities to pursue that will allow her to have a positive impact on her world. We assure her that we are always there if she needs us again.

Project Rachel has had many effects beyond the healing of women and men involved in abortion. Bishops and priests tell me that they find that the ministry reaffirms the priesthood. Priests see the healing power of the sacrament of Reconciliation in a concrete way, when they personally experience women and men being set free from the bondage of sin and made new. The experience of caring for women and men provides the clergy with a way to speak about abortion in a compassionate but truthful manner. Many priests have shared with me that through this ministry they personally rediscovered the gift of their priesthood. Many have said to me "This is what I was ordained to do—to set the captives free!"

The ministry of post-abortion healing has changed the face of the abortion debate in freeing women and men to speak openly about the tragic consequences of abortion in their lives. The acknowledgement of this reality has been named Post-Abortion Syndrome and is recognized around the world now. The growing awareness of the impact of abortion on the broader culture is changing the debate. It is the truth of their experience brought to the public square that will set us all free from the scourge of abortion in our world. *Project Rachel* opens the merciful arms of God through the compassionate pastoral concern and care for those wounded by abortion. It has brought people to the Church and back to the Church. It has healed individuals and enabled the restoration of families. Many women have said to me "I regret my abortion with all my heart, but I would never have come to know God in such a powerful and personal way. When God forgives you and restores you, you are changed forever by God's love." Those who heal from abortion never become supportive of abortion. Many become advocates for life, supporting other pregnant women who need care, praying for and supporting healing ministries and engaging in activities that promote life. Some become activists, speaking out about their abortion experience. Others quietly make a difference in their families, parishes and the world at large by a silent witness of love. Those who have not resolved an abortion loss are often advocates for abortion rights.

Project Rachel is a desperately needed ministry in a world immersed in the Culture of Death. Through the ministry of *Project Rachel*, the foundation of the Culture of Life is being built, through the people who know the lived truth of abortion and who are restored through God's gracious mercy and love.