

to Life

Special supplement to the Catholic Courier

October 2, 1997

Diocesan women work through abortion grief

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

When you lose a child, a diocesan parishioner said, what you don't want to hear is that it just wasn't a "good" pregnancy, you can work on another one.

What such remarks don't acknowledge, she said, is, "This person died and is not going to be here. Nobody looked at it this way except my husband and me."

The woman, who asked to remain anonymous, and her husband had within the past year ended a "bad" pregnancy, throughout which she'd bled and frequently saw her doctor. It was so traumatic, she told the *Catholic Courier* in a telephone interview, her husband still feels sure her body would have naturally aborted the baby.

"I'm never going to say I'm comfortable with the decision. I question it every day," the woman said. She acknowledged that no matter how she saw it, the priest with whom she later met for counseling made the church's position clear. "In the eyes of the Catholic Church it is a mortal sin."

She used the term "pregnancy termination" to describe what she and her husband chose. They'd learned their unborn child had Down's syndrome. In discussions with medical professionals and family members — though not initially with a priest — they came to fear the potential of accompanying heart problems, difficulties for the child living retarded, tendency toward other defects and the possibility the unborn daughter might outlive their support and love. In the end, they went with their doctor's advice. They chose, she said, to give their baby up to God.

"God would give her a better life in heaven than we would on earth," she argued, yet acknowledged, "It's not something I make known to a lot of people. Very few see it that way. But very few have worn my shoes also."

She longed for reconciliation, and for compassion "for someone in the situation my husband and I were in," she said.

She found compassion in that Rochester priest trained through Project Rachel, a national ministry founded in 1984 that operates through dioceses. The program, begun in Rochester last fall through a Consistent Life Ethic grant, trains counselors and priests to respond knowledgeably and pastorally to anyone suffering the effects of abortion.

Project Rachel has trained about 90 priests and counselors in the diocese to help women — and men — heal from the trauma of abortion. About 20 women have completed the counseling and reconciliation in the diocese in the past year.

The woman had heard about Project Rachel from a relative who had learned of it on the "Mother Angelica" EWTN show. Through the 800 number she reached the Rochester ministry.

Nationwide, most women who seek Project Rachel's help, unlike the woman cited earlier in this story, don't call until 7-10 years after their abortion, according to national organizers. It is estimated that Catholic women make up 25-30 percent of women who undergo abortions. In the



Jim Whitmer

Rochester Diocese, using state figures, some estimates show that could amount to nearly 40,000 Catholic women having had abortions in the past 25 years.

Toward reconciliation

For one such woman, currently in counseling through Project Rachel, it took more than 10 years to seek help. The effects of the abortion had been building within her. She had become more and more obsessed over the aborted child, which the abortion providers had assured her was so insignificant it could slip through a tiny test tube; over whether the child had been a boy or girl; and over whether she should have had and kept it.

One night her dreams became so bad that the following morning she took herself to Mass, "and cried and cried and didn't want to leave."

"It just rolls around in my head so much," she said.

Months later she approached a nun at the church, who told her about Project Rachel.

"It was really hard but she was so supportive," she said. "I knew she was a

good, nice person, a caring person but that was a pretty big thing to trust somebody with," she said. "I didn't want this woman to hate me. I hated myself. I still do."

Before, the lingering impression of harsh pro-life demonstrators, "made me think I could never tell anybody about this. ... You think they're speaking for everyone," she said, adding she was convinced there was "no love" in the church. "They're scary."

(Yet, a Project Rachel spokesman, Father Blair Raum, has said that while their work differs, the best scenario is that the pro-life demonstrators and the Project Rachel counselors be driven out of business for lack of abortions; if one group wins, so does the other.)

She'd become pregnant after leaving a husband who was "beyond abusive," and while staying with a longtime friend. She had yet to begin divorce proceedings at the time. The abortion, she said, seemed as if it would solve everything.

"I just closed my eyes and went through with it."

Now she knows different. "You can have an abortion, but it isn't

what it seems," she said. "You're gonna deal with this, maybe not now, maybe not next year or in five years, but you're gonna. It's hard to tell somebody that when their circumstances are so bad. They don't see it's a permanent solution to a temporary problem."

"I have a hard time believing God could forgive me," she said, unsure of when she'd feel ready to see a priest about reconciliation.

Reaching reconciliation

The diocesan woman who experienced the more recent abortion however, spoke of how she persisted to reach reconciliation.

"I feel some of my energy is restored now," she said.

She recalled that in 12 meetings with her first referral, she didn't experience any progress toward reconciliation. So she called a Project Rachel staff person for another priest's name.

She called him and set up a meeting at his office. That first of three sessions was the hardest, she recalled.

Despite the fact that this was the second priest with whom she'd spoken about the abortion, "It was extremely scary. I was shaking the whole time. ... I had my guard up," she admitted.

"I definitely was afraid of being chastised by the Catholic Church, by someone who represented the Catholic Church. Even though I knew what Project Rachel was all about, I couldn't believe it until I did see it."

The priest seemed to understand her feelings, she said, adding that his response was extremely gentle. In fact, he cried with her. But he made it clear that the Catholic Church considered her act wrong.

"He started every session with prayer for me, that God would give me strength," she said, "and he ended the same way."

The couple had already named their child, on the advice of Parallel, a local physician-founded group for couples who have lost children. But the priest took it further, suggesting she write a letter to the child. When she returned with the letter for their second meeting, he seemed genuinely touched, she recalled.

Her third meeting with the priest was for reconciliation. They met at his office and walked into the church together. "He had everything ready," she said. Two chairs were positioned face to face. They sat and prayed together. On the tabernacle there was a vase with a yellow rose. He gave it to her saying it was from her child, and that while it would die, "she will live on in your heart forever."

Since then she has planted a yellow rose bush outside her home to memorialize her child, and is creating a needlework memorial for inside the home.

Not everything the priest did came straight from the Project Rachel manual, she said, grateful that he added his own touch.

And at the end, "The priest said if ever you want to pray about it again and you don't want to do it alone, call me."

Project Rachel can be reached by calling 1-888-9-RACHEL. Calls are treated with confidentiality and anonymity.