

## Carol's Story

It was shortly after the birth of their first child that Carol began to suspect her husband had a gambling problem. As the years progressed, the problem grew worse. There was the inexplicable drain on finances, the secrecy and dishonesty, the violent reactions to being 'caught out', the promises to change followed by a period of harmony. Then the destructive cycle would begin all over again.

Fifteen years later, Carol knew their relationship had to end. To that point, they had tried everything: Gamblers Anonymous, persistent prayer, separations while clinging to threads of hope, repeated attempts at reconciliation. Periods of domestic peace held out great promise. But, inevitably, the gambling would begin.

'The crunch came when I discovered that his addiction was impinging upon the children's lives in ways I hadn't thought possible. Up until then I had coped with the abusive behaviour myself while trying to shield the children. When I realised I could no longer protect the rest of the family, I knew what I had to do and it was so incredibly painful, a real Gethsemane experience. I could hardly breathe from the pain as I drove to tell Dan that we had to separate for good. On the way I called in on a prayer meeting and asked for prayers. I was sobbing, but when it came time to say what I had to say, I had the strength and peace of

mind to do it.'

Speaking some years after that decisive event, Carol articulates the subtle complexities of living one's Catholic values within a web of tragic events. 'I was committed to making our marriage work. The gospel teaching on the sanctity of marriage and on forgiving one another "seventy times seven" was a constant touchstone, as was the awareness that the cross is part of life. I had to balance these truths with other truths – like the fact that our God is a life-giving God who does not condemn a person to a life of abuse and unhappiness. What I've learnt is that forgiveness is possible within one's heart, even if the relationship is not repaired. Forgiving Dan and myself has not led me to return to the marriage; but it does enable me to re-build my life and the life of my children with some sense of peace and stability.'

There is a peace about Carol as she recounts painful events; an inner calm that enables her to speak well of Dan, to remember the good times they had together and not be consumed by bitterness. 'He's a beautiful man with some wonderful characteristics,' she says. 'He's still the father of my children and I want them to relate as well as possible.' The gift of their children is a recurring theme in Carol's sharing. Even though she worries about the impact of the marriage breakdown on their lives, she speaks of each child in terms of joy and blessing.

It is obvious, too, that prayer has been a constant in Carol's

life. 'Prayer is what gives me peace. When I go to Mass I have a sense of our lives being part of a bigger picture. The Mary MacKillop prayer means a lot to me. It expresses the idea that we can't put the blame for life's disappointments on others. When we stand before God, we can only give an account of ourselves: what we did and the spirit in which we did it.

'I will always feel sad about our marriage break-up. I never thought it would happen to us. But my focus now is on moving forward, raising my children and trusting in God's care for us. Someone said to me recently, "Oh you poor thing, life's been terrible to you, you must feel so cheated." But that's not how it is. I've always had a deep faith in God's love and I consider myself incredibly blessed.'

Carol teaches us that in our darkest moments we can reach for Christ who is resurrection and life. May we examine our faithfulness in difficult situations, just as she continues to do.

