

## PROJECT RACHEL: IN THE HEART OF THE CHURCH

### Project Rachel: Beginning from the Heart

*Forty years ago I first encountered the wounds that abortion leaves on the souls of women. A friend of mine had placed her first baby up for adoption. My friend later endured sexual abuse by a family member, which led to her second pregnancy. Her mother arranged for a safe but illegal abortion. Little did her mother know that she had bought her daughter a one-way ticket to a life of suffering.*

*Later in life she struggled with suicide attempts, an abusive marriage, chemical dependency, and became abusive to her other children. She always said, "I can live with the adoption. I can't live with the abortion." My search for answers to her pain led me to obtain a degree in psychology, to become certified as a perinatal loss facilitator and a grief counselor, and to obtain certificates in trauma counseling and spiritual direction.*

*My friend's pain was a life-changing event for me, and eventually led me in 1984 to develop Project Rachel, the diocesan-based, post-abortion healing ministry of the Catholic Church.*

*People always ask me if I get depressed hearing all the painful stories that I hear. I never do because I KNOW that God will heal anyone who asks. God is alive and well. No one has ever called me and said that healing didn't happen, if they opened their heart to the Lord. In fact, women often give me a hug and whisper "thank you" in my ear. I recently met a woman whom I had counseled. With a huge smile she said, "You and I have known each other a long time!" And the joy in her eyes told me that the merciful hand of God had touched her and made her whole. If you give God permission to heal you, it will happen, and you will be astonished at the "God happenings" in your life.*

—Vicki Thorn  
Founder, Project Rachel and  
National Office of Post-Abortion  
Reconciliation & Healing

### Project Rachel: In the Words of the Bishops

In their very first *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities* (1975) developed in response to the legalization of abortion nationwide, the Catholic bishops of the United States committed "the pastoral resources of the Church" to "the specific needs of ... those who have had or have taken part in an abortion" (no. 6). They stressed in this document that "it is important that we realize that God's mercy is always available and without limit, that the Christian life can be restored and renewed through the sacraments, and that union with God can be accomplished despite the problems of human existence" (no. 24).

In their 2001 reaffirmation of the Pastoral Plan, the bishops reiterated and expanded on their call for a special focus on post-abortion healing and reconciliation:

*For many women and men, grief and anguish follow an abortion experience, which often last for many years. Women today talk about post-abortion stress and reveal a pattern of common grief in "chat rooms," through published books, and in support groups.*

*The Church offers reconciliation as well as spiritual and psychological care for those suffering from abortion's aftermath primarily through diocesan-based programs, most often called Project Rachel. Such programs utilize specially trained priests and professional counselors who provide one-on-one care. Other post-abortion ministries that involve support groups and retreats are also available in many areas.*

*Every church-sponsored program and identifiably Catholic organization and agency should know where to refer those in need of post-abortion healing. Special resources to assist priests in this ministry are available from the Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities and from many diocesan pro-life offices (pp. 22-23).*

## Project Rachel: A Network of Healing in The Heart of the Church

Offered in almost all the Catholic dioceses throughout the United States, *Project Rachel* is a network of caregivers, including priests, mental health professionals and others who provide one-on-one care to those struggling after involvement in an abortion. *Project Rachel* may include other resources such as various retreat models, support groups, Bible studies, journaling exercises and prayer efforts, but it is primarily a healing network connecting those in need with counseling and with the sacraments, right in the heart of the Church.

We do not know how many millions upon millions of abortions have really occurred because abortion statistics, both legal and illegal since the Depression, have never been accurately tallied. In 1998 the Alan Guttmacher Institute, Planned Parenthood's research arm, stated that "43 percent of women in America will have at least one abortion by age 45." This is a staggering percentage of American women. And it is important to remember that for every abortion there is also a father and an extended family including grandparents, siblings of the parents and of the lost child, and a friendship circle. Anyone in this circle may seek help.

Our society has done women a huge disservice by pretending that abortion erases the experience of pregnancy. Pro-abortion organizations acknowledge that up to 10 percent of women who have had abortions may develop serious psychiatric conditions afterwards. In addition, at least another 40 percent of women are struggling with abortion-related issues that are not severe enough to be classified as "serious psychiatric" effects. They are single and married, with other children and without. They are everywhere. Some have tucked the event away for years. Some have been trying to find ways to suppress their pain with medication and alcohol. Others have wrestled with depression and anxiety disorders, failed relationships, infertility, and pregnancy difficulties, and perhaps have never made the connection between these difficulties and their abortion.

*Project Rachel* does not use the language of the "post-abortion syndrome" that many people use. A "syndrome" implies pathology, the worst-case scenario, if you will. But for many women, the aftermath of abortion is not about physical pathology, but about grief and guilt. These feelings need spiritual and psychological healing. Both aspects need to be addressed in the healing process. Grief and guilt are normal reactions of a woman who has lost a child, or children, in a traumatic and unnatural fashion. How she is trying to cope with this loss may be where pathological issues come in. She may come to this pain immediately after her abortion, or she may not come to understand it for many years, when a "trigger incident" suddenly makes her aware of her need for healing. This is when and where the Church needs to be ready for her. And *Project Rachel* is in the heart of the Church.

Pope John Paul II addressed women who have had an abortion with tender compassion and a profound understanding of their needs:

*The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord (The Gospel of Life, no. 99).*

For information on *Project Rachel* resources in your area, go to: [www.hopeafterabortion.org](http://www.hopeafterabortion.org) or [www.noparh.org](http://www.noparh.org)

And visit the Pro-Life Secretariat of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops at:  
[www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/postabortion/index.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/postabortion/index.shtml)