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Pamphlet 275

The Sadness of Life after Abortion

Fr. William Saunders, PhD

Recently I read an article about the effects of abortion, which included "post abortion syndrome." Could you please explain what that is?

Post Abortion Syndrome (PAS) falls under the category of "post-traumatic stress disorder." The American Psychiatric Association (APA) defines a post-traumatic stress disorder occurring when "the person has experienced an event that is outside the range of usual human experience that would be markedly distressing to almost anyone." Clearly, abortion, the direct killing of an innocent human life, fits this definition. Consequently, the APA's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders — Revised* (1987) specifically included abortion as a psycho-social stressor.

The reasons why abortion causes such traumatic stress include the following: First, abortion and infanticide are "abominable crimes" (*Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World*, no. 51). To kill an innocent unborn child is the epitome of evil. Such an evil action will have a severely detrimental impact upon the spiritual and psychological health of the woman who is responsible.

Second, the abortion procedure is brutal, invasive and barbaric. If anyone has a doubt about the brutality and barbarism of abortion, please watch, "A Matter of Choice," "The Silent Scream" or "The Eclipse of Reason." Moreover, the procedure violates the woman's body that has been prepared physiologically to nurture a growing child and bring that child to birth. Given both the first and second reasons, abortion produces feelings of self-devaluation, guilt, shame and isolation.

Third, deep down inside, a person, whether male or female, knows abortion is wrong and that a baby is being killed. Yet, a person will try to rationalize the action or to suppress feelings about it. Eventually, the impact of abortion will erupt in the person's life with devastating effects.

Fourth, abortion restricts communication. Generally a woman does not want to talk about her abortion; rather, the abortion remains a dark secret she must bear by herself. She also does not want to recall the events surrounding the abortion or the procedure itself; such recall is unpleasant and hurtful. This lack of communication augments accompanying feelings of depression, grief, avoidance and denial. For example, people will talk with great ease about appendectomies, knee surgery or even cosmetic surgery; no one freely talks about having an abortion.

Fifth, the act of abortion impacts negatively upon relationships with others. The woman will reject the man who may have pressured

her to have the abortion or consented to it. She will withdraw from others fearing their judgment for such a terrible act. She is left in isolation. These last three causes — the rationalization and suppression of feelings, lack of communication, and isolation — converge to prevent healing.

These causes of PAS are clearly interrelated. Some specific symptoms of post-abortion syndrome include "bouts of crying, depression, guilt, inability to forgive oneself, intense grief/sadness, anger/rage, emotional numbness, sexual problems or promiscuity, eating disorders, lowered self-esteem, drug and alcohol abuse, nightmares and sleep disturbances, suicidal urges, difficulty with relationships, anxiety and panic attacks, and flashbacks." A survey of women who had undergone an abortion procedure found that 31 percent experienced suicidal feelings; 50 percent experience emotional and psychological disturbances lasting months; 28 percent attempted suicide; 60 percent commented that the decision to have an abortion made their lives worse; and 94 percent regretted the decision to have an abortion. ("Abortion: How Much Do You Know?" and "Abortion: Your Risks," both published by The American Life League.) These symptoms may not arise immediately after the abortion, but months or even years afterward. Without question, such evidence attests to the devastating impact of abortion upon the mother.

PAS manifests itself especially when certain circumstances are present at the time of the

abortion, including the following: a maternal orientation, prior children, prior abortions, religious affiliation and beliefs, a lack of relationship support, force or coercion, second trimester abortion, genetic vs. elective abortion, pro-abortion ambivalence, prior emotional problems, low self-esteem, lack of family support, adolescent vs. adult. (Cf. *Association for Interdisciplinary Research in Values and Social Change*, I, 1).

While PAS is treated through psychiatric and psychological counseling, spiritual healing is also needed. Only with God's grace available through prayer, the sacrament of penance and the holy Eucharist will a woman, wounded from the grievous sin of abortion, find forgiveness and peace. Our Holy Father Pope John Paul II in his encyclical "*Evangelium Vitae*" noted: "The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourself over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you His forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord. With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people, and as a result of your own painful experience you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life" (no. 99).