

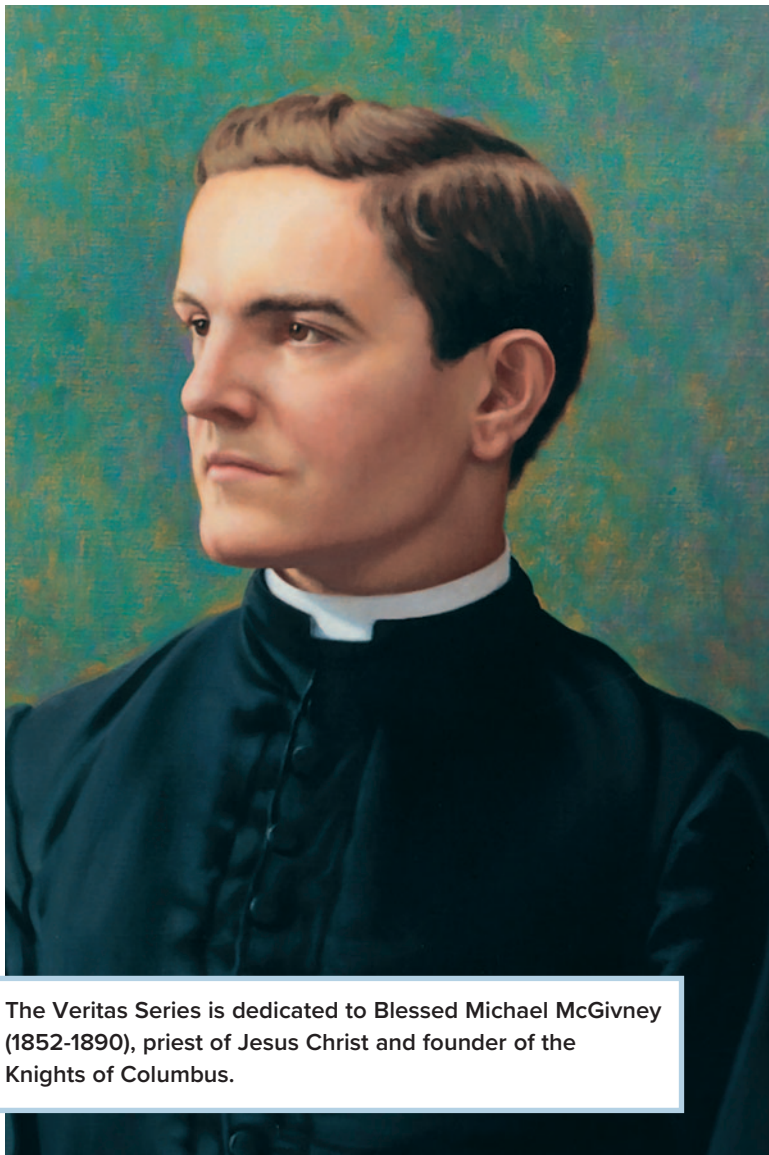


Men and Abortion:

Finding Healing, Restoring Hope



Dr. Catherine T. Coyle



The Veritas Series is dedicated to Blessed Michael McGivney (1852-1890), priest of Jesus Christ and founder of the Knights of Columbus.

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Men and Abortion: Finding Healing, Restoring Hope

BY
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Introduction

Since January of 1973, nearly 50 million abortions have occurred in the United States. In fact, abortion has become one of the most common surgical procedures in America. Approximately one-third of U.S. women will have experienced elective abortion by the age of 45 and this includes women who identify themselves as Catholic (27%) and Protestant (43%).¹ Each abortion involves both a man and a woman and often leaves them feeling wounded and confused. Men and women may feel regret immediately after abortion or they may not realize the negative impact of abortion on their lives until months or years later. These men and women need our understanding and our compassion.

Men and Abortion: Why should we Care?

At conception, a unique, genetically complete individual human begins his or her development. No subsequent child created will be the same. Therefore a distinctive, irreplaceable human being is involved in each pregnancy and in every abortion.

Each first pregnancy entails not only the creation of a unique, individual human being but also of a mother and a father. For it is procreation which propels a man or a woman into the new role of parent. Although our legal system and society do not consistently acknowledge the fathers of children yet in the womb, those men are no less 'fathers' than those whose children are already born. As has been so eloquently stated, "Whether or not the creator-father continues as parent, indeed, his part in the creation of a new life

signifies an elemental reality which no legal, social, or medical act (such as abortion) can truly alter.... It is the biological act which sets in motion the forces that will in time alter consciousness, self-perception, and even attitudes toward the outside world.”²² Surely the realization of having created one’s own child cannot be erased by abortion. Although abortion ends the life of a child, it cannot kill a man’s sense of himself as a father.

Often abortion results in multiple losses: the loss of the child, of the relationship, of self-worth, and of hope for the future. Abortion debases fatherhood as it violates a man’s instinct to protect and care for those he loves. To care about this issue is to care about ourselves and about the welfare of our fellow human beings.

Men and Abortion: Decision-Making

Some men actively encourage their partners to abort. Some abandon their partners or threaten to do so and therefore indirectly encourage abortion. Although the stereotype of the callous male abandoning his partner continues to be promoted, there are frequently other circumstances leading to abortion decisions. For example, there are men who are not aware of a partner’s abortion until after it occurs. Still other men offer support of some kind which may or may not include a commitment to a long-term relationship. Some men oppose abortion and make their views clear but, ultimately, they are at the mercy of their partners’ decisions. Finally, many men concede to the often promoted view that abortion decisions belong solely to women and so defer those decisions to their female partners.

Regardless of one’s position on the issue of abortion, it seems fair to say that abortion decisions are painful and difficult decisions which bring lasting consequences.

In spite of the gravity of such decisions, choices need to be made within a short time period and often with limited information. While abortion providers have frequently been criticized for failing to adequately inform their clients, that is not the only failure in communication. Too often, the men and women themselves do not adequately communicate their fears and desires and, as a result, an abortion decision is made which neither partner is satisfied with. Men tend to withhold their thoughts and desires concerning pregnancy outcome and, instead, yield the decision entirely to their partners as they perceive such behavior as “supporting” them. While the research on men and abortion is limited, a consistent observation is that men will repress their own emotions because they believe that is the most appropriate way to care for their partners. Ironically, many women report that had they received an assurance of support from their partners, they would have chosen to carry their pregnancies to term. Sadly then, the decision to abort is often not what either party wants but is the result of a failure of communication between men and women trying to cope with the crisis of unplanned pregnancy.

Men and Abortion: The Consequences

While not all men seem to suffer greatly after abortion, some surely do. Whether married or single, in casual or committed relationships, some men have a very difficult time after abortion as the following stories illustrate:

Tom's Story

Tom was a 19-year old college student when he met Laurie at school. They began dating and their relationship soon became intimate. This was Tom's first sexual relationship. Six months after they met, Laurie became pregnant. They were frightened but also excited. They discussed marriage and decided that it was the right choice for them. Tom was elated. He knew they would have some

financial challenges and that their parents would need some convincing but Laurie was the woman of his dreams and he looked forward to sharing a life and a family with her. Two weeks later, Laurie informed Tom that she had changed her mind and scheduled an appointment for an abortion. Tom was devastated. He begged her to reconsider and even offered to raise the child himself but Laurie would not be swayed from her decision. She kept the appointment and, within the next month, her relationship with Tom deteriorated. They never spoke about the pregnancy or the abortion and finally stopped communicating altogether. Tom became depressed and dropped out of school.

Tom lost a child, a woman he believed he would spend a lifetime with, and his hopes for the future. He lost confidence in relationships and, for a period of time, chose to become involved in a homosexual relationship believing that would be safer than getting involved with another woman.

David's Story

David and Jenny dated during high school and married two years after graduation. They were married for seven years when Jenny became pregnant with their third child. Although the pregnancy was not planned, David enjoyed being a father and looked forward to having another child. Jenny seemed somewhat ambivalent about the pregnancy but never gave David any indication that she would end it. During the next month, while David was out of state for army reserve training, Jenny had an abortion. David was stunned that his wife would make such a decision without including him. According to David, his marriage ended the day he found out about the abortion. As he said, "There was just no trust left in our marriage." David suffered from persistent thoughts about his lost child. He began drinking heavily in an effort to numb his pain.

Bill's Story

Bill was 31 when he met Ann. Both of them were working for a large accounting firm in Chicago. Ann was a new college grad and Bill became her mentor at work. Their business relationship soon became personal and intimate. A few months later, Ann discovered that she was pregnant. When she approached Bill about the situation, he encouraged her to have an abortion and offered to accompany her to the clinic and to pay for all of the medical costs. The appointment was made and Bill kept his word, taking Ann to the clinic and staying with her at her apartment for the next 24 hours. During that time, Ann was inconsolable, alternating between crying and angry outbursts directed at Bill. By the second day, Bill was eager to get back to the office and away from Ann. In the following weeks, they deliberately avoided each other at work. Eventually Ann quit her job and moved back to her hometown. Bill dated several other women including other co-workers. While most of those relationships included sex, none of them provided emotional intimacy and Bill found himself feeling vaguely uneasy and unhappy much of the time. He was especially uncomfortable when he went home for a family holiday gathering and spent time with his married sister who had a two- year-old son and was pregnant with her second child.

Jack's Story

Jack and Lisa were in a casual, sexual relationship for six months when Lisa became pregnant. Jack did not hesitate to express his desire for abortion and Lisa seemed to be in agreement. Within the first few weeks after the abortion, Jack and Lisa began to distance themselves from each other. They communicated less, spent less time together, and finally they mutually agreed to end the relationship.

After the abortion but prior to their break-up, Jack experienced impotence on more than one occasion. He had no doubt that his sexual difficulty was related to the abortion. Having been abandoned by his own father when he was an infant, he had now come to see himself as an even worse father than his own. One year after the abortion, he sought counseling for anxiety, depression, intrusive thoughts, and nightmares which he attributed to his abortion experience.

As these stories reveal, men may struggle with guilt, depression, anniversary reactions, frequent thoughts about the lost child, social isolation, disturbed sleep patterns, nightmares, difficulty being near infants or children, fear of relationships, sexual dysfunction, and drug or alcohol abuse after abortion. A sense of pervasive helplessness may contribute to lowered self-esteem as well as to problems with work or school. Anger may be tenacious and misdirected at others. Grief is often pronounced and complicated due to men's tendency to stifle their emotions and because our society, which does not recognize men's parental rights in regard to abortion decisions, is even less inclined to recognize their right to grieve after abortion.

Men and Abortion: The Research

There is very little scientific research concerning the effects of abortion on men. A recent review of that research located only 28 published studies.³ Common findings among these studies included the following:

- 1) Men tend to repress their own emotions when they learn that their partners are unexpectedly pregnant, when the abortion decision is being made, and after the abortion is performed. Men have stated that they believe this is what they *should* do in order to support their partners. In addition, the abortion decision is often passively yielded to

the woman. These beliefs and behaviors are likely due to the fact that women are the ones carrying the physical burden of pregnancy and also because abortion is consistently portrayed as a 'women's issue' by the media, feminist groups, and politicians.

- 2) Relationships are stressed by abortion. Reports of relationship failure following abortion vary from 25% to 70%.^{4,5} Some men will withdraw from relationships, particularly intimate relationships with women. Others may become promiscuous and still others may experience sexual problems such as impotence.^{6,7} Healthy communication between partners is often decreased after abortion. Some couples *never* discuss the abortion in their past.
- 3) Many men expressed a need for counseling.⁸ Men surveyed after abortion did not perceive it to be an easy experience and, in fact, 75% of men *disagreed* that men involved with abortion have an easy time of it and that they have few "lingering or disturbing thoughts" about the abortion.⁹ Yet, there are few counseling programs available to men and many men have no idea where to find help.
- 4) After abortion, men may experience grief, anxiety, guilt, helplessness, and anger. These painful emotions may be expressed in substance abuse or other risk-taking behaviors. Negative emotions may progress to clinical depression, angry outbursts, or severe anxiety that impairs concentration. Men may also experience delayed grief reactions and be at risk for unresolved or complicated grief.¹⁰
- 5) Some men may be so traumatized by abortion that they experience symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.¹¹ Symptoms include hyperarousal (e.g. feeling jittery or

irritable), re-experiencing aspects of the abortion (e.g. disturbing memories or dreams), and avoidance of reminders of the abortion (e.g. deliberate attempts to avoid thoughts and feelings about the abortion or situations that are reminders of abortion).

While published research has focused on psychological or emotional pain, clinicians, researchers, and clergy have observed spiritual pain as well. Given the moral challenges presented in an abortion decision, this is not surprising. Abortion is often contradictory to one's religious or worldview and thus creates an ethical crisis resulting in considerable grief, guilt, and anxiety.

Abortion represents a significant loss and a significant part of an individual's history. Given the magnitude of such a loss, a man's masculine identity may be threatened and severely damaged. He may question whether he is worthy to be a father and whether he is capable of parenting a child properly.

Men and Abortion: Helping Men to Heal

Few healing programs are available to men who experience pain and suffering following abortion and only one of those programs has been scientifically evaluated for effectiveness.¹² That program utilized a forgiveness therapy approach based on a psychological process model of forgiveness developed at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. Before describing the model, it may be helpful to begin by explaining what 'forgiveness' is not and then offering a definition of genuine forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not the same thing as forgetting, letting go, pardoning, excusing, or reconciliation. When we are deeply and unfairly hurt by another, we do not forget. Our brains are designed to encode and store memories about events in our lives. This is how we learn. This is also how we can avoid being hurt in the same way

in the future. Much like a child who learns to avoid matches after being burned, we learn to avoid people and situations when we remember being hurt by them in the past. When someone hurts us, we do not forget.

Forgiveness is also not simply 'letting go.' We may be able to let go of minor offenses or slights but, when we are deeply wounded, we tend to ruminate about the wrong done to us. Trying to simply let go may actually short circuit the forgiveness process if we deny or minimize the injury and avoid the psychological work that must be done in order to heal. Forgiveness does not deny or minimize the past; forgiveness remedies the past.

Pardoning and excusing are also not forms of forgiveness. A pardon implies that a legal authority has withheld a legal penalty. However, we may choose to forgive someone who stole from us and yet not ask the judge to pardon the thief. Forgiving is certainly not the same as excusing. If someone has a valid excuse for his behavior, then forgiveness is unnecessary because the excuse provides the individual with a justifiable reason for the behavior.

Finally, forgiveness is not the same as nor does it require reconciliation. Forgiveness is a gift from one individual to another while reconciliation implies some kind of behavioral interaction between two people. In many situations, it may be healthy to forgive but dangerous to reconcile. An example would be a woman who was being physically abused by her husband. She may choose to forgive him but not to reconcile and continue to live with him in order to protect herself and their children. Unlike forgiveness, reconciliation requires trust in the one who has harmed us.

What then is forgiveness? It is the conscious decision to give up one's right to resentment or retribution and to instead offer mercy to one who does not deserve it. Genuine forgiveness is a gift offered willingly and without condition. In other words, it does not

require an apology or even the recognition of wrongdoing by the offender. This means that we can forgive those who have hurt us even if they refuse to admit that they've done anything wrong or if they refuse to apologize for their behavior. We can also forgive those who have hurt us but are now deceased.

Numerous studies have found that forgiveness brings psychological healing. As people forgive, their anger, anxiety, and depression are lessened while their hope and self-esteem increase.¹³ The process of forgiveness is a powerful means of finding healing and restoring hope after we are deeply and unfairly hurt by another. Men who have been hurt by abortion can find healing and hope by learning to forgive themselves and others and by receiving forgiveness from God.

There are four sub-phases in the process of forgiveness. They are the “uncovering” phase, the “decision” phase, the “work” phase, and finally, the “outcome” phase. There are a total of twenty steps divided among the phases. While the phases tend to occur in order, the steps are not nearly so orderly. Although the steps are numbered, the model is not meant to be understood as a rigid sequence that people follow when forgiving. In fact, each individual will have a unique journey as he works on forgiveness. Some people will skip steps and others will have to revisit previous steps.

Although this model concerns the ‘psychology’ of forgiving, there is nothing about the model that is incompatible with the Christian faith. Indeed, forgiveness is the core of the Christian faith. It is by God’s gracious gift of forgiveness that we are saved and we are commanded to forgive those who sin against us. For those reasons, the process of forgiveness will be reviewed from a Christian perspective.

The Process of Forgiveness

Uncovering Phase

1. Examination of psychological defenses
2. Confrontation and release of anger
3. Admittance of shame when appropriate
4. Awareness of cathexis
5. Awareness of cognitive rehearsal of the injury
6. Insight that injured person may be comparing him or herself with the injurer
7. Realization that the self may be permanently & adversely changed by the injury
8. Insight into a possibly altered just-world view

Decision Phase

9. A change of heart, new insight that resolution strategies are not working
10. Willingness to consider forgiveness
11. Commitment to forgive the offender

Work Phase

12. Reframing who the wrongdoer is by viewing him or her in context
13. Empathy toward the offender
14. Compassion toward the offender
15. Acceptance & absorption of the pain

Outcome or Deepening Phase

16. Finding meaning for the self and others in the suffering and in the forgiveness process
17. Realization that the self has needed forgiveness from others in the past
18. Insight that one is not alone
19. Realization that the self may have a new purpose in life because of the injury
20. Awareness of decreased negative affect and increased positive affect toward the injurer; awareness of internal, emotional release.

Note. This table is an extrapolation from and extension of Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991).¹⁴

Uncovering Phase

The primary goal of the uncovering phase is to thoroughly explore the consequences of the abortion. The first step of this phase is an examination of psychological defenses. “Psychological defenses” refer to certain ways we try to avoid or distance ourselves from unpleasant people, things, thoughts, or events. A man who is using the defense mechanism of *denial* to avoid thinking about his abortion experience is not yet able to explore that experience. On the other hand, a man who is *repressing* his thoughts about the experience, *isolating* himself from social contacts, or *displacing* his anger unto others may be helped to become aware of his use of these defense mechanisms. Some questions a man could ask himself to determine if he has been using defense mechanisms to avoid dealing with the abortion are:

Have I been deliberately trying to avoid thinking about the abortion? Have I been avoiding people and social interactions since the abortion? Do I seem to be easily agitated when I am reminded of the abortion? Have I allowed myself to think honestly about the losses I've experienced due to the abortion?

Still another effective way for a man to explore his abortion experience is to tell his story to a trusted individual. As he does so, he will become more aware of the nature of his losses and gain insight concerning how he has reacted to those losses.

The second step of the uncovering phase is confrontation of anger. Men who have experienced abortion may feel a great deal of anger depending on the circumstances surrounding the abortion. To become more aware of his anger, a man might ask himself: *Have I been unusually angry or anxious and taking out my negative feelings on others since the abortion? Can I identify the 'real' targets of my anger?* A man's anger may be directed at his partner, the physician, others who influenced the abortion decision, or perhaps at himself. It is

important for him to identify who he is angry at before he can move further in the process of forgiveness. After identifying the one he most blames for the abortion, he will need to confront his anger. In other words, he will need to recognize the degree of his anger and consider how he has expressed it so far. If he has been repressing his anger, he may suffer from somatic symptoms such as headaches or anxiety. If he has been expressing it inappropriately by displacing it onto innocent people, he may have caused great damage to his relationships. The goals in this step are for him to understand how his anger has affected himself, his relationships, and his life and then learn to express that anger appropriately. It is clear from biblical teachings that Christians are not immune to anger. It is also clear that they are not to allow their anger to lead them into sinful behavior. As Paul clearly wrote to the Ephesians, "Be angry but do not sin."¹⁵ One safe way for a man to express his anger is to write a letter to the person he is angry with. While the letter is not actually sent, it can still be effective in releasing anger and the stress that accompanies it. Writing such a letter may also help him to become more aware of the degree of his anger. A deeper exploration of anger may help a man to recognize other painful emotions related to the abortion such as helplessness and grief. Several men have observed that their anger was actually a response to these other unpleasant emotions. Men may feel helpless during the decision-making process, during the procedure, and after. Since abortion often involves multiple losses including loss of the child, of the relationship, of hope for the future, and even loss of his identity as a man, grief is a normal reaction but may be masked as anger.

Guilt is also a normal response particularly among those men who actively or passively encouraged the decision to abort. Some will also feel guilty about being in a sexual relationship outside of marriage. Guilt may be expressed as anger directed at the self. Most men will benefit by confiding in a friend, family member, or

counselor about their experience. Others may benefit from journaling or from deliberately monitoring their thoughts to become aware of what triggers their anger and other negative emotions.

The third step in the uncovering phase is admittance of shame. A man may feel ashamed for failing to meet his own or others' expectations. He might ask himself,

Have I felt shame or embarrassment about the abortion? Have I felt worthless since the abortion? Have these feelings kept me from talking to anyone about the abortion?

Men who encouraged the abortion or even passively supported it are more likely to experience shame. If a man has suffered from shame or embarrassment, it is likely that he has also been carrying a great deal of guilt. Again, confession to someone he trusts will be helpful. The person he decides to share his personal experience with should be someone he expects to be accepting, compassionate and who understands that abortion can lead to personal suffering. Perhaps a parent or sibling or close friend would be a safe person to speak with. For a Catholic man, the Sacrament of Confession is an especially effective way to deal with guilt as it begins the healing process. As they are seen as God's representatives, clergy members may be very influential in relieving a man's guilt.

The fourth step, awareness of cathexis, refers to the mental or emotional energy a man attaches to the abortion event or perhaps to his partner. The expenditure of such energy can be just as exhausting as physical exertion. As a man faces the consequences of the abortion and becomes increasingly aware of his negative emotions, he may come to realize that he still has a strong emotional attachment to the abortion or to his partner. Some clues about the degree of cathexis can include unusual fatigue, sleep disturbances,

intrusive thoughts about the abortion, or physical symptoms of anxiety such as nausea or rapid pulse.

Still more revealing questions for him to ask are:

Do I have unpleasant thoughts about the abortion even when I try not to think about it? How do I feel and behave when I think about the abortion? Have I had difficulty concentrating since the abortion?

As a man answers these questions, he may find that he has been frequently reliving the abortion experience in his mind. This is referred to as “cognitive rehearsal” (step 5). His recurrent thoughts may make it very difficult to concentrate and may intensify negative feelings such as grief, guilt, anger, fear or helplessness. It is as if the abortion, which occurred in the past, is now controlling the present.

Frequent thoughts about the abortion may also lead to increasing resentment towards his partner or some other person he blames for the abortion (step 6). He may perceive these other people to be in a much better state than himself. For example, his former partner may now appear to be happy and in a new relationship while he is still mourning his losses. He may resent the doctor who performed the abortion and was financially rewarded for causing his pain. Perhaps he begrudges someone else who encouraged the abortion but did not have to live with its consequences. In any case, cognitive rehearsal only serves to perpetuate and intensify the painful emotions he feels in relation to the abortion.

As a man comes to grasp the damage done to himself, he may conclude that he has been permanently and negatively changed by the abortion (step 7). Abortion is, after all, an irrevocable act. The decision and consequences cannot be undone. His losses cannot be recovered and he is a different person than he was before the abortion occurred.

Finally, he may struggle with a threat to his ‘just world view’ (step 8). We all have a general view of justice and expectations about what we consider to be just or fair behavior. When others violate our personal view of justice, we may doubt the validity of our view or question whether the world can ever be a just place. Such uncertainty can be very disconcerting as it threatens our core beliefs about how people should relate to one another. A man who trusted his partner to inform him about the pregnancy or trusted her to take into consideration his wishes concerning fatherhood may find that his trust was grossly violated. As a result, he may have lost trust in his partner or he may distrust women in general. If he violated his personal sense of justice by supporting or encouraging abortion, he may have lost trust in himself as well.

During these first eight steps which comprise the ‘uncovering phase,’ a man may discover much about how he has responded to the abortion and how the abortion has affected him. This increasing recognition of both his response to and the consequences of the abortion is an extremely painful process. In seeking relief from his pain, he has two choices. He can continue to tackle his pain and attempt to master it or he can repress his uncomfortable emotions and hope they remain buried. Repression will not bring long-term relief. Instead, it will waste psychological energy which could be used more productively. Should he courageously decide to work toward healing, he will move into the second phase of the forgiveness process. That is the “decision phase.”

Decision Phase

Step nine is referred to as a “change of heart.” This change occurs as a man comes to realize that whatever he’s been doing so far has not been effective in reducing his suffering. As he seeks a new way to find relief, he may become willing to at least consider forgiveness (step 10). Finally he will need to make a commitment

to forgive his partner, himself or whomever else he blames for the abortion (step 11). The decision to forgive is a critical turning point. The decision signifies a desire to heal, to offer healing to another and to hope that healing is possible. Choosing to forgive those who hurt us is choosing to obey the Lord as well. As Jesus instructed: “And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”¹⁶ Our own state of grace is dependent on our willingness to accept God’s grace first and then to extend grace to others. However, a sincere desire to be obedient to God’s command does not preclude the need to deal with the pain of the injury.

Work Phase

After making the commitment to forgive, there is still much work to be done.

Although the work will be difficult, Christians have the blessed and powerful promise of God’s help as they attempt to confront their pain and offer mercy to those who caused their suffering. Step 12 is “reframing the injurer by viewing him or her in context.” The injurer may be the man’s partner, some other person who influenced the abortion decision, or it may be the man himself. Reframing requires that he see the person he is working to forgive in a larger frame or context than just that of abortion. If he blames his partner, he will need to consider all the factors that may have influenced her decision to seek abortion. These factors could include her fears, her personality, her family, and the messages she received from a society that presents abortion as a simple, safe procedure. If he blames himself, he will need to take into account these same factors and reflect on how they influenced his abortion decision. Questions a man might ask to facilitate reframing include:

What kind of pressures was I/my partner struggling with when I/she made the abortion decision? What were my/her fears? How did these fears contribute to the abortion decision? How did others (family, friends, medical personnel) influence the abortion decision?

Again, successful reframing depends on his willingness to see the guilty party in a larger ‘frame’ than only that of abortion. The largest frame or context in which to view the injurer would be as a member of the human race and as created by God. In order to grasp this level of context, a man should ask himself: *Do I believe that each and every individual has inherent worth simply because they are fellow human beings? Do individuals have intrinsic value because they are created by God?* If his answer is “yes,” then logically it must apply to whomever he is trying to forgive, be it some other person or himself. We are taught by scripture that we are made in the very image of God and that, in His eyes, we have incredible worth. “But even the hairs of your head all numbered.”¹⁷ Our tendency to sin does not diminish our basic worth as human beings and a single sin, no matter how grave it may be, does not define us.

If a man is having difficulty with this step, it may be due to confusion about the purpose of reframing. The sole purpose of reframing is to increase understanding of our own or another’s behavior. Reframing should never be confused with excusing. Nowhere in scripture are Christians instructed to condone or excuse hurtful behavior, but Christians are commanded to “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”¹⁸ Enlarging the context in which we view others helps us to comprehend their behavior. It does not excuse their behavior.

Reframing is valuable because it helps a man to develop empathy (step 13) and compassion (step 14) toward those he blames for the abortion. Empathy allows him to understand the feelings of others and to appreciate their suffering. An appreciation of suffering

fosters compassion. As his thoughts about the guilty person become kinder and more generous, his feelings will as well.

What may have begun as Christian obedience now becomes mature Christian forgiveness as described by the apostle Paul, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”¹⁹ This does not mean that a man will not have any lingering negative emotions but they should be lessened. Even after working through the pain of abortion, there will always be some residual grief and pain. The last step of the work phase concerns this residual pain and how to deal with it (step 15). This step, “acceptance or absorption of the pain” refers to a conscious decision on the part of the man to carry any lingering pain without passing it on to innocent others. This does not mean that he should not share his pain with those who can help him to bear it. It does mean that he will make every effort to prevent his pain from being destructive. While this task requires strength of heart and mind to accomplish, the Christian man has the promise of God “... who daily bears us up.”²⁰

Outcome Phase

A man who has gotten this far in the forgiveness process has already benefitted from taking an honest look at his pain, by sharing or confessing that pain to another, and sensing the beginning of renewed hope. In this last phase, he experiences still more of the healing that forgiveness brings. The word of God assures him that he can find meaning in his suffering (step 16). As St. Paul wrote to the Church in Rome, “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose.”²¹ Our heavenly Father can bring us good even through the most painful experiences. The good that

we receive may be manifest in lessons learned or it may be evident in an increased capacity to love.

As he continues in his forgiveness journey, the man may recognize his own need for forgiveness. While he may not be responsible for the abortion and subsequent pain, he has hurt others in the past and has needed to receive their forgiveness. This recognition may help him to identify with and to appreciate the deep need of the one who hurt him and further his resolve to offer the gift of forgiveness (step 17). None of us are alone in this universal struggle with sin and forgiveness; Saint Paul reminds that "...there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."²² The insight that he is not alone in either his suffering or in his struggle to forgive may comfort him. No one is free of sin and many others who have been hurt by abortion are ready to help him on his healing journey (step 18). As he shares the gift of forgiveness with another or receives it for himself, he may discover a new purpose in his life (step 19). The man who works through his pain, forgives himself and others and accepts God's forgiveness is well-equipped to minister to other hurting men. For God "... comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."²³ As the forgiveness journey is completed, there is a lightening of his emotional burdens and an increase in genuine goodwill toward the one who hurt him (step 20) which may be demonstrated in a desire to pray for his offender or in kind behavior toward her. As he willingly offers the gift of forgiveness to another, he himself experiences healing. As he forgives and sets his offender free, he frees himself from anger and bitterness. As he forgives himself, he receives the gifts of hope and peace.

Self-Forgiveness

Many post-abortion men and women who have accepted God's forgiveness find that they still have difficulty forgiving themselves. For those who are troubled by thoughts of self-condemnation, the story of the Prodigal Son can be very encouraging.

The Gospel of Luke relates the story of the wayward son who has become so destitute that he finally decides to go home and seek his father's mercy. "And he (the prodigal son) arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him."²⁴ What a beautiful picture of God's response to us when we choose to approach Him with a contrite heart. God sees us moving towards Him while we are still "at a distance" and He moves toward us at the very moment we turn back to Him. He does not wait for us to make the journey alone but He literally runs to meet us and brings us back to where we belong, in His loving, forgiving arms.

Men who find it difficult to forgive themselves after abortion would do well to consider the great love of our heavenly Father as portrayed in this story. After all He has done for us, including the sending of the Son to wash away our sins in His own Blood, the Father wills only our good, not that we continually condemn ourselves for past failures. And would not any loving human father be grieved watching his child suffer from self-condemnation? Take heart from this parable. It is one of God's greatest love letters to those who need to be healed and have their hope restored.

Men and Abortion: Prevention

It would be an oversight to not mention the issue of prevention. The most obvious prevention of abortion and its consequences is for men and women to abstain from sex unless they are committed to one another and committed to any children that may result from an intimate relationship. In the Church, this

commitment is affirmed and sanctified by marriage. Open communication and discussion about values, hopes for the future, and life goals are essential in building a healthy marriage that can survive the inevitable challenges men and women will face in their lives together.

Mature male mentors are needed to teach younger men about the importance of chastity, commitment in relationships, and responsible parenting. Mentors can serve as role models as they demonstrate the behaviors that foster spiritual and psychological health in marital, paternal and fraternal relationships. Perhaps more churches and crisis pregnancy centers would consider developing men's ministries with such goals in mind. Such ministries could do much to affirm and encourage responsible masculine behavior and thus strengthen the entire family unit.

Conclusion

In spite of the great damage done to individuals and to society by abortion, we can help our brothers and sisters to find healing after abortion. By reaching out to them with the mercy and compassion of Christ, they may come to feel worthy and welcomed by the church. This may, in turn, encourage them to seek the help they need to find forgiveness for themselves and to offer it to others.

Forgiveness, in all its forms, brings emotional and spiritual healing. Men who suffer from grief and guilt after abortion will find healing as they receive forgiveness from God, give the gift of forgiveness to others and, finally, forgive themselves. With healing comes the restoration of hope. Where there is hope, anything is possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine T. Coyle, RN, Ph.D. earned her doctorate in Educational Psychology (area of Human Development) at the University of Wisconsin. She is a registered nurse and holds a master's degree in clinical psychiatric nursing. She has taught at both Edgewood College and the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Dr. Coyle has developed a healing program for men who have been hurt by abortion and has scientifically documented its effectiveness. She is the author of the book, *Men and Abortion: A Path to Healing*, which is based on her research and is available from Life Cycle Books (1-800-214-5849).

Dr. Coyle is an associate of the International Forgiveness Institute and continues to pursue research in the areas of both forgiveness and post-abortion trauma. She has published several papers and given numerous presentations concerning these topics. She is co-director of the Alliance for Post-Abortion Research and Training and serves on the advisory boards of the International Forgiveness Institute and the Care Net Pregnancy Center of Dane County.

Contact via e-mail at: ctcoyle@abortionresearch.net

RESOURCES FOR POST-ABORTION MEN

Counseling and Referrals for Counseling:

Conquerors

Minnesota

Contact: Therese Douglas 612-866-7643 ext. 163

douglas.therese@nlfs.org

Entering Canaan – Men's Days of Prayer and Healing

Bronx, NY

Contact: 877-586-4621

lumina@postabortion.org

Fathers and Brothers Ministries

Boulder, CO

Contact: Warren Williams 888-546-0148

House of Esau Ministries

Canada

Contact: Rev. Scott Miller

houseofesau@silverlion.org

Life Issues Institute

Nationwide referral network

Contact: 513-729-3600

www.lifeissues.org

Project Joseph

Kansas City, KS

Contact: Pat Klausner 913-621-2199

Rachel's Vineyard Ministries

Contact: www.rachelsvineyard.org

Rachel's Hope After-Abortion Workshop for Men

San Diego, CA

Contact: 858-581-3022

Rich in Mercy
Everlasting Light Ministries
www.everlastinglightministries.org
Contact: Brian or Denise Walker
763-560-8383

Sons of Adam
Old Hickory, TN
Contact: Rev. Steven Wolf 615-758-2424, ext. 12
Email sonsofadam@idjc.info

Books, Bible Studies & Brochures:

Fatherhood Aborted: The Profound Effects of Abortion on Men
(book by Guy Condon and David Hazard)
Available from www.amazon.com

Forgotten Fathers: Men and Abortion (brochure by Vincent M. Rue, PhD)
Available from www.lifecyclebooks.com

Healing a Father's Heart (Bible Study by Linda Cochrane)
Available from www.lifecyclebooks.com

Men and Abortion: A Path to Healing (book by Catherine T. Coyle, RN, PhD)
Available from www.lifecyclebooks.com

Redeeming a Father's Heart: Men Share Powerful Stories of Abortion Loss and Recovery
(book by Kevin Burke, David Wemhoff, & Marvin Stockwell)
Available from www.amazon.com

Save One (Bible study by Sheila Harper)
Available from www.saveone.org or call 866-329-3571

Secret Sorrow (brochure)
Available from www.lifecyclebooks.com

Swallowed by a Snake: The Gift of the Masculine Side of Healing
(book by Tom Golden, LCSW)
Available from www.amazon.com

Websites:

www.abortionresearch.net
Online research website run by the *Alliance for Post-Abortion Research & Training*.

www.fatherhoodforever.org
Resource site for men dealing with abortion loss.

www.lifeissues.org/men/Resources.html
Resource site for men dealing with abortion loss.

www.lifeissues.org/men/MAN/index.html
Men and Abortion Network homepage.

www.menandabortion.info
General information site concerning the impact of abortion on men.

www.noparh.org
National Office of Post-Abortion Reconciliation & Healing

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- ¹⁶ Mark 11:25. *Revised Standard Version*.
- ¹⁷ Matthew 29-31. *Revised Standard Version*.
- ¹⁸ Luke 6:36. *Revised Standard Version*.
- ¹⁹ Ephesians 4:32. *Revised Standard Version*.
- ²⁰ Psalm 68:19. *Revised Standard Version*.
- ²¹ Romans 8:28. *Revised Standard Version*.
- ²² Romans 3:28. *Revised Standard Version*.
- ²³ 2 Corinthians 1:4. *Revised Standard Version*.
- ²⁴ Luke 15:20. *Revised Standard Version*.

“Faith is a gift of God which enables us to know and love Him. Faith is a way of knowing, just as reason is. But living in faith is not possible unless there is action on our part. Through the help of the Holy Spirit, we are able to make a decision to respond to divine Revelation, and to follow through in living out our response.”

– United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, 38.

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Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 34
Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission
of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World

About the Knights of Columbus

The Knights of Columbus, a fraternal benefit society founded in 1882 in New Haven, Connecticut, by Blessed Michael McGivney, is the world’s largest lay Catholic organization, with more than 1.9 million members in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. The Knights support each other and their community, contributing millions of volunteer hours to charitable causes each year. The Knights were the first to financially support the families of law enforcement and fire department personnel killed in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and to work closely with Catholic bishops to protect innocent human life and traditional marriage. To find out more about the Knights of Columbus, visit www.kofc.org.

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