

Explanation and Prayer for Post-Abortion Wounds

by Robert Sears, SJ

One of the most important prayers we can make is to pray for the baby and for the parents who have had an abortion. The Linns noted that there were four abortions for every ten live births in the United States, and two stillbirths for every hundred live births.¹ There were then more than one and a half million abortions in the United States each year. Almost every family can benefit from praying for miscarriages, abortions and stillbirths, and I have received the most thanks for such prayer.

The Linns ask how we know we can pray for these babies since one view is that they are in Limbo? Or how do we know they need our prayers because another view is they are in heaven? The notion of limbo is not much discussed today. It grew out of the conviction that baptism is necessary to enter heaven yet unbaptized babies have not sinned so do not deserve Hell. Augustine thought they were excluded from heaven but suffered only a mitigated punishment. Anselm and later scholastics like Thomas Aquinas thought they were excluded from heaven but experienced a natural happiness without knowing our call to see God in the Beatific Vision. Modern theology emphasizes God's mercy and God's desire to save all people. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (n. 1261) says: "As regards *children who have died without Baptism*, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus' tenderness toward children which caused him to say: "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them," allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism." The Roman Catholic Missal includes a "Funeral Mass of a Child Who Died Before Baptism." Thus, the church expresses hope for the child without knowing exactly how God's mercy will be shown. Healing prayer is one way to express that mercy.

Others believe such babies do not need our prayers because they are in heaven, either because of a "baptism of desire" that is offered them at their death, or simply because of God's gracious mercy. However, if original sin is communicated "by propagation and not by imitation" (Trent, document on original sin), and is freed by Christ's death/resurrection (as all are in need of redemption), and that redemptive grace is mediated by Baptism, a sacramental action of the church, it would seem to be wishful thinking that unbaptized babies would not need to experience that saving word. In fact, babies learn from how they are treated, and being killed by abortion communicates that they are not worth saving. How can they believe God's love if what they have experienced is rejection? Those who have had abortions or even miscarriages usually want to forget about the experience, not pray for the infant to be healed and loved, so the infant must feel rejected.

Judging from the attitude of most advocates of "pro-choice," the babies simply do not exist or have no "rights" till born. With that attitude the baby is totally neglected and forgotten and must experience a deep sense of unworthiness. The Linns give an example of three patients who tried to kill themselves at the same time each year. "It was discovered that the dates of the suicide attempts were the dates when each one's mother had attempted an abortion."² Dr. Frank Lake

¹ Matthew, Dennis and Sheila Linn, *Healing the Greatest Hurt* (N.Y.: Paulist, 1985), p. 108, footnotes 2 and 3. I find their chapter 7, "Healing Relationships with Miscarried, Aborted and Stillborn Babies," pp. 105-139 to be a very thoughtful and well researched discussion of this issue.

² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

devoted much of his life treating thousands of such people and concluded “that most severe personality disorders (psychoses) could be traced to prenatal trauma, especially from conception through the first three months in the womb.”³ Other research the Linns cite confirms that “a woman in a tension-filled marriage runs a two hundred and thirty-seven percent greater risk of bearing a child with physical and emotional problems than a woman in a loving relationship.”⁴ Research indicates that babies are affected by the rejection they receive in the womb. Babies remember the music they heard in the womb and they are strengthened by the love they received. This experience imprints the growing child even up to adulthood.

The awareness of what parental attitudes effect in the child can cause guilt and sadness. It is important to add that healing can change things radically. Barbara Shlemon tells of a seven month old Jennifer who was still at her birth weight of six pounds. Her mother had had three previous miscarriages and expected to lose Jennifer as well. In defense she had communicated to Jennifer “Don’t come to life because we can’t handle losing you.” When born, Jennifer was literally unable to receive life. Three weeks after Barbara prayed for Jennifer’s womb hurts, she was up to the normal weight for an eight month old, and by eighteen months she was learning to speak and walk.⁵ What if Jennifer had died? Would she not still need healing of those hurts she received in the womb? Our experience is that she would need healing, both for her own sake and for her mother and father’s sake.

A woman was referred to me who was suffering from a depression that had not responded to therapy for some fifteen years. It turns out she was single and had an abortion as a young adult. Since she was a career woman, she felt she could not do justice to bringing up a child and so chose the abortion. She didn’t know that this was likely the cause of her depression, but she heard about the possibility of prayer for the baby and came with her family. We did a short healing service, asked God for the name and baptized the baby. She was immediately relieved. A short while later she got a note in the mail by someone she knew who didn’t know about our service. It read, “I saw a little baby in white with Jesus and I thought I needed to tell you about it. I don’t know why.” Needless to say the woman was deeply touched, her depression lifted and she has brought this prayer for healing abortions to other women she knew.

So this prayer is not only for the baby but also for healing the woman and man. Bringing the event into consciousness itself brings up a deep pain, but that can be an honest grieving about terminating a beautiful relationship. It restores the relationship, rather than repressing the hurt so that it never gets addressed and healed. Carl Jung tells of a woman, about thirty years old, that he encountered in a mental hospital. She had been diagnosed as schizophrenic, but Jung intuited that there was something else behind her illness so he gave her his word association test. Her depression had begun about two months after her eldest daughter of four years old had died. The association test unearthed clues that shortly before the girl had contracted typhoid from sucking a sponge she found out that a man she had wanted to marry actually wanted her and her choice of another man to offset her disappointment had actually prevented that marriage. She was unaware that in rejecting her marriage choice, she had allowed her daughter and son to drink the possibly

³See Frank Lake, *Tight Corners in Pastoral Counseling* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), Chapter 2, “Counseling in the Presence of Primal Pain,” 14-37. Cited in Linns, *op.cit.*, pp. 113-4. See also Matthew, Dennis, and Sheila Linn and Dr. William Emerson, *Remembering Our Home: Receiving Gifts and Healing Hurts from Conception to Birth*, (N.Y.: Paulist,)

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115. They cite the conclusions of Dr. D. H. Stott who had studied over 1,300 children and their families. Cited from Thomas Verny, *Secret Life of the Unborn Child* (N.Y.: Summit, 1981), p. 48.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

infected water from the sponge. The son was saved but the daughter died of the fever. Jung struggled with whether or not to tell her about her complicity. He finally decided to do it, against the thought that he might thereby be intensifying her guilt. As it turned out, in three weeks the woman was able to be discharged from the hospital. Her unconscious self-punishment, (imprisonment in the mental hospital rather than in jail) had been turned into conscious guilt about her sin and she no longer needed the prison of the mental hospital.⁶ Bringing things into the light is healing even if painful. Prayer for healing goes a step further. The sin itself is forgiven and the grief is integrated into a restored communion. So in praying for the baby we also bring healing to the mother and father (whom we also remember in prayer) even though it brings to awareness one's complicity that may be suppressed. Like the Samaritan woman, we can rejoice that "he told me everything I have done." (Jn 4:39)

⁶ See C. G. Jung, *Analytical Psychology Its Theory and Practice* (N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1968), pp. 58-61.

Prayer for Healing Post-Abortion Wounds

Prenotes:

1. Remember, there is deep hurt, shame and guilt. The first need is to be a compassionate listener. Experience shows that the mother's repentance and prayer for the child is much more effective in preventing a recurrence than admonitions.
2. Also, take note that healing abortion is not just about the mother, but about the relationship of mother, father and child. We need to pray for reconciliation of all involved.
3. We have a tradition of prayer for those who have died. Experience shows that the baby needs to be given a name, to receive the equivalent of baptism (see 1 Cor 15:29), and to be restored in Our Lord to the love of mother and father, even while being released to God.

Some Helpful Steps:

1. Listen compassionately to the woman's story. If possible learn also about the father and whether that relationship needs repentance and prayer to free any remaining wrongful attachment.
2. Hear her confession and give absolution. You can also pray with her that the father would be given the gift of repentance and God's forgiveness. Remember, she also needs to forgive herself and receive God's forgiveness, and perhaps even to forgive God for giving the baby at a seemingly inopportune time, or for abuse she suffered, etc., or to forgive the doctor or anyone else involved. If she is unable to do this on her own, will she give God permission to create forgiveness in her through the Holy Spirit? God will do what we cannot do.
3. Speak to the woman about the need to name the baby (ask God to reveal his/her God-given name -- see Is 49:1 "From my mother's womb he gave me my name"). Have her ask Jesus to tell the baby she is sorry for rejecting him/her and she wants to ask the baby's forgiveness. Then have Jesus tell the baby she chooses him/her as her child.
4. In prayerful imagination (in keeping with Ignatian contemplations) bring the baby to Jesus for the equivalent of baptism. "I pray, Jesus, that (name) be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." [Or you could actually pray the words of baptism with Jesus, knowing that it is only analogous to the rite. Thus, "I baptize you _____ in the name of the Father"] Even see in imagination the water cleansing him/her. Pray also that the baby receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit to be an intercessor for his/her parents and the family. [omitted in the revised version 5/25/99]
5. Pray now that the shared life God intended between the baby and its parents might be restored. Time might be given for each parent to share her/his feelings and open to receive the child's forgiveness and love, to let that love help him/her forgive themselves.
6. It is good to have the parent plant a tree or some enduring plant like a rose bush in honor of the child as a way of remembering that he/she lives and is cared for.

For further reading: Matthew, Dennis and Sheila Linn, Healing the Greatest Hurt (Paulist), "Healing Relationships with Miscarried, Aborted and Stillborn Babies", pp. 106-139. Also, Serafina Anfuso, "Abuse and Abortion: Spiritual Dimensions," *Journal of Christian Healing*, vol. 13, no. 1, Spring, 1991, pp. 3-13.

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