

Emotional and Spiritual Healing After Abortion in the Rachel's Vineyard Retreat

Abstract: A national law allowing abortion often has a strong influence on the decision of many women and men to abort their unborn child when they wonder what would be best for them and for the child they have conceived. When they make the decision, they are often not told how deeply the abortion will affect them physically, emotionally and spiritually, and how it will also affect the lives of those they love. The topic of induced abortion is taboo and politicized nowadays. In this article, the author attempts to answer the question of what is really important in this controversial situation of abortion. In seeking an answer, he first illustrates the complexity of the consequences of artificial abortion. Then he introduces the Rachel's Vineyard Retreat, a spiritual program that welcomes any woman or man who has lost a child through abortion or who has been directly involved in the decision and is in need of healing because of it. There they find emotional and spiritual healing, reconciliation and peace.

Keywords: abortion, Rachel's Vineyard Retreat, consequences of abortion, emotional and spiritual healing, reconciliation, Christianity

Emocjonalne i duchowe uzdrowienie po aborcji na rekolekcjach w Winnicy Racheli

Streszczenie: Krajowe prawo dopuszczające aborcję ma często silny wpływ na decyzję wielu kobiet i mężczyzn o aborcji ich nienarodzonego dziecka, kiedy zastanawiają się, co byłoby najlepsze dla nich i dla dziecka, które poczęli. Kiedy podejmują decyzję, często nie są poinformowani, jak głęboko aborcja wpłynie na nich fizycznie, emocjonalnie i duchowo, a także jak wpłynie na życie tych, których kochają. Temat dokonywania aborcji jest obecnie wysoce upolitycznionym tematem tabu. W tym artykule autor chce odpowiedzieć na pytanie, co jest naprawdę ważne w tej kontrowersyjnej sytuacji, jaką jest aborcja. Szukając odpowiedzi, najpierw ilustruje złożoność konsekwencji sztucznej aborcji. Następnie przedstawia rekolekcje Winnicy Racheli, duchowy program, który przyjmuje każdą kobietę lub mężczyznę, którzy stracili dziecko w wyniku aborcji lub byli bezpośrednio zaangażowani w tę decyzję i potrzebują uzdrowienia z jej powodu. Tam znajdują emocjonalne i duchowe uzdrowienie, pojednanie i pokój.

Słowa kluczowe: aborcja, rekolekcje Winnicy Racheli, konsekwencje aborcji, uzdrowienie emocjonalne i duchowe, pojednanie, chrześcijaństwo.

Introduction

A national law allowing abortion often has a strong influence on the decision of many women and men to have an abortion when they are wondering what would be best for them and the child they conceived, because in their uncertainty and anxiety it provides them with a safe solution. It is often defined as a woman's "right" to make decisions about her own body. It allows them to free themselves from the burden of an unwanted pregnancy. It provides them with relief, does nothing to address the potentially severe consequences for their reproductive, physical and mental health (Burke 2006b).

Before anyone decides to undergo any medical procedure, they must by law be informed of the risks and any possible consequences, and must sign to say that they have been informed. Also, every medication must have a detailed and clear description of all possible side effects and consequences. It is important to ask why men and women who decide to have an abortion are not clearly informed early. Such information is vital and life-saving (ibid.).

The topic of induced abortion is taboo and politicized nowadays. It is rife with controversies. Marches for and against abortion are common. But rarely is there any public discussion or writing about the psychological and spiritual agony of women, men, marriages and families following abortion. There is even less discussion about the possibility of emotional and spiritual healing afterwards.

In this article, we want to answer the question of what is important in this situation of controversy for and against abortion. In seeking an answer, we will first illustrate the complexity of the consequences of artificial abortion. Following this, we will introduce the Rachel's Vineyard Retreat Weekend, which welcomes all women and men who have lost a child to abortion or who have been directly involved in this decision and need healing as a result. There they find acceptance, love and professional help to process painful emotions and memories and to find emotional and spiritual healing, reconciliation and peace.

1. The complexity of the consequences of induced abortion

Although much of the research confirming the negative effects of artificial abortion had been done before 1989, in that same year a group of experts from the American Psychological Association unanimously concluded that legal abortion "does not create psychological hazards for most women undergoing the procedure" (United States Congress House 2004). They also wrote that there were no clear signs of an epidemic of women seeking psychological help after abortion. Even the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-5* by the same organisation is silent on any effects of abortion on women's mental health (Black and Grant 2014.), but those who help women after abortion know the truth. As Theresa Burke points out: "There is an epidemic that has gone disgracefully ignored, misdiagnosed and untreated" (Burke 2006b).

Many researchers want to prove that abortion does not negatively affect mental health. David Fergusson, a researcher at Christchurch School of Medicine in New Zealand, wanted to do the same. But when he and other researchers followed 500 women until the age of 25, he was surprised to find that women who had an abortion had about a 30% higher rate of mental disorders than those who gave birth to an unwanted child (Fergusson et. al. 2008, 444). At the end of the study, they wrote: “This evidence clearly poses a challenge to the use of psychiatric reasons to justify abortion for women having unwanted pregnancies in jurisdictions that require evidence that pregnancy poses harm to the woman’s health before termination of pregnancy can be authorized” (449).

Theresa Burke, who has been intensively involved for many years in how best to help women after abortion and to raise public awareness about its harmful effects on women, clearly shows the negative effects in her discussions and interviews. She cites many studies that confirm this, including statistics from America that show the following:

“55% of those who had abortions report nightmares and preoccupation with abortion;
73% describe flashbacks;
58% of women report suicidal thoughts which they relate directly to their abortions;
68% reveal that they feel badly about themselves;
79% report guilt, with an inability to forgive themselves;
63% have fears regarding future pregnancies and parenting;
49% have problems being near babies;
67% describe themselves as ‘emotionally numb’” (Burke 2006b).

Similar statistics are also found in a study by the Elliot Institute for Social Science Research, which sampled hundreds of women who had abortions:

“90% suffer damage in their self-esteem
50% begin or increase alcohol and drugs
60% report suicidal ideation
28% actually attempt suicide
20% suffer full blown post traumatic stress disorder
50% report some symptoms of PTSD
52% felt pressured by others to have the abortion” (Burke 1994).

There are certainly many opposing views on how abortion affects mental health. In 2018, David C. Reardon did a comprehensive literature review on the common ground and disagreements between the two opposing views. He concluded, “both sides agree that (a) abortion is consistently associated with elevated rates of mental illness compared to women without a history of abortion; (b) the abortion experience directly contributes to mental health problems for at least some women; (c) there are risk factors, such as pre-existing mental illness, that identify women at greatest risk of mental health problems after an abortion” (Reardon 2018, 1).

“Not all women experience emotional problems following induced abortion”, Burke (1994) also acknowledges. But from her personal experience of working with women who have had abortions, she knows that most of them keep their pain to themselves because they are forbidden to grieve. In *Forbidden Grief: the Unspoken Pain of Abortion*, Burke invites

all readers into the intimate heart of the experience of women and men, where the various discussions about abortion rarely penetrate (Burke and Reardon 2022, 29-60). Abortion is everywhere full of controversies and marches for and against it, but almost nothing is written about the psychological and spiritual agonies of women after abortion. Society and its politics are silent about it, the media ignore it, many mental health professionals refuse to acknowledge it, and movements to legalize abortion often despise it. But the trauma of it is a serious and devastating illness for many wives and husbands. Indeed, as Burke points out, abortion “touches on three central issues of a woman’s self-concept: her sexuality, morality and maternal identity. It also involves the loss of a child, or at least the loss of an opportunity to have a child. In either case, this loss must be confronted, processed and grieved. In a miscarriage, the mother has also suffered the loss of a child. The difference is in the level of guilt and shame that post-aborted women experience because of the deliberate and conscious decision to terminate life; versus a miscarriage, which occurs due to natural causes. With abortion her loss is a secret. There is no social support or consolation from friends or family. It’s important to note that there is also an increase in miscarriages following abortion. When women lose a wanted child after having an abortion they frequently report complex grief and depression because they believe the miscarriage is ‘God’s punishment’” (Burke 2006a).

One of the big problems is that when women are attacked by their own natural reactions to the loss of a child soon after an abortion, or years later, they do not understand what is wrong with them. Many admit to themselves that they have become depressed, anxious or addicted and start treatment, but few admit that the root of their illnesses lies in the abortion. Few help them to recognise this and set them on the path to integrated healing and recovery. Unresolved memories of the abortion and the emotions that arose at the time, which they denied and suppressed deep into their subconscious to survive, remain a source of pressure that can erupt in unexpected ways. This often happens after a period of ten to fifteen years of denial and repression of the thoughts and feelings caused by the traumatic experience of abortion (Burke 2006a; 2006b).

It is important that women and men know the risks they face when they choose abortion, or the traumatic consequences it can have, but more importantly, as Burke (2006b) points out, to know “that there is hope and healing. They need to know that they are not alone”.

This is also emphasised by St. John Paul II in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, in which he addresses women who have had abortions with love and compassion. Although he condemns it as an “unspeakable crime” (John Paul II 1995, 58), he makes it clear that they need not give in to despair and lose hope, since God, the Father of mercies, is always ready to give them his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation (n. 99). For this reason, they should not live in denial, but rather try to understand what happened, face it honestly and, with humble and trusting repentance, place themselves in the hands of the merciful Father through Jesus Christ and accept the spiritual help of the Catholic Church. This is her “good news” to all women and men who have lost a child through abortion (Angelo 1997).

Pope Francis also makes it clear that abortion is “more than a problem, it’s homicide, whoever has an abortion, kills. No mincing words. Take any book on embryology for medical students. The third week after conception, all the organs are already there, even the DNA ... it is a human life, this human life must be respected, this principle is so clear!” (Francis 2021). At the same time, he invites the whole Church to be compassionate and close to all those who suffer from abortion (ibid.).

In order to ensure that no one suffering from the sin of abortion is deprived of God’s mercy, Pope Francis has decreed that, even after the Jubilee Year of Mercy (2015-2016), all priests may grant absolution for the sin of abortion (Francis 2016, n. 12¹).

This closeness is also offered in a special way by the Catholic Church through the weekend retreats of Rachel’s Vineyard. It has now expanded to more than 1000 spiritual exercises a year, held in 70 countries and 375 locations. Many new locations are still being established (Rachel’s Vineyard Ministries 2022a). Of course, there are hundreds of other forms of support emerging around the world (Burke 2006b).

2. Rachel’s Vineyard Weekend Retreat

2.1. History

Theresa Kaminski Burke founded the Abortion Healing Centre in 1986. She then founded one of the first therapeutic support groups for women who have had abortions. Later, with her husband Kevin Burke, she founded Rachel’s Vineyard and published the book *A Psychological and Spiritual Journey for Post Abortion Healing* in 1994. A year later, she adapted the programme for a weekend retreat, which began to spread quickly as many people experienced it as an effective healing process. In 2003, Rachel’s Vineyard became a ministry of Priests for Life (Rachel’s Vineyard Ministries 2022a).

2.2. Basic information about the Weekend Retreat

The retreat begins on Friday evening and concludes on late Sunday afternoon. It is usually led by a team of six people trained to facilitate the process of emotional and spiritual

¹ Cf. »Given this need, lest any obstacle arise between the request for reconciliation and God’s forgiveness, I henceforth grant to all priests, in virtue of their ministry, the faculty to absolve those who have committed the sin of procured abortion. The provision I had made in this regard, limited to the duration of the Extraordinary Holy Year, is hereby extended, notwithstanding anything to the contrary. I wish to restate as firmly as I can that abortion is a grave sin, since it puts an end to an innocent life. In the same way, however, I can and must state that there is no sin that God’s mercy cannot reach and wipe away when it finds a repentant heart seeking to be reconciled with the Father. May every priest, therefore, be a guide, support and comfort to penitents on this journey of special reconciliation” (n. 12).

healing for all participants. The team consists of a professional counsellor, women who have had an abortion, men who have been involved in abortions, loving and non-judgmental volunteers and “a representative of God – a minister or priest” (Rachel's Vineyard Ministries 2022b). They lead the retreat, and attend to the needs of the participants, who number about 12 to 15 (or fewer), so that each person can be attended to individually in a respectful and safe environment in which everyone has time to share together and put the retreat into practice (ibid.).

The group of participants is important because healing for victims of abortion trauma can be achieved by establishing safety, reconstructing the traumatic story, and restoring the connection between victims and the community. The community is therefore cathartic, as others who have “been there” or experienced it themselves can validate the symptoms and provide a supportive and healing element in the healing dynamic.

The weekend welcomes not only mothers who have had an abortion, but also men who have been involved in various ways. They too need to embark on a journey of healing the wounds that abortion has left in them. Many men who have participated have found deep emotional and spiritual healing (Rachel's Vineyard Ministries 2022c).

If the participant also has a family member with her/him to support her/him in the group (e.g., the husband or father of the aborted child, parents, siblings, etc.), the healing is often even deeper and more complete.

The weekend retreat team guarantees complete confidentiality and anonymity. Participants are also asked to sign a declaration that they will not discuss what they hear and see during the programme with anyone or anywhere. They can only talk about what happened to them and what they themselves experienced. The name of the participant in the weekend is not shared with any other individual or group under any circumstances. Locations are sought for the weekend that guarantee anonymity and discretion (Rachel's Vineyard Ministries 2022b).

2.3. Dynamics and content of the Weekend Retreat

The dynamics and content of a weekend retreat are marked by the Christian faith, but it is open to believers, non-believers and those with different beliefs. In fact, the process always “works” if the participant is open to Love, Goodness and Mercy. The weekend consists of Bible passages and meditations or Ignatian contemplations and various exercises to create a new bodily memory. An abortion wounds a person on all levels: physical, mental and spiritual, and healing is needed that involves all these levels (Bretzke and Rodman 1999).

Ignatian contemplation allows the biblical passage to become “alive”, as it enables the participants to immerse themselves in the biblical passage, to have a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and, through him, with the Father and his merciful love and forgiveness (Platovnjak 2018, 1035-1045). In this way, they can personally experience the “forgiveness

and peace” of which St. John Paul II speaks in *Evangelium Vitae* (John Paul II 1995, 99). Usually, Gospel passages that speak of Jesus’ encounter with individuals seeking healing are chose (e.g., blind Bartimaeus, the adulteress, the woman of the blood, etc.). Rituals are also performed in accordance with particular passages, which also allow for a new experiential bodily memory to take place. In the ritual of raising Lazarus from the dead, the participants are “bound” with gauze and bandages on the parts of their bodies that represent the wounds they suffered as a result of the abortion. They are then wrapped in white sheets by the facilitators and prayers of lament over the spiritual death of their sisters. Finally, they symbolically lift them up in the name and power of Christ so that they may rise to new life. For many, this is one of the most powerful rituals of the weekend, as it represents the death they experienced then in abortion and the resurrection they are now experiencing in the healing process (Bretzke and Rodman 1999).

Each exercise is an invitation to explore the participant’s feelings and emotions. Nothing is imposed. The process is appropriate to different religious traditions and cultural heritages. Each person is invited to share the experience of the exercise with the group, or to process it in the silence of their own hearts. The weekend is not intended to convert to or proselytise Christianity, but is simply an invitation to dialogue with one’s Creator in a personal and intimate process (Burke 2006b).

The Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist are key elements of the weekend on the road to healing and, for most participants, a moment of special opportunity to encounter God’s mercy and forgiveness (Bretzke and Rodman 1999). For many, the Sacrament of Reconciliation on Saturday evening is the most important time to be sacramentally reconciled to God. Some people confess abortion to themselves and others a hundred times, but never feel forgiven and never accept it as a free gift. But the sacrament of forgiveness, which is woven into the whole dynamic of the weekend, enables them to share in this gift and to begin to live it in all their relationships.

2.4. Memorial service

One of the closing rites of the weekend retreat is the memorial Mass. This is an opportunity for the participants to give their lost child the honour and dignity that they had not been able to give to the child before, as they have probably never been given permission to grieve the child’s death. They have never been able to hold the tiny body of their child in their arms or to bury it. But every mother should be able to grieve the loss of her child. The same applies to every father.

It is a special rite that allows the participants to have a deeper awareness and acceptance of the eternal life of their child in heaven. In this rite, they may bring a doll symbolically representing the lost child and lay it to rest in a cradle, representing the surrender into the arms of the Creator and the Father and into the embrace of the eternal love of the Triune

God in whom he is now. It is a rite of forgiveness of self and of the forgiveness they receive from their child. During the service, each person may read a poem, scripture, sing or do something else to express remembrance of and connection with his or her unborn child who is in heavenly glory (Rachel's Vineyard Ministries 2022d).

Every mother and father usually wants to know three things about their child: where he is, who he is with, and whether he is all right. The joyful conscience is that the aborted child is not lost forever, but is with the triune God as a living member of the communion of saints and as the personal intercessor of the parents (Bretzke and Rodman 1999). In this conviction, St. John Paul II assures all women who have had an abortion, "You will come to understand that nothing is definitely lost, and you will be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord" (John Paul II 1995, 99). This service makes it possible for each participant to know this experientially. They are now assured of true communication with their unborn child and will be able to be united with him in heaven for all eternity (ibid.).

This rite often enables the participants to continue their lives with a new dignity and life that has been given to them through the experience of free forgiveness and love within the dynamics of a weekend.

Conclusion

Research on the impact of induced abortion clearly shows that it has a negative impact on the mental health of at least some women (Luciano de Oliveira 2021). But very little is said about it in public. More should certainly be done to speak and write about this issue, so that every woman who makes the decision, as well as the men involved in the decision, can be informed about the frequent traumatic consequences of an abortion. The question is how much it would help to reduce the number of women having abortions. In any case, it is even more important that every woman who has had an abortion, and the fathers who have lost a child through one, should be reassured about the possibility of integral healing that the Rachel's Vineyard Retreat Weekend or some other emotional and spiritual support for post-abortion distress can offer.

The article gives a brief introduction to the weekend retreat for integral healing after abortion. It concludes with a brief testimony from a participant about the value of the integrated help it provides.

"I came to Rachel's Vineyard quite without expectations. I was ready to accept whatever was going to happen. I experienced, what I still can hardly believe, the immense grace of being accepted by the whole team and the other participants, sharing the experience with others, listening to the experiences of others in an extremely confidential and non-judgmental circle. After many years of atheism, I felt that it was God who was working in this circle and who had forgiven me and allowed me to forgive myself" (Odmevi na duhovne vaje Rahelin vinograd 2021).

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