

Rachel's Vineyard Mission Bringing Post-Abortion Healing to Italy

By **Monika Rodman Montanaro**

As with all of "post-Christian" Europe, Italy in the 21st century is indeed mission territory.

You might ask, how could that country, which historically sent so many missionaries abroad, need a mission of its own? What greatly needed apostolic work is there that the Italian Church hasn't yet undertaken on its own?

The answer is Rachel's Vineyard Italy Mission, which my Italian husband, Domenico, and I carry out with our lay and clergy collaborators. It's a mission of hope and healing to women, men and couples who've lost one or more children to abortion. Our apostolate is the first of its kind in Italy.

The Rachel's Vineyard three-day retreat model welcomes couples together to work through their grief and guilt. Founded by a Catholic psychotherapist and rooted in a team approach, the program carries Church approval. Losing a child through abortion is an experience that often leads both women and men to a "spiritual divorce" from God and from the Church. Struggles with depression, self-hatred, broken relationships and various addictions can follow. When people realize these problems may have to do with that painful past experience, and they hear that the Church cares enough to offer effective help, they're surprised and incredibly grateful.

It was my husband who said, "Italy des-



HEALING THE WOUNDED: *Monika Rodman Montanaro (right) and Domenico Montanaro (left) pose with some of the Rachel's Vineyard Italy Mission's team members before a retreat.*

perately needs this ministry." So why is there such a great need? Isn't Italy home to the pope? Isn't it the heart of the Church? Italy's institutional Church, in some ways, is quite privileged. It has 225 dioceses in an area the size of California (11 dioceses). But, with so many bureaucratic offices to keep open and so many historic churches to maintain and restore, there's precious little money left for pastoral care programs. Baptized Catholics make up 95 percent of the population, but only 5-10 percent practice their faith regularly, and Italy has almost no adult catechesis and no "Returning Catholics" program for the huge numbers of baptized adults who've

spent most of their life distant from the Church.

Italy embraced legal abortion 35 years ago by popular vote. The procedure is performed in public hospitals and financed with taxpayer funds. Six million children are missing because of that choice, and Italy now finds itself with a shrinking population and a serious marriage crisis. Already back in 1995, Italy became the first country in the world to have more elderly than children. In today's Italy, living together is the new normal and only-child families predominate.

Many women who come to us confess

relationship failures after their abortion experience, and deep feelings of unworthiness to have other children. They need to work through a traumatic experience and they want to meet others who've been through the same thing, in a welcoming, confidential environment where there's no rush, where there's real listening and the chance to tell their story.

Our pioneering mission embodies a desperately needed new evangelization. Women and men from all over Italy travel to the city of Bologna to participate in this one-of-a-kind program. We've received the blessing of the cardinal there, but we receive no funding from any Italian diocese or other Church entity. Neither I nor any of our collaborators receives any salary. So aside from participant program fees and a few donations, financially we remain largely a mission sponsored by friends in the United States.

Please pray for our work, pray for the Church in Italy, and let's pray that along with those who've known the touch of God's mercy in this particularly painful chapter of their lives, we, too, can become apostles of life and apostles of mercy to a world that so desperately needs both.

The Southern Cross

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