

"Abortion and Healing: A Pastoral Church Responds in Word and Sacrament" in *Post-Abortion Aftermath*, by Rev. Michael Mannion. Copyright © 1994, Sheed & Ward, Franklin, Wisconsin. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

## Absolution

To accept the Church's proclamation of healing and reconciliation, for who we are, for what we've done, by the authority of the Church. ... [With] the powerful convergence of "I absolve you" and the imposition of the hand and the sign of the Cross, the contrite and converted sinner comes into contact with the power and mercy of God. The sign of "resurrection" from "spiritual death" is renewed once again. This is not just a voice coming from within, nor a therapeutic statement rooted in theories and formulas—this is the voice of the living, resurrected God speaking from the gibbet of the Cross. ...

The Church, then, must be that home—here—in which the ... woman [who has had an abortion] can rediscover, or perhaps discover for the first time the goodness of who she is beneath the evil of what she's done.



## Counseling and Healing

### The Setting

- ◆ Before the woman arrives, pray to the Holy Spirit for the wisdom to guide her to healing.
- ◆ Fr. Blair Raum of Project Rachel, Baltimore says he likes to arrange his office so that she sits between himself and the door. The reason for this is that he does not want her to feel trapped. She should not have to get past him if she wants to leave. Also, because the conversation may elicit tears, he keeps a box of "Kleenex" tissues on hand.

### Guidelines

- ◆ *Timeline:* She will meet with you from one to six times to complete the process of healing.
- ◆ *When to Make a Referral:* If you think that progress is overly slow, or if you suspect deeper problems, you will want to refer her to a therapist in the Project Rachel network or one known to understand the profoundly negative impact of abortion on many women and men.

### Boundaries

It is important to set physical boundaries. Fr. Raum counsels against touching in any way women whom you are seeing for post-abortion healing other than, of course, an appropriate handshake at the beginning or at the end of each session. Some women you will minister to will have a history of sexual abuse and relationships with men that have been confusing. It may not be clear to them what the touching means. This will help to build trust, and she will be grateful to you for making her feel safe.

## The First Meeting

- ◆ Affirm her courage in seeking healing.
- ◆ Establish an atmosphere of safety.
- ◆ If the only way that you would be acquainted with her is through counseling, assure her that you will not acknowledge her in public unless she first acknowledges you.
- ◆ Tell her what the process entails so she knows what to expect.
- ◆ Listen carefully to her concerns and her story to determine where she is in her healing process. Some women will have begun the process intuitively on their own.

## The Process

1. From the beginning, **assure her of God's love and mercy.** She is clear on God's judgment. (You may want to tell her that the Church has been in the forefront of post-abortion healing for decades.) Continue this assurance throughout your time with her.
2. Be conscious of her body language when you speak of God. If she physically recoils or withdraws when you mention a certain image of God (God as Father, for example), consciously change your language. The words father or brother may evoke unpleasant associations from past maltreatment.
3. She needs to **tell her story**, with all its pain. And you need to be a compassionate listener. She is experiencing deep hurt, shame and guilt. She may repeat her story more than once. The first time she may minimize parts of it, until she is sure you are trustworthy. In the retelling, she may risk more of the pain or tell you about multiple abortions.
4. You need to **give her permission to be angry** with those who betrayed her in some fashion during the abortion decision and experience. (This could be the father of the baby, her parents, friends or people in the abortion clinic.) She does not feel entitled to her anger.
  - ◆ Suggest that she write to those with whom she is angry. The letters will not be sent. She is free to say all she needs to say. After finishing each one, she should set it aside and then go back and reread it. Often profound insight is gained in doing this.
  - ◆ Encourage her to do something symbolic with the letters: burn them, rip them up, bury them, or flush them. Explain to her that whatever she decides, it is symbolic of letting go of her anger so she can move to forgiveness of these people. If she does not forgive, she will be in bondage to these relationships and she will never be completely free.

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*I was never told that having an abortion would have this effect on me but once you realize that you willingly gave someone permission to violate your body and kill your child you find it hard to live with yourself.*

*I feel guilty for feeling guilty.*

*I mean where do I get the right to feel bad. I knew what I was doing and I honestly didn't care—at the time.*

*I'm a mother with no baby to hold, I guess I loved too late.*

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*I long to speak to my child  
and tell [him] how much I  
love [him] and how I wish I  
could fix what I did wrong.*

*I feel that just for this  
abortion I should burn in  
hell forever.*

*I deserve that, and I think  
about my child in Heaven as  
an angel.*

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- ◆ Explain that she may need to ask God for the grace to forgive. Forgiveness is difficult. She needs to experience forgiving so she can work toward truly accepting God's forgiveness.
- 5. She needs to **grieve for the lost child or children.**
  - ◆ Often she will want to know what happened to her child. Read to her or refer her to Section 99 of *The Gospel of Life* where the Holy Father says nothing is permanently lost; that her child is living in the Lord. (Text included in this packet.)
  - ◆ The first thing Fr. Raum asks her is "By the way, was your baby a girl or a boy?" During the time of pregnancy this is a natural curiosity, and it is amazing how often she knows or has an intuition of the sex of her baby. If she's had more than one abortion, in fact, if she's had more than one pregnancy loss, you may want to ask this question for each of her children.
  - ◆ The next thing I ask her is, "What name would you like to give your child (or children)?" At the time of her abortion she may have thought, or convinced herself, that the pregnancy was not a child but a thing. When she names her baby, her baby becomes a person to her. If she is unclear about her baby's sex, she might choose a unisex name like Chris, Fran or Gerry. From now on you should refer to her child by name.
  - ◆ Pray with her as she names her baby and gives the child to Jesus or Mary.
- 6. Encourage her to find a way to grieve for and memorialize her child.
  - ◆ Memorializing may be done with the purchase or making of an object to remind her of the child. For example: A locket or necklace she will wear; a tree or other living plant that is placed in her yard; a statue such as an angel with a child; a piece of art or needlework that symbolizes the child or her healing.
  - ◆ Encourage her to **write a letter to her child** saying all the things that her mother's heart desires. She should explain about the abortion and ask the baby's forgiveness. This is homework. When she returns with the letter, ask her to read it aloud to you. (This could also be a poem or a song.)

Fr. Robert Sears of the Institute of Pastoral Studies at Loyola University suggests the following alternative: Invite the woman in prayerful imagination, in keeping with Ignatian contemplation, to place the baby with Jesus or the Blessed Mother. She should ask them to care for her child and speak the desires of her heart to Jesus and to her child. It comforts the woman to know that her child is in a safe place and fulfills her need to take spiritual responsibility for her child.

- ◆ Help her **plan a memorial service** that includes ritual and symbols, perhaps even the reading of her letter. This provides the experience denied her in not having a funeral. Encourage her to incorporate Scripture, music, poetry and symbols that have personal meaning to her.

*Ritual Example:* A crystal bowl or a baptismal font may be used. A floating candle is lit and placed in the water while naming her child and giving him or her to the Lord. Help to guide the candle so it stays lit; should it go out, she may become upset. The woman may be able to plan other rituals that will have meaning for her.

- ◆ Encourage her to develop a new relationship with her child who was aborted in light of the Communion of Saints. This child can be a powerful intercessor for her and for her family. She is forever the child's mother; abortion did not end that relationship.
- 7. She needs to reconcile her relationship with God. Speak with her about her relationship with God. She may be very angry with him for letting her get pregnant. If she is, encourage her to be open and honest in expressing these feelings to God. From the depths of her heart she should pour out all her pain, knowing that God loves her and wants to give her his joy and peace.

Even if she has already confessed this sin, you will want to celebrate the Sacrament again at the end of your time together. She now has a new awareness of the depth of her sin and the wonder of God's love and mercy. You may find you need to catechize her about the Sacrament as you prepare to celebrate it.

This celebration should be special. You might close the church and sit before the Eucharist. Invite her to bring music and Scripture readings. Use your pastoral judgment as to whether she needs to repeat her story as part of the sacramental experience. You might judge it appropriate to pray for inner healing with regard to issues and areas of her life that she has told you about. You might want to present her with a rose upon completion of the Sacrament. This should truly be a celebration of God's love and forgiveness.

- 8. Offer to say a Mass of Healing and Remembrance for her child and for her family. This can be a weekday Mass. She may choose to attend or not. There are remarkable stories of healing among family members when this Mass is said.
- 9. She needs to move toward self-forgiveness. Women who have a history of abuse have a difficult time with this. In her own mind, she has moved from being a victim to being a victimizer. This is hard to forgive and hard to articulate.

If she has had prior bible-study or other religious instruction in which she was told that self-forgiveness is not possible, she may be confused. Her healing may be impeded. If she is to be free truly to accept God's forgiveness, however, she must let go of self-recrimination.

This may take some education. It can be helpful to explain that when we continue to judge ourselves harshly when God has forgiven us we are walking close to the sin of pride. We assume that we know better than God.



If she seems really stuck, suggest this exercise. Her goal is self-forgiveness. Explain that abortion segments a woman's perception of herself. The woman who had the abortion stands apart from the woman who is here today seeking healing. She needs to think about who the woman was who had the abortion, and to see herself compassionately as God sees her. What happened to her as a young woman that led her to get involved in sex? How did she come to be pregnant? Why did she have the abortion? Perhaps she has had more than one abortion. How did that come about? After she has had time to think about this, suggest she write a letter to the woman who had the abortion and include in it all the observations and insights she has garnered. Suggest the letter conclude with her saying she forgives this woman or she is trying to do so with God's grace. Encourage her to keep praying for the grace to be able to forgive herself.

Father Sears suggests you also pray with the woman that the father be given the gift of repentance and God's forgiveness. Abortion is not just about the mother, but about the relationship of mother, father and child. There needs to be prayer for reconciliation of all involved.

10. Speaking Publicly. If the woman says she wants to speak publicly about her abortion try to make sure she is really free to do this. The first question you should ask is **"Why do you want to do that?"** If she wants to make up for what she did, discourage her from speaking publicly because she has not finished healing. She also should be sure that anyone who might be hurt by the public telling knows of her abortion, knows she intends to speak publicly, and is not opposed to her doing so. If she has children, urge caution. Her children could find it hurtful and even threatening. It is also possible that her story could appear in the media in another city and shock a family member or friend. She may better be able to share her story privately with individuals or small groups "off the record," or in writing anonymously. Before she makes such a decision, recommend she give it careful discernment rooted in prayer.
11. Prepare her for what she will encounter in the future.
  - ◆ The temptation to believe she is unforgiven by God. At times, she will hear a little voice saying "what a terrible person you are." This is not the voice of God but a temptation to despair. Encourage her to handle it with prayer.
  - ◆ The times when something will remind her of her child and she will feel very sad. This might be a graduation or wedding. Such sadness does not mean that she is unhealed. Rather it is a sign that her mother's heart was restored to her when God healed her.
  - ◆ New life circumstances may cause a reopening of her abortion wound (for example, miscarriage, menopause, never marrying

and having children or seeing her friends become grandparents). Encourage her to find someone to talk to when this happens.

- ◆ Encourage her to remain faithful to prayer and the sacraments. You may find it appropriate to catechize her on offering her suffering as a sacrifice in union with Christ on the cross.
- ◆ Encourage her to continue her spiritual growth through reading, retreats and, possibly, personal spiritual direction.
- ◆ Encourage her to put her life-affirming energy back into the world. This might mean loving her children and spouse in a new and better way. Or helping an elderly neighbor. Or some other life-affirming effort.
- ◆ If she asks if she should tell her children about her abortion, counsel caution. If she feels strongly that she wants to do so, she should be clear on her motivation for telling them. If she does it at all, she should tell each child individually and be prepared to handle the very emotional and difficult reactions she may get.

If you detect dysfunctional behaviors, discuss them and refer her to a therapist in the Project Rachel network or one known to understand the profoundly negative impact of abortion on women and their families.

Put closure on your relationship, thank her for allowing you to be her companion on this journey, let her know you are available in the future should other issues arise (if you are willing to do so.) For now, you have finished. ■

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**I** finished the post-abortion reconciliation offered through Project Rachel two months ago.

*I can't find words to describe how wonderful this experience was. I was helped to shed all the denial, anger, lies, stubbornness and tears that were in my heart. To tell you I sinned is one thing—but I grieved my God and I was so sure He had turned his back on me! How wrong I was!*

*Through this care the walls came down and in their places stood compassion, forgiveness, grace, faith and love.*

*Thank you for Project Rachel for it has surely blessed me and changed my life!*

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*For additional help or information about counseling contact:*  
**National Office of Post-Abortion Reconciliation & Healing** (NOPARH), P.O. Box 07477, Milwaukee, WI 53207-0477.

Established by Vicki Thorn in 1989 to provide leadership in this work, the organization consults with dioceses in the formation of local programs, trains priests and therapists and provides a nation-wide referral service for those seeking help. It also has available information on retreat models and support groups.

National referral line:

**800-5WE-CARE.**

Business line:

**414/ 483-4141;**

Website:

**[www.marquette.edu/rachel](http://www.marquette.edu/rachel);**

E-mail: **[noparh@juno.com](mailto:noparh@juno.com).**