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## The Sacrament of Reconciliation

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*I had my abortion when I was 19 and in college. ... I still regret what I did. I go to church but haven't been to confession in all these years. I just ignore [confession] or say I will go but chicken out. I am afraid the church would kick me out. And I am afraid the priest will be very upset with me.*

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**R**ecent surveys of priests indicate that women who have had abortions often approach them first in the Sacrament of Reconciliation during the regularly scheduled time for confession. If this occurs, the following is recommended.


1. Affirm her courage and humility, her hope and trust in coming to the Sacrament.
2. Make sure she hears from you about God's great love, mercy and compassion for each of us—no matter what our sins.
3. Do not deny the gravity of the sin of abortion. Not only would this be incorrect, but it denies the reality of her post-abortion trauma.
4. Let her talk. She needs to tell what she has not been able to tell before: the story of her abortion, her subsequent pain and her worst fears. Assure her that her reactions are normal. Many women—for many years—find themselves unable to cope with abortion's aftermath. Many share the same pain and the same fears that she has.
5. Give her absolution. (Be aware that she may believe she has been excommunicated. See the section on canon law in this packet.)
6. There may be a penance recommended in your diocese for those involved in abortion. If not, give an appropriate penance to reconnect her to God's love and mercy and to facilitate her healing and acceptance of God's forgiveness. For example:
  - ◆ Ask her to pray for others involved in her abortion loss.
  - ◆ Suggest she attend a weekday Mass to pray for spiritual and emotional healing of herself and the family.
  - ◆ Ask her to read, pray and reflect with Scripture passages, e.g., John 15, Luke 15 (lost sheep, lost coin, prodigal son), John 3:16-17, John 8:1-11 (woman caught in adultery), John 4:7-41 (Samaritan woman), Luke 8:43-48 (or Matthew 9:20-22 or Mark 5:25-34) (woman with a hemorrhage), Luke 7:36-50 (woman washing Jesus' feet with her tears).
7. There are time constraints in regularly scheduled times for confession. Further support of the penitent may be important for her ongoing healing. It is essential, however, to maintain the integrity of the seal of confession. Priests active in post-abortion ministry have offered the following points for consideration:

It is important to assure her that the Sacrament of Penance is sufficient to bring forgiveness of sins and the fullness of God's mercy. You may also want to suggest that the often unacknowledged grief and pain associated with past abortions can be the source of profound emotional and spiritual wounds and, for this reason, additional counseling and support may be very beneficial.

You may offer to be available for pastoral counseling at another time. It would be important to explain that due to the protections ensured to all penitents under the seal of confession, she must take the initiative in approaching you to set up a time to meet, even if it is right after the confession time. The most appropriate means of facilitating a referral would be to give her the name and number of another agency or person. Business cards and brochures of referral points are good to keep on hand.

Sometimes, inadvertently, confidentiality is breached in rectories when a person calls for an appointment and mentions to a secretary or housekeeper that she has been referred by Project Rachel or saw an announcement about Project Rachel in the parish bulletin. It is important to remind parish staffs of the highly confidential nature of these calls. Also, assumptions should not be made that all people calling about Project Rachel have been involved with abortion.

8. You may want to give her a prayer card to help her continued healing. A sample card ("Trust in God's Mercy") is included in the front pocket of this manual. You might also give her a copy of Pope John Paul II's moving words to women who have had abortions, the text of which is included on page 4 of this packet.



## Some Thoughts on Confession

by Rev. Michael Mannion

*The following presumes a situation in which you have been counseling a woman, during which time plans were made regarding the Sacrament of Reconciliation.*

The issue of reconciliation with God has its roots in the spiritual authority of the Church. Therapy and counseling may have led one to look above and grasp beyond the threshold of one's own pain and alienation, but it is only the Author of Life who ultimately has the power to heal the loss of life. ...

The experience of this sacrament may well be one of the most powerful healing moments of an abortion victim's life, for through it countless moments of her personal history can converge before the common embrace of a healing God.

Before the celebration of the Sacrament, [she] can draw her thoughts together from a journal she's kept, and the personal story she's written. ... She may prepare for the Sacrament by choosing a special scripture passage which speaks to her of her own faith journey back to the Lord and his Church. ... The priest may suggest a date immediately preceding a special feast: Christmas or Easter, for

example. For some, even Mother's Day is a special time to receive one's second "First Holy Communion." During the actual celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the following elements [confession, contrition, penance and absolution] will be present.

## Confession

To express our sins before the representative of the Church community, to hear our own words, thus truly admitting of the sins for which we seek forgiveness.  
...

"The confession of sins therefore cannot be reduced to a mere attempt at psychological liberation, even though it corresponds to that legitimate and natural need, inherent in the human heart, to open oneself to another. It is the act of the Prodigal Son who returns to his father and is welcomed by him with the kiss of peace. It is an act of honesty and courage. It is an act of entrusting oneself, beyond sin, to the mercy that forgives."<sup>1</sup>

For the abortion victim who has had the experience of numerous visits to therapists or counselors, who may have helped in many ways but have not had the authority to assure one of God's forgiveness nor the ability to proclaim God's peace to one who is tortured, this element is particularly crucial. The sacrament is not therapy, nor is therapy the sacrament, but they can coincide to work together for the common goal of emotional and spiritual healing. ...

## Contrition

To recognize our sinfulness as an opportunity to reestablish and strengthen our relationship with God out of a bond of love rather than a fear of punishment; to be truly and genuinely sorry. Contrition is "the beginning and the heart of conversion ... a clear and decisive rejection of the sin committed, together with a resolution not to commit it again." For many broken by abortion, the gift of forgiveness has always awaited them. Contrition has freed them to accept it, sometimes breaking through after years of self-hatred and feelings of despicableness. Contrition and conversion go hand-in-hand. Once one stands humbly before the Lord and says, "I'm sorry, I was wrong," one never stands in the same place again. One is changed, no longer looking backward to despair, but forward to hope. One still stands at the foot of the cross, but now one looks beyond it to see the open tomb. ...

## Penance

To commit ourselves to prayer and action that expresses our spirit of remorse and regret for past sins and our commitment to a changed future. ... It is often helpful to ask the abortion victim to do a penance with both a meditative and apostolic element. The meditative aspect may involve a particular scripture passage and even the entire book or gospel from which it is taken. The apostolic aspect may involve a commitment to donate volunteer hours to an organization that is life-giving (e.g., soup kitchen, homeless shelter, [programs for the] handicapped). ... This is acceptable and even commendable as long as it is done not to "earn God's love and forgiveness" but to thank Him for it.

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1. *Reconciliation and Penance*, p. 121, 1984 post-synodal apostolic exhortation of John Paul II, available from the U.S. Catholic Conference (#951-3).