

A Prophetic Vision

By Vicki Thorn

A prophetic vision," says Henry Nowen, "is to see the world as God sees it." Today's world is one broken by sin, wounded by abandonment and filled with despair. One of the causes of this chaos is abortion. The wound of abortion is insidious. It leaves a trail of painful consequences in the lives of mothers, fathers, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins.

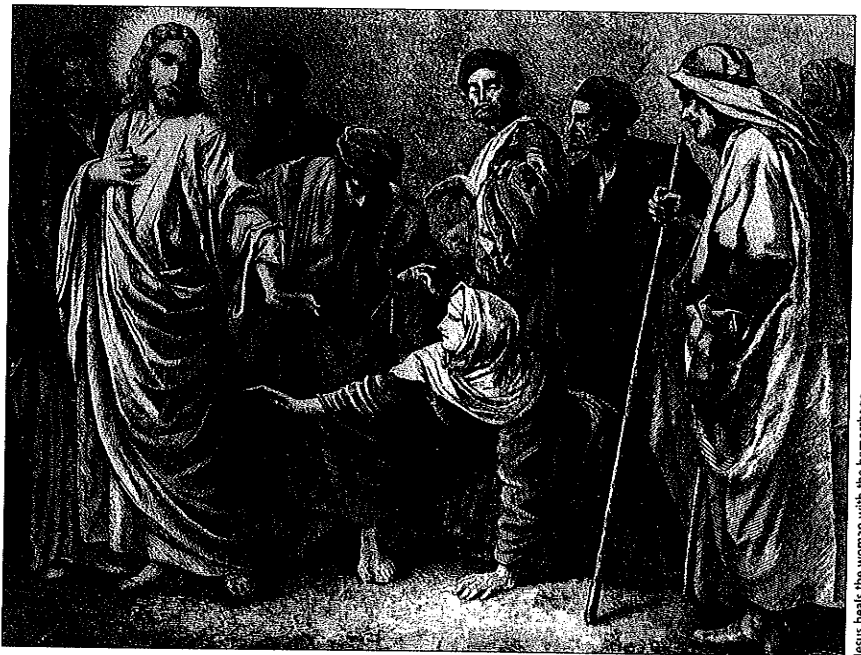
Abortion is not new. It did not come into being with the Supreme Court decision, but that decision opened the flood gates. The reality is that abortions have always happened and so any woman we encounter may have had an abortion. It is "guess-timated" that one woman in four, under the age of 45 will have had an abortion.

Women who have had abortions describe it as a "soul wound." It is a life-changing, life-offending event. The consequences remain with that woman until the day she dies. Even in her healing, she is forever and always a mother who has lost a child in a traumatic and unnatural fashion. The aftermath of her abortion may begin before she leaves the clinic or it may not come into her awareness for many years. Whenever it arises, it is devastating.

In 1984, I founded Project Rachel in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee with the encouragement and support of my Archbishop, Rembert Weakland, O.S.B. My own awareness of the need came from a friend who has both placed for adoption and had an abortion. Over the years that followed, I watched her cycle through self destructive behaviors, and always she said "I can live with the adoption, I can't live with the abortion." When I became Respect Life director I discovered that the bishops of the United States had called for a ministry of reconciliation and healing in their first "Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities," issued in 1975. The ministry catapulted into local and national awareness, the day after our first training when a local reporter, who also had a wounded friend, announced Project Rachel in the

lead story in the daily paper. And suddenly, I was an expert in a field that didn't exist the day before.

Since then, Project Rachel has begun in more than 144 dioceses in this country, 7 in Canada, all the dioceses in New Zealand and Guam. It is about to be introduced in the Bahamas and Honduras. There is interest in Poland and Ireland, Mexico, Chile and Brazil as well as Germany, France and Russia. It is clear that God must have a sense of urgency about this healing work. Anyone who has worked in the Church knows that things normally spread very slowly.



Jesus heals the woman with the hemorrhage

I believe that God is about building the Culture of Life on the ashes of the Culture of Death. The healed men and women are becoming the foundation of this new culture. In their healing they are truly transformed. Every time a woman is healed, God has stopped the cycle of abortion in her life. If unhealed, she is likely to continue having abortions.

It is important to know that many women who have abortions have many other wounds in their lives, including sexual abuse that may lead them to an abor-

tion to begin with and then compound the complexity of the healing journey. It is the rare woman I have encountered who would describe growing up in a healthy, intact family and say she made this decision in a cool, calculated way. So many women share the pain of fear of rejection by their parents or partners. They tell of incredible pressure being placed upon them to abort and of not knowing where to turn to get the help she needed to carry her baby. The abortion is just one more brokenness in her life, but the grace is that it is usually the one that brings her for healing.

Your role as priest and your maleness can do much to heal the hidden wounds of abortion

You, as priests, are a crucial part of this ministry. It is you, in your sacramental role, who reflect the face of Jesus most clearly to the wounded woman. It is in the Sacrament of Reconciliation that she is truly set free of her sin. Don't **ever** be put off by those who say this should be women's ministry. Your role as priest and your maleness can do much to heal the hidden wounds of abortion. Your gentleness and unconditional care for her, helps to heal a hidden wound of bitterness toward men. In many cases you are the first non-judgmental, non-hurtful male she has encountered.

The most essential thing to remember with this ministry, and I believe any others as well, is that God is the healer and Savior. The first thing you must do when beginning to minister is to say a prayer to the Holy Spirit. When you have opened yourself up to the guidance of the Spirit, you will be amazed at how "wise" you have become. People will say "Father, how did you know I needed to hear that?" Your role is to companion her on this journey; to lay out the road map, if you will. There will be times when women will not come back and you wonder what went wrong. Often, she simply is not yet strong enough to continue at this time. I urge you to keep in mind that God will not aban-

don her and when she is strong enough, God will see to it that she is again in a position of finding someone to help her on the journey. This is not about you, but about her. When someone doesn't come back, then I believe that you are called to become an intercessor for that woman. The Catechism says the confessor "must pray and do penance for his penitent, entrusting him (her) to the Lord's mercy" (Section 1466).

This ministry is also important to you on a personal level. It is in this ministry that you encounter the mystery of your ordination. This is the place where you set the captives free and give sight to the blind — in Jesus' name. More than one priest has shared that he is still a priest today because, during a crisis of vocation, he took one more phone call and it was from a Rachel woman. And it was in and through that ministry that the crisis was eased and perhaps, even resolved. He again rediscovered the power of the sacraments and came to realize that God is alive and well, touching and healing those who approach Him in the same way He did in Scripture. In that moment, God touches the priest who is in crisis and begins to heal him.

People have often asked me if I don't get depressed doing the work I do; hearing all the pain. But the truth is exactly the opposite. I find this to be exhilarating work. It is about hope and healing. I have come to know that when a woman gathers her courage to embark on her healing journey, crying out to God for mercy, that the Lord is quick to respond. And I know that when the Lord begins this mighty work in her she will be changed and renewed. She will indeed be a "new creation" as we hear about in Corinthians because the lived truth of her life is that she believed she had committed the unforgivable sin. She has encountered her God and been forgiven. That is a life changing event!

Scripturally speaking, I am always struck by the "women stories" in the New Testament. Each story reflects a facet of this ministry. The woman with the hemorrhage who has only the courage to touch the hem of His garment — that is our woman. She knows that her healing is only in the

Lord. And often she has suffered for many years. She feels herself unworthy of the Lord's attention, but her desperation drives her to stretch out her hand.

The woman at the well — that is our woman. Jesus engages her gently in dialogue, not diatribe, and leads her to the truth of her life. Indeed, it is in the truth that has been revealed to her that she recognizes the need to reform her life. And it is that truthful awareness that sets her free to go and proclaim what has happened to others.

The woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears — that is our woman. She has cried rivers of tears in her sorrow over her lost children. In the translation I prefer, Jesus says "because she has loved much, much is forgiven her."

Our women have often tried to love much. Someone said that sin is a gift going in the wrong direction. The woman we encounter often was searching for love in all the wrong places, and often made the abortion decision based on a misguided sense of love as well. It was to please her boyfriend or to keep her parents from the pain of embarrassment and shame.

The woman caught in adultery — she is our woman too. She has been caught in her shame. She has been condemned by the society around her, but most importantly by her own conscience. She knows she is guilty. After Jesus has turned away those who would stone her, he says to her "Neither do I condemn you."

There is a consistency in what Jesus says to these women after he has heard their story, healed them and set them free. It is "your faith which has saved you. Go in peace." Indeed, it is my experience that it is the kernel of faith that is in that woman that leads her to recognize that only God can heal her. (I believe this is part of the grace of Baptism. It is that knowledge deep in the core of our being that healing comes only from God.)

This is a ministry of compassion and mercy. Henry Nowen says that "Compassion means to become close to the one who suffers." But we can come close to another person only when we are willing to become vulnerable ourselves. A compassionate

person says: "I am your brother; I am your sister; I am human, fragile and mortal, just like you. I am not scandalized by your tears, nor afraid of your pain. I too have wept. I too have felt pain." We can be with the other only when the other ceases to be "other" and becomes like us. . . . This perhaps, is the main reason that we sometimes find it easier to show pity than compassion."

"Mercy," says Father Joe Tagg of Memphis, "is love that seeks to relieve the misery of others. Mercy is active love poured out upon others to heal, to console, to pardon, to remove pain. It is the love God has for us and it is the love He demands from us for each other. God's mercy is always available for those who turn to Him in humility. God's love is for those who need it most." I believe these definitions, lived out, would make us all very effective ministers.

This ministry embodies the spiritual works of mercy: that is to admonish sinners, instruct the uninformed, counsel the doubtful, comfort the sorrowful, be patient with those in error, forgive offenses and pray for the living. These works truly encapsulate the ministry the priest carries out with the woman who comes to him.

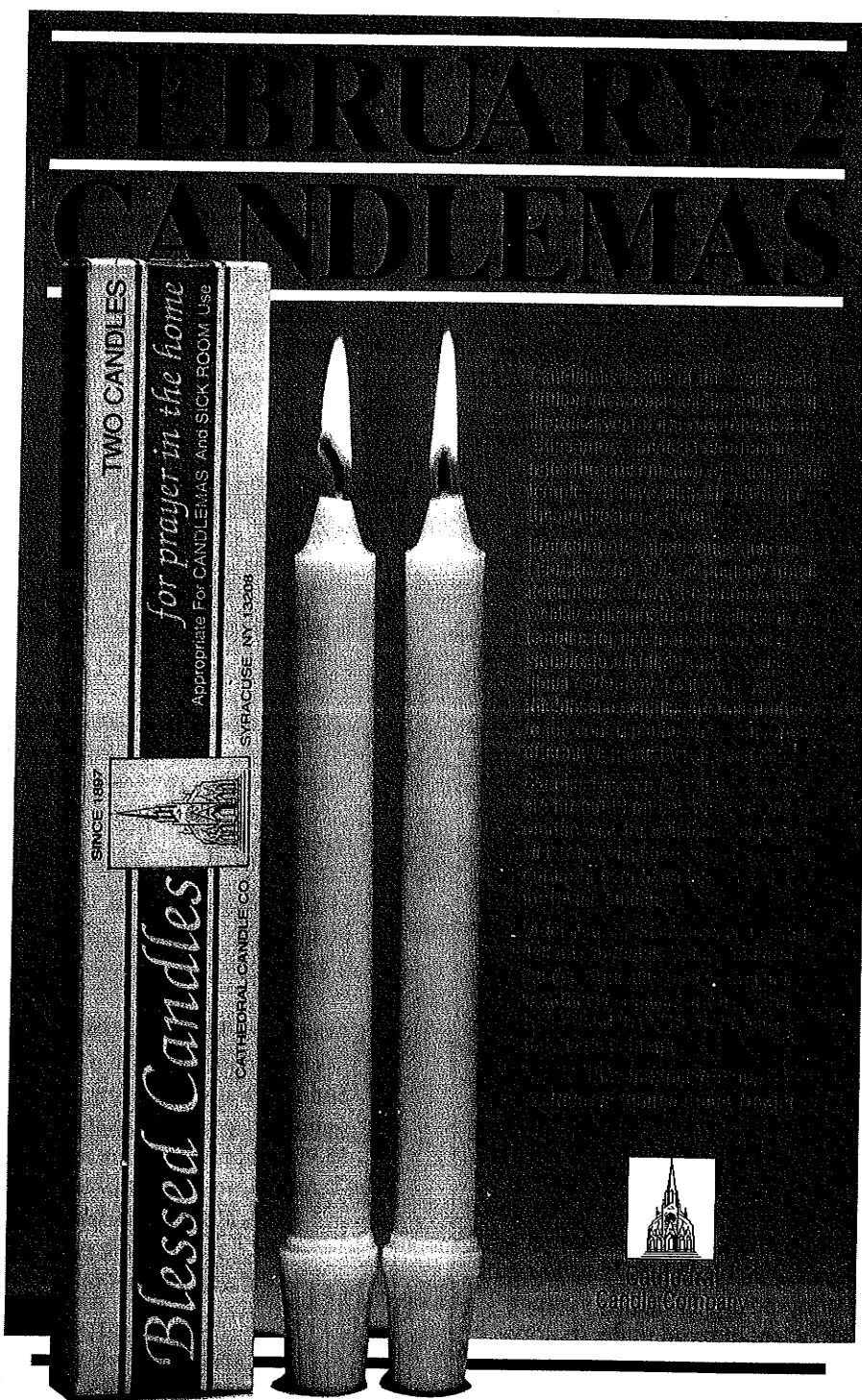
The role of confessor and companion in healing involves many facets. Perhaps Section 1465 of the Catechism best sums up these roles. It says "when he celebrates the sacrament of penance, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, of the Good Samaritan who binds up the wounds, of the Father who awaits the prodigal son and welcomes him on his return and of the just and impartial judge whose judgment is both just and merciful. The priest is the sign and the instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner."

Since many of you reading this article have been trained as Project Rachel priests or have received the Priest Manual for Post-Abortion Ministry that was sent out to all ordinaries to be distributed to their priests last year, I will not go into all the aspects of facilitating healing. (If you did not receive this manual, contact your ordinary for a copy.)

Briefly, the process of healing

involves proclaiming to the woman the Good News of God's mercy and love. She is very clear on His justice. She needs to tell her story. She needs to be encouraged to grieve for her child, including recognizing its sex, choosing a name, memorializing the baby and writing a letter to say all that her mother's heart needs to say. It is good to offer to say a Mass of healing for the family. Help her process any anger she has toward others by suggesting she write the anger out in the form of letters that will never be sent

and which will eventually be symbolically destroyed as she moves toward forgiveness of those who wronged her. You will celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation with her, even if she has already gone to confession. This celebration will have new meaning as her understanding of God's mercy has grown over the time she is working with you. Encourage her to choose readings and music. Prepare her in closure for the fact that there will be times when she hears a condemnatory voice that will tempt her to despair.



This is temptation. God's voice is never one that says "you terrible person." Encourage her to handle this with prayer and to walk in confidence of God's forgiveness. Tell her there will be times she will feel sad. This is normal and it is called "shadow grief." It is a sign that God has restored her mother's heart to her. And finally, the abortion may come up again during difficult life circumstances, such as premature menopause. When it does,

Parents need to hear the countercultural message of the gift of children.

encourage her to talk to someone about it. This too is normal. Abortion is a life-changing event. And above all, encourage her to pursue on-going spiritual growth through retreats and spiritual direction.

What I would like to share with you are some practical things you can do to promote healing.

Don't be afraid to preach about abortion but when you do, always begin by asking those in the congregation whose lives have been touched by an abortion to pray for you that you can speak the truth of their lived experience. Focus your homily on the wounds of those involved in abortions. The sad but true fact is that most people are numb to the fact that a baby is destroyed. We have moved beyond that. I recommend the book *The Jericho Plan*, by David Reardon Ph.D., of the Eliot Institute, as a wonderful resource. It is concise in its description of the impact of abortion on the others and has letters you can read as part of your homily. Also never miss an opportunity to mention abortion when you do your favorite laundry list of sins that God can forgive.

I challenge you to preach about the gift of children. (I have yet to hear this homily preached.) Talk about how each child stretches us in new ways. Several countries have proverbs that say a new child always comes with a loaf of bread under its arm. Talk about the gift that a handicapped child can be. There is a lovely quote in

the book *The Clowns of God* where a retarded child is brought to the God figure and in an eloquent statement, the child is described as perfect in God's eyes, one that will never offend Him and more importantly, that this child is a gift to mankind, as this child is what keeps us human. Think about your own experiences of the handicapped in your congregations and talk about the impact that they have made on you and on others. Parents need to hear the countercultural message of the gift of children.

Priests often ask "what happens if I encounter her in confession on Saturday. The time is short. How can I help her?" First, you must hear her confession and deal with the pastoral reality of that. It is important to help her understand that God, through the Sacrament has forgiven her but that there are human wounds that need to be dealt with and these can even keep you from feeling forgiven. Encourage her to pursue further healing through Project Rachel, whether you work with her or she works with someone else. It is a good idea to have Section 99 of

the *Gospel of Life* (John Paul II, *Encyclical Evangelium Vitae*, 1995) made into a bookmark style card that also carries the number of the local Project Rachel.

Find someone in your parish willing to take on a special apostolate and make it their role to make sure that for every holiday there are little business type cards for Project Rachel in the pews. They will also oversee bulletin announcements and having brochures in the pamphlet rack and posters on the walls. Last year NCCB's Pro-Life Secretariat produced a lovely poster and pamphlet. It is a timeless image of Jesus holding out his hand to a woman and it says "Neither Do I Condemn You." I know that the pamphlet has touched women deeply as they have taken time to e-mail our office with their comments.

Priests share that one of the hardest things to deal with are the angry people who fly at him after church when he has talked about abortion. I have an insight that may be helpful. I will tell you that the angriest people all have a story. If you can keep your

Pope Pius XII:

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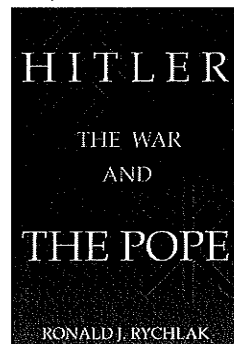
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cool and absorb their anger, reminding yourself that this really is not personal, even though it feels that way, you will find they go away in a different place. If you can allow them to vent and with something as simple as "clearly this is something you feel very strongly about. Would you care to talk about it? I'm here to listen." That type of gentle response catches them off guard. If their anger is not met with anger or defensiveness on your part, their anger dissipates. We all know the experience of meeting anger with anger and both parties can go away with their anger still in tact. You are called to reflect the gentle face of Jesus.

It is imperative that you give some thought to the ethical dilemmas that will soon be presenting themselves to you. The reality is that our technological capabilities have far surpassed what we have been trained to think about. A case in point is the genetic abortion. This usually involves a couple and a much desired pregnancy. Medical science, through its "search and destroy" technology has somehow

determined that this baby is less than perfect and quickly refers them for an abortion. Should they come to see you beforehand, you need to refer them to a pro-life physician for a second opinion. Do you have such a doctor in your rolodex? And should they come to you afterward seeking burial for their child, you must ask yourself, "what would Jesus do?" I believe that many of these people are coerced by the medical profession into making this choice. They are terrified and, in fact, may have been made to feel that to choose life for the child is irresponsible and cruel. These people are often very angry at the Church, at the doctors, at everyone. I believe they need all the compassion we can gather and, indeed, we need to ask some serious questions about culpability. Often they have been forced to the abortion decision on every count.

The poet, Kahil Gibran says that a "healing vision is to see that which is unseen with new eyes." It is my prayer that this article will help you to become architects of the Culture of Life. Know that all you do in service of

life is deeply significant and greatly appreciated. A prophetic vision coupled with a healing vision can change the world.

For further information on materials mentioned and others: Contact National Office of Post-Abortion Reconciliation & Healing, 1-800-5WE-CARE or send us an e-mail at P.O. Box 070477, Milwaukee, WI 53207-0477. ♦

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Penance Suggestions From Project Rachel Priests

1. Donation to a pro-life or post-abortion group or a charity that helps children.
2. Pray the Rosary:
 - A decade per day or a rosary per day for some period of time;
 - Specifically pray the Joyful mysteries.



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3. Return to the Church and Sacraments regularly. Sponsor a child in the Third World (according to their ability).

4. Pray:

- For the others involved in her abortion loss;
- For other women who have had abortions but are unreconciled;
- In front of the Blessed Sacrament;
- For someone contemplating an abortion.

5. Make a pilgrimage to a site nearby and pray with Scripture while there.

6. Pray to St. Monica, patroness of Christian mothers and pray to the child's patron saint.

7. Make an active prayer connection with the baby every day for a week.

8. Act of service of their choice.

Possible suggestions if she needs help:

- Do something for the poor and homeless;
- Outreach or intentional act of kindness to the elderly or children;
- Offer volunteer assistance to a

crisis pregnancy center or pro-life agency;

- Help someone in need in their life, like an elderly neighbor.

9. Ask them what would be a suitable penance for them. Moderate if penance is too harsh.

10. Concentrate deliberate attention to her other children.

11. Reflect, pray and encounter Jesus by reading:

- John 15
 - Luke 15 (Lost sheep, lost coin, Prodigal son)
 - John 3:16-17
 - John 8:1-11 (woman caught in adultery)
 - John 4: 7-41 (Samaritan Woman)
 - Luke 8: 43-48 and Matthew 9: 20-22 and Mark 5: 25-34 (woman with a hemorrhage)
 - Luke 7: 36-30 (Woman who washes Jesus feet with her tears)
13. Pray Psalm 103 or Psalm 51.
14. Spend time in quiet digesting the experience of forgiveness in Mary's company.
15. Daily Mass (perhaps assign a number of times), offer the intention

for the aborted child and/or the healing of the family.

16. Read the Gospels for five minutes per day for a month to help them discover the person of Christ. Explain this as medicinal.

17. Tell them they have already done their penance in all the pain and suffering.

18. Fasting from food for a day or some other favored activity for a period of time.

RESOURCES

A Path to Hope: For Parents of Aborted Children and Those Who Minister to Them by John J. Dillon, Resurrection Press, Ltd., 186 Wardwell Rd., Mineola, NY 11501. (1990) 80 pp. \$6.95 pb.

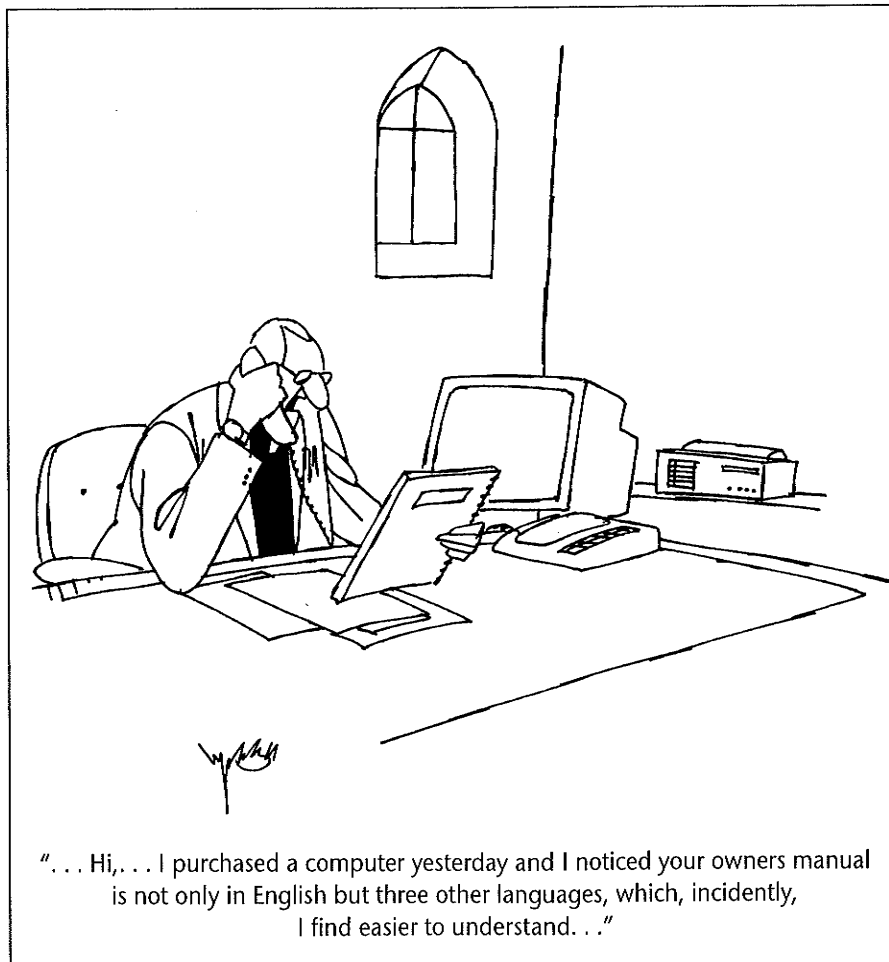
Post-Abortion Aftermath: A Comprehensive Consideration by Michael T. Mannion, Sheed & Ward, 7373 S. Lovers Lane Rd., Franklin, WI 53132. (1994), 190 p., \$12.95 pb.

Abortion and Healing: A Cry to Be Whole by Michael T. Mannion, 2nd edition, Sheed & Ward, 7373 S. Lovers Lane Rd., Franklin, WI 53132. (1986), 96 p., \$6.95 pb.

Catholic Women and Abortion: Stories of Healing edited by Pat King, Sheed & Ward, 7373 S. Lovers Lane Rd., Franklin, WI 53132. 144 p., \$7.95 pb.

The Jericho Plan: Breaking Down the Walls Which Prevent Post-Abortion Healing, by David C. Reardon, Acorn Books, P.O. Box 7348, Springfield, IL 62791-7348. (1996), 120 p., \$8.95 pb.

No one Told Me I Could Cry: A Teen's Guide to Hope & Healing After Abortion (gr. 7 up) by Connie Nykiel, For Teen Moms Only, P.O. Box 962, Frankfort, IL 60423-0962. (1997), 85 pp., \$8.00 pb.



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