

Healing
the broken

Hearted

sowing

the seeds of
hope
after
abortion



Judge not lest you be judged

How often we hear the words "Judge not lest you be judged." Yet how easy it is to judge others. Sometimes we wonder how anyone could have an abortion. Yet many of us, and people whom we know and love have had an abortion or have been involved in an abortion decision, even if they have never told us.

The Gospel of Luke reminds us that Jesus did "not come to invite the self-righteous to a change of heart, but sinners"¹. It is time to once again reflect on Jesus' mission to heal the broken hearted. Pope John Paul II reminded us "we should always forgive, remembering that we too are in need of forgiveness."² He said that "two gestures are characteristic of Jesus' mission: healing and forgiving. Jesus' many healings clearly show his great compassion in the face of human distress... and that his mission from the very beginning, is meant to free people from these evils."³ John Paul II stressed, "Christ came not to condemn but to forgive, to show mercy. And the greatest mercy of all is found in his being in our midst and calling us to meet him and to confess with Peter that he is 'the Son of the living God'."⁴

Understanding abortion

It has been estimated that at least one in three women in Australia have already had an abortion experience or will have one based on current rates. Many women do not freely choose abortion but have had the abortion for someone else, commonly at the request of boyfriend or parent(s). They may have felt that they were offered no other alternative. They may have felt alone or abandoned or that they just could not cope with another child. Research is showing that poor quality intimate relationships are the reason that many women agree to abortion and that abortion is strongly associated with domestic violence and abuse of women.⁵ It has been estimated that around 70% of women go against their own conscience in choosing an abortion and report that they would have kept their baby had they been given appropriate support and encouragement.⁶



Healing the broken

How abortion breaks hearts.

Abortion affects different women and men in different ways: no experience is exactly the same. It is becoming increasingly clear that abortion is not an answer. Women may arrive at the abortion clinic in obvious distress and tearfully sign forms they are too upset to read.⁷ They may try to pretend that the abortion is happening to someone else and afterwards say that they are “relieved” and even believe for a while that they can “get on with their life” but often all this comes crashing down as the reality of what has happened becomes all too clear. Their babies have gone.

Denial of reality can be shattered by other events in her life such as anniversaries— the day the child would have been born, the date of the abortion - seeing other children around the same age as her child would have been, Mother’s Day, debate in the media⁸, or seeing other pregnant women. Flashbacks to her abortion experience can be triggered by the sound of a vacuum cleaner, a visit to the gynaecologist, or a dental appointment and she may become overwhelmed by guilt, depression and grief. Her pain can be increased if she believes that she is the only one who feels like this. It is now thought that somewhere between 10-20%⁹ of those who have had an abortion are suffering from some form of “post-abortion syndrome.” Many women are simply not able to “get on with their lives” as they were told they could after an abortion. Abortion can affect them emotionally, physically and psychologically. One woman describes her abortion decision:

My family would not support my decision to keep my baby. My boyfriend said he would give me no emotional or financial help whatsoever. All the people that mattered told me to abort. When I said I didn't want to, they started listing the reasons why I should. They said that it would be detrimental to my career, and my health, and that I would have no social life and no future with men. Could I actually do it alone? I started feeling like maybe I was crazy to want to keep it.

I finally told everyone that I would have the abortion just to get them off my back. But inside I still didn't want to have the abortion. Unfortunately, when the day came I shut off my inside feelings. I was scared to not do it because of how my family and boyfriend felt. I'm so angry at myself for giving in to the pressure of others. I just felt so alone in my feelings to have my baby.

Two days later this same woman attempted suicide. In fact a large Finnish study has found that women who have an abortion commit suicide¹⁰ at three times the rate of the general population and almost six times the rate of women who give birth¹¹. A recent New Zealand study found elevated rates of mental health problems in women who have had an abortion¹². There is growing evidence that after an abortion women can suffer increased depression, anger, grief and bouts of crying or emotional numbness. They may develop eating disorders, or abuse

drugs or alcohol in an attempt to numb the pain. They may suffer from lowered self-esteem, sexual problems or promiscuity, difficulty in relationships, multiple abortions, or a pattern of repeat crisis pregnancy. They may suffer from an inability to forgive themselves, nightmares and sleep disturbances, anxiety and panic attacks, and flashbacks. They may develop a fear of pregnancy, or a discomfort around babies or pregnant women.

Although many women may have an abortion to “save their relationship” most relationships do not survive an abortion. One or the other partner often blames the other and communication tends to break down. Other family relationships can also be affected by abortion. Siblings can sometimes sense that someone is missing from the family and suffer from a type of “survivor syndrome.” Their sense of unconditional love can be shaken by the knowledge that a brother or sister has been aborted.

JPII Special words to women who have had an abortion

Many people who have been caught up in the human tragedy of abortion, especially women who have had abortions, believe that they have committed the ultimate sin and that they can never be forgiven. They often think that God might forgive other sins, but never abortion. They might think that they no longer deserve to be part of the Church, or they may continue to attend but live in fear and shame that someone will learn their terrible secret. Some might even think that God is a mean and vengeful God who is just out to get them! But they do not understand that the Church condemns the sin of abortion without condemning the sinner. One of the aims of the Catholic Church's sanction against abortion is conversion of the offender, ultimately his or her highest good, namely eternal salvation¹³.

Pope John Paul II wrote especially to women who have had an abortion in his great encyclical on life where He said:

The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart many not yet have healed. Certainly what happens remains wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope.

The Father of mercies is ready to give you 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 for forgiveness from your child who is now living with the Lord. With the friendly expert help and advice of other people, and as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life. ...You will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life¹⁴.

Broken Hearted



Words of Hope and Compassion

Pope John Paul II's words are not words of condemnation but of tenderness, compassion and hope. His words are not a sell-out to the promoters of abortion. He is not saying that abortion is now okay: that abortion is not always a grave matter. Indeed he is saying the opposite. And the experience of many men and women confirms this. Women who have experienced an abortion describe it as a profound wound to the soul. In the light of faith we understand that wounds of abortion are the result of sin. But John Paul II reminds us that this is not the end of the story. Again he writes that "God's salvation is the work of a love greater than man's sin. Love alone can wipe out sin and liberate from sin. Love alone can consolidate man in the good, in the unalterable and eternal good."¹⁵ Indeed it is the story of our salvation.

The good news is that there is a way home. "The way home is the sacrament of Reconciliation. By sharing in this sacrament, the woman who has had an abortion and who now seeks to be healed, shows her deep trust in God to love her, to bring her home."¹⁶ To acknowledge one's sin—to recognise oneself as being a sinner, capable of sin and inclined to commit sin—is the essential first step in returning to God.¹⁷ She will eventually be able to forgive herself and ask for forgiveness from God and from her child(ren) who are waiting for her in heaven.

"The whole of the Christian life is like a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father, whose unconditional love for every human creature, and in particular for the "prodigal son," we discover anew each day. This pilgrimage takes place in the heart of each person, extends to the believing community, and then reaches to the whole of humanity."¹⁸

Benedict XVI on the "look of love"

So how are we to treat those who have had an abortion? How should we relate to those who have talked someone into having an abortion? Are we to condemn them or shame or shun them? Are we the judge and jury? Are we only interested in finger pointing and being right? No. Such actions are only counterproductive. "It only creates resentment and drives away those who most desperately need to assurance of God's healing love."¹⁹

Pope Benedict XIV says that we are to look on them with love.

A child can open himself confidently to love if he knows he is loved, and he can develop and grow if he knows that is followed by his parents "look of love." Similarly, we too succeed in looking at others in a manner that respects their personal dignity if we experience how God looks at us in love. It is this look that reveals to us how precious is our person... Christianity is this remembrance of the look of love, ...this look that preserves the fullness

of his truth and the ultimate guarantee of his dignity. The mystery of Christmas reminds us that in the Christ who is born, every human life -from the beginning- is blessed and welcomed by the look of God's mercy.²⁰

Breaking down the walls

The abortion culture prevalent in Australia is now such a problem that it will not magically disappear by itself. We can no longer afford to ignore it. We need to speak up. There are now too many who have been deeply wounded, too many who have fallen in this battle for hearts and minds. We need instead to begin the New Evangelisation. We are being called to become Ambassadors of life. We are being called to co-operate in God's great work of healing the broken hearted. We are being called to search for those who are wounded and lost and bring them home, to help them make sense of what happened and find reconciliation and peace.

Project Rachel

The Catholic Church's great mission to heal the broken hearted was given renewed emphasis and direction with the establishment of Project Rachel in the USA over 15 years ago. Project Rachel has now rapidly spread to many parts of the world where abortion has been widely practised, including Australia. Project Rachel was established in Sydney a few years ago and is now spreading throughout Australia. The Catholic Church in Melbourne is working with a number of organisations including Project Rachel, professional counsellors and priests to build networks and to reach out to the many women, men and families who have been affected by abortion. "Everyone in the Church can be a part of Project Rachel, part of the healing ministry of Christ. You may know someone whom you think has had an abortion. You must never accuse or confront. A simple word that will touch their hearts and release them from fear and isolation can begin the healing process."²¹

On Sunday March 25, 2006 during a visit to a parish in Rome, Pope Benedict XVI read aloud the last message that Pope John Paul II had written but never lived to read aloud. These were the words, written in the message "as a testament," which Benedict XVI recalled: To humanity, which at times seems to be lost and dominated by the power of evil, egoism and fear, the risen Lord offers as a gift his love that forgives, reconciles and reopens the spirit of hope. It is love that converts hearts and gives peace.²²

May we make his words our own.

Prayer

Dorothy Day, Servant of God, pray for us—for us who labour for a culture of life and a civilisation of love, for the unborn, for the mothers in crisis pregnancies, for mothers who have suffered from abortions, for the poor and for the dying.²³

Dorothy Day

A modern saint

Her life is a model for all in the third millennium, but especially for women who have had... abortions²⁴... I have never condemned a woman who has had an abortion; I weep with her and ask her... to know always God's loving mercy and forgiveness²⁵.

Cardinal John O'Connor,
Archdiocese of New York 1997

Dorothy Day,
Servant of God.

How could she be a saint?

How could a woman who has had an abortion become a saint? Women "like her" cannot be saints can they?

Founder of the Catholic Worker

Dorothy Day is well known for her work with the poor and outcast. She was a journalist, social activist, radical and suffragist. In 1933 she co-founded the Catholic Worker newspaper in 1933 with Peter Maurin to promote social justice. Her first House of Hospitality also opened in 1933 in New York and today over 130 Catholic Worker Communities exist in thirty-two US states and eight countries overseas²⁶.

Before her conversion

Less well known is the fact that as a young woman, Dorothy had an abortion. She hardly ever spoke or wrote about it:

I hobbled down the darkened stairwell of the Upper East Side flat in New York City. My steps were unsteady. My left arm held the banister tightly. My right arm clutched my abdomen. It was burning in pain. I walked out onto the street alone in the dark. It was September of 1919. I was twenty-one years old and I had just aborted my baby.

Lionel, my boyfriend, promised to pick me up at the flat after it was all over. I waited in pain from nine am to ten pm but he never came. When I got to his apartment I found only a note. He said he had left for a new job and, regarding my abortion, that I "was only one of God knows how many millions of women who go through the same thing. Don't build up any hopes. It is best, in fact, that you forget me..."²⁷

Dorothy feared for many years that she would not be able to have other children but longed for a child. Later on while living with Foster Batterham, an atheist and an anarchist she became pregnant again. She saw this as "a miracle from God because I thought that he had left me barren after the abortion." She expected her child to be "an ugly grotesque thing which only I could love; expecting perhaps to see my sins in the child... On the contrary, I gave birth to a beautiful daughter, Tamar Teresa, on March 4, 1926... I was filled with awe of my baby's new life and in gratitude to God I wanted her to be baptised in the Catholic Church... This was the last straw for Foster who wanted nothing to do with any commitments ... Tamar was baptised in June."²⁸

Dorothy wanted to be baptised but knew that her decision would cost her dearly. She would lose Forster and so she delayed. Eventually on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, December 28, 1927, she was baptised. "It was something I had to do..." Dorothy Day, with Peter Maurin, went on to open House of Hospitality for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, and for abused women and pregnant mothers²⁹.

A model for the Third Millennium

Cardinal O'Connor observed that Dorothy Day's life is a model for all in the third millennium, but especially for women who have had or are considering abortions. Dorothy Day procured an abortion before her conversion to the Faith. She regretted it every day of her life. After her conversion she proved a stout defender of human life. The conversion of mind and heart that she experienced speaks volumes to all women today ... it testifies to the mercy of God since a woman who had sinned so gravely could find such unity with him after conversion. It demonstrates that one may turn from the ultimate act of violence against innocent life in the womb to a position of total holiness.³⁰ "In short, I contend that her abortion should not preclude her cause, but intensifies it ... It is with great joy that I announce the approval of the Holy See for the Archdiocese of New York to open the Cause for the Beatification and Canonization of Dorothy Day."³¹

"I Regret My Abortion"



This campaign creates a safe place for women to break their silence about the pain of abortion. It is an honour to speak the truth and let others know they're not alone. Jennifer O'Neill, National Spokeswoman for the Silent No More Awareness Campaign www.silentnomoreawareness.org

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Organisations offering support to those suffering after an abortion:

Project Rachel - 02 9440 7980 or email info@projectrachel.org.au www.projectrachel.org.au

Open Doors - Ringwood 03 9870 7044 or 1800 647 995 www.opendoors.com.au

Centacare Catholic Family Services - A new pregnancy support and post abortion counselling service is due to commence in late 2006

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25 Cardinal John O'Connor, "On the Idea of Sainthood and Dorothy Day," *Homily St Patrick's Cathedral* 9/11/1997 *Catholic New York* 13/11/1997 republished <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/dbiographytext.cfm?Number=38>

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27 Dan Lynch, "Dorothy Day's Pro-life memories" *Catholic Exchange* 24/9/2002

28 *ibid* 29 *ibid*

30 Cardinal John O'Connor, 16/3/2000

31 *ibid*