

“Is there hope? There is so much hope—for you, and for us all!”

—From the foreword by Mother Agnes, Sisters of Life

GOD'S MERCY

FIND HEALING AFTER ABORTION

AWAITS YOU

Patricia Marie Barnette, RGS

A licensed professional counselor with more than thirty years of experience offers guidance and support in your journey toward healing and peace

God's Mercy Awaits You

Find Healing after Abortion

By Patricia Marie Barnette, RGS



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*This book is dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe
and to all the courageous women who have opened
their hearts to walk the healing journey
from darkness to the light of Christ.*

Foreword

“In hope we were saved,” (Rom 8:24).

The cry from the heart of a woman who has suffered an abortion is, in our experience as Sisters of Life, invariably, “Is there hope for me?” It is an almost universal and often hesitant question. The one suffering holds her breath in fear, waiting for the answer. The answer comes in an instant, pouring out of the Father’s merciful and tender heart: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you . . . you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you,” (Is 43:1, 4). Is there hope? There is so much hope—for you, and for us all!

Through our Hope and Healing Mission, we Sisters of Life accompany hundreds of women each year along the path of hope toward healing from their abortion experiences. What a great privilege it is to be invited into the darkest places of another’s heart, and to see the Light of

Christ dispel her deepest fear: that she is alone in her suffering. We have witnessed time and again that transformation occurs when a woman trusts enough to reach out for the hand of another and comes to know she is not only not alone, but loved in her sinfulness and suffering. What a stunning truth—this mysterious, glorious, unfathomable mercy of God!

In *God's Mercy Awaits You*, Sister Patricia offers an introduction to this process and points us to Christ's infinite mercy and love. She shares stories of women and men, whom she has accompanied over the years, who have found hope and healing after their abortions. She also explores different facets of the healing process itself. Sister uses Scripture so beautifully to illustrate and ground her words in the Truth that sets us free. And so, whether you have suffered the effects of abortion yourself or are supporting another seeking healing, this book may be a source of comfort and encouragement.

Each person's journey is unique, and Jesus has a particular plan for *your* healing. Navigating with you through the pain, suffering, and grief that follow an abortion, and restoring you to a place of peace and calm, is his great desire. As Sister Patricia mentions, our identity does not lie in the choices we make or in the sins we commit, but in

the fact that we are created in the image and likeness of God. We are his beloved.

Many women find it helpful to attend a retreat, join a support group, or meet regularly with a priest, counselor, or other trusted advisor. *God's Mercy Awaits You* is an aid both for those who have suffered an abortion, as well as for the friends, relatives, professionals, and others who minister to them.

My sincere prayer for you is that you will find within these pages a helpful resource—one of encouragement and guidance—as you embark on this journey, and that the Lord will grant you the grace of perseverance in seeking healing, peace, and wholeness. Everything is possible with God!

May God richly bless you, and may Christ, the Lord of Life, heal all that is broken and restore you to newness of life.

“Behold, I make all things new,” (Rev 21:5).

“I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly,” (Jn 10:10).

MOTHER AGNES MARY DONOVAN, SV
Superior General, Sisters of Life

Is This Book for You?

Love is calling you.

If you have ever had an abortion, and you find it difficult to resolve its effects, reading this book and praying over the Scriptures can help you find the tranquility and wholeness you have been searching for. Jesus is calling you to receive and live his peace, which is beyond any peace that this world gives. Jesus is the healer of all hurts. This book is an invitation to receive this healing.

Did your inner life change after the abortion? Do you feel as if your life has not moved forward since that day? Do shame and low self-esteem keep you at an emotional distance from other people? Do you have trouble sleeping or have nightmares about your baby? Is it difficult for you to concentrate on studies, work, or other tasks? Do you get anxious around the anniversary date of the abortion or near the date your child would have been born? Does

being around pregnant women or babies make you uncomfortable? Do you lack interest in joyful life events? Did you turn to alcohol or drug abuse after the abortion to deaden inner pain?

Do you have an undying hope that your life can turn around, in spite of all this? That you can find peace and happiness again, even though you may feel you have lost a part of yourself?

This book can be a part of your journey to be restored to the fullness of life that Jesus promises all of us. His mercy and love await you. Do not be afraid to come to *life*.

If you are a family member or friend seeking ways to help someone you love, or if you are a counselor or pastoral minister, this book can help you too. It can guide you to help others who may disclose a past abortion and share all the difficulties that have occurred in its aftermath.

Introduction

Jesus is waiting to heal you. Healing! We all seek healing from the hurts of life. If you have had one or more abortions in the past, and you now have trouble putting all the pieces together so you can live your life in peace, I hope that you will find comfort, tranquility, and courage in the pages of this book.

Abortion can have many negative effects on a person's life, including depression, anxiety, addiction, and other psychological and physical symptoms of trauma. This book invites you to allow yourself to grieve—over the loss of your precious child, over the loss of innocence and dreams, over fragmented relationships. Blocked grief buries pain, anger, and sorrow deep inside and prevents healing and freedom.

Our society tends to look the other way regarding the negative effects of abortion. Some people deny any ill effects whatsoever. As a result, a woman or man affected

by abortion may not feel free to mourn the loss of a child due to the abortion. Often abortion is a deeply kept secret. I hope that you will give yourself permission to acknowledge your sorrow, to mourn, and to heal.

Although this book focuses mainly on healing for women, it devotes one chapter to the unique way in which men grieve the loss of a child due to abortion. Most who come for healing are women. Unfortunately, too many men suffer silently about their participation in the abortion decision. Family members also mourn the loss of a grandchild, niece or nephew, brother or sister. Appendix 3 lists resources to help women, men, and family members who are searching for healing.

Suggested Scripture passages are listed at the end of each chapter. They may be helpful for you to ponder and to listen to God speaking to your heart. You may discover other passages that are more helpful to you. Please see the Appendix 1 and 2 for tips on how to look up and pray with Scripture passages. At the end of each chapter you will also find reflection questions for yourself, along with tips for family members and friends.

This book is only an introduction to the process of grieving and healing. Words can be inadequate to describe the experiences and realities of loss and healing. That said, this book shares what I have learned from the many

women, men, and family members who have shared their stories with me over my years as a counselor, as well as in informal settings. Each story is unique, as is each person's journey to freedom. Yet we find common elements in the very human experience of loss, grief, isolation, buried emotions, floods of tears, and the desire to be whole. Courage has brought many people to a place of calm, inner reconciliation, and a strengthening of the entire person—body, mind, and spirit—with the grace of God.

I have also been educated through psychological studies, workshops, and friends and colleagues who work in this ministry. For me, this journey has been a call within a call. Having been very active in various aspects of pro-life work leading up to Project Rachel's founding in the mid 1980s, I felt a deep calling to get involved in helping others to heal from the severe wound of abortion. I am a Sister of the Good Shepherd, a religious order whose charism involves living out the belief that "a person is of more value than a world" (in the words of Saint Mary Euphrasia, our founder). This vision urges me to reach out to those who are most in need of God's mercy, those who are most brokenhearted. This call led me to get a master's degree in counseling psychology, with subsequent licensure as a professional clinical counselor in two states. I have volunteered in several dioceses with Project Rachel and have

assisted in a peer ministry for more than twenty years. I have also counseled people through various agencies and healing ministries. The integration of psychology and spirituality used throughout this book offers a broader approach to healing.

It's my deep desire that women, men, and families experience renewal of healthy relationships by being healed after an abortion. As the prophet Jeremiah says: "Then it is as if fire is burning in my heart, / imprisoned in my bones; / I grow weary holding back" (Jer 20:9). Jesus Christ is the healer, and he invites others to be his instruments in this process.

To Jesus Christ be the glory. Entrust to him your desire for healing, and you will find yourself made new in the ocean of his mercy and love. God has his own time and way of leading each person along the road to the fullness he envisions for you.

Let yourself be found by the Lord, healed and forgiven, just like this client I accompanied on the healing process:



Carina was able to say with such honesty when her life was restored: "My life changed so drastically after the abortion, that I did not recognize myself.

For years I isolated myself from those people I loved and drowned my pain in the numbness of alcohol. When I couldn't take the darkness anymore, I reached out to God for help. I never thought my life could be filled with so much peace after God gave me the courage to seek help and to be free of this suffering. With the help of counseling and prayer, I came to understand why I made this decision and found that facing the truth enabled me to forgive and to accept forgiveness.”¹



1. Client stories are either used with permission of the persons involved or are composites in which names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

The Broken Vessel

When we shatter and break into pieces,
like a dry earthen vessel,

We sometimes activate tears from the well
of our soul.

These tears have been buried so deep that it is
painful for them to travel the long journey
to the surface.

They emerge carrying the pain which has been
lying hidden for so many years.

This process can be:

So painful yet so freeing

So frightening yet so encouraging

So depleting yet so refreshing.

These tears initially are rusty.

They are full of the hurts and disappointments
of our life.

As they flow the tears become more pure and clear,
Like a beautiful stream in the summertime.

The tears moisten the dry, broken pieces.

The Potter carefully gathers all the little fragments
and begins to work them in his hands.

He forms them back into the vessel's original
design.

He restores the vessel and makes it new.

This time it has been strengthened through the
tears and through his hands.

The new vessel is restored.

It is now capable of holding clean, fresh water
to provide refreshment for others.

*Written by a woman
who has been on the journey*

CHAPTER 1

Encouragement for the Journey

Merciful and gracious is the LORD,
slow to anger, abounding in mercy. . . .
But the LORD's mercy is from age to age,
toward those who fear him.

Psalm 103:8, 17

The Lord hears the cry of the poor. The Lord God hears *your* cry. *Your* cry for healing. *Your* cry to be free of the pain, the isolation, the grief, the guilt. *Your* cry for a new life. God loves *you*. If you are suffering from a previous abortion or abortions, God will give you the courage you need to find peace. Jesus desires to heal you. Yes, *you!* You deeply desire to be as you were before the pain and suffering entered your life. Jesus will restore you and give you new life.

The cry from within your heart may shout, “No, I don’t deserve it, I can never be forgiven!”

Now is the time to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, who desires to lead you into the pastures of hope, the land of sunshine and fresh breezes, waters that take away the dryness of the desert. No one is beyond the reach of the mercy of God! You are not beyond the reach of God’s mercy. God is love. God is mercy. You are his child. Mercy is for *you*. Healing is for *you*. Forgiveness is for *you*. There is no sin that God will not forgive. New life is for *you*. Come to the waters of peace and restoration.

Words of Encouragement

Take time to ponder these words of women who have been through the healing journey to recovery. They share these words with you to encourage you to take that first step, or to continue, if you have begun. These women have great love and hope for your healing. One of them says:

No matter what thoughts came into my mind, it all was okay because God was with me. . . . I could look back into my past and place it all with the Lord. Praise Jesus! I could see my past with different eyes and knew it would be okay! I was no longer looking back into my past alone; I was looking back with God.

Another woman recounts:

For too long I tried to create my own serenity by using substances to numb the pain; by agreeing with others, even if I didn't, just to avoid conflicts; and by minimizing the hurts others have caused me. I then recognized that all these efforts for serenity were actually causing me anxiety. Peace was not to be found within my broken heart. Peace would only be found in the broken heart of Christ.

The Lord will send people to help you on this journey. You may fear that once a person hears your story, that person may reject you. Trust takes time to build. If you feel safe with a person, that is a good sign. Testing the waters by taking small steps can help you feel secure enough to take a bigger risk in sharing next time. When you find a person who will listen with compassion to your story, your sorrows, your hopes and dreams, do not be afraid. If the listener stays with you, now you have found a person who is willing to share in your difficulties and accompany you to hope and healing.

It is important to be careful about sharing your story. You have no obligation to go public with your story. Your integrity as a person, the needs of your family, and your mental health must be protected. Careful discernment in deciding whom to tell and when to tell is important as you

continue to journey to health. You will find more about relationships in Chapter 7, but for now know this: Priests, ministers, religious sisters, peer companions, Project Rachel volunteers, and Christian counselors are trained to help you through the difficult phases. Appendix 3 in this book lists online resources for locating licensed Catholic therapists located near you.

For many years, I have been entrusted with the stories of women who express pain and sorrow over the decision to abort a child. It is difficult to accept the death of a child, especially one in the womb, especially a child who dies through abortion. Many women say that a part of them died, or went dormant, when their child died. In some sense, their emotional life became stuck in time, at the moment of the death of their child. Perhaps you, like many women, have gone into emotional isolation. You appear healthy on the outside, but you suffer deeply on the inside. Other relationships may be ruptured, such as with the father of the child, with your husband, with other children, with other family members, and with friends. Often self-respect and self-worth plummet, while shame and self-criticism take over.

Many women have suffered in silence for a long time—some for decades, some for a lifetime. Women are often afraid to seek help. Perhaps you fear that everyone

will find out about the abortion and you will be rejected. Or perhaps you are anxious that the process will be too painful. But now you have so many opportunities to seek and find joy, peace, and newness of life. When you decide to begin the steps toward healing, your outlook will begin to improve as hope emerges. Facing the pain that already exists helps resolve the issues and integrate the solutions into your life. Your pain will lessen as peace, understanding, and acceptance gain a greater part in your life.

You may fear that if you go through the healing process, you will forget the child you have lost. Be at peace and know that this will not happen. The wonderful process that does happen is that you begin to accept yourself as a person of worth and dignity, to accept your role as mother of this child who now lives in the presence of God, and to connect with your child on a spiritual level. Letting go of pain, anger, guilt, and bitterness opens the door to living in peace. God will send gentle rain to soothe your soul, and waterfalls of grace to refresh you.

You may fear that abortion is the unforgiveable sin. But if you are truly sorry, no sin is unforgiveable. Jesus died on the Cross to free every single person who has ever lived or ever will live.

Mercy is for you too.

This woman made the decision to trust God on his word:



Laurel sat very still, holding a small crucifix in her hands. For several months she had made progress in healing, as she faithfully attended our weekly therapy session and explored the reasons and events that led to her decision to abort her first child. At the age of fifteen, she had become pregnant. For a year she had been going with an older crowd of friends who introduced her to drinking, drugs, and sex. She was rebelling against the chaos of her family life. When her mother found out Laurel was pregnant, she told her to either get an abortion or get out of the house. Laurel felt she had to comply, as she didn't want to be out on the street. However, she did not want to have an abortion. Immediately afterward, she had difficulty trusting anyone and became very depressed.

Fifteen years later, as she matured, Laurel knew she needed help to deal with her past actions. She had a very difficult time forgiving herself. Laurel seemed to not be able to move forward. She was stuck. So one day, I suggested that she hold a small crucifix in her hands. I asked her to gaze on Jesus, who loves her

so much, and to believe in his promise of mercy and forgiveness. While she gazed in silence, I prayed silently for her. After some time, Laurel starting weeping. The impasse was broken by the saving grace of Jesus flowing into her heart. Laurel was able to pardon herself and began to live a life of joy, immersed in the love and mercy of Jesus.



Believe in Jesus' words from the Cross: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). Those words of truth will set you free. Jesus' love and mercy are so immense that he would give his life to save even one person. Each person is of infinite worth to our merciful God.

Women have abortions when they are single, divorced, or married; rich, poor, or with moderate income; during the early years of fertility, and near the end of the fertile years—in other words, women have abortions in many situations. Since 1973, when statistics began to be kept, millions of women in the United States have had at least one abortion.¹ This means that we are all affected by the

1. For real-time statistics on the numbers of abortions in the United States and worldwide, see the abortion counters at "Number of Abortions - Abortion Counters," <http://www.numberofabortions.com>.

fallout of abortion. Few families do not have a member who has suffered from an abortion, whether it is general knowledge or not. The negative effects of abortion touch the entire family.

That is why the restoration of one woman also heals others in her family. It heals her friendships. Healing can break patterns of generational dysfunction. The healing of one woman can prevent another abortion. The healing of families helps to heal a nation. And our nation needs much recovery of health and wholeness regarding the sanctity of human life.

The Healing Process

We will cover the specifics of the healing process in greater depth throughout this book. In brief, most women go through several main phases of healing to integrate and understand this event in their lives. However, it is important to understand that each journey is as unique as the individual woman. Your journey may be similar to others' journeys in some areas and may be very different in other aspects. Please do not compare your progress to that of another person. God knows exactly what *you* need so that you may experience his love and understanding. You may need to look at issues that caused difficulties in your life