

Divine Mercy Ministry - A Man's Story

I grew up the last of eight kids, four boys and four girls, in a loving family with two loving parents. I was always a good kid, never causing trouble, never doing anything that my parents would disapprove of. Even as a pretty young boy I saw the sacrifices they made for me and my brothers and sisters, so I always tried to do what I could to help them in any capacity I was able. It was like that throughout my youth, adolescence, my teens, and my young adult life. I was also a practicing Catholic, having gone through 12 years of Catholic grade school and high school. I was the “Altar Server of the Year” my eighth grade year, I won the Juniper Serra Award my senior year of high school, I was the captain of the football team and the Homecoming King. I was the All American Boy.

When I was 22 years old I met a woman that my parents, especially my mom, did not like, and she let me know that in no uncertain terms. My girlfriend was a year older than me but had two young girls, 2 and 3 years old, and was separated from her husband; she wasn't even divorced. I don't know if my folks ever knew that about her, but the fact that their “baby” was dating a woman with kids was not to their liking. But I thought I was in love, I was experiencing sexual intimacy, and I was sure that at my wise old age of twenty-two I knew what was right and best for me.

The reality was that the pain I caused my mom and dad because of my relationship with this woman did cause me a lot of anguish; I hated to disappoint them and make them worry that I might “ruin my life.” Although they never said anything about this, I'm pretty sure that they were worried I'd end up getting her pregnant.

About a year into our relationship she in fact did become pregnant. She worked in the Peds/ICU at one of the hospitals. After I got off work one evening I went to see her. She told me she had something to tell me, so we walked out into the hall and stood in front of the nursery full of sleeping beautiful newborn babies. She told me that she was “late” in having her period so she did an at-home pregnancy test which came back positive. It seemed immediately that my legs turned to jelly and began to shake out of fear of having to tell people, especially my folks, what I had done. She said it was only an EPT, which could be a false positive, so she had an appointment with her doctor for a more accurate test. She tried to assure me that she probably wasn't pregnant, but that did little to ease my mind. On the way home, I was still going to college and living with my mom and dad, I cried and tried to make deals with God to not let her be pregnant. I was so scared!! That night I got in the shower and wept. I sat on the edge of the tub with my head in my hands and just wept; a cry that could not be heard over the noise of the shower running. I simply thought that this wasn't supposed to happen to me, I was a good kid all my life and there were a lot of other guys who were having indiscriminant sex with lots of women and they weren't getting any of them pregnant. Why me? How could this possibly happen to me? I was cold. It was a cold February night, but the cold I felt I was unable to get rid of even with the hottest of showers. After the shower, I crawled into bed and assumed the fetal position, still cold and shaking out of incredible fear. I kept putting blankets on my bed to try and get warm, but no stack of blankets no matter how high would get me warm that night. It was

possibly the worst night of my life. I prayed and prayed and prayed that God would make her pregnancy test negative.

A few agonizing days later it was all confirmed, the test was positive, my girlfriend was pregnant with my child. I was numb, I couldn't think straight. I thought about how disappointed my family would be with me. I was sorry for disappointing God, too, for so many times during our relationship going to confession and promising that I would end the illicit affair, but never doing so. It was all so surreal. I had to keep on a happy face for my family and friends; I had to somehow keep focused on my college classes; I had to be "normal" so that no one would ask me what was wrong, all with a terrible secret hanging over my head. A secret that Satan certainly wanted me to keep secret because then he could use it to torment me more and more. Sadly, I listened to him.

A few days later my girlfriend and I talked about what we were going to do about this situation we found ourselves in. I have a pretty strong suspicion that she had made up her mind what she was going to do after the EPT test because she told me she wanted an abortion. She stated the facts rather clearly, saying she was only separated from her husband, that she had filed for divorce, and that she will fight for custody for her two girls when the divorce is granted. Then she said that she loved the two girls whom she had with her more than the child she doesn't know that is inside her. She feared an unfavorable judgment in the custody case if it was brought out that she was involved in a sexual relationship even before she was ever divorced; she felt her credibility as a mother would be challenged if she had another child from some other guy than her legal husband. In a way, her words were a great relief to me, an abortion would keep anyone from ever finding out about my stupidity, my mom and dad wouldn't be disappointed with me, my future wouldn't be "ruined"; as if a child could "ruin" someone's life. I took the cowardly route and supported her decision instead of taking a stand on what I knew to be right. I told her that I would take her to the Planned Parenthood clinic and even pay for the abortion.

I don't know how much time actually elapsed, a week maybe, when we made the trip to Planned Parenthood. I met Jesus that day. He was disguised as an elderly man who was on the sidewalk begging us not to go in there. Callously I brushed Him aside and walked past Him in a hurry as I shielded my girlfriend.

Planned Parenthood was a terrible place. We had to walk up a flight of stairs to the office where there were many other people sitting in cheap plastic chairs in the waiting room, all looking rather...blank. Some you could tell had been crying, others trying not to cry would give the "new people" entering the room a strained half smile. It was a sinister place, it did not feel good. After some time, we had our consultation with the person I assumed was a doctor, but to tell you the truth, it was all such a blur that I don't recall what actually took place during that consultation. Afterward, I left my girlfriend in that room and I returned to the waiting area with all the other boyfriends, sisters, parents, who were waiting on their girlfriends, sisters, daughters. There were attempts at small talk to try and mask the wrong we all knew that we were doing; it was all so unreal and ugly. All I wanted to do was get out of there.

After some time, who knows how long, my girlfriend came out and was ready to leave. We had to stop at the drug store to get a prescription for antibiotics filled, but I don't recall anything of our conversation as I drove her to her home.

So it was over. Now no one will know anything about my getting her pregnant. Everything will be okay and I will get my life back in order because the "problem" has been taken care of. Unfortunately, it didn't work out that way. My "secret" was still secure, but nothing about my life was normal again. Maybe on the surface it looked normal, but on the inside I was a wreck!! I knew all along that what I did was wrong and was too afraid, too prideful, to do what was right. I was Peter by denying Christ, I was Judas by betraying Christ. I was a worm and no man. Soon after the abortion I went to confession. It was a slow confession day and I was the only one in the church. I sat in the pew crying and trying to get up enough courage to enter the confessional. I feared so much hearing from the priest that my decision to abort my baby has left him no other decision than to excommunicate me from the Catholic faith. I love my faith and was frightened by what he might say. Finally, after what seemed ages, I was able to get up and walk to the confessional. Once I knelt down and the screen slid open I burst out in tears. I tried between sobs to get out my confession, which did eventually come. The priest was my parish priest, a man I had known all my life and for whom I served many masses. He was wonderful in his compassion and understanding. He tried to calm me down and assure me that my sin was forgiven and that I would not be excommunicated. I thanked him and left the church after saying my penance.

As I wallowed in the mire of decision, I began to believe the lies Satan planted in my mind, that my sin was so bad that God would not and could not forgive me. And even though I still went to mass weekly, and often throughout the week, always begging God to forgive me for my sin, I could never accept that He had already done so when I went to confession. My interior life was a mess as I put on a charade that everything about me was good.

My relationship with my girlfriend ended several months after the abortion; a common occurrence from what I hear; just too many bad feelings to make it work. For five years I suffered interiorly, something I embraced because I "deserved" it. I made a very bad choice and now I deserve to suffer forever. Over the next five years I never dated anyone long enough to where intimacy would be an option because I didn't want to have to tell them about my past. My secret was going to be safe with me. I feared being rejected, I feared being thought of as a bad person, I feared getting another girl pregnant, I feared that if I told a new girlfriend my past, she might tell others and it would eventually become known by my mom and dad. I lived in fear. I was approached many times over those years to participate in a Christ Renews His Parish retreat weekend, but always declined because I knew that something like that would expose me and my deep dark secret.

Everything began to change one summer's evening when I met a girl who was pretty, nice, and Catholic. She said she had heard about from one of her co-workers, so I asked her out, not expecting much would come of it since I was leading a guarded life. Turns out we sort of clicked and I began to trust her more and more with parts of my life. Eventually I did tell her about the inner turmoil I was experiencing because of the abortion five years previously. After

some discussion and my admitting that I couldn't believe God would forgive me for this sin, she told me she had a friend who also had an abortion and that maybe it would help me to talk to her. I was not ready for that. A short time later I received an anonymous letter from her friend who briefly shared with me her story and about God's unconditional love for us. The friend closed the letter with an invitation to meet me in person to talk more about our shared experience. When I told my girlfriend that I would like to meet this person, she told me it was Liz (not her real name). I had previously met Liz and her husband through the friendship they had with my girlfriend. We had done things together as couples, so I knew who she was. I called her and told her that I was the one to whom she had written the letter and that I wanted to meet with her to talk about what I had done.

A few days later we met for lunch. I think it turned into a rather long lunch because for the first time in five years I was able to get this burden off my chest, I was finally able to open up and talk to someone who knew what I was feeling, but who also would not judge me. What a relief!! I think I must have cried some during our talk because at one point she said to me, "I didn't know guys suffered from this," and that it gave her some comfort thinking that maybe the guy who got her pregnant was feeling some remorse as well. Believe me, guys suffer – at least this guy did! I really felt good after talking to her that day. For the first time in five years I knew I was not alone in my suffering, nor did I have to remain alone in my suffering, I would always have my new friend to talk to.

Feeling this inner healing beginning, I finally accepted an invitation to attend a CRHP weekend. It was a wonderful experience. I went to confession during the weekend and confessed once again my participation in the abortion. The priest asked if I had already confessed that sin before. I told him I had. He said it was already forgiven. He then asked if I had told my best friend about the abortion. Which I did, but guys being guys, he pretty much sloughed it off and moved on to some other subject. The priest asked if my best friend still liked me after hearing the news of the abortion. I said he does, and that we were still best friends. The priest then asked me, "then why can't you believe God can forgive you and still love you?" It seemed so obvious to me at that point. Of course He forgave me, of course He still loves me. What an epiphany. The priest then asked, "What other sins do you have that you haven't confessed." I was sort of dumbfounded and couldn't respond because I hadn't thought about anything but getting the courage up to confess the abortion; I didn't think of any other sins prior to entering the confessional. I think I threw out some old stand by's, received absolution, left the confessional, and entered a dark church with only the candles illuminating the altar. Again I wept, but this time they were tears of pure joy, love, and appreciation for the God's love and mercy. After the weekend was over, my girlfriend was over at my house, I told her that I had to call Liz to tell her how I was feeling. It was an amazing thing, I felt warm inside. it was the complete opposite of the feeling I had five years previously when I was in the hot shower but felt cold, and when I lay in bed in the fetal position freezing cold under a stack of blankets. I think I now know what the Grinch felt like near the end of that story when his heart grew two sizes after he let CHRISTmas into his life.

I then joined the CHRP team and went through six months of formation to present the next weekend. And sure enough, it was discerned that I should be the one to give the “Renewal” witness. I just knew years before that if I went on a weekend I would have to tell my story. Sure enough it happened. For the first time I told my story to a large group of guys in preparation for me telling it to the guys who would be coming on the weekend. Liz gave me my witness song, “When God Ran” by Bennie Hester. What a great song, and what a great image of love to see God running to me to embrace me. To this day, I think the story of the Prodigal Son is still my favorite Gospel parable because I am the wayward son. The witness I gave to the new group went very well and one guy came to me afterward and said he was suffering the same thing. There was a reason for me to give that witness and I had just discovered for whom it was meant.

Well, my girlfriend and I didn’t last, but my friendship with Liz and her family has been going strong for something like 27 years now. And after years of “searching for love in all the wrong places,” I finally came to the conclusion that the only One I could truly love without compromise and who could truly love me unconditionally, was the One who forgave me my sins and who loved me despite my selfishness. In my mind there was nothing else to do but to give my life completely to this Jesus who completely forgave me. So in 2003, I gave my life to God and joined a Religious Order. I think the experience of coming to understand God’s love for me and then my ability to accept that unconditional love and forgiveness, albeit very slowly, left me with an incredibly intense love for God; so much so, that I never felt I could give my heart to anyone else but God. I wanted God to be my spouse. He would be the perfect spouse who had already proven He would love me through thick and thin – unconditionally.

At one point, maybe four years after I joined the Order, I was speaking with Liz and sharing with her my frustration I felt towards my community for its lack of intimacy beyond the surface level. In her great wisdom and forthrightness, she asked me if I had ever shared with them my past; had I opened up to them the way I wanted them to open up to me? The plain and simple truth was that I hadn’t.

Soon afterward, our community was scheduled to have a Recollection Day, a day of prayer, given by a very kind, holy, and well known man. I said to myself that if he mentions anything in his talk about “abortion” I would speak to him about my own abortion as a way of breaking the ice with my community. Well, low and behold, I didn’t have to wait long for that word because he opened up his talk with, “I am the chaplain for a group of women in Cleveland who suffer from the effects of having had an abortion.” Geez, talk about being shocked. It was pretty clear what God wanted me to do. After Father’s talk I went to his room to talk to him. He was happy to see me and welcomed me in to his room to talk. After exchanging pleasantries, I tried to tell him that I, too, was post abortive, but I said it so softly that Father could not hear what I said. So to add to my pain and embarrassment I had to repeat it again and say it louder. Obviously he was surprised by the news of my past, but he was never judgmental. During our conversation he told me about his work as chaplain in the post-abortive ministry in Cleveland. He then invited me, a man, to go on the next weekend retreat. I accepted his invitation and then called Liz and told her about the weekend and asked her if she would go on it too. Father thought I could give a witness of my past and my healing, but that didn’t

happen. The retreat was a Godsend anyway for my continued healing, and Liz's as well. But it seems God also took the opportunity to plant a seed in Liz's heart to start a similar ministry in Ft. Wayne, IN

God certainly didn't want me or Liz to experience abortions, but what He did in our lives over the next 27 years to bring us full circle, working and praying together, in order to heal from this tragedy, and then leading her to begin a ministry to help other women, and hopefully someday men, has truly been a blessing from God. When I look back and see His Hand in all this I am so incredibly humbled.

You all are in my prayers as you journey towards healing.

Peace and God Bless.