

## LIFE MATTERS: FORGIVENESS AND HEALING AFTER ABORTION

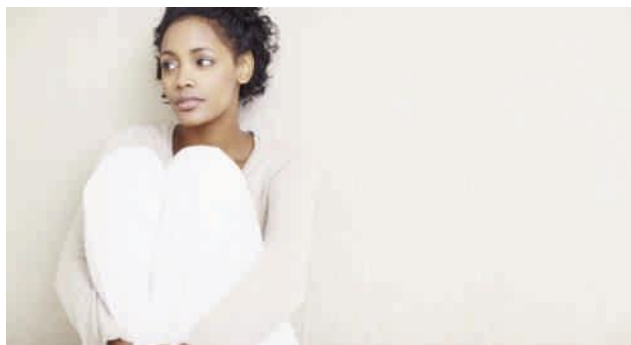
*My life is ruined. I have been depressed, suicidal, guilt-ridden for 24 years. ... I beg every day for forgiveness. ... I cannot believe God would forgive the life I have led.*

*Over the years I continually went to confession. A priest once told me, "God has forgiven you. You need to forgive yourself. You are putting yourself through your own purgatory." But I could not bring myself to accept forgiveness.*

*I know God has forgiven me for this sin I have committed but it is so hard for me to forgive myself. Thirteen years later and I still haven't forgiven myself. I live with this shame, guilt and disgust every day of my life.*

These are but a few of the many thousands of messages sent to the website of Project Rachel Ministry ([www.HopeAfterAbortion.org](http://www.HopeAfterAbortion.org)), the post-abortion ministry of the Catholic Church. They speak for many who struggle with forgiveness after abortion.

A priest active in Project Rachel Ministry once spoke of the spiritual desolation experienced by post-abortive women: "Many feel they have committed 'the unforgivable sin' and are destined for hell, or that they deserve to be on death row. Most suffer this spiritual desolation in silence, too ashamed and feeling unworthy to seek reconciliation from God."



That a deeply remorseful woman does not trust in God's desire—his *eagerness*—to forgive her, or that after receiving absolution in the Sacrament of Reconciliation she cannot accept that she has been forgiven or remains unable to forgive herself—these obstacles to healing and peace tell us nothing about

who God is or how efficacious the Sacrament is. What they tell us is that such women are devastated by the loss of their children, aware of the seriousness of their sin, and that they have never encountered such merciful love in their relationships with others—love that might have allowed them to hope in God's infinitely greater merciful love.

Is the despair of forgiveness merely a product of "Catholic guilt" as some abortion supporters have suggested? Even nonbelievers recognize their need for God's forgiveness and for the ability to forgive themselves. Another letter to *HopeAfterAbortion* reads in part:

*I'm not religious but I'm scared that I'm going to be punished for what I've done, in the afterlife. Where do those who were raised atheist turn to? ... I don't want to hear people say that I have to forgive myself because after all these years I still can't. I'm scared that I'll never be able to because I know what I did was wrong.*

She can write "I know what I did was wrong" because God has written his law on every human heart (cf. Heb 8:10). But when becoming pregnant sets off a "crisis," conscience can easily be drowned out by fears: fear of condemnation, of disappointing parents, of losing a boyfriend, of not being able to complete one's education, fear of raising a child alone or fear of what it may be like to raise a child with severe disabilities.

It may seem impossible for a post-abortive woman to find healing and peace, much less hope and joy, as long as she is convinced that God will not forgive her sin of abortion. If—as she believes—she will spend eternity in hell, forever separated from her child, how could she begin to forgive herself for casting aside her child, and forfeiting her present and future happiness?

God has provided the solution to this misery and asks us to be catalysts to the solution. It is to believe in one's heart what Jesus has repeatedly said and shown—"I am love and mercy itself. ... Let no soul fear to draw near to me, even though its sins be as scarlet."<sup>1</sup> "I do not want to punish aching mankind,

but I desire to heal it, pressing it to My merciful heart.”<sup>2</sup> “The greater the misery of a soul, the greater its right to My mercy.”<sup>3</sup>

Throughout salvation history, God has welcomed repentant sinners with special joy. Jesus concludes the parable of the lost sheep with these words: “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance” (Lk 15:7).

Jesus goes out of his way to speak privately with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. She is an outcast, scorned for having had five husbands and now living with one who is not her husband. In a conversation marked by gentleness, truth and love, Jesus reveals her inherent dignity to her and confides that his mission is to save *all* men and women. She becomes at once an apostle to her village. (Jn 4:4-26)

When Simon and other Pharisees were scandalized that Jesus allowed a “sinful woman” to bathe his feet with her tears while dining at Simon’s house, Jesus holds her up as an example of humility, gratitude and love: “I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven, hence she has shown great love” (Lk 7:36-50). Not even once does Jesus reject a humble contrite sinner.

Blessed John Paul II envisioned that post-aborted women who have approached Jesus with humility and sorrow and who then experienced his merciful love will also become Jesus’ most eloquent evangelizers:

*With the friendly and 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. Through your commitment to life, whether by accepting the birth of other children or by welcoming and caring for those most in need of someone to be close to them, you will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life.*<sup>4</sup>

Thanks to Project Rachel I am me again. The retreat allowed me the opportunity to experience God’s love and forgiveness—something I had decided I was not worthy of. Little did I know that God was there, all along, offering me his love. ... I actually feel lighter. The power of forgiveness is life-altering. I am happy again and the people whom I love sense that.

How can we be catalysts to the healing of women who’ve had abortions, to help all others believe in God’s merciful love so that they may find healing from any grave sin? Let us heed the advice of Pope Francis:

*Take up God’s offer .... For God, we are not numbers, we are ... the most important thing to him; even if we are sinners, we are what is closest to his heart. ... let us be enveloped in the mercy of God; let us trust in his patience, which always gives us more time. Let us find the courage to ... [allow] ourselves [to] be loved by him and to encounter his mercy in the sacraments. We will feel his wonderful tenderness, we will feel his embrace, and we too will become more capable of mercy, patience, forgiveness and love.*<sup>5</sup>

*Susan E. Wills, Esq. is Assistant Director for Education & Outreach, USCCB Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities*

If you know of someone in need of confidential help to experience God’s forgiveness and healing, contact [www.HopeAfterAbortion.org](http://www.HopeAfterAbortion.org) or 888-456-HOPE (4673).

<sup>1</sup> *Diary of St. Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in My Soul* (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press, 1987), no. 699.

<sup>2</sup> *Diary*, no. 1588.

<sup>3</sup> *Diary*, no. 1182.

<sup>4</sup> Bl. John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life)* (1995), no. 99.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, homily, April 7, 2013.



SECRETARIAT OF PRO-LIFE ACTIVITIES  
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops  
3211 Fourth Street NE • Washington, DC 20017-1194  
Tel: (202) 541-3070 • Fax: (202) 541-3054  
Website: [www.usccb.org/prolife](http://www.usccb.org/prolife)

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