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From Sin to Freedom

I came by chance upon your magazine at a friend's place. On reading your contributors' frank and distressing accounts, I felt deeply shaken. It suddenly occurred to me that my own experiences should finally see the light of day. Perhaps they could serve as a warning to others. No doubt some readers will be filled with disgust or pity. That cannot be helped. I often feel that way myself.

I will not give my name and surname (the shame is too great), but I wish to share with you the most painful part of my life. Not many people know it. I can count them on the fingers of one hand. It is not easy for me to dredge up the past, but with the abortion debate returning like a boomerang, I wish to give witness to my own personal experience.

I am now an older woman, on the verge of retirement, reasonably well off. I have a happy family: a husband, a son, grandchildren, a good job, and numerous material possessions. But deep down, the memory of what happened many years ago is always with me; and it tortures me, returning again and again.

My first young love resulted in a *de facto* relationship and an unplanned preg-

nancy. We were both in university at the time—young and rebellious. The pregnancy was confirmed only in the fifth month and, at that stage, it was much too late to consider an abortion. The birth and the circumstances surrounding it were so horrific that when six months later I fell pregnant for the second time what I feared most was a repeat of my earlier experience in the hospital. Add to this the influence of a great many “concerned and well-wishing” people. My friends and cousins deplored the housing difficulties, the lack of money, and the “interruption to my CV.” The gynaecologist talked about birth control and the strain put on the body by “back-to-back pregnancies.” When she mentioned the medication I had previously taken, I became even more ▷

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You were given the opportunity to live, so give the same to your child!

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frightened. Finally, I heard the following words from another gynaecologist whom I also consulted: “Are we keeping it or getting rid of it?”—as if I were to decide whether I preferred vanilla or chocolate ice cream. I still had doubts; and then the talk turned to the “embryo,” the “conglomerate of cells,” the possibility that a second child so close on the heels of the first would be damaged. And what security could I offer this child! I continually felt guilty. I did not understand that all this was just so many lies! My young companion first wanted to finish his studies. He was writing his Master’s thesis, and we were then renting an apartment in an “adult complex.” He said it was too soon for another child but the decision was mine. I felt a terrible responsibility weighing on me—for myself, for the living child and the one yet unborn, and for the happiness of my partner. His family was unwilling to help. They constantly complained about “the wasted opportunities for an academic career” and the two of us living *de facto*. Rancor and ambition overwhelmed us, and we were unable to seek support.

In those days no one showed photos or films about the life of the child in its mother’s womb. There were no debates, books or television programs. At any rate, I never came across any. Neither did I have the good fortune of meeting people who might have held me back, talked me out of it, or indicated another way out. The whole world was against my child and myself—a terrified mother! And yet my instinct was to resist, but I could not rationalize it. My best friend accompanied my partner and myself to the doctor’s rooms, where the doctor carried out the abortion—for a fee that we paid out of pocket. But in saying all this, I do not wish to imply that everyone else was at fault and not I. Ultimately I made the choice. I did not give my second child the chance to live. The aftermath of this terrible “procedure”—as it is so nicely called—awakened nightmarish emotions in me. Initially, there was a strange sense of emptiness and numbness. The thought haunted me: what have I done? I could not look at the man I loved, for he only aroused disgust. I think I was blaming him for what had happened, though I tried suppressing such thoughts. To this day, I cannot understand how we could so easily have brought death to our own child. What was worse, whenever I looked at my first-born son, I asked myself questions to which I had no answer. What did the other child look like? Was it a boy or a girl? Why did I allow this one to live and not that one? I had never had any particular health issues, but soon after the abortion I began so experience hormonal problems. Often my periods lasted several weeks, and the doctor was unable to explain the cause. These symptoms stopped, but the sorrow remained and intensified. Worst of

all, I could not talk to anyone about it. I was continually afraid that I was not a good mother, that someone like me just could not be a good mother. In those days I did not go to church at all and considered myself an atheist. I had no idea that I was experiencing the post-abortion syndrome. It was only years later that a psychologist told me what the problem was and that my case was no exception.

My relationship with my nearest and dearest caused much discord. I had changed from a good-tempered and cheerful person to a bundle of nerves. Even toward my son I became either overprotective or aggressive, as if I held it against him that he was alive and the other had died—or as if I were afraid that he too would die. I dreamed of the abortion at night and would wake up trembling. My lover told me I should go to a psychiatrist, as I was starting to go crazy. I no longer raised the subject with him. My despair would deepen whenever I saw a pregnant woman out on the street or young mothers pushing their baby carriages. I could have been one of them, but instead I had killed my child!

At this time, my partner became interested in another woman, and—out of revenge—I began to deceive him as well. I was on the pill and consequently suffered digestive problems and changes to my menstrual cycle, which were accompanied by much physical and mental discomfort. And so new problems were added to the old. In those days I did not make the connection between “abortion” and “contraception,” but I now realize that these are part of a whole. The source of my unhappiness lay in my lack of faith in God, pride, and selfishness. It seemed to me then that I was the unhappiest person on

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earth and that there was no hope for me. However, there was no accompanying humility and remorse, only revolt and more manifestations of pride.

Then came the day when I decided that life was not worth living. I had failed as a mother, a partner, and a woman. Besides that, the relationship I had been in, which was the most important thing to me, fell apart like a house of cards. I decided to commit suicide. I planned everything: from sending my son off to his grandparents for two days (so as to have the house to myself) to the actual means of killing myself. And if my lover had not decided to visit me that very day, or if I had locked the door, I would no longer be on this earth.

I was saved in the nick of time, and I found myself in a psychiatric hospital. No one listened to what I had to say about my lost child. One day I asked the doctor outright why he noted down all my words except those about the abortion. He said that a terminated pregnancy could not be the cause of such a depression and that we should concentrate on my relationships with my parents and men. I did not understand that I was being fooled once again, but I felt that the conversations were useless. I was discharged, and I returned to an empty apartment, because my parents were taking care of my son. Neither my boyfriend nor my first partner visited me. I felt like a tired old woman—at a loss as to what to do with myself. The years that followed were dreadful and bizarre. I oscillated between despair and the wish to forget. My previous partner started a new family, then divorced and remarried. Fearing loneliness, I fell into another senseless relationship with a man who turned out to be a criminal. I also became pregnant by him—and, as if I had forgotten the previous terrible experiences, had another abortion. I had realized quite late that I was pregnant (or perhaps subconsciously I was avoiding the truth), and my new partner did not want a child either. He quickly found a gynaecologist who was willing to carry out the “procedure” in the twelfth week of the pregnancy.

I lived in such a ghastly void that everything—even suffering itself—seemed meaningless and expressionless. Such must be the road to hell. Life was one mistake after another. I even thought it was good that I had had an abortion, since I was incapable of being a good

mother or having a normal relationship or making a happy home. I knew my partner was not suited to fatherhood, for he was a liar. Telling me he was infertile, he had tricked me into sleeping with him. Only later did I find out that he wanted to have sex without condoms. My liver and kidneys were so damaged that I could not take the pill. Because of advanced cervical erosion and a predisposition to haemorrhaging, coils, gels, and diaphragms were out of the question. In this way my partner made sure of his own comfort in bed at the cost of my health and the life of our child.

It is painful to admit this, but in deciding to have a second abortion, I felt no grief at all—only anger and fear. A relationship founded on lies and despair

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could not possibly give me the strength I needed; all the more reason for not wanting children from it. The mere thought of the child and its dishonest father aroused repugnance in me. Apparently people get what they deserve. I had a man whose level of morality matched my own—and mine had quite simply gone to the dogs. My lover cheated on me in many ways. Later I found out that he was a thief and dealt in stolen goods. We lived wildly: alcohol, drugs, loud parties. I used to tell myself I did not want to be alone—or maybe I just did not care.

When I embarked on this affair I had no idea of the price I would pay. Young girls often do not realize how ruthless unloving men can be, men who are bent only on seducing and exploiting women. Such types never want to take on the responsibility of a family or the life of a child they have begotten. They see a child as “a mistake,” the result of carelessness or simply “bad luck,” as >





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my partner put it. Surely this shows that once you question one commandment it is very easy to question another—even all of them. Having lived with a man outside of marriage, that is, by striking out “do not commit adultery,” I—deceived by a false view of love and freedom—easily came to rejecting the commandment “do not kill.”

Life with a criminal, and the emptiness and despondency that went with it, resulted in a growing self-loathing and recurring thoughts of suicide. When I think back to that time (over 35 years ago), I am amazed that I could have put up with such a life. Chaos, bewilderment, lies, profanities, sex without any emotion—all this I accepted for a good many years. I probably believed that I did not deserve any better, and subconsciously wanted to punish myself to the end, to finish what had I begun when I had attempted suicide. Now I cannot believe I was capable of such rottenness—or rather moral indifference, as though my conscience and all my deeper feelings had dried up. But when finally I realized that my small son was taking on some of my partner’s behaviors, I began to fear for him. It was only then that I broke off this sick relationship. The remnants of a sense of responsibility saved me from total collapse and the destruction of my son’s life.

I do not know how I ever managed it, but without wasting time I left my partner, found an honest job and a roof over my head. Perhaps it was the result of my aunt’s prayers. Of all my family only she believed in me. Perhaps it was the prayers of others who wished me well, or the intercession of the poor souls in Purgatory. Or maybe one of the saints interceded for me. I do not know. All I know is that I did not deserve help, and yet it was granted me. Grace is beyond our comprehension. But it was not easy, and I often contemplated suicide. I cannot describe my experiences in detail. I will only say that I lived in hell—a hell that lasted many years. Finally, one day before Easter, when things were at their lowest, I found myself in a church. Terrified and uneasy, but driven by some inner compulsion, I went to confession. At first it was just to talk to someone who did not know me. I do not know what my confessor thought of me. After all, I had not been to church since my First Holy Communion. I cried the whole way through my confession and sometimes could not even speak. And so began the process of my conversion.

Gradually I came to realize that most of my sins were born out of a tremendous sense of pride. I wanted to decide everything for myself. I believed I had the right to judge what was good and what was bad, what I could do, and what I could not. I felt I could decide my life and the lives of my children. Even my acquiescence in all those lies concerning lifestyle, “love,” and abortion, and my pandering to the needs of my seducers and others—all this was connected to my pride. I do not wish to judge the role other people played (God forgive them!) in my tragic past, but I still struggle with feelings of resentment toward those who surrounded me then. I asked myself why I was not smarter, more honest and virtuous? Why did I have to experience all those dreadful things and condemn two of my children to death? Where were they now? Could my sin be forgiven? Such thoughts tormented me for many years; they revisit me even now. I think that when people face such grave decisions evil does its utmost to make the choice more difficult, to falsify reality—simply to deceive us. It is not only my own experience that bears this out, for I have had occasion to compare

I was a victim of an inhumane system, which allows mothers to be cheated and preyed upon by their fears and sense of isolation

notes with many other women who have gone through abortions. Helplessness and the realization of the irreversibility of one’s decision give rise to feelings of guilt, which destroy hope and self-respect and lead very easily to nervous breakdown and suicide.

One day I came across a little brochure on abortion by Father Jack Salija OP. Only then did I see with complete clarity the horror of my sin. But this time the very thing that had earlier steered me toward suicide led me to something else: humility. Somehow I wanted to make up for my sin, to atone for it, to warn other men and women about it, and yet I knew it was not possible. I felt isolated. Maybe I would have fallen into despair yet again, had it not been for God’s grace.

During my confessions I lamented my feelings of despair. Abortion was too great a sin to be forgiven, I said. My confessor suggested I go on a retreat. There I realized that once again my sin was one of pride, for God’s mercy is greater than our sins. I also realized that in addition to being the judge and executioner of my children, I was a victim—a victim of an inhumane system, which allows mothers to be cheated, which preys on their fears and isolation, which sanctions the murder of unborn children with the full majesty of the law. There were days when I wanted to go out into the street and shout, “Give me back my children!” Sometimes I did not want to live.

But the Good Shepherd gave me solace. He showed me that I have a mission to carry out. As the mother of a living child I can, through prayer and spiritual adoption, help other children threatened with abortion. That mission offers me a measure of consolation, although sometimes thoughts of the past bring

me to tears. But God is more merciful than we think and He gives graces even to the worst of sinners. In the autumn of my life, He allowed me experience true love. Ten years ago, I met a good and noble man, a convert after years of living in a sect and struggling with despair. We were married in the Church and are now a happy couple, witnesses to the power of the Sacrament of Marriage and the Holy Spirit. At last I came to believe that I could love and be loved. My son calls my husband father. My husband knows my past, although I was terribly afraid that telling him would put an end to our friendship. And yet, despite so many terrible failings on my part, he accepted me as his wife.

Sometimes I stand in dread of the Last Judgement, where my own unborn children may accuse me, but I am saved by my trust in God's mercy. Discovering that I could not have any more children was a painfully heavy cross to bear. My husband and I both wished to have children, but it seems God decided not to give me another chance, since I had rejected the gift of bearing life twice already. Or maybe it was the result of my age and health problems, for we married when I was already in my thirties. Another shock was learning (after my son was married and after the birth of my first granddaughter) that my daughter-in-law had also had an abortion. Her high school boyfriend had assured her of the "absolute reliability" of condoms and spermicide tablets. Duped by his assurances, she became pregnant despite taking these precautions. So does the pharmaceutical industry, which manufactures these dark products, prey on the stupidity and naivety of young people! Fearing ridicule, expulsion from school, a tainted reputation, and the anger of her parents, my daughter-in-law easily yielded to persuasion. Somehow her boyfriend got hold of the money and "settled" the whole business. She never told her mother about it. When she told me, we both cried.

Listening to her story, I thought how little it would have taken to save both of us from choosing death. One word uttered in time might have held back the evil. Unfortunately there was no one there to utter it. My daughter-in-law experienced the same doubts, the same bouts of depression and despondency that I had, but belief in God, repentance,



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prayer, and marital happiness (I trust) will cure her of her sadness. I do my best to deter women from having abortions. I try to tell them what that step means and what the consequences will be.

But I know that all this is very little. That is why I decided to write this letter. I have never told my son or his wife about my tragic past. I could not make myself do it. Again, this shows what a horrible thing abortion is, shattering as it does something so fundamental as the right to life and motherhood—a woman's very nature. Could my son still love me and confidently leave his own two children in my care if he knew I had deprived him of his siblings? He always complained of being an only child. I fear that telling him about my abortions will change his attitude towards me. True, he showed compassion for his wife and forgave her, but every child wants to regard his mother as someone pure, upright, loving, caring, and protective—not someone who is ready to kill her children. Besides, the

priest and psychologist both advised me against burdening my son psychologically with my experiences.

Recently I had a lively discussion with a young feminist on the street. She was defending a woman's "right" to have an abortion. Not making any headway with her, I finally asked if she had ever talked to anyone who had wanted to commit suicide because of an abortion. She said no; such women did not exist. Without hesitating, I answered her with words that poured out straight of my heart, "Right now you are talking to just such a woman, and now, rather than promoting real freedom of choice, you are defending the abortion that you once had. Real choice exists only when you is aware of the consequences. So let us not say that killing is a woman's right." I do not know what possessed me, but the effect of my words was astonishing. The young woman grew pale and fled. I saw panic on her face. I had revealed her secret, the real motive behind her >



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feminist worldview. I know that many women grow bitter after an abortion; they hate themselves. They try to project that hatred on men or other women and children. What's more, they envy those who decide to have their children.

No one likes to feel bad. We like to justify our actions, and that is why women who have had an abortion often laugh at their pregnant peers and those who have large families. They cannot contain their indignation at the supposed thoughtlessness and "backwardness" of such people. Here one plumbs the wellspring of false feminism: a cultivated contempt for men; self-hatred projected on others; a fostering of the role of a wronged victim. The result is like a domino effect. Evil is vengeful and infectious and is passed on down the generations. I know it all, because I have had these feelings. And yet now and again God allows us see the whole truth about ourselves and forgives. Only He can forgive. No doctor, psychologist, psychiatrist, loving relative, or friend has that power. People can only be instruments of the Creator. I experienced that forgiveness myself, and I try to forgive. I try to forgive the men who thoughtlessly begot children on me, who did not want them and refused to fight for their lives because they wanted to rid themselves of a "problem" that interfered with their pleasures and comforts. I try to forgive the doctors who did not tell me the truth about abortion and its consequences, but who happily offered to kill my children for money, and even encouraged me. I try to forgive the horrible, brutal, corrupt, and ruthless midwives, nurses, and doctors at the hospital, where in inhuman conditions reminiscent of a concentration camp, I gave birth to my first child. That

All I know is that I did not deserve help, and yet it was granted me. Grace is beyond our comprehension

experience traumatized me and filled me with a dread of further childbirth. I try to forgive the authors of pamphlets and articles promoting contraceptives, which are not nearly as safe and "effective" as they would have us believe. I try to forgive my friends who persuaded me to use those contraceptives and then have an abortion, as though it were a normal and proper way of solving the "problem." I try to forgive my neighbors and family members who engaged in gossip and viewed with indifference, and even perverse pleasure, the difficulties of a young couple with a small child and "another on the way." I try to forgive the priests and catechists who kept mum or talked so unconvincingly about such matters in my youth. I try to forgive the owners of the apartment building who did not want to hear of young children. Finally, I try to forgive myself, a stupid, naïve, lost, helpless, fearful, and selfish woman who arrogated to herself the "right" to take away the life of her own child and herself as well. Truly, sin is death. I experienced this in the worst possible way, by agreeing to kill my children and attempting suicide. Sin leads to a desire for death—physical and spiritual death!

A few years ago, with my husband's encouragement, I went to see a young psychologist not much older than my

daughter-in-law. She helped to bring me out of my depression and the sense of guilt that was still tormenting me years after the abortions. On one occasion she told me that we need something greater than ourselves to gain some sort of perspective, a point of reference, a mainstay. Without that we are just so many particles blown hither and yon in a void—lost and alone. Or beasts devouring our young! It was only recently that I fully understood these words. Finding God allowed me to see both the enormity of my sins and the greatness of God's goodness, the Giver of Life, Who desires not to punish and destroy, but to save sinners.

I give thanks for my life, mercifully saved despite so many attempts to destroy it, for the life of my nearest and dearest—my husband, son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. I deeply repent of not being able to defend life, of not being a mother to all of my children. Now that my son has his own children, I trust that none of them will ever do anything as awful as their grandmother did long ago. I pray that none of them will have to carry so terrible a burden. To mothers who doubt the purpose of the birth of their child I say: do not condemn your own little one to physical death, and yourself to a nightmare that will haunt you for the rest of your days! You were given the opportunity to live, so give the same to your child! I ask all those who read this letter: do not counsel anyone to have an abortion and do not be silent or indifferent when you hear such advice given. And here is something just as important that applies to everyone: do not react with disgust, anger, irony, laughter, ridicule, contempt, or impatience when you hear that a woman is expecting—be she ever so young or old, unmarried, sick, without means, even if she strikes you as stupid and irresponsible and not sensible enough to be a mother. Perhaps, if you treat her with sympathy and understanding, you will save someone's life.

If my letter helps someone to make the right choice, if it saves just one life, I will have fulfilled my purpose, and I will take comfort in that. Thank you for publishing my letter and raising such a painful and necessary topic. I send you my sincere greetings. God bless you for making my testimony known to others.

A repentant grandmother. ■