

Puzzle Project offers forgiveness in aftermath of abortion

By Teresa A. Parsons

Sooner or later, Father Robert J. Winterkorn believes, just about every woman who has an abortion will suffer some negative consequences.

For those who escape any physical repercussions, the aftermath may bring nothing more serious than an occasional crying spell. Others sink into severe depression, drug or alcohol abuse and sometimes attempted suicide. "I think it bothers almost everybody," he said. "I don't think there's anyone who escapes scott-free."

The personal cost of an abortion may catch up with an individual within a few weeks, or it may take more than 20 years, but what many Catholics seek when that time comes is reconciliation.

Reconciliation is what Father Winterkorn, pastor at St. John the Evangelist, Spencerport, has quietly provided through the Puzzle Project for almost six years. The project functions without the benefit of an office or an administrator, and without much of a budget. It is mainly a collection of phone numbers and names, each of which represents a listening ear and a compassionate, non-judgmental response.

Callers may remain as anonymous as they wish; Father Winterkorn and other counselors usually only ask for some means of identifying them. Because strict confidentiality is one of the keys to the Puzzle Project's success, Father Winterkorn refuses to keep records on the project. "I don't talk about particular cases either," he said. "It sends your credibility right down the tubes."

Thus Father Winterkorn has no idea how many calls he has received during the past several years. He will say that three or four calls a week is above average, and that the number of calls commonly rises during holiday seasons. Most callers are female, although a woman's husband, boyfriend or father occasionally telephones.

"Society makes it easy for guys to get off the hook," observed Father David Mura, who also serves as a Puzzle Project volunteer. "On the other hand, some guys never knew" about the pregnancies.

Most often, people call in the hope that by telling their stories they can shed the burden

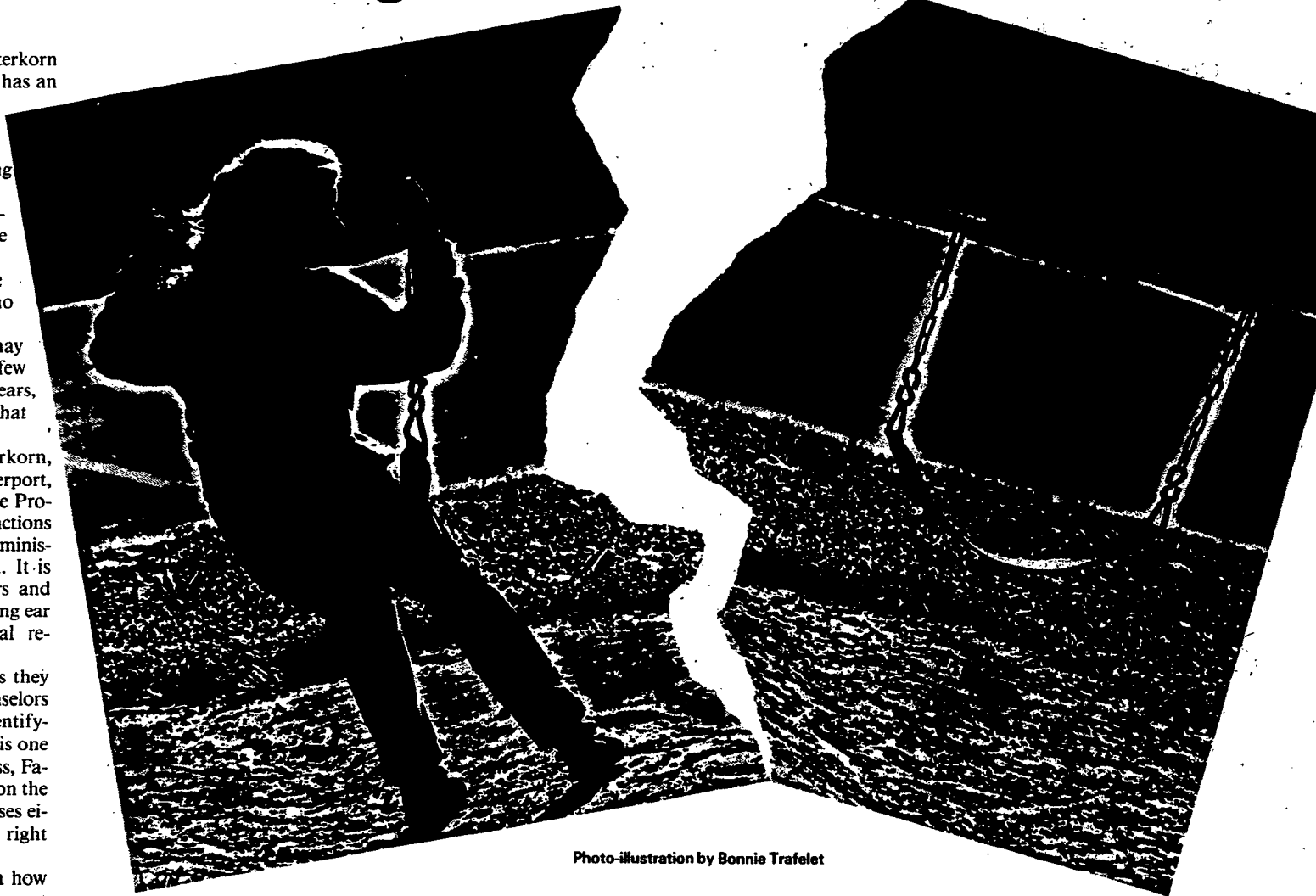


Photo-illustration by Bonnie Trafelet

of guilt and self-recrimination they are bearing. "You can almost see their relief," Father Winterkorn said. "They have just been carrying (their guilt) around with them for so long that they can't wait to get rid of it."

"They'll say, 'I know God has forgiven me. My friends who know about it forgive me, but I can't forgive me. How could I have been so stupid, so weak?'" he added.

Such decisions are not difficult to understand considering the enormous pressure society places on women with an unwanted pregnancy, Father Winterkorn pointed out.

Some may face the loss of their jobs or added stress on an already shaky marriage. Others must deal with boyfriends, husbands or parents who want them to abort the baby.

"Most of them do it figuring it's the only way out of a difficult situation," he said. "People don't realize the consequences on their lives until after the abortions take place"

Whatever those consequences turn out to be, fear and shame ensure that they are seldom acknowledged. Many women struggle for years to forget abortions and to prevent others from finding out.

Their suffering tends to support the Catholic

Church's consistent opposition to abortion. At the same time, the Church's intense political involvement in the issue has presented a forbidding facade to the man or woman who seeks forgiveness.

"What happens is that a lot of people hear about the sin, the horror of abortion, and so they don't come back (to the Church) for healing," Father Mura said. "Intellectually, they can understand that God forgives them, but they need compassion to get to the point where they can forgive themselves."

"The Church has never officially said,

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