

to Life!

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Project Rachel message: God forgives, offers hope

An estimated 5,213 abortions were performed in the Diocese of Rochester's 12 counties in 1993; an estimated 25-30 percent of the women who underwent the abortions were Catholic, according to state and diocesan officials.

Throughout this past year alone, perhaps 50 to 100 such women from the diocese have called the National Office of Post-Abortion Reconciliation and Healing in Milwaukee.

"The women are hurting. They are filled with guilt. They are filled with shame. They have profound remorse. They are wanting to know desperately if God will forgive them and if they'll ever see their children again," said Trish Schickert, associate director of the office. She added that they already have agonized for five to 10 years before calling for help.

"I have no place to refer the women to," she said. "I can refer them to crisis pregnancy centers, but that's not what they're looking for. They're looking to come back into the church," Schickert said.

As of Oct. 4, there will be such a referral service sponsored by the Diocese of Rochester. About 30 priests, plus about 20 counselors and intake volunteers signed up to undergo training Oct. 2 and 3 for Project Rachel, a post-abortion helping network. Begun 12 years ago in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, the project has been adopted in 128 dioceses in the United States and in dioceses in several other countries.

It is being started in the Rochester diocese with a \$4,000 Consistent Life Ethic Fund grant.

Project Rachel focuses on reconciliation. It pairs priests and therapists with women who have had abortions, and offers help as well to relatives, friends and medical personnel also affected.

Its founder, Victoria Thorn of Milwaukee, and Father Blair Raum of the Archdio-

cese of Baltimore, diocesan outreach director for the National Office of Post-Abortion Reconciliation and Healing (an offshoot of Project Rachel), were scheduled to conduct the training for the Rochester diocese. The Oct. 2 training at St. Bernard's Institute was expected to be filmed by an ABC news crew for a "Solutions" segment on World News Tonight. The Oct. 3 training was to be held at St. Francis de Sales Church in Geneva.

On Oct. 4, the Project Rachel ad hoc committee will activate a toll-free number for diocesan women and others affected by abortion: 1-888-9-RACHEL(722435). Referrals will be made to a priest or counselor who has taken the training, according to Father Jim Hewes, chaplain at the State University of New York College at Geneseo's Newman Community.

Project Rachel typically offers three-month support groups that end with a healing Mass in which women may name the children they lost to abortion.

In a Sept. 1 letter to pastors, Father Hewes noted that if the 5,213 abortions in 1993 were multiplied by nearly 25, for the approximate number of years abortions have been legal, "there are a lot of women who have been hurt by this tragedy."

For many diocesan women, he wrote, "the pain of abortion is intensified by a sense of alienation from God and the Church. The fathers, grandparents, close friends, and medical personnel have also been affected by the abortions. We want to find a way to reach out to these hurting people and let them know the healing and reconciliation offered by Jesus and His Church."

He noted that calls to request counseling and to confess have continued since the diocesan Puzzle Project, a similar but informal effort run in the late 1980s, and

which ended in 1990. The project, intended to help women fit the pieces of their life's puzzle back into place, involved one or two diocesan priests serving as consultants.

Father Hewes is hoping for broader support for Project Rachel.

The project already has a supporter in Father Bill Donnelly of St. Mary's Church, Elmira, who took the training while working in the Diocese of Rockville Centre 10 years ago.

"I have used it many times in my dealing with penitents who confess abortion and wish to be reconciled," Father Donnelly said. "It dealt with a very painful issue in a positive, creative way."

"It brought together psychological and religious aspects of healing, and understood very well it could occur in stages, that it couldn't happen instantaneously," he said.

"One of the most constructive parts was discussion of appropriate penance and how that is necessary for the person to feel reintegrated back into the community," Father Donnelly continued. "And it appears to be something that can't be done by saying, 'Why don't you say three Hail Mary's and three Our Father's.'" Instead, his training suggested constructive penance by the woman, he said, such as working in a service project or care program involving children.

Father Donnelly said the fact the diocese will offer Project Rachel "is a powerful statement to people suffering with this."

"It's time we did something to make it easier and more compassionate," he said of helping women to find healing after having had abortions. "God knows we've made it hard enough. We've so single-issued abortion, we've made it so hard for people caught up in it to deal with it."

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*Thus says the Lord:
In Ramah is heard the sound
of moaning, of bitter
weeping! Rachel mourns her
children, she refuses to be
consoled because her
children are no more.*

*Thus says the Lord:
Cease your cries of mourning,
wipe the tears from your eyes.
The sorrow you have shown
shall have its rewards, says
the Lord, they shall return
from the enemy's land. There
I will give you hope for your future,
says the Lord"*

(Jeremiah 31:15-17, The New American Bible)

