

Post-Abortion Aftermath: the Problem

(notes from a workshop at the 1999 Los Angeles Religious Education Congress, given by Fr. Blair Raum, Baltimore Diocese)

Why does a woman choose an abortion? Because she is having a crisis pregnancy. Someone has a problem with that child in her womb. It could be 1) the father, 2) the medical profession (life of the mother is at risk, the baby has a defect, etc.), 3) the boyfriend/father of the child (“maybe I can keep him this way” even though 70% of the time she breaks up with him within 3 months of the abortion), or 4) she herself has a problem. Abortion is seen as the logical solution to the problem, because it is cheap, available, “risk-free” and solves all the problems of that crisis pregnancy. **What happens after the abortion? Relief, initially.** But that research was done on the women as they came out right after the abortion. Not long afterwards, however, a deep pain begins to emerge within her, **and this is the guts of the problem:** she is a mother who is missing her child. From the moment of the conception of the first child, a woman’s “mother-wiring” begins to become active, and she is FOREVER a mother after that. But that child is now missing. **What will she do with that pain?** She will either 1) grieve the loss, or 2) not grieve the loss. #1 is very difficult to do, because she then has to admit that the reason she is missing the child is because she killed her child. That is very difficult to admit. So most post-abortion women choose #2. And they then become stuck in their grief. Health professionals call it “complicated mourning” or “impacted grief”. The person in effect says, “I have a loss, and I am not going to grieve it.” But the natural thrust of the human body-mind is to get the grief-pain up and out, to heal. If the obstacles are removed, people tend to heal. For example, someone suffering from severe abuse is put into a safe environment, so that those bad experiences can now slowly be mourned and the powerful emotions no longer be compartmentalized and dissociated from the person but integrated. So, since the post-abortion woman chooses not to grieve, she must now use denial to thrust the grief-pain back down and keep it away from her. Denial is the defense mechanism that says, “It isn’t true/it doesn’t hurt, because I say it isn’t true/it doesn’t hurt.” **Now she has two problems: 1) unresolved grief, and 2) a powerful tension between her pushing down the grief through denial, while the grief pushes up to try to get out.** SO NOW SHE HAS NOT RELIEVED BUT DOUBLED HER PAIN. Denial as a defense mechanism works very well, but is very expensive, because to deny some of your feelings, you have to deny all of them, which takes a great amount of work! Very expensive! It is like trying to keep a beach ball under water. It keeps trying to pop up, so you must constantly keep on top of it to prevent that. **So denial has two problems: 1) she must numb out all her emotions, and thus becomes emotionally isolated from others** (which is why 70% of women break up with their boyfriend within 3 months of the abortion), **and 2) denial does not last forever, and will break sooner or later** (Fr. Raum has seen it break as soon as 2-3 months after the abortion, and as long as 45 years after). **These two pains can now lead to a third problem: a lifestyle that seeks to cope with all that pain: eating disorders** (stuffing and purging symbolize the pain being pushed down and trying to come up), **or alcohol/drug abuse** (to numb out), **or sexual promiscuity** (to try to feel good in the midst of all this pain), **or depression** (de-press, pressing down the emotions), **or anxiety** (“What would happen to me if all the pain came up?”). If this sounds like a hellish existence, it is. Many women have said, “The day I had my abortion is the day I walked through the gates of hell!” And as of 1999, about 29 million women and 29 million men have gone through or are going through this kind of suffering. (What has been said above about women goes for men as well, although they have another problem, in that sometimes the abortion is hidden from them, so they do not even know if they have a loss they should grieve.) **Something else to consider:** health professionals think that about 50% of women have been sexually abused before the age of 21 by a male whom they knew and trusted. (About 37% report this abuse, so the pros suspect that the actual numbers must be significantly higher.) **What is abuse?** When someone crosses the legitimate boundaries of another person and takes from him/her something the abuser has no right to take, for the satisfaction of the abuser’s own needs, irrespective of the needs of the other. **What is abortion?** The crossing of the legitimate boundary of another person (the unborn child) and taking from the child what you have no right to take (the child’s life) for the satisfaction of your own needs (the resolution of the crisis pregnancy) irrespective of the legitimate rights of the child (to live). So 50% of women in the U.S. have “abuse” imprinted into their brains, and so they have a pre-disposition or inclination to say “yes” to abortion, before the crisis-pregnancy ever takes place, because she has been told during those vulnerable years of her childhood that “It is alright to cross the boundaries of another person to satisfy your needs by taking something from the other person, even if the “other” is an unborn person. So if 50% of women have been abused before the age of 21, then no wonder there is so much anger in the pro-abortion women. It is actually a wonder that they have not torn the country apart with their anger. If you listen to the slogans at the pro-abortion rallies in Washington, D.C., like “Keep the Supreme Court out of my body!!!” you realize that that is the rhetoric not of politics but of abuse survivors. It makes you wonder, “Who else has been in your body that you did not want there!?” **There is another dynamic at work in the abortion decision:** the possible dynamic of re-enactment. When you suffer an overwhelming trauma as a child (e.g. sexual abuse, which is quite overwhelming for anyone, especially a child), you can attempt to resolve the trauma by an action that in effect says, “I will re-enact this trauma, but this time I will win.” This strategy doesn’t work, because it only avoids the pain of the earlier abuse. It doesn’t resolve it. And it adds new problems and pains to the old ones. So on some level an abortion may be the re-enactment of the trauma of abuse earlier in life. Some women have multiple abortions with the hope that “If I do it often enough, I won’t feel the pain anymore.”

THE SOLUTION The problem in a nutshell is that the woman says, “I will not be your mother” to that child in the womb. The solution in a nutshell is when she reverses that decision and begins to say, “I WILL be your mother” and somehow lets the child say, “I will be your child.” Since the child has died, this bonding can only be in the spiritual world, the world (as Christians know by faith) of the Holy Spirit of the Father and Jesus Christ. So the ultimate healing is always a spiritual and supernatural healing. **EVERY MOTHER NEEDS TO KNOW THREE THINGS ABOUT ALL HER CHILDREN: 1) WHERE THEY ARE, 2) WHO THEY ARE WITH, AND 3) THAT THEY ARE SAFE.** A poor couple in Baltimore lost all three of their pre-school children in a fire, two weeks before Christmas. The mother came to the priest very angry at God: “I want my children back!” “Well, tell God, and pray hard.” She came back after a few days and said God spoke to her in prayer, and told her that He asked the children if they would like to come back, but they said they would rather stay with God. She said to the priest, “I can accept what happened now, because I now know three things I didn’t know before: where they are, who they are with, and that they are safe.” **The great news is that you (anyone with two ears) can begin to turn things around for a post-abortion woman in about ONE HOUR!!!** How? **GET HER STORY!!!** And she is more likely to approach you than a priest or minister. When she says something like, “Do you have a few minutes? I would like to share something with you.” you just have to sit back, get a couple of boxes of Kleenex, one for her and one for you, and **LET HER TELL HER STORY!!!** And let her tell it the way she wants to tell it. Don’t worry about getting details, or the missing pieces. One effect of trauma is partial amnesia. She may never recover certain parts of the story. But that doesn’t matter. What matters is to let the pain and grief come to the surface, to let that painful beach ball up to the surface where it wants to and should be! **And above all, NEVER, NEVER, NEVER, NEVER JUDGE HER!** She has already judged and condemned herself and felt terrible guilt many times over. She is the perfect penitent. Your job is simply to listen. By doing that, you accomplish these wonderful things: 1) you significantly lower that toxic pain she has been carrying for an average of 10-12 years, by being a safe person whom she can talk to and in so doing let the toxic emotions up (but you will get some of the poison by listening to her, so you have to be careful to de-toxify by taking a nap, or going out, or exercising, or listening to good music, etc.); 2) you help her to come out of that emotional isolation she was in for an average of 10-12 years (or somewhere between 2-3 months and 45 years). One woman came to Fr. Raum, and for three sessions spent the whole time crying, until by the fourth meeting she told her story. **What if she brings up these two questions?** 1) I feel I have committed the unforgiveable sin. I have taken the life of my child. 2) Why would the Church want me back? I’ve gone against everything the Church stands for. **Here is how you can respond (only if she brings them up):** first, try to go for the story: “These concerns of yours are very important, and before we get into them, it would be very helpful for me if you could tell me your story.” Then, after her story, you can deal with these two concerns. Here is how: don’t respond to number one. Since she doesn’t ask it as a question, but states it as a declaration, she would not bring it up if she REALLY believed she had committed that unforgiveable sin. [Traditionally the unforgiveable sin is seen as refusing God’s grace of final repentance; so it is not that God refuses to forgive, but that the person goes to his grave refusing to let God forgive him. It involves the pride of insisting that there are some sins so great that God is not powerful enough to forgive them--in spite of God repeatedly trying to tell the person otherwise.] With regard to #2, this response seems to work every time: “You know, you raised this question about why the Church would want you back. And I am really puzzled by that question, because everything I hear from the Church, from its preaching and teaching and canon law and papal encyclicals, is that ‘abortion is not good for you’. And from your story I hear you also saying the same thing: ‘Abortion was not good for me.’ So I’m not sure where the opposition between you and the Church lies. You both are saying exactly the same thing. And the Church can also bring the healing from that great pain, which you also want.”

Remember, all you have to do is be a good listener, to get her to a safe place. And you don’t have to be a trained professional. You are like the person at the side of the lake, throwing the life preserver to the drowning woman (or man). Your job, through letting her tell her story, is to pull her to shore. [If the time seems right, you can also help further her healing by encouraging her to name her child. This will help her to hope in finding out where her child is, who the child is with, and that he or she is safe.] Then the others can do the CPR, get her to the hospital, etc. And in fact, unless you are a trained professional, it is better NOT to work with her on an on-going basis after she tells her story. Instead you can offer to drive her to Project Rachel appointments for post-abortion counseling, keep in contact with her that way, baby-sit her children, pray with her, call her up regularly, etc. **BUT YOU HAVE ALREADY DONE THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU COULD HAVE DONE, IF YOU HELPED HER TELL HER STORY ABOUT THE ABORTION.**

By way of encouragement to you pro-life workers: 1) women say that the Rosary you prayed outside the abortion mill ten years ago, while they were inside, is the reason they are now in the office of Fr. Raum telling their story. 2) post-abortion women are very angry, but not primarily at their boyfriend (“he was just as messed up as I was”) or the abortion doctor (“I paid him to do that job”), but rather at the people who should have been there to tell her the truth but didn’t. They won’t be mad at you (“I know they tried to tell me, but I wouldn’t listen”) Long before Roe vs. Wade the Catholic Church has consistently said that abortion is wrong, so in the long run they will not be angry at us, because they will know that we tried to tell them the truth and to help them choose life. **POST-ABORTION HEALING AND RECONCILIATION 1-800-794-7863**