

## **Divine Mercy In My Soul**

**by Theresa Bonopartis**

"We are to show to those in need His goodness to ourselves. . . ."

This phrase at Mass speaks to my heart, reminding me of the despair, the grief, the pain of abortion from which Christ delivered me. It reminds me also of my duty to give hope to those still suffering, to help point the way to a place of shelter and peace in the heart of Jesus. And so, I relate my experience--unique and personal, but not unlike the stories of many other women. But this story is not, finally, about me. It's about our good and merciful God . . . always there, wanting to forgive us and make us whole again.

At 18 I honestly believed I was the only one not having sex. I gave in to peer pressure and slept with someone I was seeing occasionally. I remember vividly the day I phoned the doctor for my test results and learned I was pregnant. After months of denial, I was nearly four months pregnant, so I knew the answer long before the word "positive" was uttered. I was overwhelmed by a range of feelings: happiness at the thought of a child growing within me, but also fear of telling my parents--the reason I had "denied" it for so long.

I immediately told the father of the child, and we decided to get married. Although we planned to tell our parents together, I blurted the truth to my mother and father. Their reaction took me by surprise. Shocked, angry and disappointed, they told me to leave the house and forget that I was their daughter. In retrospect, their reaction was understandable. They believed that premarital sex was wrong and thought it would be a disgrace to have a child out of wedlock. At least, I thought, my parents were practicing Catholics and would never ask me to abort my child. I left the house with no job, no money, no home and nowhere to turn, feeling utterly abandoned and alone. It wasn't long before the baby's father and I broke up. Still, I was certain I would not get an abortion. I wanted my child.

A friend's mother invited me to stay in their home. I had no idea how I could support the baby and myself, and things began to feel hopeless. During this period, my father sent several messages urging me to have an abortion. He even offered to pay for it. I refused. But as I began to feel more desperate, I decided, finally, to let the abortion happen. I shut down my feelings and went through the motions, functioning more like an observer in a surreal world than someone in control.

Thirty years later, I still can't remember how I got to the hospital. But I do remember being alone in the hospital room when a doctor entered, and I'll never forget the sadistic look on his face as he injected saline into my abdomen. No one explained to me the baby's development or what the abortion would be like. I had no idea what was going to happen. I

lay there just wishing that I could die. I could feel the baby thrashing around as his skin and lungs were burned by the saline. He was dying. Labor began. After twelve hours of labor, alone in the room, I gave birth to a dead baby boy.

I looked at his tiny feet and hands. All I wanted to do was pick up my son and put him back inside of me. I couldn't fathom what I had done. I rang for the nurse. She came in, picked up my son and dumped him in what looked like a large mayonnaise jar, a jar marked 3A. Then she left the room and I was alone again, filled with hatred for myself. The thought of death seemed comforting. My downward spiral had only just begun.

After the abortion I flew to California to spend time with my sister and her family so I could get my bearings again. I wasn't the same person anymore. I went through the motions of daily living, but I had no desire for anything. At night, in the room I shared with my two-year-old niece, I'd lie awake asking God over and over again to forgive me.

Three months later I returned to the New York area. Although I was not in contact with my father, my mom would slip out to meet me occasionally. Still trying to run away from myself, I moved to Florida. During my two years there, I called my dad and we began speaking again, although never mentioning my abortion.

When I returned to the area, I found a job and outwardly things seemed fine. But nothing was as it seemed. I tried hard not to think about who I was and what I had done. When I thought about my dead child, I would become depressed and despairing. Desperate to be loved, I became involved with the man I would marry, even though he was emotionally and psychologically abusive to me.

Two years later I was thrilled to be pregnant with our first child. But I was also afraid that God would punish me for the abortion, that something would be wrong with my child. I prayed constantly that the baby would not have to suffer for my sins, and was immensely relieved when he was born healthy.

The marriage began to fall apart soon after the baby's birth. My husband was abusing alcohol and we were arguing all the time. We tried counseling to salvage our marriage. Knowing that my abortion was at the root of my problems, I told the counselor about it. He told me to just forget about it. It was in the past. I could not make him understand that the abortion was very much in the present because I was living with the consequences every day.

For awhile my husband stayed sober, and I became pregnant with our second child. By the time I was to give birth, however, his addiction was again full-blown. The night our second child was born, I did not expect my husband to be there. By the time he got home, I was well along in labor and we barely made it to the hospital in time. The birth of my third son

was anything but joyous. I didn't know how I was going to care for two children, living with someone addicted to alcohol. Unlike the husbands of mothers around me, my husband did not show up the next day; he was recovering from a hangover. I lay alone in a hospital room, but this time my child was alive.

Soon after I brought the baby home, my husband overdosed and had to be rushed to the hospital. The incident helped me to begin breaking the cycle. During his two-week hospital stay, I began to enjoy my children for the first time. I didn't have to worry about where he was or what he was doing. I gave the children my full attention. I promised myself that I would not let them grow up in an abusive home, and that if he didn't straighten out, the children and I would begin a life for ourselves.

I kept my sanity by praying and reading the Bible. My husband stayed sober for two years before it began all over again. The day my older son, then four, told me to hide in the closet when he saw his father coming home, I knew we would have to leave. For myself, I may well have stayed in that abusive relationship forever, but I did not want the boys to experience abuse. One day when my husband was drinking again, I took the children and walked out the door. Once again I found myself with no job, no money, no home. This time, thank God, I had my children.

My sister took me in to her already full apartment, and with my family's help (in this crisis I had their full support), I began to get my life together. Shortly after I walked out, my husband ended up in a rehab, so the boys and I were able to move back into our apartment. I found a job. Within a year or two I returned to school to train as a substance abuse counselor. My family helped me both financially and by helping to care for the boys. I could not have made it without them.

After graduation, one of my teachers offered me a job. I thought I had finally gotten it together. Little did I realize how fragile this new life was.

By this time I had grown in my spiritual life and had a relationship with God, even though I did not truly know Him and still kept a distance from church. I still suffered from depression, entertained thoughts of suicide and had very low self esteem; the fact that I had been one of the few from my class offered a job did not raise my self-esteem. In time, as I struggled with my personal problems, my professional work began to suffer. I experienced "burn out." It was devastating to have worked so hard to achieve what I had and then become unable to function. I realize now that it was God's way of drawing me closer to Him.

I quit my job and struggled to stay out of the hospital. My dad supported me and the kids. I just moved through life. Every day it was a challenge just to get out of bed and take care of

the boys. I did, however, begin attending Mass again, sitting in the back of the church, certain that everyone knew I had had an abortion, certain that the walls would come crashing down on me. But I went, listening for some word of hope that I could be forgiven for my terrible, "unforgivable" sin. By then my older son was seven and ready to make his first penance. At a meeting for the parents, a priest talked about God's mercy and His desire to forgive any sin, even the sin of abortion. I remember thinking: Can this be true? Did I hear him correctly? Will God really forgive abortion? That evening I left with the first inkling of hope I had known in ten years.

It took time and courage, but I decided to contact that priest and ask him to hear my confession. Scared and nervous, I made the first confession in many years. The priest was gentle, trying to make it as easy as he could for me. He showed great empathy and support. At last, I was on my way home.

I began to see the priest regularly for spiritual direction. At first, all I could see was darkness. It was an effort to do the things he asked, like examining my life, because I was sure I would uncover only what a terrible person I was. But I was tired of the depression and desperate enough to try. I felt sorry for my children who had a mom who cried a lot and simply couldn't cope with life. I wanted more for the three of us. And so I prayed, went to Mass every day and spent time before the Blessed Sacrament. I needed so badly to trust in this God I had been told was so good.

Still I could not forgive myself. I continued to struggle with depression. I would beg Jesus for healing. I felt bad that I had not reached full healing, and my confessor's eyes showed his own sadness over my continued struggle. I understand now that the fullness of healing must come in God's time.

One night I felt depressed and suicidal again, but despite these feelings, I also somehow felt a deep trust in God. I didn't want the children to see me crying again, so after putting them to bed, I closed myself in the bathroom, crouched on the floor, and repeated over and over "Jesus, I trust in You." I don't know how many hours I did this, but well into the night I had an experience that changed my life. I experienced being on the cross with Christ. But instead of experiencing suffering, I felt love so intense that it was capable of taking away that pain. I felt His love wash away my sin and I knew my healing was complete.

I have never since felt the despair of abortion, only the profound love and forgiveness Christ gave me. I've watched my life be transformed, miraculously, as I've been privileged to help countless women and men suffering from abortion's aftermath. Christ's love transformed not only my life, but the lives of those I love.

Before my mother died, I learned that my abortion had caused her great suffering, although she had never told me. One day when we were watching TV, abortion was mentioned. She said, "Well, sometimes it's all right to have an abortion." I said, "Mom, it is never all right." God gave us this moment of grace. She told me that my abortion was her sin and that she would take it to the grave with her. I was able to comfort her, telling her that we both bore responsibility for it. I told her that I forgave her and asked her to forgive me. After that my mother went to confession to the same priest I had seen for direction, and she felt that her terrible burden was lifted.

Most difficult was telling my children. I felt that God was calling me to speak out about abortion, but I knew I couldn't unless my children knew first. I was terrified they would hate me. It took me years to muster the courage. By now I was active in the pro-life movement and they had been brought up to respect human life. I planned to tell them many times, but each time I backed out, afraid to say the words. Finally one day I knew I was being given the grace to talk to them.

How can I describe that day? I trembled as I told them of how our lives had come to be as they were. If not for my abortion, they would not be living in a fatherless household or seeing the strained relationship between my father and me.

The boys wrestled with their feelings. They were angry at me. They grieved for the brother they never knew. They felt guilty for surviving. It took time, a lot of talking, and the grace of God, but they understood finally why things were as they were, and why I had spent years crying. They grew closer to God, and we grew closer to one another. I didn't speak publicly right away. The boys needed time to deal with their feelings and cope with the loss of their brother before I would do that. I was even resigned and at peace with the fact that the day might never come. But a few years later, they gave me their blessing. To say I am proud of them is an understatement. They have become great advocates for life.

I've now worked for some years with the Sisters of Life, conducting Days of Prayer and Healing for those suffering abortion's trauma. I am grateful to be able to stand alongside the Sisters at the foot of the cross and minister to these children of God, and blessed to watch them be transformed by His love and forgiveness. I have witnessed countless miracles of His mercy and am convinced that God is marshaling an army of once-wounded women and men to dispel the lies of abortion.

Saint Faustina Kowalska's diary, *Divine Mercy in My Soul*, tells of words spoken to her by Christ: "Let the greatest sinners place their trust in my mercy. They have the right before others to trust in the abyss of My mercy. My daughter, write about My mercy towards tormented souls. Souls that make an appeal to My mercy delight Me. To such souls I grant

even more graces than asked. I cannot punish even the greatest sinner if he makes an appeal to my compassion, but on the contrary, I justify him in my unfathomable and inscrutable mercy."

I know that this is true.

Jesus I trust in You.

**Theresa Bonopartis assists the Sisters of Life and the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal in conducting spiritual retreats for those wounded by abortion.**