

# THE SECRET LIFE of POST-ABORTIVE MOTHERS

AND HOW WE CAN HELP THEM

By Christina P. Lynch

In the spring of 2004, approximately 150 women from around the United States were motivated to seek help for post-abortion healing by attending a Rachel's Vineyard retreat. This group bravely volunteered to participate in my research study that examined why they sought psychological help through the retreat.

A post-abortion weekend retreat allows the mother (and/or father) to get away from the daily

pressures of work and family and identify all the ways an abortion may have affected her. The retreat takes place in a supportive and non-judgmental environment and it includes a number of exercises which permit the individual to work through the grief and sorrow she may feel as the result of an abortion. The retreat further helps individuals to accept forgiveness. Typically, four to 18 adults may attend the retreat which is offered

almost every weekend in different cities throughout the U.S. and several countries around the world.

## The women's background

The women who volunteered for this study ranged from 22 to 73 years of age, with an average age of 41.5. The majority was highly educated (83 percent with some college or advanced degree). Fewer than one third (30 percent) reported

that 10 years or less had passed since their first abortion; as compared to 70 percent who waited 10 years or longer. Most women (76.5 percent) had only told a few people about their abortion; and a mere 23 percent reported telling their husbands. What's more, almost 40 percent of the women admitted to having undergone between two and seven abortions.

## Implications of the findings

Over half of the women (54.7 percent) sought outside help to recover from their abortions before attending the retreat, while the remainder (45.3 percent) had not. Of those who did seek help, 53 percent said they had sought individual counseling while approximately 20 percent sought the help of a Catholic priest. Almost half of those who sought help from an individual counselor waited an average of 3.6 years after their first abortion, while the majority of those who sought help from a priest waited an average of 8.6 years.

There are implications to these findings. Perhaps the post-abortive women felt safer seeking help from a secular source because they wanted to protect and preserve various community relationships. Thus individual counselors who have integrated Catholic faith into their practice might consider making referrals to priests, thereby helping the women to reconcile with God and the Church sooner.

The findings also suggest that priests may want to consider making a greater effort to welcome

post-abortive mothers to counsel. Of the women who indicated wanting the help of a priest earlier, one wrote: "I want to pursue healing within the context of my Catholic faith, through the sacraments, with the help of other women who have also had abortions and with the help of a priest." The study further revealed that an average of 11 years passed between



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the time a woman sought help from a priest and attended a retreat. Therefore, priests might encourage women to attend such a retreat where they'd find the support of other women like themselves.

## Change of heart and mind

The study showed three areas of change in regards to the women's

abortion history: marital status, abortion views and religious beliefs.

Most women (66.4 percent) were single when they had their first abortion but were married (56.2 percent) when they attended the retreat.

Second, most women were either uncertain of their stance on abortion, pro-choice or pro-choice leaning (64.4 percent) at the time of their abortions; as compared to the majority of women (71.3 percent) who were either pro-life or pro-life leaning when they took the retreat.

The implications of these findings are several. First, an understanding and possible integration of what it means to be pro-life developed over the time that had elapsed from the abortion until they attended the retreat.

Second, women who claimed to be pro-life in some capacity may have been more motivated to seek psychological healing from abortion. The fact that 71.3 percent of women were pro-life leaning during the retreat suggests that post-abortion retreats be promoted in pro-life arenas such as conferences, workshops, church services and bulletins, the internet and other media outlets.

Third, their religious beliefs changed. Most of the retreats offered by Rachel's Vineyard are Catholic in focus, so apparently Catholicism plays an important role in women's motivational factors for seeking psychological help. At the time of the retreat, two thirds of the surveyed women (68.1 percent) identified themselves as Catholic, as compared to

over half (54.1 percent) who identified themselves as Catholic at the time of their first abortion. Considering the Church's pro-life doctrine, the latter number is rather stunning.

### Motivations for seeking help

Post-abortive mothers can be motivated to seek psychological help for different reasons. One third of the ladies attended the retreat based on their emotions. They admitted connecting the consequences of their abortion decision to their negative personal feelings. Apparently they imagined a positive outcome to the retreats and were willing to take a risk in seeking psychological treatment. This also suggests that pastors, counselors, teachers, spouses, family members and friends who become aware of women with post-abortion emotional distress, may want to encourage and direct these women to seek help through post-abortion retreats.

The second highest motivational factor was spiritual.

Post-abortive mothers indicated an intrinsic desire to return to God. This corresponds with other findings in the study showing that the women's religious beliefs had changed. Approximately 20 percent of women admitted to having no religious beliefs at the time of their abortion as compared to only three percent at the time of the retreat. It suggests that religious environments can nourish a post-abortive woman's desire to reconcile with God.

Psychological motivations equaled 7.6 percent of women's responses. Some women identified relationship conflict and marital distress as key motivators for seeking help. In fact, the majority of women were married at the time of the retreat (56.2 percent) as compared to being single at the time of their abortions (66.4 percent). As noted earlier, most women reported that they only told a few people about their abortion history; and of those less than one quarter had told their husbands.

In short, results from this study suggest that the majority of women motivated to attend one of the surveyed post-abortion retreats are Catholic in their religious beliefs (68.1%); pro-life leaning (71.3%); highly educated (83.8%); married (56.2%); and intrinsically motivated to seek help for psychological healing from their abortions through the retreats (64.5%).

### Healing the marital union

The information gathered suggests the need for an awareness campaign aimed at married couples within the Catholic Church. This wouldn't be an easy task as couples need to feel connected to the people and the mission of the cam-

paign; which means it's possible only if post-abortive couples think they'll be able to identify with other couples like themselves.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that special consideration must be given to husbands of post-abortive women who may be unaware they belong to a post-abortive couple. Of course, some women may be married unknowingly to post-abortive fathers as well. The campaign, therefore, should be presented to couples in a non-threatening manner, with support system referrals such as retreats; marriage counselors; priests trained in post-abortion healing, etc., readily available to help strengthen the couples during the healing process.

In light of all these findings, it would seem appropriate that a post-abortion healing campaign begin with the Catholic Church raising awareness to its married members. Marriage encounter weekends (retreat for married couples), retrouvaille (retreat for troubled marriages), and natural family planning classes would be fitting venues. Pre-cana conferences (weekend retreats before marriage) could also take part in the campaign. These events might incorporate the testimonies of married couples who are post-abortive, or at least speakers who raise the subject, so that all post-abortive Catholics and Catholic couples are offered the opportunity of healing and true happiness.

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