**Counseling Tips: Helping People Choose Life, Not Abortion**

**By Fr. Frank Pavone, Founding Director of Priests for Life**

**Introduction**

Saving lives in our day has never been easier, and this is so for the tragic reason that more lives are in danger and easily snuffed out than ever before. The potential victims are all around us: in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our Churches. How do we counsel someone who is pregnant, in need, and tempted to abortion? Counseling in these situations can be direct (speaking to the one who is pregnant) or indirect (speaking to someone who knows her), brief or extended. We intend to carry a series of articles on practical counseling in this newsletter, but want to begin with a few insights and suggestions about the direct counseling of the pregnant individual.

**Narrowing the focus**

We are speaking here of the abortion-minded woman, and for our purposes we will define this person as one who sees abortion as either her only option or one of her likely options. Others who are pregnant but not abortion-minded may come to us for various kinds of help and advice, and helping them is certainly part of the mission of the Church. But stopping an abortion has dynamics that are unique and require special attention.

**She does not want the abortion**

A key thought to keep in mind is that those who have abortions don't want them. As Frederica Mathewes-Green has said, no woman wants an abortion like she wants a Porsche or an ice cream; rather, she wants it like an animal caught in a trap wants to gnaw off its own leg. Most likely, this pregnant girl has received no advice from anyone she has spoken to except "You have to get an abortion; there's no other way." We should assess right from the start who knows about the situation and what they are telling her. We then need to provide the voice of hope, that there are alternatives. Deep down, this is what she is hoping against hope to hear. Countless post-abortion testimonies reflect the experience of crying out -- on the inside -- for an alternative.

**Why some feel adoption is worse than abortion**

In his article, "Abortion: A Failure to Communicate," (First Things 82, April 1998: 31-35), Paul Swope of the Caring Foundation gives us the following insights regarding studies done on women's perception of abortion, adoption, and parenting: "Adoption, unfortunately, is seen as the most "evil" of the three options, as it is perceived as a kind of double death. First, the death of self, as the woman would have to accept motherhood by carrying the baby to term. Further, not only would the woman be a mother, but she would perceive herself as a bad mother, one who gave her own child away to strangers. The second death is the death of the child "through abandonment." A woman worries about the chance of her child being abused. She is further haunted by the uncertainty of the children's future, and about the possibility of the child returning to intrude on her own life many years later.

Basically, a woman desperately wants a sense of resolution to her crisis, and in her mind, adoption leaves the situation the most unresolved, with uncertainty and guilt as far as she can see for both herself and her child. As much as we might like to see the slogan "Adoption, Not Abortion" embraced by women, this study suggests that in pitting adoption against abortion, adoption will be the hands-down loser. "The attitude of these women toward abortion is quite surprising. First, all of the scores of women involved in the study (none of whom were pro-life activists and all of whom called themselves "pro-choice") agreed that abortion is killing. While this is something that is no doubt "written on the human heart," credit for driving home the reality of abortion is also due to the persevering educational work of the pro-life movement. Second, the women believe that abortion is wrong, an evil, and that God will punish a woman who makes that choice. Third, however, these women feel that God will ultimately forgive the woman, because He is a forgiving God, because the woman did not intend to get pregnant, and finally, because a woman in such crisis has no real choice, the perception is that the woman's whole life is at stake.

**Find out whom she is afraid to hurt, disappoint, or lose**

Whom is she trying to please or protect? Some believe that the key elements causing a person to seek abortion are practical matters like money or housing. Just as significant, however, are relational concerns. Frederica Mathewes-Green conducted listening groups in major cities across the United States to ascertain why women get abortions. Her book, **Real Choices**, gives excellent insights from what she learned. She writes, "Women in the listening groups uniformly talked about pressures in relationships; the abortion was done, each told us, either to please someone or to protect someone" (p.17).

"For nearly every woman, the abortion decision is the result of many reasons, not just one. Relational and practical, emotional and material problems all jumble together in a dense knot, and abortion appears the most efficient -- if not the only -- way to solve them all" (p. 20). The "pro-choice" Alan Guttmacher Institute states the following on it's website: www.agi-usa.org/pubs/fb\_induced abortion .html about why women get abortions: "On average, women give at least 3 reasons for choosing abortion: 3/4 say that having a baby would interfere with work, school or other responsibilities; about 2/3 say they cannot afford a child; and 1/2 say they do not want to be a single parent or are having problems with their husband or partner."

**See and treat the situation as a life and death emergency, which it is**

Though it may come to us in the most calm and normal of circumstances, the conversation with someone who might have an abortion has immersed us all at once into a life-or-death struggle. We need to treat it accordingly with the highest priority, being sure not only to assist the pregnant individual in our conversation, but to maintain contact with her on a daily basis, either doing so ourselves or entrusting her to an individual who can do so. Even if we seem to have persuaded her to choose life, those who are pressuring her to abort will be at it again later that day and the next day. We should know the nearest abortion-alternatives and the people who serve there, and we should, wherever possible, establish the connection ourselves between the person in need and the pregnancy assistance center. Simply giving her the contact information does not assure that she will call. Hotline numbers like the National Life Center (800-848-LOVE) should be on the tip of our tongue.

**Different levels of persuasion are necessary in different cases**

Some abortion-minded individuals can be talked out of it with counseling alone, maybe just one talk. Others will be persuaded only if they see photos of the developing baby. It is good to have some at hand. (see our web site at **www.priestsforlife.org**/resources/abortionimages/fetaldevelopment.htm). It is also advisable to identify a doctor in the parish who is willing to volunteer his or her services in these emergencies, and provide an ultrasound for the mother. Some will not be moved either by counseling or by positive images, and may need to see the pictures of aborted children.

There are those who, despite their knowledge of the life of the child and the violence of abortion, have completely closed their heart to the child. Sometimes, speaking about the risks of abortion to their own health and safety, and information about abortion malpractice and the dangers of the procedure, can persuade them not to go through with it. Finally, there are those who have placed themselves beyond the realm of reason, and only some form of peaceful, direct intervention can save that life.

**A priest's (or pastor's) counseling is unique**

You are offering, by your very presence, a caring fatherly image that contradicts the abandonment that this woman likely experiences from the baby's father. Moreover, the powerful religious symbolism a priest or pastor provides is an essential element which professional counseling by itself cannot provide.

**Invite them to come**

People who are pregnant and in need will come if we invite them to. By preaching and writing about abortion within our churches and schools, and inviting people to come forward to seek help, we give them permission to bring to us this deeply personal and troubling matter. And as a result, lives will be saved.