

Testimony of a Grief to Grace Participant

I am a 48 year old mother with three grown children and three aborted children in Heaven. I am divorced from the father of these children and the marriage has been annulled since 1999. I have been an extraordinary minister of communion and am currently on the parish Council.

I attended a *Grief to Grace* retreat this past summer. I went at the invitation of Dr Burke (who I knew and respected through *Rachel's Vineyard*) to fill out a small retreat to make the group dynamic effective for someone who was desperately seeking help. I didn't think I needed it. In the ten years since the resurfacing of sexual abuse by a priest that I experienced as an 8 year old, I've had much healing through spiritual and psychological counseling and *Rachel's Vineyard* and felt I was doing well. As soon as I was certain I would attend this retreat, however, I was surprised by how reluctant I was to open up that past abuse. I had come so far, I attend daily Mass, work in a religious articles store where most of our customers are clergy, and volunteer with *Rachel's Vineyard* ministries, but the truth was I felt anxious and ambivalent. There-in lies the reality of the residual lack of confidence in myself and in God. Once I arrived, with much fear and trepidation, and began to enter into the process I cried tears from depths I didn't know I possessed. Hearing the stories from others helped me to access deep emotions I was burying or trying to deny. The exercise of drawing a picture of ourselves as God created us, then depicting the damage from the abuse onto our image was very powerful. I didn't realize how that distorted image of who I was had sent my life on a trajectory and formed patterns that were not God's plans for me. Only by realizing that, could I begin to change my expectations and allow Him to rebuild my self image. Similarly, the rededication of the temple ritual was extremely healing for me. I had always felt that I had been desecrated but didn't know how to articulate that or how to recover from it. The living scripture and action were meaningful and I still occasionally revisit that when I need reminding. The letters written to myself and God helped me explore the difficult question of why me and work out my feelings of anger towards God over my perceived abandonment by Him and my disdain and contempt for the needy little girl who still lived inside me.

In the past six months I've been evolving into a new, whole person. I've gained better control over my appetite, feel healthier physically, don't grind my teeth or have jaw problems, I'm learning to confidently make choices that are good for me and allow for changes as needed. Just this month I find within myself the strength to courageously help a young lady who has experienced a similar situation with a clergy member. God's providence has put her in my path and prompted her to share the trauma with me. I'm able to relate to her pain and confusion and offer reassurance that she's not crazy, our God cries with her and is sending his ambassadors to bind her wounds and we can look for them together. I'm able to act as an advocate for her truth to be told to proper authorities. I hope to be a light in her darkness and help her to find a safe person and place to correct the distortions and help her to rebuild a healthy relationship with Jesus and His church. At the very least I am able to love her and accept her emotions in the midst of her woundedness and doubt. I am grateful that the retreat has healed my heart enough to allow this fearless shining of light into a dark ugly place. It is a sacred gift to both of us and also

the church. I hope and pray that this young woman can experience the healing and correction offered through the *Grief to Grace* retreat soon and not have to live in shame and sad isolation for as long as I did.

I also notice that the sense of helpless vulnerability which seemed ingrained in me has evaporated and I have a new sense of being present to myself and integrated in body, mind and spirit as never before. Now I think, this must be how we're meant to feel. It helps me understand my lack of accomplishment and direction in life up til now. How could I make goals and follow through with them when so much energy was expended in agonizing then second guessing every decision and choice I faced with? Now I'm happy to say my greatest accomplishment is my full acceptance of humanity, wounds, scars and all, in myself and in others.

Through the anointed work of Dr. Burke's retreat I can say with conviction that God knows all our pain and died to deliver the balm for our wounds. Carrying that loving presence of compassion, hope and light of Jesus Christ into the darkness of the myriad of sufferings of our world is a calling I am honored to accept. God is fully present in reality, no matter how messy, uncomfortable or shameful we think it, and He waits there with humility for us to join Him as He leads us to a better place.

"To have a right to do a thing is not at all the same as to be right in doing it." ~ G.K Chesterton