

Men Suffer Too: Healing After Abortion

By Martin Pable, O.F.M. Cap.

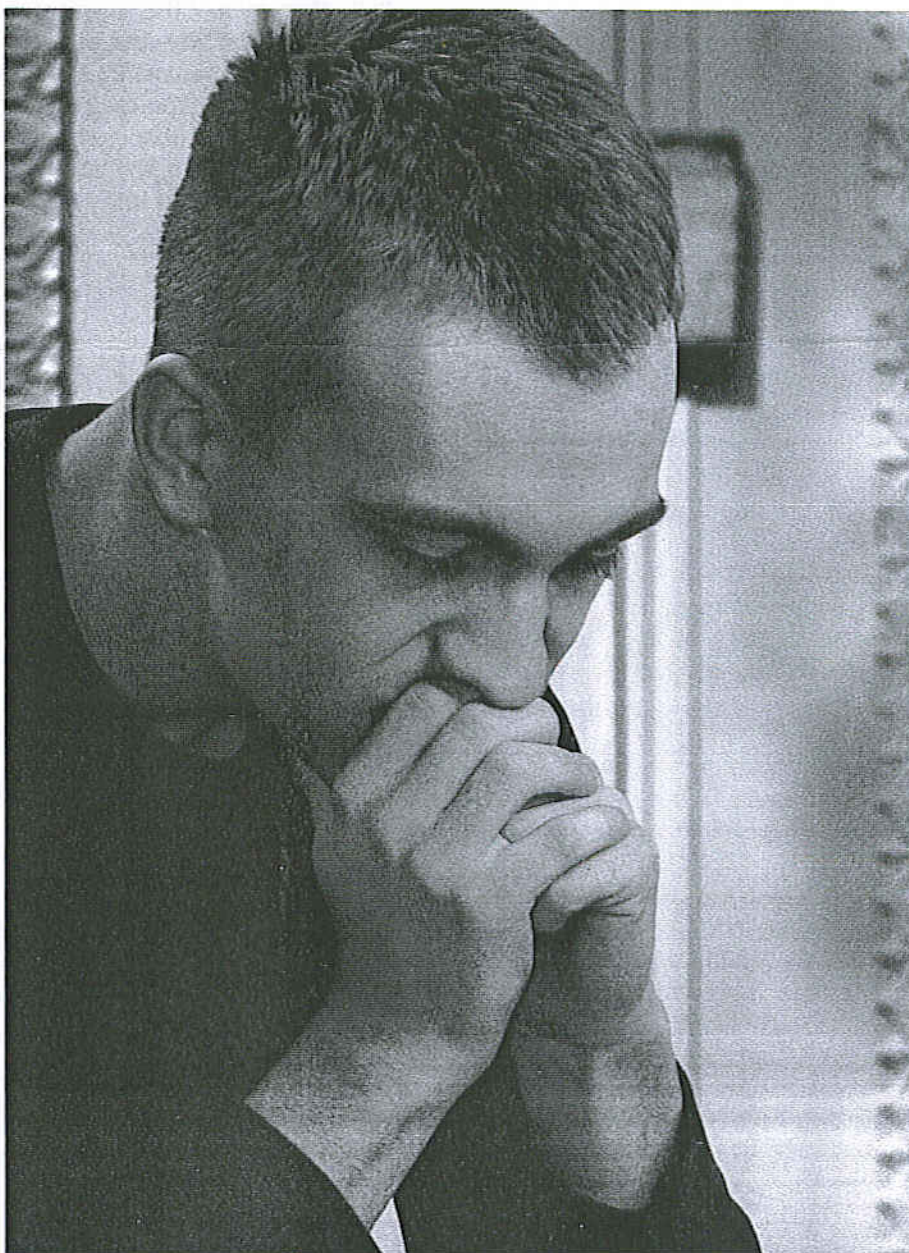
Recently, I was privileged to be involved in a weekend retreat for a small group of men who were fathers of aborted babies. Vicki Thorn, director of Milwaukee-based National Office for Post-Abortion Reconciliation and Healing (NOPARH), has been working for years with post-abortion mothers.

But she and others have come to realize that many fathers have also been wounded by their involvement in abortion. She has decided this is the next important step in post-abortion healing. She brought together a few men from around the country for a retreat.

These "post-abortive fathers" poured out their stories, often with deep emotion. For most, it took many years for them to come to an awareness of what they and their partners had done. They began to experience the grief, the regrets, the guilt, the anger — the whole cluster of feelings that had long been suppressed. They also shared how the Church either was or was not helpful in their search for healing. This was the main impetus for writing this article, since priests were often the key persons in their recovery journey.

In preparation for the retreat, I also did a good deal of reading of case studies of post-abortive fathers, as well as

recalling my own experience of counseling with them. It is helpful to recognize first of all that there is no single



IN BRIEF

- *Post-abortive fathers*
- *'It's legal, so it can't be wrong'*
- *AA and recovery steps*
- *'I'm so glad you are here'*
- *Grief, guilt, anger, powerlessness*

Where do post-abortive fathers turn when they feel ready for help?

pattern that fits every man; indeed, the variations seem almost endless.

Some men pushed the woman into having the abortion; others wanted her to keep the child and offered to marry or help care for the child. For some, it was "no big deal" at first; for others, the aftermath quickly gave rise to grief, guilt and anger.

For Catholic men, most were aware of the Church's teaching against abortion, but it had little to do with their decision. Either they were not practicing their faith; or if they were, the Church's teaching was nullified in their minds by the notion that "it's legal, so it can't be wrong."

Some men have participated in only one abortion; others, two or more. Some were married to the woman; others never saw her again after the abortion. What prompted the men to seek healing? Again, the patterns varied considerably. Some sought to escape their pain through drinking or drug use.

When they finally got help, they felt the need to deal with the abortion(s). This was particularly true for men who sought recovery through Alcoholics Anonymous.

The Fourth and Fifth Steps require them to make a "searching and fearless moral inventory" of their lives and to reveal to God and to another human being "the exact nature of our wrongs." This is clearly a form of confession.

Step Eight asks the person to "make amends" to those they may have wronged while abusing alcohol or drugs. Often the abortion issue will surface and be dealt with in taking these crucial steps.

For other men, "the moment of truth" came from viewing an ultrasound of their pregnant wife's child. As some of them said, "You can't tell me that's just a blob of tissue; that is a human person." Then the reality of previous abortion breaks in.

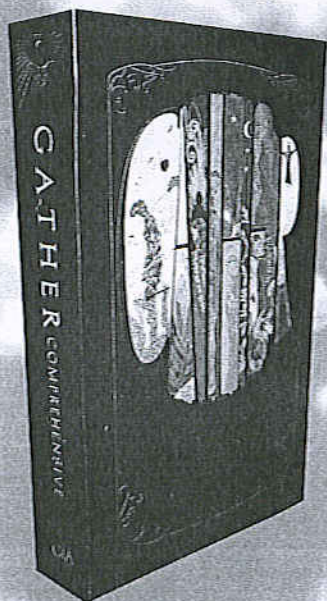
Some begin the post-abortion journey when their wife or girlfriend begins hers; or, if she has already experienced healing, she may nudge the father. Some are awakened in other ways: hearing or viewing a pro-life message; listening to a thoughtful homily on the sacredness of all human life; reading or hearing someone's testimony of how they came to regret their abortion and found healing and inner peace.

For others, it began with just a vague awareness that they had done something wrong, which gradually grew into a crescendo they could no longer ignore.

Where do post-abortive fathers turn when they feel ready for help? We are concerned here mainly about men who have been brought up Catholic, whether or not they are currently practicing their faith.

Unless they are angry at the Church, most Catholic men retain some respect for priests. So they are

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Abortion creates a serious soul wound, and the priest can be a true physician of the soul.

likely to seek out a priest to speak with, whether in confession or outside. So we priests need to be ready to minister to them. What are some of the important issues?

First, it is crucial that we concur with the father's self-judgment that he has committed a serious wrong. Some men have said they were deeply disappointed when the priest, no doubt with the best of intentions, tried to minimize their guilt or made light of the abortion. We need to receive and honor the man's feelings, even though they may seem exaggerated.

It is always good to begin with a word such as, "I'm so glad you are here. Just take your time. Tell me, in your own words, what happened." Let the story pour forth: what led up to the decision for abortion; how much was he involved in the decision; what were his feelings, both before and after. Since men in our culture are not generally encouraged to express emotions, this may take some gentle prompting.

More than likely, the central feeling will be *grief*; this is the natural, normal response to loss. The abortion will be experienced as a loss: loss of a unique human life, of my own child. There may also be a loss of self-respect: "I should have fought more strongly for the child." Another feeling may be *guilt*: "I was the one who pushed for the abortion; I saw it as a way to solve our problem." Another common feeling may be *anger*. This is especially likely when the father has been passed over in the decision process: "She said it was her body and she has the right to do what she chooses." Men often experience this as *powerlessness*, a common antecedent to anger. Whatever the case, we do well to encourage the man to name and express these feelings, without judgment on our part about their "rightness" or "wrongness." Indeed, very often the simple act of expressing feelings allows the person to make a self-correction, such as: "That wasn't very reasonable of me, was it?" At any rate, "telling the story" is the essential first step toward healing.

Even if this act takes place in the confessional, it ought not to be rushed. Of course, it will then be necessary to move toward the expression of contrition and the granting of absolution. So the priest may proceed along these lines: "I really appreciate your honesty in sharing all this. It seems clear to me that you are sincerely sorry for this sin, and I will grant you absolution in the name of Jesus." Then we can go on to speak of God's infinite mercy, perhaps using Biblical references. But it will also be necessary to tell the penitent that he may be in need of further healing and invite him to return to you, preferably outside the confessional. Or, if there is evidence of depression, sleeplessness, marital discord, and the like, we urge him to seek professional counseling. But always keep the door open for further spiritual guidance. Abortion creates a serious soul wound, and the priest can be a true physician of the soul.

If the man does return, or if the first encounter takes place outside the Sacrament of Reconciliation, there are a number of other ways the priest can minister to him. For one thing, if this has not already been done, we can encourage the father (and the mother, if she is his wife) to give a name to the aborted child. This serves to heighten the reality of the child's life with God and in the memory of the parents; we can then also remind them that they can ask the child to pray for them and for the family. In the Church's "Book of Blessings," there is a beautiful ritual for healing after a miscarriage or a still-birth. This can easily be adapted for parents of an aborted child. It would also be a gracious gesture to offer to say a Mass for the healing of all those involved.

The father's confession is indeed the crucial first step toward healing. But more work needs to be done. For instance, should he tell his wife about the previous abortion(s)? I generally

believe there should not be secrets in marriage; so at least the priest should raise the question and ask the man to pray for

God's guidance as to whether he should share the secret with his wife. There are wives who have offered to spiritually adopt the aborted children of their husband; men could do this same loving act for their wife if she has aborted a child.

Another important issue is that of forgiveness. Sometimes the father has great difficulty believing God can forgive him for the abortion (which is why it may take years before he can bring himself to talk to a priest). In such a case we move into an evangelizing mode, using the rich texts and images of Scripture to assure him. I often use a line from the prophet Micah: "Who is there like you, the God who removes guilt and pardons sin...? You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea" (7:18-19). I comment: "Think about that; once we repent of our sins and confess them, God drowns them in the depths of the ocean. They are gone — out of God's sight and mind. So you can let them go, too."

Sometimes the man will need to forgive the woman who had the abortion without his approval. We can point out to him that his anger may be justified, but it is counterproductive; he is stuck in negative energy, and she remains unaffected. It is time to let go, forgive, commend her to God, and move on. This will take time, as well as prayer. I always tell people: if you sincerely pray for the grace to forgive, it will always be granted. Why? Because you are praying for what God *wants* to give. The father may also want to ask forgiveness of the aborted child; he can be encouraged to do that, either in his own words, or with the help of our prayer.

Sometimes also, men wonder if they should tell their living children about the abortion. This is a very delicate matter. I would generally discourage it — unless one or the other child brings it up directly: "Mom/Dad, sometimes I feel there is another child in our

family. Is there?" In that case, rather than lie or cover up, it may be best to speak honestly and humbly: "Yes, I/we did have an abortion years ago. We have been very sorry for that, and we have confessed it and received God's forgiveness. We hope you can forgive us too." The lost child is part of the family through the Communion of Saints. So the parents should share the name of the child and remind the living children that they "have a brother/sister in heaven praying for all of us."

Finally, we asked the post-abortive fathers at the retreat what more the Church could do for men like them. They had several suggestions. For one, we need to be aware that there are a large number of men "out there" who are in need of healing. We have to find ways to reach them. We can do so through our ordinary preaching, writing, and teaching. Just the simple fact of stating that the Church wants to reach out, with compassion and healing, to both men and women who have had abortions, will be received with gratitude. Remind people that abortion is something for which God's mercy and forgiveness are always available. Encourage them to talk to somebody in the Church community to begin the process of healing and reconciliation. Even if many of them are not attending church, friends will hear this message and may pass it on to them. I am often astounded at how God's grace works in most unlikely circumstances. Two men attending a sports event or sharing a drink after work; two women shopping or having coffee together; two people talking about their children – all of a sudden the topic turns to abortion, and one says, "I was involved in that, and it still bothers me." Wouldn't it be wonderful if the other would say, "I know someone you can talk to."

The other message the men gave us was: we need to work harder to *prevent* abortion. They urged us to continue speaking out against this evil – not with ranting and condemnation, but with reason and persuasion. They also included speaking out against contraception, since the latter creates a mind-

set that conceiving a child is some kind of failure or disaster. Some of the men have discovered Natural Family Planning and have found it to be a powerful way to strengthen their marital relationship.

We priests are in a privileged position to foster the healing of post-abortive men as well as women. A number of excellent resources are available

through the National Office for Post-Abortion Reconciliation and Healing: www.noparh.org (1-800-5WE CARE). **P**

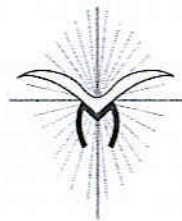
FATHER PABLE, O.F.M. Cap., is the author of many books, including *Prayer: A Practical Guide* and *Catholics and Fundamentalists*. He lives and works at St. Anthony Retreat Center in Marathon, Wis.

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