

The Role of Churches in Preventing Domestic Violence: Can Churches Really Do Anything about Domestic Violence?

*Catholic News Service * Viewpoints * March 2006*

Only if we overcome our fear of it

by Julia L. Perilla

Religious teachings can undoubtedly be a roadblock in stopping domestic violence. In my work the past 17 years with families affected by this tremendous social problem I have heard many women talk about responses by some priests, religious sisters or lay workers when survivors shared their experiences of domestic violence. These church figures could have comforted with biblical passages on God's unwavering love and the importance of respect and equality within a couple. They could have held the batterer accountable for the violence he had committed against the woman he had promised to love.

Instead, abused women are often told that they must not do things that anger their spouses so that the spouses do not respond with violence. Women are reminded of the permanence of marriage and the need to "bear their cross" for the good of their children and family. Biblical passages are misinterpreted to validate the tremendous power imbalance present in these couples.

These responses are of grave concern because women who have been abused often seek support from the church first.

"When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women," published by the U.S. bishops' conference in 1992 and addressed again in 2002, affirms many realities that confront my daily work, including the problem's epidemic proportions. As a statement from the bishops, this document contains important messages for families in crisis due to violence. The letter speaks of Jesus' love and respect for women, and the biblical image of a kind, merciful and loving God. It names domestic violence a sin. It calls for clergy and lay church workers to obtain training so that parishes can enhance victim safety and batterer accountability. So, why do we not hear more often about this document from the pulpit?

I suspect it has to do with our individual and collective fears about tampering with the institution of marriage, with issues that are best kept as "family secrets," with our anxiety about exposing untenable situations within couples. Fortunately, the bishops' letter provides an excellent roadmap for the church's involvement through direct, caring action. Reading the

document will allay fears and provide clear and scripturally based guidelines for using the pulpit as a tool for justice-making.

The misguided advice that women often receive obviously reflects a lack of knowledge regarding the dynamics of violence. In stark contrast, the bishops' message teaches that "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," whereas misinterpretations of Scripture and church teachings "can contribute to the victim's self-blame and suffering, and to the abuser's rationalizations." Silence from the pulpit on the topic of domestic abuse can indeed become a roadblock for victims and lend support to their victimization.

Obviously, it's not the absence of church teachings or Episcopal guidance that prevents parishes from becoming the haven that many battered women consider them to be. The Catholic Church has created a document that affirms the basic human right of each person to live without violence at home. It is time that we begin to make good use of this important tool. I believe it will significantly enhance our work in creating God's kingdom on earth.

Julia L. Perilla writes that silence in the churches on this issue is still a problem. She cautions that misinterpretations of biblical teachings have been harmful to women and children in situations of violence. Perilla teaches psychology at Georgia State University in Atlanta, where she attends Our Lady of the Americas Catholic Mission. She does community work with immigrant Latino families affected by domestic violence at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in that city.

Yes, we have resources that matter

by Rev. Dr. Marie M. Fortune, Founder and Senior Analyst, FaithTrust Institute

Christianity was misused for centuries to somehow justify the abuse of wives and children by husbands and fathers. This assertion is easily documented. But does it tell the whole story? No. Christianity can serve as a valuable resource in a variety of ways to those suffering domestic violence.

It is easy to justify or refrain from challenging the abuse of women and children through the misuse or misinterpretation of texts and doctrines. But if the agenda is to provide safety for women and children, and to hold an abuser accountable, this also is accomplished easily through the use of texts and doctrines.

We have the opportunity as clergy and lay leaders to provide helpful resources on domestic abuse through sermons, prayers, education and pastoral care.

One important function the church can serve is to tell the truth about women's experiences of abuse, to give a voice where there has been silence. For a battered woman in the pew to hear a prayer for all those living with abuse in the home breaks the silence. This may open the door for

her to come forward seeking help. The same is true for a sermon addressing domestic violence or using it as an example. (See "Telling the Truth: Preaching About Domestic Violence," by John S. McClure and Nancy J. Ramsay.)

Think about the biblical passages that Phyllis Tribble calls the "texts of terror" (the rape of Dinah or of Tamar, the rape and murder of the concubine in Judges 19, etc.). When preachers mention these, it can be seen—though the stories are vivid and painful—that our ancestors in the faith not only knew the experiences so many have today but also spoke about them in the context of faith.

Another valuable function of the church is support and inspiration. Whether in a public worship setting or a private pastoral care setting, we can offer the faith community's encouragement to those seeking to end violence in their families. And we can provide material support for shelters for battered women.

But we can also provide a word. For example, the Psalms give voice to the anguish and struggle that is common for battered women and their children. Psalm 31—"Be gracious to me, O God, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief"—can be heard as the voice of an abused woman. Psalm 32—"While I kept my silence, my body wasted away. [. . .] Then I acknowledged my sin to you [. . .] and you forgave the guilt"—can be read as the voice of an abuser.

Church teaching can serve as a resource for victims and abusers. The U.S. Catholic bishops published a very useful resource, "When I Call for Help," in 1992 (revised, 2002). They said, "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." It is important that our churches take a public stand like this and participate in community efforts to address this social justice issue.

It matters greatly to the faithful of the church what we say or don't say about these painful, personal and persistent experiences of abuse. We have the resources to make a positive impact.

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