

## WHEN I CALL FOR HELP: A PASTORAL RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

*In the beginning, I was young . . . he was handsome. He said I was beautiful, smart, worthy of love . . . made me feel that way. And so we were married, walking joyfully together down a church aisle, our union blessed by God. Then came the angry words . . . the verbal tearing apart. . . . Now I was made to feel ugly, unintelligent, unworthy of any love, God's or man's. Next came the beatings . . . unrelenting violence . . . unceasing pain. I shouldn't stay, but this is my husband . . . promised forever. He says I deserve it . . . maybe I do . . . if I could just be good. I feel so alone . . . doesn't God hear me when I cry out silently as I lie in bed each night? Finally came the release, the realization. It's not me . . . it's him. . . . I am worthy of love, God's and man's. One spring morning, my heart was filled with hope and with fear now only of starting over on my own. And so again I walked . . . down the hallway of our apartment building . . . never again to be silent . . . never again to live with that kind of violence, to suffer that kind of pain.*  
—A battered wife<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

As pastors of the Catholic Church in the United States, we state as clearly and strongly as we can that violence against women, inside or outside the home, is *never* justified. Violence in any form"—physical, sexual, psychological, or verbal"—is sinful; often, it is a crime as well. We have called for a moral revolution to replace a culture of violence. We acknowledge that violence has many forms, many causes, and many victims—men as well as women.<sup>2</sup>

The Catholic Church teaches that violence against another person in any form fails to treat that person as someone worthy of love. Instead, it treats the person as an object to be used. When violence occurs within a sacramental marriage, the abused spouse may question, "How do these violent acts relate to my promise to take my spouse for better or for worse?" The person being assaulted needs to know that acting to end the abuse does not violate the marriage promises. While violence can be directed towards men, it tends to harm women and children more.

In 1992 we spoke out against domestic violence. We called on the Christian community to work vigorously against it. Since then, many dioceses, parishes, and organizations have made domestic violence a priority issue. We commend and encourage these efforts.

In this update of our 1992 statement, we again express our desire to offer the Church's resources to both the women who are abused and the men who abuse. Both groups need Jesus' strength and healing.<sup>3</sup>

We focus here on violence against women, since 85 percent of the victims of reported cases of non-lethal domestic violence are women.<sup>4</sup> Women's greatest risk of violence comes from intimate partners—a current or former husband or boyfriend.<sup>5</sup>

Violence against women in the home has serious repercussions for children. Over 50 percent of men who abuse their wives also beat their children.<sup>6</sup> Children who grow up in violent homes are more likely to develop alcohol and drug addictions and to become abusers themselves.<sup>7</sup> The stage is set for a cycle of

violence that may continue from generation to generation.

The Church can help break this cycle. Many abused women seek help first from the Church because they see it as a safe place. Even if their abusers isolate them from other social contacts, they may still allow them to go to church. Recognizing the critical role that the Church can play, we address this statement to several audiences:

- To women who are victims of violence and who may need the Church's help to break out of their pain and isolation;
- To pastors, parish personnel, and educators, who are often the first responders for abused women;
- To men who abuse and may not know how to break out of the cycle of violence; and
- To society, which has made some strides towards recognizing the extent of domestic violence against women.

We recognize that violence against women has many dimensions. This statement is not meant to be all-inclusive, but rather to be an introduction, along with some practical suggestions of what dioceses and parishes can do now.

### **An Overview of Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence is any kind of behavior that a person uses to control an intimate partner through fear and intimidation. It includes physical, sexual, psychological, verbal, and economic abuse. Some examples of domestic abuse include battering, name-calling and insults, threats to kill or harm one's partner or children, destruction of property, marital rape, and forced sterilization or abortion.<sup>8</sup>

Younger, unmarried women are at greatest risk for domestic violence. According to a U.S. government survey, 53 percent of victims were abused by a current or former girlfriend or boyfriend. One-third of all victims were abused by a spouse, while 14 percent said that the offender was an ex-spouse. Women ages 16 to 24 are nearly three times as vulnerable to attacks by intimate partners as those in other age groups; abuse victims between ages 35 and 49 run the highest risk of being killed.<sup>9</sup>

While abuse cuts across all ethnic and economic backgrounds, some women face particular obstacles. Women of color may not view the criminal justice system as a source of help. Additionally, in some cultures women feel pressured to keep problems within the home and to keep the family together at all costs. Some fear that they will lose face in the community if they leave. Immigrant women often lack familiarity with the language and legal systems of this country. Their abusers may threaten them with deportation.

Women in rural communities may find themselves with fewer resources. The isolation imposed by distance and lack of transportation can aggravate their situation. Isolation can also be a factor for women who do not work outside the home. They may have less access to financial resources and to information about domestic violence. Women with disabilities and elderly women are also particularly vulnerable to violence.

Some who suffer from domestic violence are also victims of stalking, which includes following a person,

making harassing phone calls, and vandalizing property. Eight percent of women in the United States have been stalked at some time in their lives, and more than one million are stalked annually.<sup>10</sup> Stalking is a unique crime because stalkers are obsessed with controlling their victims' actions and feelings. A victim can experience extreme stress, rage, depression, and an inability to trust anyone.

Domestic violence is often shrouded in silence. People outside the family hesitate to interfere, even when they suspect abuse is occurring. Many times even extended family denies that abuse exists, out of loyalty to the abuser and in order to protect the image of the family. Some people still argue—mistakenly—that intervention by outside sources endangers the sanctity of the home. Yet abuse and assault are no less serious when they occur within a family. Even when domestic violence is reported, sometimes there are failures to protect victims adequately or to punish perpetrators.

### **Why Men Batter**

Domestic violence is learned behavior. Men who batter learn to abuse through observation, experience, and reinforcement. They believe that they have a right to use violence; they are also rewarded, that is, their behavior gives them power and control over their partner.

Abusive men come from all economic classes, races, religions, and occupations. The batterer may be a "good provider" and a respected member of his church and community. While there is no one type, men who abuse share some common characteristics. They tend to be extremely jealous, possessive, and easily angered. A man may fly into a rage because his spouse called her mother too often or because she didn't take the car in for servicing. Many try to isolate their partners by limiting their contact with family and friends.

Typically, abusive men deny that the abuse is happening, or they minimize it. They often blame their abusive behavior on someone or something other than themselves. They tell their partner, "You made me do this."

Many abusive men hold a view of women as inferior. Their conversation and language reveal their attitude towards a woman's place in society. Many believe that men are meant to dominate and control women.

Alcohol and drugs are often associated with domestic violence, but they do not cause it. An abusive man who drinks or uses drugs has two distinct problems: substance abuse and violence. Both must be treated.

### **Why Women Stay**

Women stay with men who abuse them primarily out of fear. Some fear that they will lose their children. Many believe that they cannot support themselves, much less their children.

When the first violent act occurs, the woman is likely to be incredulous. She believes her abuser when he apologizes and promises that it will not happen again. When it does—repeatedly—many women believe that if they just act differently they can stop the abuse. They may be ashamed to admit that the man they love is terrorizing them. Some cannot admit or realize that they are battered women. Others have endured trauma and suffer from battered women syndrome.

**REMEMBER:** *Some battered women run a high risk of being killed when they leave their abuser or seek help from the legal system. It is important to be honest with women about the risks involved. If a woman decides to leave, she needs to have a safety plan, including the names and phone numbers of shelters and programs. Some victims may choose to stay at this time because it seems safer. Ultimately, abused women must make their own decisions about staying or leaving.*

## **The Church Responds to Domestic Violence**

### Scripture and Church Teachings

Religion can be either a resource or a roadblock for battered women. As a resource, it encourages women to resist mistreatment. As a roadblock, its misinterpretation can contribute to the victim's self-blame and suffering and to the abuser's rationalizations.

Abused women often say, "I can't leave this relationship. The Bible says it would be wrong." Abusive men often say, "The Bible says my wife should be submissive to me." They take the biblical text and distort it to support their right to batter.

As bishops, we condemn the use of the Bible to support abusive behavior in any form. A correct reading of Scripture leads people to an understanding of the equal dignity of men and women and to relationships based on mutuality and love. Beginning with Genesis, Scripture teaches that women and men are created in God's image. Jesus himself always respected the human dignity of women. Pope John Paul II reminds us that "Christ's way of acting, the Gospel of his words and deeds, is a consistent protest against whatever offends the dignity of women."<sup>11</sup>

Men who abuse often use Ephesians 5:22, taken out of context, to justify their behavior, but the passage (v. 21-33) refers to the mutual submission of husband and wife out of love for Christ. Husbands should love their wives as they love their own body, as Christ loves the Church.

Men who batter also cite Scripture to insist that their victims forgive them (see, for example, Mt 6:9-15). A victim then feels guilty if she cannot do so. Forgiveness, however, does not mean forgetting the abuse or pretending that it did not happen. Neither is possible. Forgiveness is not permission to repeat the abuse. Rather, forgiveness means that the victim decides to let go of the experience and move on with greater insight and conviction not to tolerate abuse of any kind again.

An abused woman may see her suffering as just punishment for a past deed for which she feels guilty. She may try to explain suffering by saying that it is "God's will" or "part of God's plan for my life" or "God's way of teaching me a lesson." This image of a harsh, cruel God runs contrary to the biblical image of a kind, merciful, and loving God. Jesus went out of his way to help suffering women. Think of the woman with the hemorrhage (Mk 5:25-34) or the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:1-11). God promises to be present to us in our suffering, even when it is unjust.

Finally, we emphasize that no person is expected to stay in an abusive marriage. Some abused women believe that church teaching on the permanence of marriage requires them to stay in an abusive relationship. They may hesitate to seek a separation or divorce. They may fear that they cannot re-marry in the Church. Violence and abuse, not divorce, break up a marriage. We encourage abused persons who

have divorced to investigate the possibility of seeking an annulment. An annulment, which determines that the marriage bond is not valid, can frequently open the door to healing.

### **First Responders: Priests, Deacons, and Lay Ministers**

Many church ministers want to help abused women but worry that they are not experts on domestic violence. Clergy may hesitate to preach about domestic violence because they are unsure what to do if an abused woman approaches them for help.

We ask them to keep in mind that intervention by church ministers has three goals, in the following order:

1. Safety for the victim and children;
2. Accountability for the abuser; and
3. Restoration of the relationship (if possible), or mourning over the loss of the relationship.

We also encourage church ministers to see themselves as "first responders" who

- Listen to and believe the victim's story,
- Help her to assess the danger to herself and her children, and
- Refer her to counseling and other specialized services.

Church ministers should become familiar with and follow the reporting requirements of their state. Many professionals who deal with vulnerable people are required to report suspected crimes, which may include domestic abuse.

In dealing with people who abuse, church ministers need to hold them accountable for their behavior. They can support the abusive person as he seeks specialized counseling to change his abusive behavior. Couple counseling is not appropriate and can endanger the victim's safety.

### **What You Can Do to Help**

We offer the following practical suggestions for several audiences.

#### **For Abused Women**

- Begin to believe that you are not alone and that help is available for you and your children.
- Talk in confidence to someone you trust: a relative, friend, parish priest, deacon, religious sister or brother, or lay minister.
- If you choose to stay in the situation, at least for now, set up a plan of action to ensure your safety. This includes hiding a car key, personal documents, and some money in a safe place and locating somewhere to go in an emergency.
- Find out about resources in your area that offer help to battered women and their children. The phone book lists numbers to call in your local area. Your diocesan Catholic Charities office or family life office can help. Catholic Charities often has

qualified counselors on staff and can provide emergency assistance and other kinds of help.

- The National Domestic Violence Hotline provides crisis intervention and referrals to local service providers. Call 800-799-SAFE (7233) or 800-787-3224 (TTY). E-mail assistance is available at [ndvh@ndvh.org](mailto:ndvh@ndvh.org). In some communities, cell phones programmed to 911 are made available to abused women.

#### For Men Who Abuse

- Admit that the abuse is your problem, not your partner's, and have the manly courage to seek help. Begin to believe that you can change your behavior if you choose to do so.
- Be willing to reach out for help. Talk to someone you trust who can help you evaluate the situation. Contact Catholic Charities or other church or community agencies for the name of a program for abusers.
- Keep in mind that the Church is available to help you. Part of the mission Jesus entrusted to us is to offer healing when it is needed. Contact your parish.
- Find alternative ways to act when you become frustrated or angry. Talk to other men who have overcome abusive behavior. Find out what they did and how they did it.

#### For Pastors and Pastoral Staff

Make your parish a safe place where abused women and abusive men can come for help. Here are some specific suggestions:

- Include information about domestic violence and local resources in parish bulletins and newsletters and on websites.
- Place copies of this brochure and/or other information, including local telephone numbers for assistance about domestic violence, in the women's restroom(s).
- Keep an updated list of resources for abused women. This can be a project for the parish pastoral council, social justice committee, or women's group.
- Find a staff person or volunteer who is willing to receive in-depth training on domestic violence; ask this person to serve as a resource and to help educate others about abuse.
- Provide training on domestic violence to all church ministers, including priests, deacons and lay ministers. When possible, provide opportunities for them to hear directly from victims of violence.
- Join in the national observance of October as "Domestic Violence Awareness Month." Dedicate at least one weekend that month to inform parishioners about domestic abuse. During that month, make available educational and training programs in order to sensitize men and women, girls and boys to the personal and social effects of violence in the family. Help them to see how psychological abuse may escalate over time. Teach them how to communicate without violence.

Use liturgies to draw attention to violence and abuse. Here are some specific suggestions:

- In homilies, include a reference to domestic violence when appropriate. Just a mention of domestic violence lets abused women know that someone cares. Describe what abuse is so that women begin to recognize and name what is happening to them. Watch the video *When You Preach, Remember Me* (see **Resources**).
- In parish reconciliation services, identify violence against women as a sin.
- Include intercessions for victims of abuse, people who abuse people, and those who work with them.
- If you suspect abuse, ask direct questions. Ask the woman if she is being hit or hurt at home. Carefully evaluate her response. Some women do not realize they are being abused, or they lie to protect their spouses. Be careful not to say anything that will bolster her belief that it is her fault and that she must change her behavior.
- Have an action plan in place to follow if an abused woman calls on you for help. This includes knowing how and where to refer her for help. This will be easier if you have already established contact with local shelters and domestic violence agencies.
- Include a discussion of domestic violence in marriage preparation sessions. If violence has already begun in the relationship, it will only escalate after marriage.
- In baptismal preparation programs, be alert that the arrival of a child and its attendant stress may increase the risk of domestic violence.

### **When I Call for Help: A Prayer**

One source of healing we have in our lives as Christians is prayer. Psalm 55 may be an especially apt prayer for women who are dealing with abusive situations. With all of you we pray these verses:

Listen, God, to my prayer; do not hide from my pleading; hear me and give answer.

If an enemy had reviled me, that I could bear; If my foe had viewed me with contempt, from that I could hide.

But it was you, my other self, my comrade and friend, you, whose company I enjoyed, at whose side I walked in procession in the house of God.

But I will call upon God, and the Lord will save me. At dusk, dawn, and noon I will grieve and complain, and my prayer will be heard.

(Ps 55:2-3, 13-15, 17-18)