

Roe v. Wade turns 40: A Look at the Legacy of Legal Abortion

by Lisa Everett

January 22 will mark the fortieth anniversary of the infamous Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*, which along with its companion case, *Doe v. Bolton*, legalized abortion in our nation for all nine months of pregnancy for virtually any reason. In pondering the significance of this anniversary, David Bereit, the founder of *40 Days for Life*, shared during a meeting with pro-life colleagues that the Lord had put the phrase “Exodus 20:13” on his heart, and the image of the Israelites wandering for forty years in the desert immediately to his mind. Out of curiosity, one of the other people in attendance at the meeting decided to look up in the Bible the citation “Exodus 20:13.” Imagine the astonishment in the room when the verse was read aloud: *You shall not kill.*

The Chosen People wandered for four decades in the Sinai desert in punishment for disobeying God’s clear command and refusing to trust in His continued providence. Let’s take a closer look at the legacy of legal abortion, the spiritual wasteland that our nation has wandered in for the last forty years because we have rejected God’s clear command *You shall not kill.*

First of all, abortion has become one of the most common surgical procedures in the United States—a child is aborted about every thirty seconds. In fact, it has been calculated that more than 55 million unborn children have been killed since

abortion became legal in 1973. It is difficult to visualize what a number this vast looks like, but Benjamin Bull offered this perspective in a recent post at LifeNews.com: “If you added together the populations of New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, Phoenix, San Antonio, San Diego, Dallas, Jacksonville, Indianapolis, and San Francisco [the twelve largest cities in the U.S.], you would only have about 26.1 million people—less than half the number aborted.”

Secondly, while the effect of abortion on these little ones is obvious, the aftermath of abortion on their mothers is also tragic. According to Vicki Thorn, director of the National Office of Post-Abortion Reconciliation and Healing, while some women report relatively little trauma following abortion, for many, the experience is devastating, causing serious and persistent emotional, psychological and spiritual difficulties.

The overwhelming majority of women who obtain abortions—about 85%—are unmarried. 18% of the women who obtain abortions are teens, while women in their twenties account for 58% of all abortions. According to research conducted by Fergusson et al in 2006 and again in 2008, among young women who had an abortion, there was a 61% increased risk of suicidal ideation and 42% of the young women who aborted reported major depression by age 25. Adult women with an abortion history are nearly three times as likely to report significant depression

(Pedersen 2008), and the suicide rate is nearly six times greater among women who aborted compared with women who delivered (Gissler et al. 1996, 2005).

Research on the aftermath of abortion in women is published much more readily in Europe, where the political stakes surrounding the issue of abortion are not nearly so high as they are in our own country. The prestigious *British Journal of Psychiatry* published in 2008 an analysis of extensive data gathered over the course of a thirty-year longitudinal study and found that abortion was the only pregnancy outcome that was “consistently related to significantly increased risks of mental health problems.” In 2011, the same journal published *Abortion and mental health: quantitative synthesis and analysis of research published 1995 –2009* by Priscilla K. Coleman. “Based on data extracted from 22 studies, the results of this meta-analytic review of the abortion and mental health literature indicate quite consistently that abortion is associated with moderate to highly increased risks of psychological problems subsequent to the procedure,” the author concluded. “Overall, the results revealed that women who had undergone an abortion experienced an 81% increased risk of mental health problems.”

Finally, what about the millions of men whose children have been aborted since *Roe v. Wade*? According to Vincent Rue, PhD., a practicing psychotherapist and co-director of the Institute for Pregnancy Loss in Jacksonville, Florida, “While there is much we don’t know about men and abortion, there are some 28 studies on

men's reactions to abortion that are informative. In one study, most men felt overwhelmed, with many experiencing disturbing thoughts of the abortion (Shostak & McLouth, 1984).” Another, more recent study found that “four out of ten men experienced chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, occurring on average 15 years after the abortion. Other disconcerting findings included: 88% feeling grief and sadness, 82% guilt, 77% anger, 64% anxiety, 68% isolation, 31% helplessness, 40% sexual problems. (Rue, Coyle, & Coleman, 2007).

Beyond the risk of significant psychological aftermath, the certainty of serious spiritual harm is the most tragic legacy of Roe v. Wade. But God who in His great mercy draws good out of evil has drawn out of the forty years of legal abortion in our nation not only a clearer and more courageous witness to the Gospel of Life on the part of His Church, but also a vibrant and compassionate outreach to all those who have been involved in abortion in order to bring them the reconciliation and peace that only He can give. For more information about Project Rachel, the program of post-abortion healing in our diocese, call 1-855-RACHEL HOPE (1-855-722-4354), email projectrachelhope@gmail.com, or visit the website at www.diocesefwsb.org/projectrachel.

In this new year, the bishops of the United States have called Catholics across our country to pray the Rosary daily and to fast and abstain from meat every Friday

so that we may again become a nation that respects life, marriage and religious liberty. May our prayer and penance in 2013 be another example of the good that God was able to draw out from the evil of Roe v. Wade.