

CATHOLIC RETREAT FOR POST-ABORTION WOMEN AND MEN: RESULTS AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

As part of a Catholic response to healing, reconciling, and offering new spiritual life to those suffering from the grief and guilt of abortion, a Milwaukee-based team, of which this author is a member, has for over three years provided a semi-annual retreat for people who have had abortions.ⁱ These retreats arose as a response by a director of a Milwaukee crisis pregnancy center to needs manifested by women who had had previous abortions. As the director, who was Catholic, listened to woman after woman struggling with her past and present situations, she sensed that for at least some of the Catholic women, a spiritual remedy beyond sacramental reconciliation, one which originated from within their own religious beliefs and experiences, was needed, and not only material and psychological solutions to their problems. At least in the Milwaukee area, most of the popular ministries to post-abortion women, such as Bible studies like PACE, were Protestant. She had read about a Catholic retreat, “Raphael (God Heals),” offered in Texas to women who had had abortions, and she sent for information.ⁱⁱ She concluded that a similar retreat would provide one important avenue of recovery from abortion aftermath, and she formed a team to plan and give such retreats.

After eight successful retreats, in which this team continuously adapted and improved the format to respond to observed deficiencies and needs, people who knew of the good results of these retreats requested that the team present their results at prolife and academic conferences and publish the results. To present these results would not only supply important confirmation of the routinely denied harmful effects of abortion on many who have had them but also provide some very promising avenues for reaching out to those who had aborted their babies and for helping them

come to full spiritual as well as psychological and physical wholeness afterwards. It was hoped that such a report might prompt others in other parts of the country and world to provide similar retreats.

Two previous reports based on earlier retreats have been given at “Healing Vision: An International Conference on Post-Abortion Aftermath and Its Resolution,” where they were very well received by the conference participants, who included some of the world’s leading experts in post-abortion aftermath.ⁱⁱⁱ But in one sense, these reports were “speaking to the saved,” in that those participants already had considerable expertise in understanding, appreciating, and trying to ameliorate the harmful aftereffects of abortions even on the living. The academic establishment has for eleven years been ignoring the results of the Healing Vision conferences, because it is not politically correct to draw so much attention to suffering by women from the abortions they chose to have. Therefore many who knew about our retreat expressed the view that this information needed to reach a wider academic audience. This article provides a description and theological evaluation of our retreats, arguing that these retreats provide important evidence about the traumatic aftermath of abortion for many, and about what is important for their full reintegration into the Church as Body of Christ.

DEVELOPMENT OF POST-ABORTION RETREATS

The first team which was assembled to plan and give these retreats included the director of the crisis pregnancy center, one of her volunteer helpers (who was also a veteran volunteer counselor for Pregnancy Aftermath Helpline), a Catholic woman who had recovered from traumatic abortion aftermath, and two Catholic priests. The team gathered to plan the retreat in a prayerful atmosphere and manner, not simply as if they were some kind of secular committee.

One of their first decisions was to modify the format of the Texas retreats to include more explicit ministry concerning the abortions that the women had had. The Texas arrangement, because the program also included support groups and follow-up, was often to send individual women anonymously to generic Ignatian silent retreats, that is, retreats based on the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius promoted especially by the Jesuits.

The team agreed that the weekend would remain primarily a traditional “generic” Catholic retreat without the primary focus being placed on abortion itself, which was the genius of the Texas experiences. There are other programs for explicit ministry to women who have had abortions for their psychological and spiritual healing. But such women cannot go through the rest of their lives identifying themselves primarily with their abortion as a “post-abortion woman.” We believed that God calls these women, as converted and healed sinners, to true wholeness, full Christian living, to sanctity itself.

But the team did consider it important to deal explicitly with abortion in a supportive context with others who were suffering from similar grief and guilt, and to do some direct ministry facilitating recovery of the retreatants from the effects of the abortion itself. The result remains basically an Ignatian retreat, based primarily on traditional topics and focuses from the *Spiritual Exercises* (for example, God’s love and mercy, Creation, Sin and Reconciliation, Incarnation, Eucharist, the Passion of Jesus, Mary and saints, and prayer). But the retreat also includes explicit witness to post-abortion trauma and recovery, opportunity for retreatants to talk about their abortions among themselves and with the retreat team members, private counseling and confessions (the Catholic sacrament of reconciliation), some brief input on chastity and purity, and an explicit but brief and limited memorial at the Eucharist for the retreatants’ lost children.

The team also met briefly at times during the retreat and returned afterwards for debriefing and looking prayerfully at the results of the retreat just given. One of the very first modifications was to change the name of the retreat. The primary title remained the same: “The Love and Mercy of God.” But our initial descriptive subtitle had been “A Retreat for Post-Abortion Catholic Women.” We changed this to express better what the retreat actually is: “A Catholic Retreat for Post-Abortion Women.” This would open the retreat to non-Catholic women, as long as they were at peace with unapologetically Catholic teachings, spirituality, worship, devotions, etc. Experience, including that at the crisis pregnancy center, had alerted us to the intense need of most women who have had abortions to learn the basics of their Catholic faith, worship, and sacraments. We could not afford to miss the opportunity to provide this basic grounding in

their Catholicism under the strictures of a “least-common-denominator ecumenism.”

Before one of our very first retreats, after it had been advertised and most of the women had signed up for it, a man asked if he also could be allowed to make the retreat. The team called every woman who had signed up for the retreat and got their permission to make this modification, so that the current subtitle reads, “A Catholic Retreat for Post-Abortion Women and Men.” This has been a happy modification. Most of our retreats have included at least one male retreatant, and the women retreatants (without any exceptions of which I am aware) expressed appreciation for and benefited from seeing the suffering and concern which some men also had over aborted babies, since so many of these women had been abandoned or pressured into the abortion by irresponsible males who had impregnated them. In turn, several of the men were quite stunned by the depth of the women’s pain and the reality of what they had done, as when one man saw the booties a mother kept to remember her two aborted babies. Although the male retreatants have always been a small minority, the masculine presence of the two priests has helped them also be comfortable as part of the retreat group.

FORMAT AND CONTENT OF RETREATS

The retreat is structured around talks which set the tone, instruct, and prepare for private prayer and use of the sacraments. It includes two Masses, the first on Saturday at 3 p.m., and the second on Sunday at 10:30 a.m., which ends the retreat. There is a simple memorial for the retreatants’ aborted babies at the Saturday Mass. Counseling from the staff and confessions with the priests are available throughout. Quiet times for prayer, rest, and walking are important. So is the sharing among the retreatants and staff members, both in the formal group sessions as well as over meals and evening relaxation with snacks.

At the opening of the retreat on Friday evening, a welcoming hospitality is extremely important in order to overcome the anxiety and awkwardness many if not most of the retreatants experience initially. It is a time for greeting, for quiet and undemanding repetitious prayer (the rosary) while waiting for other retreatants to arrive, for a strong proclamation of the

gospel of God's mercy and love followed by a witness given by a post-abortion staff member of that mercy, for explanation of the memorial for their lost babies, and for informal conversation as the retreatants wish.

Saturday is very full, with morning talks and prayer, afternoon time for personal ministry as well as talks and the Mass with the memorial service, and evening talks, quiet adoration and prayer in a eucharistic chapel, and finally optional relaxation together. Sunday ends the retreat with a morning talk on how to pray, followed by the closing Mass and blessing, and a brief session of farewells, debriefing, and feedback.

The team generally meets for lunch afterwards for further immediate debriefing, and some weeks later for a prayerful overview of the previous retreat and first steps toward planning the next one. In these debriefing sessions the team reflects on the written evaluations of the retreatants, as well as on recollections of their oral remarks and the team's own observations of the retreat dynamics, to make suitable adjustments.

TOPICS OF RETREAT TALKS

The focal points of the retreat talks come primarily from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, with some special attention to distinctive requirements with respect to the retreatants' moral and spiritual lives in general and their abortions in particular. The retreat team was convinced that most prospective post-abortion retreatants would have additional needs beyond just the potential for basic conversion for which the process promoted by the *Spiritual Exercises* is appropriately distinguished. Most of these retreatants would also require a lot of basic catechesis in their Catholic faith, practices, and moral principles, as well as, of course, healing from the traumatic effects of their abortions.

Therefore the talks were to have these three dimensions: (1) the fundamental conversion processes from the *Spiritual Exercises*, (2) remedial basic Catholic catechesis in topics such as God, creation, sin, redemption, the incarnation, birth, suffering, and death of Jesus, the sacraments of reconciliation and Eucharist, devotion to Mary and the saints, the virtue of purity or chastity, and the importance and methods of prayer, plus (3) healing and ministry specifically dealing with the aftermath of their abortions.

Talk 1: The Love and Mercy of God. Many if not most of the retreatants enter the retreat Friday evening with some mixture of anxiety, guilt, fear, and yearning for healing and relief. It is important from the very beginning that the speaker set a tone of acceptance, hope, and God's love and mercy, which is therefore the primary aim of the opening talk. After a welcome and some introductory procedural suggestions for the retreat, the talk focuses on who this God is with whom we are about to spend the weekend.

The retreatants learn that (1) God created each of our souls out of love for us and with a plan for each of our lives; (2) it is important to come to realize that God loves me, since that is the beginning of a new freedom and dynamic life; (3) as our hearts spontaneously go out to a sick or injured child, so God's love for us is compassionate love. At the culmination of the introduction, the speaker reads and unpacks some implications from Isaiah 43:1-7 ("you are precious in my eyes") and compares God's love and mercy to the sun which is always shining, even when we do not see it.

The body of the talk is based primarily on biblical passages that emphasize God's mercy. The speaker continues by reading and explicating the mercy of God as a Father who knows his children's frailty in Psalm 103. Then Romans 8:28-39 provides the assurance that nothing can separate us from God's love. Finally, the three parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son in Luke 15 emphasize that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who have no need for repentance and that with unconditional acceptance the Father takes joy over the returning prodigal: "My son was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found." The speaker concludes by urging the retreatants to ground their retreat in an awareness of God's love and mercy for them and to "let God tell you that he loves you."

Retreatants in this situation are not well served by downplaying the gravity of the wrong and harm of abortion, for they would not be making this retreat if they were not already at least implicitly aware that something was seriously wrong with their abortion choice and action. Most retreatants have had years to live with the consequences of their abortion. In our early retreats most of the abortions had occurred 14-20 years previously, and in later retreats, when some women came whose abortions were only 6-10 years old, their wounds were often conspicuously more raw

and, as it were, still “bleeding.” Almost all of the retreatants have suffered severely after their abortions. Some have struggled terribly and for years with guilt and self-hatred.

Therefore, it is important to be forthright about the seriousness of the wrong of abortion, lest one appear to be either condescending to the retreatant or ignorant of the depth of her suffering. First, however, one must lay a foundation that enables retreatants to face their sin by focusing on God’s love as a compassionate love which reaches out to us even more tenderly in our sinfulness and wrongdoing. The words of the Scriptures themselves provide perhaps the most eloquent witness to God’s merciful love, along with the personal testimony of staff people who have been forgiven their own abortions.

Talk 2: Personal Witness of Post-abortion Reconciliation and Healing. Therefore, immediately after the opening topical talk on God’s mercy, a staff member who had suffered after her abortion and been healed would share her experiences with the retreatants. Most retreats also featured a second witness by a former retreatant from one of our previous retreats, who was now healed enough to be able to function as a kind of adjunct member of our retreat team. This second talk builds added hope in the retreatants by testifying specifically to the effectiveness of this particular form of retreat for others who have made it before them.

Talk 3: God the Creator and Creation (“The First Principle and Foundation” of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises). Saturday morning’s opening talk focuses on who God is and who we are as created by God. Since a major element in serious human sin is “wanting to be like gods” (cf. Gen 3:5) and to determine for ourselves what is right and what is wrong, the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius focus initially on the reality and implications of God as our Creator and we as creatures, who are not ourselves God.

An important treatment of the concept of creation is “The First Principle and Foundation” of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Its preamble states that we humans were created to praise, reverence, and serve God, with whom we thus reach eternal happiness.^{iv} On the first evening, the team provides copies of this principle for private reflection and for review after the retreat.

This notion of ourselves as created by a loving God, to whom we are responsible for our lives and for everything about ourselves, is quite alien to the reigning secularist contemporary mindset. It is an essential prerequisite for attaining a reasonable sense of the horror of all sin. Since it is important not to focus so exclusively on the sin of abortion in isolation from other serious sins that one reinforces many retreatants' false sense of being uniquely unforgivable and unlovable, the traditional elements of the retreat continually contextualize the sinfulness of abortion within the general biblical concept of the gravity of all forms of seriously sinful wrongdoing against our Creator God. When the retreatants can see (for example, from Scripture) how common and how many are the kinds of serious sins that humans commit, they can overcome the false but typical notion that by their abortion they have committed the only terrible wrongdoing and a sin that is uniquely unforgivable.

Talk 4: Sin and Confession (Sacrament of Reconciliation). After these foundational talks on God's love, mercy, and majesty as our Creator, the retreatants are more prepared to hear a straightforward presentation of the meaning and gravity of sin, and of the beauty and power of God's remedy in the Church's Sacrament of Reconciliation. Even this talk, however, has an introductory focus on God's mercy, as manifested in the account of the sinful woman anointing and weeping over Jesus's feet in Luke 7:36-50. Especially important is its conclusion in the mouth of Jesus, which links forgiveness and love: "Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven for she loved much; but whoever is forgiven little, loves little." The speaker emphasizes that not only does their sin not make them unworthy of being loved and loving, but both the gospel and the experience of members of the retreat staff emphasize how the experience of God's forgiveness can lead to an extraordinarily profound love of God.

The body of the talk is organized around some key biblical passages. Genesis 3 illustrates what sin is, from which the speaker further explains the classical (and pastorally still very helpful) distinction, on which St. Ignatius constantly insisted, the distinction between mortal and venial sin.^v

Psalm 32 provides a powerful biblical witness to the need to admit and confess one's guilt lest one suffer serious psychological and even physical consequences. On this biblical foundation, the speaker can provide some

key elements of traditional Catholic catechesis on the Sacrament of Reconciliation: (1) The priest within this sacrament is functioning “in the person of Christ” when judging and forgiving the penitent’s sins. (2) The biblical fact that Christians are not isolated individuals but members of the Body of Christ explains why sins have social consequences, since they affect other members of the Body and not just the sinner. Such social consequences require the social remedy of confession to a representative of Christ’s Body, the priest-confessor. (3) The context of private confession of sins in this sacrament provides an excellent opportunity for a skilled confessor to counsel, encourage, and minister to the penitent.

Talk 5: Incarnation and Birth of Jesus. This talk is a straightforward combination of the two corresponding Ignatian contemplations in the “Second Week” (that is, the second section) of his *Spiritual Exercises*. Concerning the incarnation, the retreatants are invited to use their imaginations and faith to contemplate the Trinity determining to rescue sinful humans from their hopeless slide toward hell by sending the Second Person, the Son, to become human in order to save our race. They are also to imagine the angel inviting Mary to cooperate by becoming mother of the Incarnate Son of God.

In the contemplation on the birth of Jesus, the retreatants are invited to enter personally into the events through their faith imagination and to be present with Mary and Joseph as they travel to Bethlehem, to be told that there is no room for them in the inn, and to find a place for animals where Jesus is born and laid in a feeding trough, and then to respond or to worship Jesus as they find themselves drawn.

The emphasis on faith imagination rather than on rational processing of the abstract doctrines of the incarnation provides a way for the retreatants to become participants in this mystery of faith and thus to experience and appreciate its significance for them.^{vi} Four centuries of experience in offering this form of prayer to retreatants confirm that retreatants come to quite personal appreciations of what it means that God became man to save them from the eternal consequences of their sins. This is no less true of this particular retreat population of people who have had abortions, and the contemplation is very healing for many of them. It focuses on divine and human love, rather than on commandments, sins, and punishments, but it

effectively shows both the magnificent generosity of God for us and the seriousness of sin against such a loving God as well as the presence among us of a divine and human savior as a helpless baby. Because of their abortions, some retreatants might be afraid of God or of Jesus as judge. They are not likely to be afraid of Jesus as a newborn baby.

Talk 6 (as Homily): The Eucharist. The next talk utilizes the occasion of the sermon or homily at the Catholic Mass to provide catechesis on the meaning and practice of the Eucharistic Liturgy (as Jesus's Sacrifice, as Meal, as Sacrament, and as Memorial) and on receiving Holy Communion appropriately, as well as to explain the biblical liturgical readings for the day and to provide at least remote preparation for the memorial of the retreatants' aborted and miscarried babies during the offertory and communion portions of the Mass. Because the Eucharist is at the heart of Catholic worship and devotional life and yet is becoming so routinely misunderstood, eucharistic catechesis seems especially imperative. Although it is not explicitly related to abortion aftermath as such, frequent and reverent reception of the Eucharist is an important element of the retreatant's overall healing and growth as a Catholic disciple of Christ.^{vii}

Talk 7: Passion and Death of Jesus. Like the contemplation on the incarnation and birth of Jesus, the talk on the suffering and death of Jesus invites the retreatants to enter imaginatively with Jesus into what he suffered for their sake. It appeals not to reasoning about abstract doctrines like atonement, but to faith-filled imagination of what our salvation actually cost Jesus and to the desire to be somehow present with him as he undergoes his suffering for us. Willingness by the retreatants to share with Jesus in his sufferings on their behalf helps to deepen their awareness of the incredible depth of Jesus's love for them and to strengthen their resolve not to hurt him by any additional sins.

The retreatants are invited to imagine themselves at the foot of the cross with Jesus, his mother Mary, the beloved disciple, and Mary Magdalen (as portrayed especially by John's Gospel). They are to ask for "sorrow with Jesus in sorrow, tears and deep grief because of the great suffering Jesus endures for me."^{viii} Very helpful scriptures for appreciating what Jesus suffered for sinners are the seven biblical words of Jesus on the cross (see below), Psalms 69 and 22, and Isaiah 52:13-53:12, 42:1-9, 49:1-26, and

50:1-11.

As they enter into this contemplation by imagining themselves at Christ's cross, many retreatants find especially moving the seven words of Jesus on the cross: (1) "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34); (2) "Woman, behold your son... behold your mother" (John 19:26-27); (3) "I thirst" (John 19:28); (4) "This day you shall be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43); (5) "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34); (6) "It is finished" (John 19:30); (7) "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

In the contemplation itself, retreatants are first invited to see in their imaginations what is happening among all the people at the cross, the mockery, etc. They are to listen to what everyone is saying, to those jeering, to Jesus, to the disciples, and so on. Psalm 69 provides many powerful insights into these things in the psalmist's urgent petition to God to save him from those who surround him and hate him, how he is suffering for our sake, how there is no one to comfort him.

Retreatants are to consider what Jesus suffers and try to share his sorrow. The psalmist's cry to God in Psalm 22—"why have you abandoned me?"—is followed by his sense that he is a "worm and no man, scorned by men and despised by the people," surrounded by bulls and ravenous lions, poured out like water, with his hands and feet pierced and his bones numbered, his garments divided by lots.

Retreatants are to consider further "how Jesus suffers all this for my sins" and how they can respond to Jesus. Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is very well-suited for this consideration: "There was no comeliness in him; he was despised; he has borne our griefs; we have esteemed him smitten by God; yet he was wounded for our iniquities; upon him was laid the chastisement that makes us whole, and by his wounds we are healed. Though oppressed he opened not his mouth, like a lamb led to the slaughter. They gave him a grave among the wicked, though he had done no violence. He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the sinners."

The final focus of this contemplation is to ask for an awareness of the horror for the retreatants' personal sins which caused such agony in God's own Son dying to save them from those sins; to appreciate more fully the depth of God's love for each of them personally in undergoing all this

suffering for them; and to take hope that if God was willing to do all this to save them from their sins, they can have assurance that God wants to bring them to himself in heaven. This kind of selfless looking at the suffering of Jesus for us implies a certain level of maturity in retreatants. But it also fosters such maturity, so that even most spiritual beginners are touched in some way by this presentation.

Talk 8: Devotion to Mary and the Saints. Saturday evening begins with a cheerful change of pace. Experience with many converted and healed post-abortion Catholics attests to the important influence which Catholic devotion to Mary and saints can have on their healing and growth. This talk also signals to the retreatants that the retreat's goal is not simply reconciliation and healing from their past abortions but to challenge them to lead holy lives in the future, as Mary and the saints did. Focus on Mary also offers the retreatants a mother-figure whom they can trust.^{ix}

Talk 9: Purity (Chastity). Because so often abortion is a consequence of unchaste behavior (including unchaste uses of contraception within marriage, which imply antecedent rejection of any child "accidentally" conceived), catechesis on chastity to counter the omnipresent propaganda of the sexual revolution seems particularly relevant in this retreat. Besides, unchastity fosters dispositions toward others (such as "using" them) that themselves lead to disrespect for human life. Most retreatants have not been taught to recognize God's authority over their sexual behavior, nor the value and importance of the virtue of chastity, nor the true meaning of and divine purposes for marriage, nor the exclusive relationship in God's plan between sexual intercourse and committed marriage which is open to having and educating children. In one sense, this is a pro-active approach to help forestall future problems with abortion rather than just a reaction to crises produced by unchaste behavior. After healing from past abortions, retreatants need to live their future lives on the sound footing of this virtue of chastity. Most retreatants respond favorably to this talk, though some, whose tiredness or headache may be mostly an excuse, simply do not come to it.

Talk 10: Importance of Prayer and How to Pray. This is another important talk in preparing retreatants for the future. If it had not been clear to them before this point that God desires not only their healing and

reconciliation but their love and intimate friendship (and consequently sanctity), this talk demonstrates it plainly.

The context for this instruction on prayer is a comparison to any love relationship between persons. The introduction acknowledges what they all know from their experience to be true—that all humans, even those in a happy marriage, have some loneliness and a hunger for love which can never be satisfied. As the well-known saying of Augustine puts it, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”^x The only solution for this fundamental aloneness is to know the love of Jesus and of God his Father. But one cannot grow in love of any person if one does not spend time communicating with that person. The same is true for one’s relationship with God. Nor in communication can one person do all the talking. To get to know someone else, one must listen to that person. To get to know God, one must listen to God.

The speaker can point out further experiential incentives to daily prayer from the retreatants’ struggles to live peaceful, upright lives without discouragement. It is most helpful for the speaker to provide his or her personal witness to the necessity and practice of daily prayer in the speaker’s life. When I give this talk, I describe my practices of a daily extended prayer time: what I do and how I pray and what I use for prayer. I also describe my practices of frequent short prayers interjected throughout my whole day.

From this concrete personal example, the speaker then describes what prayer is—conversation with God and a sharing of one’s life with “the God who loves me.” The speaker underlines the importance of prayer: (1) for awareness of God’s presence and love in one’s life, (2) for God’s guidance and peace in one’s daily living, (3) for protection against delusion and temptation, (4) to repent of sin and begin anew.

The basic catechesis then describes four simple kinds of prayer: (1) set prayers (liturgical prayer, the rosary, devotions), (2) brief prayers throughout the day, often referred to as “practicing God’s presence,”^{xi} (3) prayerful reading of Scripture, listening to God speak to one’s own life and situation, (4) extended quiet listening prayer (often called “meditation”) such as the retreatants learned in meditating on the birth and sufferings of Jesus.

The heart of the catechesis is actually to show the retreatants some simple methods of meditative prayer. The speaker speaks from a handout which the retreatants can use as a guide after the retreat. He or she gives basic instructions such as the following steps, which are adaptations of various forms of prayer taught in St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*. (1) Prepare a place where one can pray regularly with some privacy. (2) Prepare one's heart, trying to quiet oneself, giving one's cares to God. Do a short examination of conscience, asking and thanking God for his forgiveness. (3) Begin meditation by asking that everything that happens be for God's praise and service. (4) Read the scripture passage slowly (e.g., Luke 10:38-42 on Mary and Martha, or Matthew 6:7-15—the Our Father in context) and really to listen to it. (5) See in one's imagination the setting (perhaps re-reading the passage), trying to enter the scene oneself. (6) Ask the Lord for what one desires, such as intimate knowledge and love of Jesus. (7) In imagination *see* what is happening, (8) *listen* to what is said, and (9) *imagine oneself in the scene*, especially listening to what Jesus shares with oneself. Once one has entered into the passage, one should remain there in silence even if it feels uncomfortable, letting God do what he wills in one's heart. At the end, thank God for whatever happened and close with an Our Father.

This catechesis and instruction in how to pray, for which many retreatants are particularly grateful, provides important means for the retreatants to continue to grow in their knowledge and love of God and to find ever more peace and meaning in their lives.

MEMORIAL AT MASS FOR ABORTED, MISCARRIED, STILLBORN BABIES

This memorial in the Saturday afternoon Mass is typically an especially powerful moment in the retreat. In preparation for it, the team gives instructions after the first talks of the retreat on Friday evening. Most of the retreatants have a deep sense of whether their aborted baby was a boy or girl. The memorial gives them an opportunity to remember them individually and to offer them to Jesus. Friday night the team provides vigil candles which the retreatants decorate in any way they choose with items like ribbons, pictures, and flowers provided by the staff. The retreatants are invited to name their babies if they have not already done so,

which treats them as the persons they are. Before the Saturday Mass the retreatants place the vigil lights on the altar. During the prayers of the faithful these children are mentioned by name and offered to the Lord. The retreatants find this an especially healing prayer. Many find great relief when they name their babies and acknowledge their identity. As they recognize the dignity of these babies, they do what they failed to do at the time of the abortion. Now they can offer them to Jesus and his mercy.

SUMMARY THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON RETREAT RESULTS

Forgiveness of past sins brings genuine healing and change in the present. So often people remain depressed over past wrongdoing because they have refused to face openly what they have done. This retreat preaches the full gospel message, both its pleasant and uncomfortable aspects. It preaches the goodness and forgiveness of God, but also the evil and horror of sin. Forgiveness is not just that God overlooks what we have done. Forgiveness looks squarely at the evil one has done and not only forgives it but empowers the penitent to reject and turn away from that sinful behavior and live a newly whole and holy life.

In this way the adult human dignity of the retreatants is respected. One does not “enable” their denials nor gloss over what they have done wrong and what they instinctively know to be quite wrong. It is the basest form of condescension not to treat persons as adults who are accountable for what they have done in the past nor to call them to a reformed and responsible way of living in the present.

An important (and characteristically Catholic) aspect of the retreat is that it invites the retreatants to enter into the concrete realities of how the human race was created and saved. Faith is not just abstract doctrines assented to by reason. The retreatants enter into the concrete realities of the life of Jesus in the first century as narrated in Scripture in order to appreciate who he was on earth and who he is in his risen life today. Not only do they enter into humanly responsible life but into the life of the Body of Christ today as made present to them in the sacraments, especially of Eucharist and Reconciliation.

Finally, they concretize and recognize the identity and dignity of their aborted children, living in the truth about the dignity of every human

person from conception to natural death, and rejecting the lies and denials of the personhood of the “fetus” that contribute to the present “culture of death.” But the retreat is not primarily for focusing on past wrongs—it is a call for the retreatants’ present renewal and change and their new freedom as beloved daughters or sons of God. It is a call to accept God’s forgiveness and invitation to intimate friendship and holiness of life that overflows into generous love toward others.

The retreat team hopes that this retreat is a concrete way of expressing to women who have had abortions the consoling message of the Church to them, as expressed by Pope John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* #99:

I would now like to say a special word to *women who have had an abortion*. The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord. 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.

NOTES

i. On post-abortion suffering, treatment, and ministry, see Susan Stanford-Rue, “Healing Post-Abortion Trauma” in *Life and Learning V: Proceedings of the Fifth University Faculty for Life Conference, June 1995 at Marquette University*, ed. Joseph W. Koterski, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: University Faculty for Life, 1996) pp. 177-90; Susan M. Stanford-Rue, *Will I Cry Tomorrow? Healing Post-Abortion Trauma* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell [Baker], 1990 [1986]);

Wanda Franz and David Reardon, "Differential Impact of Abortion on Adolescents and Adults," in *Life and Learning: Proceedings of the Second University Faculty for Life Conference*, ed. Joseph Koterski, S.J. (Washington, DC: University Faculty for Life, 1993) pp. 60-70, with good bibliography; David C. Reardon, *Aborted Women: Silent No More* (Westchester: Crossway Books [Good News Publishers]/Chicago: Loyola Univ. Press, 1987); Michael T. Mannion, *Abortion and Healing: A Cry to be Whole*, 2nd ed. (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1986); *Post Abortion Aftermath*, ed. Michael Mannion (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1994), papers at international conference of post-abortion experts convened by James Cardinal Hickey in Washington, D.C.; Linda Cochrane, *Women in Ramah: A Post-Abortion Bible Study Group* (self-published for the PACE program by Christian Action Council Education and Ministries Fund, Falls Church, Va., 1987); Ken Freeman, *Healing the Hurts of Abortion* (self-published: Last Harvest Ministries, Inc., 2734 W. Kingsley Road, Garland, TX 75041, telephone 972-840-3553); The Elliot Institute, *The Post Abortion Review* (Spring 1993-); Jeanette Vought, *Post Abortion Trauma: Nine Steps to Recovery* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991); Terry Selby, *The Mourning After: Help for the Post-Abortion Syndrome* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990); John J. Dillon, *A Path to Hope: For Parents of Aborted Children and Those Who Minister to Them* (Mineola: Resurrection, 1990); Douglas R. Crawford and Michael T. Mannion, *Psycho-Spiritual Healing after Abortion* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1989).

ii. The name and address are: *Raphael (God Heals) of North Texas*, 3704 Myrtle Springs Rd., Fort Worth, TX 76116, telephone: 817-738-1086. The phases of the Raphael program are five: (1) Application, (2) Silent Spiritual Retreat, (3) Group Counseling, (4) Celebration of Mass of Christian Burial for children who die without baptism, (5) Days of Recollection.

iii. Healing Vision international conferences are held annually in middle or late June at Marquette University in Milwaukee. This year's "Healing Vision XI" took place from Saturday to Monday, June 21-23, 1997, with a day-long pre-conference introductory workshop primarily for helping professionals and clergy unfamiliar with post-abortion aftermath and healing on Friday, June 20. "Healing Vision XII" is scheduled for Friday to Sunday, June 26-28, 1998. These conferences are sponsored by The National Office of Post-Abortion Reconciliation and Healing (NOPARH), P.O. Box 07477, Milwaukee, WI 53207-0477, business telephone: 414-483-4141, referral line: 800-5WE-CARE, Fax: 414-483-7376, Email: noparh@juno.com, Web site: www.mu.edu/dept/comm/rachels.

iv. As a classic among many translations, see Louis J. Puhl, S.J., *The Spiritual*

Exercises of St. Ignatius (Chicago: Loyola Univ. Press, 1951) #23, “First Principle and Foundation.”

v. *Pace* some theologians, theories of the so-called “fundamental option” have not eliminated the practical truth and usefulness of this distinction. To deny the common usefulness of this distinction between mortal and venial sin can have consequences that border on implying that the vast majority of human beings are moral cripples incapable of either serious sin or genuine sanctity and love of God and others. Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (*The Splendor of Truth*; St. Paul Books and Media, 1993) #65-70; Pope John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (*On Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church Today*; St. Paul Editions, 1984) #17. See also the recent summary in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana [several US publishers], 1994) #1854-64, #1874-76, “The Gravity of Sin: Mortal and Venial Sin.”

vi. Christian faith is not ultimately grounded in “abstract” doctrines, for these are themselves grounded in actual historical events and persons. To appreciate this faith, it makes sense to try to come to a deeper comprehension of the actual persons and events that have brought salvation. Cf. Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991) p. 79; Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1993), esp. “Conclusion”; Ignace de la Potterie, “The spiritual sense of Scripture,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 23 (Winter 1996) 738-56, with special reference to Henri de Lubac’s notions of spirit and history; and Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: A Study of Dogma in Relation to the Corporate Destiny of Mankind*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1950), chaps. 5-6.

vii. Cf. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* #84: “We are called to express wonder and gratitude for the gift of life and to welcome, savor and share the *Gospel of life* not only in our personal and community prayer, but above all in the *celebrations of the liturgical year*. Particularly important in this regard are the *Sacraments*, the efficacious signs of the presence and saving action of the Lord Jesus in Christian life. The Sacraments make us sharers in divine life and provide the spiritual strength necessary to experience life, suffering, and death in their fullest meaning. Thanks to a genuine rediscovery and a better appreciation of the significance of these rites, our liturgical celebrations, especially celebrations of the Sacraments, will be ever more capable of expressing the full truth about birth, life, suffering, and death, and will help us to live these moments as a participation in the Paschal Mystery of the Crucified and Risen Christ.”

viii. St. Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises* #203.

ix. See the powerful symbolism in John 19:25-27, where Jesus on the cross gives Mary as mother to his beloved disciple (which all Christians are invited to become).

x. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.

xi. Cf. the helpful and very readable classic (of which there are many translations and editions), Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, trans. John J. Delaney (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1977).