

## Hope For Your Future: Catholic Charities' Project Rachel Program

A central aspect of the Pro-Life perspective is a deep compassion for both a woman facing an unplanned pregnancy and the child she is carrying. That compassion does not end if the woman obtains an abortion. For that reason, the Church has consistently professed a desire to reach out to women and men who have had the experience of abortion to extend mercy and support for their healing. In 1975, just two years after the Supreme Court's decision in Roe vs. Wade, the US Bishops "Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities" pledged the pastoral resources of the church "to the specific needs of those who had or have taken part in an abortion." In 1984, the first Project Rachel Program was created in the Arch-Diocese of Milwaukee, choosing the name based on inspiration from the passage in the book of Jeremiah that proclaims "Rachel mourns for her children, she refuses to be consoled because her children are no more. Thus says the Lord: Cease your cries of mourning, wipe tears from your eyes... There is hope for your future." (Jeremiah 31: 15-17) Now, the United States Council of Catholic Bishops coordinates and supports Project Rachel programs in dioceses throughout the country. This includes the Diocese of Winona, where the Project Rachel Program is operated by Catholic Charities as part of our Family and Individual Counseling Program.

Archbishop Joseph Nauman has said that, "Project Rachel Ministry is at the heart of the church, because mercy and forgiveness is at the heart of Jesus' mission, ministry, and message." We have sought to live out that ministry through our Project Rachel Program. Our agency has offered trainings to interested clergy, counselors, lay ministers and others at various times since the Project Rachel Program was founded in our diocese. The most recent of these trainings brought Vicki Thorn, who founded the original Project Rachel program in Milwaukee, to our diocese in the fall of 2015.

We promote Project Rachel through bulletin announcements and other means so people who are need of healing after an abortion know that this help is available to them. For those who would benefit from counseling services, we offer confidential outreach through a toll free number (800-222-5859) that is staffed by Catholic Charities social workers 24 hours per day 7 days per week. They can facilitate scheduling a counseling appointment, if desired. Thanks to a generous donor, those who seek counseling through Project Rachel can receive up to ten counseling sessions at no charge.

Not everyone who has had the experience of abortion needs professional counseling to help them heal. Some will achieve healing through loving support from family or friends, their own prayer and reflection, and through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We hope that even for those who never directly use Project Rachel services promoting Project Rachel encourages them on their journey by communicating God's love for them and the Church's desire for their reconciliation and healing.

So when is professional counseling important for healing to occur? Some women who experience abortion will have symptoms that are akin to post-trauma symptoms: nightmares, intrusive memories of the experience, depression or anxiety symptoms, and avoidance of situations that trigger memories of the abortion. If these symptoms persist, counseling can help address them.

More broadly, women are apt to initiate counseling after an abortion when they experience problems in one of four areas: behavioral concerns, difficult emotions, difficulty in relationships, and poor self-worth. Theresa Bonapartis, an expert on treating women experiencing post-abortion difficulties, describes the impact abortion can have on a woman's self worth by saying, "So many women think abortion is who they are rather than something that they did." It is important to say that not all women who experience abortion will develop these sorts of problems, and of course, it is also important to remember that these kinds of symptoms do not automatically mean a woman had the experience of abortion.

How can counseling help? Catholic Charities counselors can provide information and tools to help a person work through the behavioral and emotional symptoms they are experiencing. The techniques we use to help people work through depression, anxiety, trauma, and grief caused by other life events can also be of help for someone healing after an abortion. Additionally, Project Rachel counseling supports the woman in personal and spiritual reconciliation with God, with her baby, and with herself. If the woman has never named her baby, she can consider doing so. Some women will choose a specific act of reconciliation, like writing a letter to her baby or planting a tree or bush to help her remember her child. These sorts of actions are always up to the woman; only she can know what will best facilitate her healing and reconciliation. Of course, we encourage the Sacrament of Reconciliation and will help facilitate that if the woman wants us to do so. This too is always her choice.

We all have a role to support Project Rachel's ministry of healing and reconciliation. When we pray to end abortion, we might also pray for healing for those women-and men-who have had the experience of abortion. In my experience, these are kind and decent people, blessings to their families and their communities, who are carrying the weight of the experience of abortion. As Theresa Bonapartis said, abortion is something that they did, not who they are. And for those who need help in their journey toward healing, Catholic Charities Project Rachel counseling services can, in Pope Francis' words, "help her look to the future with hope and make a new start in life."

John McGuire,  
Director, Family and Individual Counseling Program  
Catholic Charities of Southern Minnesota