



Life Insight

A Publication of the NCCB Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities

Vol. 11, No. 2 March 2000

Healing Happens

The U.S. bishops' Jubilee outreach program to women and men suffering in the aftermath of abortion began February 7 in the greater metropolitan area of Baltimore, Washington and northern Virginia.

For nearly a year, the three diocesan offices of Project Rachel--the Church's ministry of reconciliation and healing for those wounded by abortion--prepared for this outreach by greatly increasing their capacity to help. Many more priests were trained in post-abortion counseling. Additional lay professional counselors were recruited. Diocesan offices upgraded their phone systems to handle increased calls and trained more staff to answer referral lines.

The outreach consisted of four 60-second radio ads broadcast on 10 stations, eight billboards placed along major commuter corridors and three messages displayed on placards in over half of local buses and Metro trains. Posters and brochures entitled "How to Talk to a Friend Who's Had an Abortion" were distributed to Catholic churches in the area. An 800 number was established to route callers automatically to the office nearest them. The Archdiocese of Washington and Our Sunday Visitor Foundation arranged for the distribution of Hope and Healing, a newspaper supplement available from the Elliot Institute, as an insert in the Sunday February 27 edition of The Washington Post.

This effort was only the beginning of a Jubilee outreach program to be carried out in individual dioceses and states throughout the U.S. this year and into 2001. A comprehensive and attractive website provides information about the Jubilee program, abortion's aftermath, the

Project Rachel ministry and the location of its more than 150 diocesan offices:
www.hopeafterabortion.com.

The four radio ads (two of which are available in Spanish) were particularly effective in conveying the pressures women face in deciding to abort and the emotional, psychological and spiritual grief they experience following an abortion. In each ad, three women tell their stories, their phrases interwoven to create a profoundly moving effect. The radio ads ring with sincerity because the text is taken directly from women's own words about their abortion experience. These words provide a "comfort level," giving women the courage to call for help. Many callers remark that the ads described their situation and their pain exactly.

The Results

The results of the outreach in Baltimore-DC-northern Virginia are very encouraging. Numbers are incomplete, but the local Project Rachel offices report a much greater than anticipated response. Arlington, a relatively small diocese with an effective outreach before the campaign (mainly through parish bulletin inserts and ads in the diocesan paper), helped an average of 10 people per month before the outreach. Since then it has arranged for help for 110 people in less than 8 weeks. In that period, 603 phone calls were received.

Before the outreach program, the Archdiocese of Baltimore averaged about 18 inquiries a month and made 14 referrals to priests or lay counselors. They estimate a 10-fold increase in callers and clients since February 7.

The Archdiocese of Washington averaged 8 referrals for post-abortion counseling and 30 inquiries a month last year (or about 15 referrals every 8 weeks). In less than 8 weeks since the outreach began, the D.C. office of Project Rachel handled 450 inquiries and made referrals for 346 new women and men. (Referrals are made to 52 priests trained in post-abortion counseling, and lay counselors and ministers of other faiths who are similarly trained.) This represents a 23-fold increase in people being helped. These figures don't include women and men who, realizing that forgiveness is available through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, went directly to a priest for confession.

Not only has the program reached hundreds of Catholic women and men who were unaware such help was available, but it has extended the grace of God across religious and racial communities. The Baltimore-Washington area is both racially and religiously diverse. The Project Rachel ministry has been virtually unknown outside the Catholic and pro-life communities. And pro-abortion groups sometimes claim that post-abortion problems are simply the result of "Catholic guilt."

The public outreach brought calls from Hindus, Muslims, atheists and Protestants, in addition to Catholics. The community is home to many African Americans, only a small percentage of whom are Catholic, so few sought help previously from Project Rachel. Since February 7, however, African American women make up about 25% of the clients in Baltimore, nearly 33% of those in Arlington and about 50% of those in Washington. Referral to counselors and ministers of other faiths are offered. At the same time, when those seeking help learn that priests to whom they would be referred are specially trained in post-abortion counseling, even those who are not Catholic are usually pleased to talk to them. The program is thus bringing healing not only to individuals but also among our sometimes splintered faith and racial communities.

Truly, this is a fitting outreach for this Jubilee Year of grace and forgiveness, producing fruits that may last well into the new millennium.