

A unique Mission opportunity for Catholics!



Rachel's Vineyard Italy Mission: **Reaching women and men who seek Hope and Healing after losing a child through abortion**

Founded over 20 years ago by a Catholic psychotherapist from Philadelphia, ***Rachel's Vineyard*** is a post-abortion healing retreat flourishing in the United States and now expanding internationally. **Monika Rodman Montanaro** for 12 years led Rachel's Vineyard retreats for the Diocese of Oakland, CA. After moving to Italy in 2007, she and her Italian husband, together with other Italian volunteers, in 2010 launched the retreats in Italy.

This pioneering ministry is Italy's first-ever Catholic outreach to women, men and couples seeking to reconcile their hidden grief associated with past abortion experiences. Our work embodies the New Evangelization so desperately needed in what is rapidly becoming a "post-Christian" Europe. During the *Year of Mercy* and beyond, **Pope Francis** has emphasized that the Church must expand its post-abortion pastoral care. The Italy Mission is doing precisely this - at the heart of the Church!

Women and men from Sicily to Piemonte travel hundreds of kilometers to Bologna to participate in this one-of-a kind 3-day program. While the ***Rachel's Vineyard Italy Mission*** has attracted the attention of the Italian Bishops Conference and the blessing of **Cardinal Renato Martino, Cardinal Carlo Caffarra, and Cardinal Elio Sgreccia**, financially the ministry is not yet self-supporting and thus remains largely a Mission of U.S. Catholics.

American Catholics who've already partnered in this ground-breaking project include mission-minded, pro-life individuals, Knights of Columbus Councils and, in 2016 and 2017, a diocesan Missions office in California. We invite you to join us!

Will you become a prayer and financial supporter of the Rachel's Vineyard Italy Mission?



For more information, including **Testimonies by Italian women and men whose lives have been touched and transformed by this apostolate**, contact Monika at mimmont@hotmail.com or 805-680-0406. Monika is glad to provide references.

www.vignadirachele.org (click on ) / www.rachelsvineyard.org

FAQ's: Rachel's Vineyard Italy Mission



In communion with the universal Church, the Rachel's Vineyard Italy Mission ("La Vigna di Rachele") opens the doors of Mercy and Reconciliation to women, men and couples who bear the wounds of abortion. Collaborating with Italian clergy, mental health professionals and other laity, we labor in this vineyard of the New Evangelization seeking to facilitate a life-transforming encounter with Christ – an encounter which brings hope and healing to individuals and families, Church and culture.

What is Rachel's Vineyard? Rachel's Vineyard (www.rachelsvineyard.org) is a small group healing experience offered in weekend retreat or weekly support group format. It is a sensory-based treatment blending sound psychology with Catholic spirituality and the sacraments, and it is rooted in a Catholic understanding of the human person and of the loss of life involved in every abortion. The Rachel's Vineyard Retreat Manual, already translated into Italian, carries the Church's approval (*imprimatur*).

Where are your activities conducted? All ministry activities are conducted exclusively in Italy. Since 2010 at least 3 retreats per year have been offered in the Diocese of Bologna. Participants travel from all parts of Italy seeking this experience. We look forward to "planting" Rachel's Vineyard in other Italian regions in the upcoming years.

How do those you serve find out about your program? Chiefly through the internet, but more and more often through a friend, psychotherapist or counseling center, a physician or priest.

Do you serve only practicing Catholics? No. Anyone open to making a healing encounter with Jesus by doing the intense psychological and spiritual work of the retreat process is welcome. Many of those we've served have found that this experience does draw them closer to God, to the Church, and to their loved ones. We've welcomed a broad spectrum of individuals and couples: strongly practicing Catholics including consecrated women and a permanent deacon and his wife who aborted years ago, as well as non-practicing Catholics, an unbaptized Italian woman and two Muslim women, one with her husband.

Do you conduct political activism on the abortion issue? No. For those we serve, abortion is a choice already made whose consequences they are struggling with today. It is not an "issue" but a painful chapter of their life story. Our sole focus is to accompany those needing a safe place to share that story and find the forgiveness and peace they seek. While this ministry does not take part in the political debates surrounding abortion, public conversation of the issue opens the door for *La Vigna di Rachele* to speak fresh words of hope in a polarized society, and to offer opportunities for healing which political arguments cannot provide. We have leafleted at Italy's new *March for Life* in Rome, and in 2015 had 3 former participants in our program give their testimonies, thanks to an invitation by the event organizers.

Do you charge fees for your services? Yes. Retreatants are asked to donate 200 euros (ca. \$220) each for the 3-day weekend and the one-day follow up Saturday two months later. Those unable to donate this entire amount are matched with an Italian friend of the ministry who anonymously provides financial assistance. We have never turned anyone away due to financial need.

Do these participant fees cover all program costs? No. They cover barely half of all ministry expenses. Travel and infrastructure costs (chiefly rental of our small office space) require us to raise additional operational funds. Our goal is to not raise program fees but to instead find more Mission partners whose donations will subsidize our operational costs, so as to be able to welcome all in need of the unique help we offer. We are particularly looking for individual and organizational donors in the giving range of \$400 (one month's rent and utilities) to \$5,000 per year. Smaller gifts are also much appreciated!

Who directs this outreach? Coordinator of the Italy Mission for Rachel's Vineyard Ministries is **Monika Rodman Montanaro, MDiv.** While employed as full-time Respect Life Ministry director by the Diocese of Oakland from 1995-2007, Monika established and directed Rachel's Vineyard in the Diocese of Oakland. She is fluent in Italian and collaborates with Milan-based **Italian psychologist Valeria D'Antonio**, who trained with Rachel's Vineyard founder Dr. Theresa Burke. Monika's husband **Domenico Montanaro** is a native Italian who uses his excellent English and strong Italian writing skills in his website work for the ministry, and who does a marvelous job of preparing and companioning male retreat participants. **Clergy collaborators** include a former hospital chaplain and a Dominican priest, and **4 former retreat participants** who themselves benefitted from the program collaborate by offering generous one-on-one companioning to current participants before, during and after the retreats.

Do you have paid staff? No. Aside from some English tutoring begun 3 years ago to help meet financial needs of this apostolate, Monika has done no paid work since leaving the Diocese of Oakland in July 2007. Her husband works full time as a civil servant and volunteers evening and weekend time to the ministry, as do the psychologist, clergy and former participant collaborators.



Why Italy? Despite the popular perception of Italy as a Catholic nation, Italian culture is in many ways highly secularized. Both demographics and low levels of faith practice reveal what can only be called a deep crisis of faith and hope. Post-abortion outreach addresses one of the major spiritual and human wounds of this culture, a wound which often weakens or destroys relationships and leads many women and men to what they themselves call a spiritual "divorce" from God. Catholic post-abortion healing outreach is not only a work of psychological assistance and emotional recovery, but an evangelizing apostolate that heals hearts, restores marriages, and renews families.

Italy is Europe's most rapidly aging nation, with a mere 1.27 birthrate – among the lowest in the world. Despite an adoration of the child, there is great fear of marrying and having children, all fueled by a sense of *precarietà* (uncertainty). Abortion was legalized by popular referendum in 1981. Since that time Italy has suffered over five million legal abortions - the combined populations of Rome and Milan. While there are regional variations, Italian abortion rates nationwide are comparable to those in the United States.

Many priests have said they quite rarely hear abortion confessions. Aware that abortion grief manifests itself even when it does not lead to the confessional, we eagerly take up the challenge of reaching those who are not approaching the dark solitude of this sacred - but for many, uninviting - box. Many Italians assume the Church issues only condemnation after abortion. The *Rachel* outreach offers a different response more in keeping with the Good News of hope and healing, life renewed and life transformed by compassionate friendship and the Mercy of God.

Italians have now lived with readily available, state-paid abortion for three decades. **The requests for help we receive in ever growing numbers show there is much healing work to be done.** In addition to

launching the retreats throughout Italy, we place high priority on producing top-quality written resources to train clergy, counselors and others to be instruments of hope and healing in the lives of others.

Why Bologna? This city lies at the crossroads of Italy and is proving accessible to people from all corners of the country. Efforts to start offering retreats in Rome were aborted due to local leadership difficulties. We hope to begin offering the retreats elsewhere, based on local initiative, in the upcoming years.



Who sponsors this ministry? Each Rachel's Vineyard site, including the Italy Mission, is expected to be financially self-sustaining. We receive NO FUNDING from any agency or ministry, nor from Rachel's Vineyard headquarters in Philadelphia. Instead, we must raise all our own funds for the Italy Mission. From 2009 to present a registered 501(c)3 non-profit organization in the United States has graciously assisted us by facilitating tax-deductible restricted giving for the Italy Mission. The Italy Mission is also able to receive donations by **PayPal** through our website www.vignadirachele.org. Those donations are presently not tax-deductible, as they are converted into euros and deposited directly into our Italy account devoted exclusively to the apostolate.

Do you receive Italian funding? Participant program fees do not cover all ministry expenses, and to date Italian donations have been minimal, consisting largely of financial aid to participants in need. No diocese, religious congregation or other ecclesial entity has yet stepped up to offer assistance. Expenses not covered by Italian donations and program fees are reimbursed by charitable gifts from our American friends. Thus, it is your financial support that will continue to make this outreach possible! U.S. donations have been particularly critical to help us meet our \$400/month overhead expenses (rent and utilities) of our small national office.

How can I find out more? Go to www.vignadirachele.org and click on the Home page's American flag. Or email Italy Mission coordinator Monika Rodman Montanaro at mimmont@hotmail.com. When she is visiting the United States Monika is also available by phone at **805-680-0406 (cell)**.



In the Words of Those we Serve

The Hurt

- ❖ *A 43 year-old Italian professional woman contacted us 2 months after giving birth, suddenly overwhelmed by grief for an abortion 10 years earlier: "I thought I'd gotten over it, but I was so wrong. The years after that event were filled with anger, and then I got sick. I had to stop my hectic work life and finally take care of myself. I found my life partner and a few months ago we had a baby girl, who's my sunshine. But from the moment I felt her stirring in my womb, the volcano I thought I'd put out years ago opened up again and I was overwhelmed by intense pain. Since the day our baby was born not a day has passed in which I don't think about my never born baby, asking myself why I did what I did. Now that I know what it's like to have a baby in your arms, to smell her, to look in her eyes and feel all her love for me, I've died inside. I feel so guilty and cry constantly. They've diagnosed me with post-partum depression, but I can't tell them the real story. You're the only ones who know what's behind my deep sadness."*

- ❖ *A father wrote to his aborted son:* “Dear Peter: I was not a father to play with, to get to know and to grow up with together. I was weak and selfish from the first moment I heard about you. I ask your forgiveness for the evil I did to you, whose seriousness I only now realize. Only now have I come to understand how little it would have taken to say yes, I want you...”
- ❖ *A 30 year-old single professional in Bologna:* “I know what I did is horrendous, and I did it 3 times... From the moment I did it the first time, my life ended. I carry a huge sense of despair inside me, and it’s suffocating me. For the longest time it’s like I didn’t want to see what I’d done, but the truth is, I’m carrying death inside of me. I can’t find the words to tell you what I feel, I find myself totally disgusting, and I figure this is just my punishment for what I did in such an irresponsible way. There is not a crumb of love left in my life. My heart swings between total desperation and being frozen solid. I can’t love anyone anymore. I have no life in me anymore.”
- ❖ *A married woman in a rural area near Switzerland:* “By now 2 years have passed since that day of pain.... I feel emptiness, a desire to die myself, loneliness, self-hatred, shame and a sense of unworthiness in my relations with others. I wish I could throw up all these feelings. I’m mad at those who found me and my child to be a burden... My husband feels nothing, he’s just fine.... I’ve lost trust in God, since the people who pray to him all the time are the very people who left me alone... I hope that even if I abandoned God, He hasn’t abandoned me, and I just hope he doesn’t punish my other children.”



The Hope

- ❖ *A 63 year-old participant from Florence:* "My first contacts with *La Vigna di Rachele* were marked by understanding, patient attention and warmth.... Taking part in this retreat was on the one hand an enormous effort, and on the other hand, so very easy that I wonder how long I was being “prepared” for this experience! I entrusted myself to the process, I just trusted this was for me and didn’t ask a lot of questions about the structure or activities. I felt this was simply my opportunity to finally deal with this pain (after 35 years), and so I took it.”
- ❖ *A single woman from Torino:* “I saw my own suffering in others and I began to not feel alone anymore... At the beginning I was afraid to tell my story in front of strangers, but then, when I realized my suffering was also theirs, I let myself go. The group allowed me to share with others a very heavy and painful situation, and this made me feel I was no longer alone.”

The Healing

- ❖ "It helped me a lot to be able to speak openly about the abortion experience. Being totally focused on that experience was also helpful.... The retreat really filled my heart that was so cold and empty... I feel cleansed and loved, and I feel like a huge weight has been lifted from me.”
- ❖ “There was such a respect toward my deepest feelings. Respect for me and for my mistake. It was an unexpected and indescribable moment. A voice, a light, a blessing.”
- ❖ *A woman from Sicily:* "The whole process helped me so much. Whenever I couldn’t quite “get there” in making sense of my feelings and experience, there was always someone else who, in sharing her experience with the group, helped me go deeper and understand better.”
- ❖ *A woman from Milan who aborted while working in Australia:* “I’m writing to thank you for the wonderful work you’re carrying out. I also thank those who prayed for me during the retreat. Thanks to *La Vigna di Rachele* JESUS has worked healing and liberation in my life and in the life

of my family.... My heart's deep desire is to help other women like me who've touched bottom, who've been to Hades and wonder if they can come back. I so desire that they, too, might return to life by experiencing God's love, His infinite Mercy, healing and liberation... I want many unborn children, abandoned and buried in darkness, to be resurrected in the hearts of their moms and to be led by Jesus into Paradise. I send you a big hug."

Husbands say:

- ❖ "... I was amazed and pleasantly surprised by this experience, even having already done three weekend experiences over the years for our relationship as a couple."
- ❖ "I was welcomed in my rather unconvinced request for help ... If at first I thought I'd be opening a door to resolve a very particular wound, instead I found myself immersed in questions and exercises that really made me confront myself at a most basic level. Surrounded both by the intensity of my own emotions and by wonderful people who knew how to help me, I learned how to navigate my feelings in a new and positive way."



Wives say:

- ❖ "As I've shared before, my biggest hurdle/pain was in going into a church to take part in Holy Mass.... Now, one month after the retreat, I find it easier to pray. I feel more heard, maybe because I lift my heart and mind to God with more conviction... My thoughts about my child are also more serene. I'm finally able to think of him without getting a huge knot in my throat, a knot that was always so big that it hurt and it wouldn't even let me speak without intense pain and crying... My husband says he sees something different in me, and he likes what he sees. He was deeply moved by the few hours he was at the retreat. He talked about his feelings as he listened to letters being read and as he took part in the ceremony....Thank you from the bottom of my heart."
- ❖ "The Lord helped me cry out all my pain. He was there for me in the moments in which I relived my own death and the death of my child... He brought my husband and me back to a sense of "us". He put balm on my wounds. He woke me up, made me able to realize new things and to surrender my life to Him rather than insist on being in control of it all. Thank you!"
- ❖ "The group work, guided so well by the team, was a real treasure. My experience was that of having taken part in a rich banquet. Being here with my husband made everything even more precious and was a saving grace for our relationship."

A psychotherapist in Milan wrote: "I've had two individuals whom I see for psychotherapy make the retreat. The effects I see in them are very beautiful, and it is wonderful to continue to walk with them now because I see their heart has been deeply touched by Love, and that heart is coming back to life. Good work, thanks to you all."

A deeper look

"Teresa" is a 39 year-old Roman woman who made her retreat in February 2012. She studied philosophy at university and owns her own gardening business. Teresa grew up extremely protected in an active Catholic family. In her 20's, after being left by her fiancée just before the wedding, she embarked on a 10-year "late adolescence" in which she dated various men, often making unwise choices in a partner. At age 37 she became pregnant. Encouraged to abort by her sister, friends and psychologist, she ended the life of what may be the only child she ever conceives. She reflects:

"Years ago my spiritual director gave me the book "The Prodigal Son" by Father Henri Nouwen, based on the painting by Rembrandt which I see you also use in your ministry. .. At the time I couldn't get into the book, so I left it for years on my bookshelf.



Last Fall, looking with ever greater urgency for an answer, for a way out of my depression, my anguish and my inability to find any sense in life, I took the book in hand again. I was most struck by the reflection on the younger son who leaves home. I was perfectly able to imagine all of the states of mind and heart described: work just being feeding the pigs, the hunger that made him want to eat what he was feeding those pigs, the shame and regret. But while the younger son heard the voice that made him desire to return home, all I heard was a voice that made me resign myself to the dark and desperate life I was living. All I felt was unworthiness and inability to even want to really return "home". I wanted to desire to go home, but deep down, I just couldn't, my heart just wasn't able. And the other thing that I just couldn't imagine was that there could be a fatted calf that would be slaughtered for me. I couldn't imagine being clothed in a beautiful gown. I thought these images were in the story just for literary effect.

If by chance I'd been able to muster the huge effort to ask to return home, and to actually "go home", I imagined I'd simply be welcomed, but without much fanfare, just welcomed back into the same gray life that I remembered for years before the abortion.

The *Vigna di Rachele* weekend was my fatted calf, my most beautiful gown, the Father who saw me from a distance and ran to embrace me... it was the ring, the special shoes and all the rest. It was my return home. And the celebration at returning home! The retreat was one of the most beautiful gifts I've ever received. Never, never before in my whole life have I ever felt so welcomed, so cared for and listened to, so worthy and so "at home". I thank God in all of His greatness, I thank Jesus, Mary, and my little "Maryam", who I believe didn't ever stop praying for me.... but I also thank all of you so very much, you who made all of this materially and spiritually possible."



***"Jesus Himself said that He came to call sinners and not the self-righteous.
I pray that all who participate in Rachel's Vineyard with the longing to be free
and to be healed by Jesus, may find Him
the source of true joy, peace and love,
and allow God to restore them to wholeness and happiness."***

- Mother Teresa of Calcutta

The journey into Rachel's Vineyard

"Lori" is a 40 year-old university administrator in Piemonte:

"I would like to tell you in greater detail the path that led me to *La Vigna di Rachele*. As I already mentioned, I used to live the faith in a very detached way. The man whom I loved, and who desired to form a family with me, instead lived the faith very intensely. He talked about his acquaintances with well-known clergy and high-ranking Church officials, he was a great admirer of the traditional Latin Mass, his home was filled with relics and religious images, and he frequently chided me for my "secular" approach to the faith.

When the child we desired arrived in my womb, he began, after some initial enthusiasm, to distance himself from me and from the child, to the point of finally rejecting and then abandoning us. I was totally hopeless and desperate. I exhausted myself trying to reason and then plead with him to fulfil his responsibilities. I had suicidal thoughts. Physically I was a wreck.

After the awful abortion experience, despite treatment including antidepressants and constant sessions at the psychiatrist's office, I urgently felt need to approach the Church and draw closer to the faith. I knew (and I still know today) that I killed, that I failed in welcoming life, but I found myself seeking answers from the faith and the Church because I was totally numb and impenetrable in the face of "secular" comfort. And it was precisely through that ever-more urgent search that I found (online) *La Vigna di Rachele*. I was also blessed by the availability and closeness of the Bishop of my Diocese, who pointed me toward the road of faith and the long spiritual journey that I need to undertake. My experience in *La Vigna di Rachele* was intense yet tender. It has sown in me the seed of faith. The personal encounter and the spiritual embrace I experienced with your team are bringing hope back to life in me."



Restoring the Mother-Child Relationship

"Serena" didn't feel ready for motherhood again at age 42, and together with her husband "Davide" aborted their third child two years ago. The couple participated together in our last retreat, finally confronting and working through their abortion pain and other issues that were putting their marriage at risk. Here is the letter that Serena wrote to her aborted son:

Dear Peter,

You, the stone cast off, have become my cornerstone and support. Here we are face to face. Your eyes seem to say to me, "So, mommy, you finally want to get to know me? I've been expecting you, I've been waiting for you for so long, you know."

I, on the other hand, wasn't expecting you. When you arrived two and a half years ago in no way was I expecting you, and I refused to wait and get to know you, to learn who you were, to see what you were like and whom you'd look like. I was in a rush to let you go. You were supposed to disappear in silence, in the same way you arrived. So I erased you from my body. I eliminated you. And I died with you.

Now I know all too well the emptiness that you left inside of me. An infinite emptiness that disarms me, an emptiness inside of that body of mine that had been a welcoming nest for your siblings, but for you was a place of rejection.

Now I meet you again here, when you are no longer in my body, but feeling you so very present. Now I recognize you, and I'm getting to know you like never before. Now I really do want to have you with me forever. Be born again together with your mommy, don't leave me again, never again.

I love you. Thank you for having waited for me with such patience and trust.

Truly, your Mom

NOTE: Just weeks after the retreat, at Easter 2012, this couple baptized their two living children, ages 11 and 9. They continue their faith journey by taking part in a couples group that meets monthly with the pastor to dialogue about faith and the Word of God as these apply to daily life. They have found hope for their future, and they trust their third child Peter intercedes for them before the Throne of God's Mercy.



“...[T]he Catholic community should be open to welcome back all who repent of having participated in the grave sin of abortion, and should guide them with pastoral charity to accept the grace of forgiveness, the need for penance, and the joy of entering once more into the new life of Christ.”

**- Pope Benedict XVI to the Bishops of Kenya
19 November 2007 *Ad limina* visit**



Vatican official endorses Rachel's Vineyard's Italy Mission

"I am delighted to be informed that Rachel's Vineyard Ministries, a valuable apostolate sponsored by *Priests for Life/Gospel of Life*, is also present and operating in Italy.

Rachel's Vineyard Ministries offers weekend retreats to women and men suffering emotional and spiritual pain following the traumatic experience of abortion.

The retreats are carefully designed to help wounded souls face and overcome the repressed feelings that are often triggered by the abortion experience: anger, shame and guilt. The retreats facilitate the grieving process for aborted children, in such a way that participants experience the mercy and the forgiveness of God.

I wish to express my cordial support and warm encouragement to Rachel's Vineyard Ministries, and I promise my prayers for the success of this apostolate, present in Italy and in other countries around the world."

Renato Raffaele Cardinale Martino
President Emeritus, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace

29 June 2009

www.vignadirachele.org (click on ) / www.rachelsvineyard.org

Year-End 2015 RESPONSE FORM to kick off the "Jubilee of Mercy"

Rachel's Vineyard Italy Mission (*"La Vigna di Rachele"*)

A Mission of Mercy to the Heart of the Church

www.vignadirachele.org



Your Gift will go to work exclusively in Italy to sponsor *Rachel's Vineyard* post-abortion healing retreats, phone and internet support, development of training materials for Italian clergy and mental health professionals, speaking engagements and outreach to Dioceses across Italy!

_____ I am sending a gift by credit card, through the **PayPal** link found on the English-language page of your website. I understand that this gift is not tax-deductible.

_____ I am sending a gift **by check** payable to **Monika Rodman Montanaro** (**Check Memo: Italy Mission**) for exclusive use in the *Vigna di Rachele* Italy Mission. *I understand the contact information requested below is NEVER passed on to other individuals or organizations, but used solely for acknowledgement purposes.* I also understand that this gift is not tax-deductible.

NAME: _____

(Organization: _____)

ADDRESS: _____

CITY, STATE, ZIP: _____

EMAIL: _____ PHONE: _____

If donating by check, please mail your gift with this COMPLETED RESPONSE FORM to former Rachel's Vineyard retreat team member:

Tara Somerday
37151 Ila Court
Fremont, CA 94536

Reminder:

Check is made out to "**Monika Rodman Montanaro**" (Check Memo: "ITALY MISSION") and sent to Tara Somerday in Fremont, CA. Tara will have your check deposited so that your gift may be put to work **exclusively for our Italy Mission**. Questions? Contact Italy Mission coordinator Monika Rodman Montanaro at mimmont@hotmail.com or 805-680-0406 (U.S. cell)

Thank you for your prayers and sacrificial giving
which both make you partners in this mission!