



*... the thing the church needs most today is the ability to
heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful ...
I see the church as a **field hospital** after battle.*

POPE FRANCIS

walking with love

alternatives & responses to abortion

**Resource for priests, pastoral associates
and Walking With Love leaders**





‘Walking with Love’ is an educational and pastoral initiative of the
Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
Commission for Pastoral Life
2015

For extra copies of this booklet please contact:

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
GPO Box 368, Canberra, ACT 2601 Australia
Phone: (02) 6201 9859

A PDF of the booklet is available for distribution from:
www.walkingwithlove.org.au

Prepared by Dr Brigid McKenna and Marcia Riordan,
with special thanks to Bishop Eugene Hurley.

Cover image: Pope Francis greets the crowd as he leaves his general audience in
St Peter’s Square at the Vatican 24 April 2013. Photo by CNS/Paul Haring.

Quote on cover: Pope Francis interview with Antonio Spadaro, ‘A big heart open to God’,
America, 30 September 2013.

My brother priests,

One of the most privileged and humbling aspects of our priesthood is the ministry of Reconciliation. Each of us is aware of our own sinfulness. Nevertheless, as sharers in the priesthood of Jesus Christ we are the instruments of God's forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

I'm sure you would agree that we meet people at their most loveable as we encounter them; humbly before their God.

Our great responsibility, it seems to me, is to be the messenger and the instrument of God's mercy and forgiving love. It is our incredible privilege to bring the healing, gentle, life-giving forgiveness of Jesus Christ, to the people of God.

*I'm often reminded of the words of consecration which we use at each Mass
"This is the chalice of my blood of the new and eternal covenant which will be
poured out for you and for many FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS".*

The whole point of the redemption is just that ... to reconcile us with the Father.

Let us be conscious of the goodness of those who come to reconciliation, their courage and their faith. As best we can, let us have the forgiving heart of Jesus as we bring his healing and loving forgiveness in this incredible Sacrament.

Bishop Eugene Hurley
Chair Commission for Pastoral Life 2014





Australia has one of the highest abortion rates in the developed world. Each year approximately 85,000 abortions are performed; that's one abortion for every three live births.

These figures describe a grave moral situation and are an alarming sign of what John Paul II described as 'the culture of death.' Irrespective of whether it occurs as the result of a procedure or a medication, soon after conception or much later in the pregnancy, the deliberate and direct killing of the unborn deprives a human being of the opportunity to grow and develop and experience all that life on earth has to offer. Pope-emeritus Benedict XVI described abortion as 'the most serious injustice today' for it silences those who have no voice.

Pope Benedict XVI, 'Address to International Diplomats', 18 March 2006.

At the same time, abortion is a massive pastoral issue for the Church in Australia. Although the unborn child is the primary victim, abortion can also have profound spiritual, emotional and psychological effects upon everyone who is involved: mothers and fathers, grandparents and siblings, wider networks of family and friends, healthcare and other professionals.

One in three Australian women will have an abortion. While some women report relatively little trauma following abortion, for many, the experience is devastating.

Dr Joanne Angelo, MD, is an Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Tufts University School of Medicine and has years of experience treating women seeking help through diocesan Project Rachel programs. She explains 'Every woman who undergoes an abortion suffers a death experience—the death of her child'. After the abortion she may feel numb and may continue in this emotional state for days, weeks, or even for many years. While society may insist that she should feel grateful that her problem has been solved, in reality, however her inner life is often plagued by guilt and shame, nightmares, insomnia and anxiety, alcohol and drug abuse, intrusive thoughts, flashbacks. She may become seriously depressed and even suicidal. When she is in this state she may enter a cycle of multiple pregnancies and repeated abortion.

It is necessary to recognise that, in this context, we are witnessing true human tragedies.

Often the woman is the victim of male selfishness...

St John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, London: Random House, 1994, p. 206.

Grief is a natural consequence of death—even prenatal death. The medical and psychiatric literature abounds with articles about grief following perinatal death—death due to miscarriage, premature death, and stillbirth. Couples who lose a child to abortion can experience similar grief, however their grief is not visible since society, family, and friends, do not support or are not trained to support them. Unlike other deaths, there is no funeral service, no grave to visit, no consolation from family and relatives who most often are unaware of the abortion, or may have encouraged the abortion and or paid for it.

Dr Joanne Angelo, 'The Negative Impact of Abortion on Women and Families' in Michael T. Mannion (ed.) *Post-Abortion Aftermath*, 1994, also see 'Post Abortion Trauma', *Pontifical Academy for Life*, 25 February 2011.

But abortion need not be the source of long-term psychological, emotional, social and spiritual wounds. It is not, as many people believe it to be, an 'unforgiveable sin'. Christ and his Church are waiting to forgive, heal and restore hope to women and men who have been involved in abortion. As John Paul II explained:

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 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 peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. To the same Father and his mercy you can with sure hope entrust your child.

St John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*, St Paul's: Sydney, 1995, no. 99.

Pope Benedict XVI has reaffirmed this message of God's love and mercy: 'I make my own the exhortation in *The Gospel of Life* addressed to women who have had an abortion ...' Pope Benedict also expressed 'deep appreciation for all those social and pastoral initiatives being taken for the reconciliation and treatment of people injured by the drama of abortion', describing them as an essential element for building the 'civilisation of love that humanity needs today more than ever.'

Pope Benedict XVI, Address to an International Congress on *Oil on the Wounds: A Response to the Ills of Abortion and Divorce*, 5 April 2008, www.vatican.va

... the Church, after the example of her Divine Teacher, always has the people themselves before her, especially the weakest and most innocent who are victims of injustice and sin, and also those other men and women who, having perpetrated these acts, stained by sin and wounded within, are seeking peace and the chance to begin anew.

The Church's first duty is to approach these people with love and consideration, with caring and motherly attention, to proclaim the merciful closeness of God in Jesus Christ. Indeed, as the Fathers teach, it is he who is the true Good Samaritan, who has made himself close to us, who pours oil and wine on our wounds and takes us into the inn, the Church, where he has us treated, entrusting us to her ministers and personally paying in advance for our recovery.

Pope Benedict XVI, Address, *Oil on the Wounds*, 5 April 2008.

Clergy make an invaluable pastoral and sacramental contribution to post abortion healing and reconciliation. However this is, without a doubt, an extremely challenging and often confronting area of ministry. It is also a ministry that needs support to expand and deepen.

Walking with Love is an educational and pastoral project of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Commission for Pastoral Life which focuses upon how to walk with love and gentleness with vulnerable pregnant women and all those who suffer the effects of abortion. *Walking With Love | The Priest and Post-Abortion Healing and Reconciliation* forms an important part of a renewed effort by the Church in Australia to improve the spiritual and pastoral care of women and men who have experienced the loss of a child through abortion.

Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God's saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings.

Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, St Paul's: Sydney 2014, no. 44.

This resource draws heavily upon sections of *Project Rachel Ministry:*

A Post-Abortion Resource Manual for Priests and Project Rachel Leaders 2009.

Developed by the Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life, and Vocations and by the Committee on Pro-Life Activities of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), this excellent resource is based upon empirical research and the extensive experience of men and women, clergy and laity, who work in post-abortion ministry. This manual is strongly recommended to clergy and other interested persons who have further questions or a particular interest in post abortion ministry.

The Australian manual is intended to be supplemented by the *Walking With Love Practical Guide, 2007*. Additional resources, including the full text of the *Project Rachel Ministry* manual, are available at www.walkingwithlove.org.au/forpriests

Abortion's aftermath

There are many reasons why a woman may decide to have an abortion. In the encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II explains that the Church understands that this decision is often tragic and painful for the mother, insofar as it is '... not made for purely selfish reasons or out of convenience, but out of a desire to protect certain important values such as her own health or a decent standard of living for the other members of the family. Sometimes it is feared that the child to be born would live in such conditions that it would be better if the birth did not take place. Nevertheless, these reasons and others like them, however serious and tragic, can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being.'

The Gospel of Life, no. 58.

Sometimes, too, external pressure may come from the father of the child, either directly or indirectly, such as when he leaves the mother alone to face problems associated with the pregnancy. Pressure to abort can also come from a woman's wider family circle, friends, and healthcare professionals. At times, John Paul II explains, 'the woman is subjected to such strong pressure that she feels psychologically forced to have an abortion: certainly in this case moral responsibility lies particularly with those who have directly or indirectly obliged her to have an abortion.'

The Gospel of Life, no. 59.



Because the circumstances of an abortion are always different and deeply personal, every woman will exhibit her own unique cluster of grief symptoms after an abortion. Nevertheless, some commonly reported manifestations are:

- guilt and shame
- grief that she cannot share
- depression and low self-esteem, sometimes to the point of becoming suicidal
- withdrawal and/or alienation from partner/spouse, family, and friends
- fear that God will punish her, or is punishing her, for committing the ‘unforgivable sin’
- eating disorders, self-punishing behaviors such as ‘cutting’ (deliberate self-harm)
- sexual dysfunction, hypersexuality, or loss of sexual interest; problems with intimacy
- problems bonding with her other children or subsequent children, including being overprotective, emotionally distant, unavailable, or abusive
- deep and unrelenting anger at herself, her partner/spouse, family, friends, abortion provider, even God
- sleep problems, including abortion-related nightmares, flashbacks, or ‘hearing’ sounds of a baby crying
- alcohol and drug dependency used for self-medication
- desire for a ‘replacement’ baby, rapid repeat pregnancy, and increased risk for subsequent abortion
- anniversary reactions of grief or depression on the date of the abortion or the baby’s expected due date
- anger or avoidance when conversations turn to babies or abortion
- involvement in the pro-choice movement or an unhealthy or imbalanced involvement in the pro-life movement
- workaholism.

Project Rachel Ministry, pp. 4–5.

The meaning and impact of an abortion may also change over the course of a woman’s life making it difficult to predict when abortion-related problems will prompt a woman to seek help. Some Catholic women seek counseling and the Sacrament of Reconciliation immediately after the abortion. Others may do so later when they experience another pregnancy and childbirth, or if they face infertility, subsequent pregnancy loss, or the death of someone close to them, especially another child. Others may not recognise their need for healing and reconciliation until they have reached old age or are preparing to die.

c.f. Project Rachel Ministry, p. 3.

The first reform must be the attitude. The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people's night, into the darkness, but without getting lost.

Pope Francis interview with Antonio Spadaro, 'A big heart open to God', *America*, 30 September 2013.

As a result, there is no single profile of a woman who seeks out a priest for post-abortion healing.

She may identify herself as Catholic but have little formation in the faith. Or she may exhibit overly pious or scrupulous behavior, or even be deeply involved in church activities as a form of atonement for her abortion. She may attend Mass regularly and be raising her children Catholic. Or she may not have stepped inside a church since the day of her abortion. She may be very young or very old or somewhere in between. She may be the very angry woman who criticizes her parish priest when he preaches about abortion.

She may never have confessed her abortion, or she may have done so numerous times. In any case, she certainly believes she has committed a grave sin. She fears rejection by the Church, but at the same time she desperately desires healing and reconciliation with God.

She needs to know at the outset that there is hope, there is healing, and there is the promise of help and reconciliation from the Church, who cares about her.

Project Rachel Ministry, p. 9.

Dr Angelo explains, 'Every child who dies in an abortion has a father as well as a mother. Men also suffer from the tragedy of abortion. They also grieve their lost children.'

As Dr Vincent Rue has said, 'For men and women alike, the feeling of emptiness may last a lifetime, for parents are parents forever, even of a dead child.'

In Dr Angelo's experience, 'A man who tried to prevent his partner's abortion and found that he has no legal right to protect the life of his child may feel emasculated and stripped of his fatherhood. A man who insisted on the abortion, paid for it, or did nothing to try to dissuade his partner from' the abortion 'may become overwhelmed by guilt, shame, and self-loathing. Both groups of men often become angry, anxious, and distrustful of women, shutting down any tender feelings which would make future intimate relationships possible. Like women, they too may experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress and psychosomatic illness.'

Dr Joanne Angelo, 'Portraits of Grief in the Aftermath', 8 August 2011, Project Rachel *Hope After Abortion*, www.hopeafterabortion.com
Dr Vincent Rue, 'Forgotten Fathers', Life Cycle Books, Lewinston, NY, 1997. (pamphlet).

Much of the material that follows will apply to men as well as women.

A good source of information specifically for men can be found at *Reclaiming Fatherhood*, www.menandabortion.info

The role of the priest

Priests play a unique and central role in the Church's ministry of healing and reconciliation after abortion. 'Through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, they alone can bring the unconditional love and mercy of Christ to those broken by sin. Through the sacrament and pastoral counselling, priests help to restore spiritual, emotional, and mental health to those wounded by the sin of abortion and to assist them on the path of conversion and healing.'

Project Rachel Ministry, p. viii.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

When a woman who has had an abortion seeks the Sacrament of Reconciliation, she may be feeling *very fearful* and *anxious*.

- Be gentle with her and *reassure* her of God's mercy and love.
- Affirm her *courage and humility*, her hope and trust in coming to the sacrament.
- Let her talk and listen to her. It is important that she is able to share her story, her pain and her fears. (Assure her that her reactions are normal.)
- She may also feel that her sin is greater than God's mercy can ever bear, so assure her of God's great love, mercy, and compassion for each of us—no matter what our sins.
- Do not deny the gravity of the sin of abortion. It is mostly likely that she is already beginning to recognise this seriousness of abortion and its aftermath.
- Be aware that she may believe she has been excommunicated.

- Choose an appropriate penance to facilitate her healing and acceptance of God's forgiveness. In choosing a penance, remember that she may have suffered for many years already. The penance should be life-affirming and simple (as she may be unable to hear much at this time).

For instance you could ask her if she knows the *Hail Mary*. Perhaps ask her to pray this prayer with you, and in doing so appeal to her natural motherhood by reminding her that Our Lady also knows a mother's grief and has a mother's heart and compassion.

- You could invite her to light a candle, or to plant a rose, or to create a memorial of some kind, a place where she can go to when she is feeling sad/needs to remember or to pray. (Some parishes have memorial gardens, see St Therese's Parish, Essendon, Garden of the Angels).
- It is important to assure her that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is sufficient to bring forgiveness of sins and the fullness of God's mercy. And just as God forgives, she needs to forgive herself too.
- You may also want to suggest that the often unacknowledged grief and pain associated with past abortions can be the source of profound emotional and spiritual suffering and that, for this reason, additional counselling and support may be very beneficial.
- It could be a good idea to have some small prayer cards as well as contacts for counsellors in the confessional that you could give out.

Adapted from *Project Rachel Ministry*, pp. 11–12.

The following pamphlet provides some useful theological reflections and practical guidance for priests. Fr Antonius Wall, OP, *An Imaginary Confession: The aborted child and redemptive love* (Copies of pamphlet available from Western Dominican Preaching, email: preaching@opwest.org).

The Canonical perspective on abortion

It is commonly thought that the Church excommunicates all Catholics who have procured a successful abortion. However, in probably a great many cases, mitigating or extenuating circumstances prevent the individual from incurring the censure of excommunication. The tragedy of abortion triggers distinct and separate questions regarding the personal responsibility of one who procures a successful abortion: has a sin been committed? If so, was the commission of that sin such that it also resulted in the incurring of a penalty?

According to the *Code of Canon Law* both a person who procures a successful abortion, as well as any accomplice whose positive cooperation was necessary for a successful abortion, incur the automatic *latae sententiae* penalty of excommunication (cf. cc. 1398; 1329 §2; 1314). Actually, excommunication is a censure that should be seen as a medicinal penalty, meaning that it is intended primarily to foster the repentance and reconciliation of the one who committed the act (cf. c. 1312 §1, 1°). Thus, excommunication may be applied only until the offender accepts God's healing grace and repents, at which time the excommunication is to be lifted in the Sacrament of Reconciliation or by other legitimate means.

For a person to be automatically excommunicated that person must have procured a successful abortion or have positively cooperated in a successful abortion and:

1. have possessed full use of reason
2. have been at least eighteen years of age
3. known the fact that church law includes the penalty of excommunication for the crime of abortion (this is different from simply knowing that abortion is a serious or mortal sin; church law presumes that Catholics are not ignorant of the law by which they are bound: see c. 15 §2).
4. have been able to exercise his or her free will and not have been operating out of grave fear, serious heat of passion, inadvertent drunkenness, or any other similar mental disturbance.

Excerpted from *Project Rachel Ministry*, pp. 67–69;
The full text of this section can be accessed at www.walkingwithlove.org.au/forpriests

Thus, in the image of the Good Shepherd, the priest is a man of mercy and compassion, close to his people and a servant to all. This is a pastoral criterion I would like to emphasize strongly: closeness. Closeness and service, but closeness, nearness!... Whoever is wounded in life, in whatever way, can find in him attention and a sympathetic ear ... The priest reveals a heart especially in administering the Sacrament of Reconciliation; he reveals it by his whole attitude, by the manner in which he welcomes, listens, counsels and absolves ...

Pope Francis, 'Address to the Parish Priests of Rome', 6 March 2014.

At their May 2013 Plenary meeting, the Bishops of Australia have agreed that all Bishops of Australia formally delegate to their priests the faculty to raise an excommunication for the sin of abortion, and grant absolution for it.

Post-abortion counseling and healing

Receiving the Sacrament of Penance doesn't mean that everything can or should go back to the way it was before. A woman's child has died, and she is changed forever. As well as receiving God's forgiveness, she must also forgive herself if genuine healing is to occur. Accordingly, after the Sacrament of Penance, it may be necessary and appropriate to offer to be available for pastoral counseling at another time, or to encourage her to participate in some other form of post-abortion ministry.

It would be important to explain that owing to the protections ensured to all penitents under the seal of confession, she must take the initiative in approaching you to set up a time to meet, even if it is right after the confession time.

The most appropriate means of facilitating a referral would be to give her the name and number of another program, agency or person. It is good to have this information on hand or in the confessional. You could also refer her to the Walking With Love website for further information.

The *Project Rachel Ministry* manual includes a comprehensive section entitled 'The Priest's Role in Post-Abortion Counseling and Healing,' which is available online at www.walkingwithlove.org.au/forpriests

What can priests do to encourage others to seek help?

Many people who have been involved in an abortion come to view abortion as the ‘unforgiveable sin.’ They may believe that they are not entitled to the mercy of God or man. While Catholic teaching clearly opposes abortion, it also calls us to distinguish the sin from the sinner, to reject the sin, but not the sinner. By continuing to remind people that forgiveness and healing are possible after abortion, we can bring both joy and hope to those who are suffering.

Jean Laffitte, ‘To Act According To the Merciful Example of God,’ in *Oil On The Wounds*, New York: Square One, 2011, pp. 213–7.

In our present day—indeed, perhaps now more than ever, the Church is called to be the ‘inn’ we hear about in the parable of the Good Samaritan, a place where the wounded can be brought back to health.

Livio Melina and Carl A. Anderson, *Oil On The Wounds*, 2011, p. 3.

Some priests are reluctant to mention abortion because they are aware parishioners have had abortions. However those suffering after abortion look to their priest to help them break out of circle of denial and despair, to let them know that help is available, to give them permission to seek that help and to know that it is safe to do so. If we never mention abortion women in the congregation may think that we don’t understand, we don’t care about their pain and we have nothing to offer them. They need to know that we do care about them, and we do offer hope.

Project Rachel *Hope After Abortion*, www.hopeafterabortion.com

Additional preaching resources can be found at *Walking With Love* www.walkingwithlove.org.au/forpriests and Project Rachel *Hope After Abortion* www.hopeafterabortion.com

What happened to my baby?

As part of their post-abortion healing journey parents will often wonder what happened to their children. Some will be concerned that their children have not been baptised.

True mercy takes the person into one's care, listens to him attentively, approaches the situation with respect and truth, and accompanies him on the journey of reconciliation. And this is demanding, yes, certainly. The truly merciful priest behaves like the Good Samaritan ... but why does he do it? Because his heart is capable of having compassion, it is the heart of Christ!

Pope Francis, 'Address to the Parish Priests of Rome', 6 March 2014.

While we cannot definitively be certain of their fate or assure parents that they are in heaven, the Catechism teaches that infants who die without baptism are entrusted by the Church to the mercy of God. 'The principle that God desires that salvation of all people gives rise to the hope that there is a path to salvation for infants who die without baptism (cf. CCC, 1261)...' A recent study of the question of the fate of un-baptised infants by the International Theological Commission, concluded that 'there are theological and liturgical reasons to hope that infants who die without baptism may be saved and brought to eternal happiness, even if there is not an explicit teaching on this this question found in Revelation.'

International Theological Commission, 'The Hope of Salvation for Infants who die without being baptised', 2007, p. 1, www.vatican.va

Pope John Paul II wrote especially to women who have had an abortion encouraged them to trust their children to the mercy and love of God, in the Gospel of Life:

The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. To the same Father and his mercy you can with sure hope entrust your child.

Pope Benedict XVI made these words his own where when he repeated them in an address to the Participants at an International Conference on abortion 'Oil on the wounds.'

Benedict XVI, Address, 5 April 2008.

It often comforts parents to know that their unborn children are in a safe place and can be helpful to encourage them to build a relationship with their lost children in the light of the Communion of Saints.

Project Rachel Ministry, pp. 15–24.

Where indicated, text has been directly excerpted from *Project Rachel Ministry: A Post-Abortion Resource Manual for Priests and Project Rachel Leaders*, copyright ©2009, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C. All rights reserved.

Yes, the men and women of our day sometimes truly find themselves stripped and wounded on the wayside of the routes we take, often without anyone listening to their cry for help or attending to them to alleviate and heal their suffering ... Only by assuming an attitude of merciful love is it possible to approach in order to bring help and enable victims to pick themselves up and resume their journey through life ...

Pope Benedict XVI, Address to an International Congress on
Oil on the Wounds: A Response to the Ills of Abortion and Divorce,
5 April 2008, www.vatican.va

Counselling and Support



Educational Resources

'Walking with Love' DVD resource pack and practical guide

www.walkingwithlove.org.au

