



VOLUME XLIX No. 3 ♦ SUMMER 2023

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FEMINISTS AND CONTRACEPTION

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Maria McFadden Maffucci on: *Madame Restell: The Life, Death and Resurrection of Old New York's Most Fabulous, Fearless and Infamous Abortioneer* by Jennifer Wright



Appendices: Clarke D. Forsythe ♦ Gerard V. Bradley



the HUMAN LIFE REVIEW

Summer 2023
Vol. XLIX, No. 3

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Published by The Human Life Foundation, Inc. Editorial Office, 271 Madison Avenue, Room 1005, New York, N.Y. 10016. Phone: (212) 685-5210. The editors will consider all manuscripts submitted, but assume no responsibility for unsolicited material. Editorial and subscription inquiries, and requests for reprint permission should be sent directly to our editorial office. Subscription price: \$40 per year; Canada and other foreign countries: \$60 (U.S. currency). ISSN 0097-9783.

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BOOKNOTES

SURVIVOR: A MEMOIR OF FORGIVENESS

Cynthia Toolin-Wilson

(En Route Books and Media, 2021, paperback, 194 pages, \$14.95)

Reviewed by Kiki Latimer

Survivor: A Memoir of Forgiveness by Dr. Cynthia Toolin-Wilson is a story of human tragedy and sorrow intercepted by divine grace, hope, and ultimately forgiveness. Toolin-Wilson is a Professor of Dogmatic and Moral Theology who taught for over 25 years at Holy Apostles College and Seminary. Her life as a daughter, granddaughter, woman, wife, mother, friend, theologian, and author was almost cut short in utero by an attempted chemical abortion. When Cynthia was 11 years old, her mother sat her down and told her that she had tried to abort her, with drugs procured by her beloved grandfather. Her mother explained that when she started bleeding, she feared for her *own* life, and stopped taking the drugs. Shattered by this disclosure, and already living in a gravely dysfunctional family, Cynthia no longer trusted those who had tried to kill her.

I didn't have the words to express it then, as I was just a little girl, but I never cared about her again. She told me the story, and I turned off my love like the light leaving a room when someone flips the switch. I had thought that they loved me the way I loved them—Ma, Pa, my grandfather. It had never occurred to me that they saw me as an unwanted inconvenience. I felt devastated and I remained that way for decades.

Abortion is often a sorrowful choice considered in spiritual desolation. Fr. Paul Desmarais, Rhode Island priest and authority on the occult, refers to the three portals to hell as: addiction, abuse, and abortion. Cynthia's childhood family misery revolved around all three. Her parents were both addicted to drink, her father was a serial adulterer addicted to sex, and the environment of these addictions, no doubt, led to the attempted abortion. This was followed by years of emotional child abuse, marital anger, continued infidelity, filthy living conditions, mental illness, and ultimately, misery and despair, which included the untimely and appalling confession by her mother.

Yet out of this familial devastation, Cynthia not only survived, but escaped and moved onward and upward, primarily due to her strong intellectual abilities and her strength of resolve to be a better person than genetics predicted. But these natural human coping skills did not include the ability or understanding of forgiveness. Rather, coping meant sweeping the past under the rug and never looking back.

Cynthia went on to marry a Catholic man, even though she herself had no religious affiliation, and worked at having a normal family life. This went well until Cynthia's compassionate husband felt that her parents needed help in their old age and insisted they move in. This part of the book must be read to be believed, and is not for the squeamish, as the daily behaviors of Cynthia's parents had gone from bad to disgusting. At long last, both parents died, and Cynthia breathed a sigh of relief. There was no consideration of forgiveness or searching for a deeper meaning.

But then, in literally a miraculous moment, grace broke through. While on a visit to Rome with her husband, Cynthia accidentally ventured into a tour of one of the ancient catacombs, where God, in no uncertain terms, spoke to her of the Truth to be found in the Church. Cynthia's was an instantaneous conversion to Catholicism. And with that journey set in motion, she eventually came to perceive the need to accept her past and begin the arduous process of forgiveness of her father, her grandfather, and finally her mother. They had all long since died and so there was no hope of hearing them say they were sorry, which meant that the entire burden of forgiveness lay in Cynthia's soul. Such a monumental act of forgiveness can only be the work of grace within the human heart.

Many confuse this kind of *initiating* forgiveness (rather than *responding* to someone being sorrowful for hurting you) with being weak, a doormat, letting the abuser off the hook, and sometimes even allowing abuse to continue. But this kind of forgiveness does not necessarily involve a return to the relationship, and especially if there is any possibility of continued abuse, should not. This radical forgiveness of huge offenses, such as those experienced by Cynthia, is a power of the soul, and rightly exercised by grace, brings freedom, wisdom, and ultimately peace.

Survivor: A Memoir of Forgiveness is the harrowing story of harm done to a child by the very people meant to love and protect her; it is a tale of addiction, abuse, and attempted abortion. But it is also a story of hope, forgiveness, and redemption, a physical and spiritual rags to riches journey that will give you a new understanding of the preciousness of the human person and God's unfathomable love for each one of us. At a time when, state by state, we as a society are deciding the abortion laws that will either protect or allow the killing of the innocent child in the womb, this book calls for a recognition of the horror of abortion. Cynthia's entire life—all that she would accomplish, all those she would love, all the hundreds of students and seminarians she would teach—her entire life was held in the balance between life and death, by someone's choice.

Fr. Paul Desmarais speaks of the two great lies that Satan, the father of lies,

whispers concerning abortion. The first lie, *before* the abortion, is aimed at the death of the child; it whispers slyly that abortion is no big deal, merely a final solution to an unwanted pregnancy. The second lie, *after* the abortion, is aimed at the very soul of the woman; this lie now tells her that she has committed the most unforgiveable of all sins; this lie says that God Himself cannot redeem her. Abortion is a grave objective moral evil, but no one is beyond the reach of God's mercy and forgiveness.

So, allow Cynthia's *Survivor: A Memoir of Forgiveness* to speak to your heart; give her memoir to anyone considering or advocating abortion; give it to anyone struggling to forgive the unforgiveable. Our stories of the workings of God's grace in our lives, however painful, are important to help others on the journey to healing and forgiveness.

—*Kiki Latimer is the author of four children's books and co-author of Understanding Abortion and Philosophy Begins in Wonder. She was a teacher of homiletics for many years at Holy Apostles College & Seminary in Cromwell, Connecticut, and has recently completed and published Home for the Homily.*

**MADAME RESTELL: THE LIFE, DEATH AND
RESURRECTION OF OLD NEW YORK'S MOST FABULOUS,
FEARLESS AND INFAMOUS ABORTIONIST**

Jennifer Wright

(Hachette books, New York, 2023, 334 pp.)

Reviewed by Maria McFadden Maffucci

Crawling through this "pop history" book on Madame Restell brought to mind "The Piranha Brothers," a memorable skit from the absurdly hilarious *Monty Python's Flying Circus* program.

The fictional Doug and Dinsdale Piranha in the Monty Python skit are violent criminals who terrorize their victims, as this "interview" of one of Dinsdale's victims reveals:

Interviewer: I've been told Dinsdale Piranha nailed your head to the floor.

Stig: No. Never. He was a smashing bloke. He used to buy his mother flowers and that. He was like a brother to me.

Interviewer: But the police have film of Dinsdale actually nailing your head to the floor.

Stig: [pause] Oh yeah, he did that.