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The University of Notre Dame's de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture will award its 2020 Notre Dame Evangelium Vitae Medal to Vicki Thorn, founder of the post-abortion healing ministry Project Rachel.

Thorn, who also is executive director of the National Office of Post-Abortion Reconciliation and Healing, will receive the honor at a Mass and banquet April 25.

"Vicki Thorn has dedicated her life to caring for women and men who have been wounded by abortion," said O. Carter Snead, the William P. and Hazel B. White director of the de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture.

"Her work is a living witness to the unconditional love and mercy that lies at the heart of the Culture of Life. We are pleased to honor her with the Notre Dame Evangelium Vitae Medal," he said in a statement Oct. 6.

The honor is announced annually on Respect Life Sunday, the first Sunday of October, which this year was Oct. 6. The Evangelium Vitae award consists of a specially commissioned medal and $10,000 prize.

"Vicki Thorn's work has been a source of healing for women and men whose lives have been touched by abortion," said Holy Cross Father John I. Jenkins, Notre Dame's president. "I'm grateful to the de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture for recognizing Ms. Thorn for her service to the Church and to the work of mercy on

behalf of a Culture of Life."

Thorn, a certified trauma counselor and spiritual director, started Project Rachel in 1984 while working in the Respect Life Office of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Since the first training workshop for a small group of attendees was held Sept. 19, 1984, the ministry has expanded to the majority of dioceses across the United States and more than 25 additional countries around the world.

Now overseen by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Project Rachel is a diocesan-based network of specially trained priest confessors, mental health professionals, spiritual directors, medical professionals and others who provide ongoing, one-on-one, confidential post-abortion care.

Thorn is the author of "Progetto Rachele, il volto della compassione" ("Project Rachel, The Face of Compassion"), published in 2009 by Libreria Editrice Vaticana, and is an internationally acclaimed speaker on the effects of abortion on women, men and families.

With her husband, William, she was inducted in 2008 into the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. In 2009, she received the People of Life Award from the USCCB for her pro-life service to the Catholic Church, and in 2017, Pope Francis re-appointed her as a corresponding member of the Pontifical Academy for Life.

"Vicki not only championed the cause of post-abortion reconciliation and healing, she has lived to see it become an essential aspect of the Catholic Church's pro-life ministry in the United States and around the world," said Richard Doerflinger, retired associate director of the USCCB Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities and recipient of the inaugural Notre Dame Evangelium Vitae Medal.

Thorn is "now a leader in showing how the church's vision of human sexuality is supported by the findings of medical science, helping young people to turn away from behaviors that lead to the tragedy of abortion," Doerflinger added.

By choosing Thorn to receive the Evangelium Vitae Medal, "Notre Dame recognizes her important service of the Gospel of life," Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend said in a statement. "She has helped thousands of women who have had an abortion to accept St. John Paul II's invitation in 'Evangelium Vitae' to 'not give in to discouragement and not lose hope.'"

He added, "Project Rachel reminds us all that the Gospel of Jesus, the Gospel of life, is also the Gospel of mercy."

He thanked Thorn "for assisting so many women and men to experience God's love and forgiveness and to become, in the words of St. John Paul II, 'eloquent defenders of the right to life.'"

Helen Alvare, former spokesperson for the USCCB and recipient of the 2012 Notre Dame Evangelium Vitae Medal, said Thorn "puts the 'respect' in the 'Respect Life' brand." She praised her for being "the kind of creative, brave, kind, tenacious woman who keeps the movement strong."

The Notre Dame Evangelium Vitae Medal, named after St. John Paul II's 1995 encyclical on life issues, is the nation's most important lifetime achievement award for heroes of the pro-life movement, honoring individuals whose efforts have served to proclaim the Gospel of life "by steadfastly affirming and defending the sanctity of human life from its earliest stages."

Last year the medal was presented to the Women's Care Center Foundation. Previous recipients include Mother Agnes Mary Donovan and the Sisters of Life; U.S. Rep. Chris Smith, R-New Jersey, co-chair of the Bipartisan Congressional Pro-Life Caucus, and his wife, Marie Smith, director of the Parliamentary Network for Critical Issues; Supreme Knight Carl Anderson and the Knights of Columbus; the Little Sisters of the Poor; the Jerome Lejeune Foundation; and Mary Ann Glendon, professor of law at Harvard Law School.

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