



Rachel's Vineyard Italy Mission: **Reaching women and men who seek Hope and Healing after losing a child through abortion**

Founded in the 1990's by a Catholic psychotherapist from Philadelphia, ***Rachel's Vineyard*** is a post-abortion healing retreat flourishing in the United States and rapidly expanding internationally. **Monika Rodman Montanaro** for 12 years led Rachel's Vineyard retreats for the Diocese of Oakland, CA. After moving to Italy in 2007, she and her Italian husband, together with other Italian volunteers, in 2010 launched the retreats in Italy.

This pioneering program is Italy's first-ever Catholic outreach to women, men and couples seeking to reconcile their hidden grief associated with past abortion experiences. Women and men from Sicily to Piemonte travel hundreds of kilometers to Bologna to participate in this one-of-a kind 3-day program.

We invite you to listen to their stories of hurt, hope and healing.



The Hurt

- ❖ *A 43 year-old Italian professional woman contacted us 2 months after giving birth, suddenly overwhelmed by grief for an abortion 10 years earlier: "I thought I'd gotten over it, but I was so wrong. The years after that event were filled with anger, and then I got sick. I had to stop my hectic work life and finally take care of myself. I found my life partner and a few months ago we had a baby girl, who's my sunshine. But from the moment I felt her stirring in my womb, the volcano I thought I'd put out years ago opened up again and I was overwhelmed by intense pain. Since the day our baby was born not a day has passed in which I don't think about my never born baby, asking myself why I did what I did. Now that I know what it's like to have a baby in your arms, to smell her, to look in her eyes and feel all her love for me, I've died inside. I feel so guilty and cry constantly. They've diagnosed me with post-partum depression, but I can't tell them the real story. You're the only ones who know what's behind my deep sadness."*

- ❖ *A father wrote to his aborted son: "Dear Peter: I was not a father to play with, to get to know and to grow up with together. I was weak and selfish from the first moment I heard about you. I ask your forgiveness for the evil I did to you, whose seriousness I only now realize. Only now have I come to understand how little it would have taken to say yes, I want you..."*
- ❖ *A 30 year-old single professional in Bologna: "I know what I did is horrendous, and I did it 3 times... From the moment I did it the first time, my life ended. I carry a huge sense of despair inside me, and it's suffocating me. For the longest time it's like I didn't want to see what I'd done, but the truth is, I'm carrying death inside of me. I can't find the words to tell you what I feel, I find myself totally disgusting, and I figure this is just my punishment for what I did in such an irresponsible way. There is not a crumb of love left in my life. My heart swings between total desperation and being frozen solid. I can't love anyone anymore. I have no life in me anymore."*
- ❖ *A married woman in a rural area near Switzerland: "By now 2 years have passed since that day of pain.... I feel emptiness, a desire to die myself, loneliness, self-hatred, shame and a sense of unworthiness in my relations with others. I wish I could throw up all these feelings. I'm mad at those who found me and my child to be a burden... My husband feels nothing, he's just fine.... I've lost trust in God, since the people who pray to him all the time are the very people who left me alone... I hope that even if I abandoned God, He hasn't abandoned me, and I just hope he doesn't punish my other children."*

The Hope

- ❖ *A 63 year-old participant from Florence: "My first contacts with La Vigna di Rachele were marked by understanding, patient attention and warmth.... Taking part in this retreat was on the one hand an enormous effort, and on the other hand, so very easy that I wonder how long I was being "prepared" for this experience! I entrusted myself to the process, I just trusted this was for me and didn't ask a lot of questions about the structure or activities. I felt this was simply my opportunity to finally deal with this pain (after 35 years), and so I took it."*
- ❖ *A single woman from Torino: "I saw my own suffering in others and I began to not feel alone anymore... At the beginning I was afraid to tell my story in front of strangers, but then, when I realized my suffering was also theirs, I let myself go. The group allowed me to share with others a very heavy and painful situation, and this made me feel I was no longer alone."*



The Healing

- ❖ *"It helped me a lot to be able to speak openly about the abortion experience. Being totally focused on that experience was also helpful.... The retreat really filled my heart that was so cold and empty... I feel cleansed and loved, and I feel like a huge weight has been lifted from me."*
- ❖ *"There was such a respect toward my deepest feelings. Respect for me and for my mistake. It was an unexpected and indescribable moment. A voice, a light, a blessing."*

- ❖ *A woman from Sicily:* "The whole process helped me so much. Whenever I couldn't quite "get there" in making sense of my feelings and experience, there was always someone else who, in sharing her experience with the group, helped me go deeper and understand better."
- ❖ *A woman from Milan who aborted while working in Australia:* "I'm writing to thank you for the wonderful work you're carrying out. I also thank those who prayed for me during the retreat. Thanks to *La Vigna di Rachele* JESUS has worked healing and liberation in my life and in the life of my family.... My heart's deep desire is to help other women like me who've touched bottom, who've been to Hades and wonder if they can come back. I so desire that they, too, might return to life by experiencing God's love, His infinite Mercy, healing and liberation... I want many unborn children, abandoned and buried in darkness, to be resurrected in the hearts of their moms and to be led by Jesus into Paradise. I send you a big hug."

Husbands say:

- ❖ "... I was amazed and pleasantly surprised by this experience, even having already done three weekend experiences over the years for our relationship as a couple."
- ❖ "I was welcomed in my rather unconvinced request for help ... If at first I thought I'd be opening a door to resolve a very particular wound, instead I found myself immersed in questions and exercises that really made me confront myself at a most basic level. Surrounded both by the intensity of my own emotions and by wonderful people who knew how to help me, I learned how to navigate my feelings in a new and positive way."



Wives say:

- ❖ "As I've shared before, my biggest hurdle/pain was in going into a church to take part in Holy Mass.... Now, one month after the retreat, I find it easier to pray. I feel more heard, maybe because I lift my heart and mind to God with more conviction... My thoughts about my child are also more serene. I'm finally able to think of him without getting a huge knot in my throat, a knot that was always so big that it hurt and it wouldn't even let me speak without intense pain and crying... My husband says he sees something different in me, and he likes what he sees. He was deeply moved by the few hours he was at the retreat. He talked about his feelings as he listened to letters being read and as he took part in the ceremony....Thank you from the bottom of my heart."
- ❖ "The Lord helped me cry out all my pain. He was there for me in the moments in which I relived my own death and the death of my child... He brought my husband and me back to a sense of "us". He put balm on my wounds. He woke me up, made me able to realize new things and to surrender my life to Him rather than insist on being in control of it all. Thank you!"
- ❖ "The group work, guided so well by the team, was a real treasure. My experience was that of having taken part in a rich banquet. Being here with my husband made everything even more precious and was a saving grace for our relationship."

A psychotherapist in Milan wrote: "I've had two individuals whom I see for psychotherapy make the retreat. The effects I see in them are very beautiful, and it is wonderful to continue to walk with them now because I see their heart has been deeply touched by Love, and that heart is coming back to life. Good work, thanks to you all."



A deeper look

“Teresa” is a 39 year-old Roman woman who made her retreat in February 2012. She studied philosophy at university and owns her own gardening business. Teresa grew up extremely protected in an active Catholic family. In her 20’s, after being left by her fiancée just before the wedding, she embarked on a 10-year “late adolescence” in which she dated various men, often making unwise choices in a partner. At age 37 she became pregnant. Encouraged to abort by her sister, friends and psychologist, she ended the life of what may be the only child she ever conceives. She reflects:

"Years ago my spiritual director gave me the book “The Prodigal Son” by Father Henri Nouwen, based on the painting by Rembrandt which I see you also use in your ministry. .. At the time I couldn’t get into the book, so I left it for years on my bookshelf.

Last Fall, looking with ever greater urgency for an answer, for a way out of my depression, my anguish and my inability to find any sense in life, I took the book in hand again. I was most struck by the reflection on the younger son who leaves home. I was perfectly able to imagine all of the states of mind and heart described: work just being feeding the pigs, the hunger that made him want to eat what he was feeding those pigs, the shame and regret. But while the younger son heard the voice that made him desire to return home, all I heard was a voice that made me resign myself to the dark and desperate life I was living. All I felt was unworthiness and inability to even want to really return “home”. I wanted to desire to go home, but deep down, I just couldn’t, my heart just wasn’t able. And the other thing that I just couldn’t imagine was that there could be a fatted calf that would be slaughtered for me. I couldn’t imagine being clothed in a beautiful gown. I thought these images were in the story just for literary effect.

If by chance I’d been able to muster the huge effort to ask to return home, and to actually “go home”, I imagined I’d simply be welcomed, but without much fanfare, just welcomed back into the same gray life that I remembered for years before the abortion.

The *Vigna di Rachele* weekend was my fatted calf, my most beautiful gown, the Father who saw me from a distance and ran to embrace me... it was the ring, the special shoes and all the rest. It was my return home. And the celebration at returning home! The retreat was one of the most beautiful gifts I’ve ever received. Never, never before in my whole life have I ever felt so welcomed, so cared for and listened to, so worthy and so “at home”. I thank God in all of His greatness, I thank Jesus, Mary, and my little “Maryam”, who I believe didn’t ever stop praying for me.... but I also thank all of you so very much, you who made all of this materially and spiritually possible.”



The journey into Rachel's Vineyard

“Lori” is a 40 year-old university administrator in Piemonte:

“I would like to tell you in greater detail the path that led me to *La Vigna di Rachele*. As I already mentioned, I used to live the faith in a very detached way. The man whom I loved, and who desired to form a family with me, instead lived the faith very intensely. He talked about his acquaintances with well-known clergy and high-ranking Church officials, he was a great admirer of the traditional Latin Mass, his home was filled with relics and religious images, and he frequently chided me for my “secular” approach to the faith.

When the child we desired arrived in my womb, he began, after some initial enthusiasm, to distance himself from me and from the child, to the point of finally rejecting and then abandoning us. I was totally hopeless and desperate. I exhausted myself trying to reason and then plead with him to fulfil his responsibilities. I had suicidal thoughts. Physically I was a wreck.

After the awful abortion experience, despite treatment including antidepressants and constant sessions at the psychiatrist's office, I urgently felt need to approach the Church and draw closer to the faith. I knew (and I still know today) that I killed, that I failed in welcoming life, but I found myself seeking answers from the faith and the Church because I was totally numb and impenetrable in the face of “secular” comfort. And it was precisely through that ever-more urgent search that I found (online) *La Vigna di Rachele*. I was also blessed by the availability and closeness of the Bishop of my Diocese, who pointed me toward the road of faith and the long spiritual journey that I need to undertake. My experience in *La Vigna di Rachele* was intense yet tender. It has sown in me the seed of faith. The personal encounter and the spiritual embrace I experienced with your team are bringing hope back to life in me.”



Restoring the Mother-Child Relationship

“Serena” didn’t feel ready for motherhood again at age 42, and together with her husband “Davide” aborted their third child two years ago. The couple participated together in our last retreat, finally confronting and working through their abortion pain and other issues that were putting their marriage at risk. Here is the letter that Serena wrote to her aborted son:

Dear Peter,

You, the stone cast off, have become my cornerstone and support. Here we are face to face. Your eyes seem to say to me, “So, mommy, you finally want to get to know me? I’ve been expecting you, I’ve been waiting for you for so long, you know.”

I, on the other hand, wasn’t expecting you. When you arrived two and a half years ago in no way was I expecting you, and I refused to wait and get to know you, to learn who you were, to see what you were like and whom you’d look like. I was in a rush to let you go. You were supposed to disappear in silence, in the same way you arrived. So I erased you from my body. I eliminated you. And I died with you.

Now I know all too well the emptiness that you left inside of me. An infinite emptiness that disarms me, an emptiness inside of that body of mine that had been a welcoming nest for your siblings, but for you was a place of rejection.

Now I meet you again here, when you are no longer in my body, but feeling you so very present. Now I recognize you, and I’m getting to know you like never before. Now I really do want to have you with me forever. Be born again together with your mommy, don’t leave me again, never again.

I love you. Thank you for having waited for me with such patience and trust.

Truly, your Mom



NOTE: Just weeks after the retreat, this couple baptized their two living children, ages 11 and 9. They continue their faith journey by taking part in a couples group that meets monthly with the pastor to dialogue about faith and the Word of God as these apply to daily life. They have found hope for their future, and they trust their third child Peter intercedes for them before the Throne of God’s Mercy.

www.vignadirachele.org (click on ) / www.rachelsvineyard.org



***“Jesus Himself said that He came to call sinners and not the self-righteous.
I pray that all who participate in Rachel’s Vineyard with the longing to be free
and to be healed by Jesus, may find Him
the source of true joy, peace and love,
and allow God to restore them to wholeness and happiness.”
- Mother Teresa of Calcutta***