

# How the Church can better respond to the problem of domestic violence

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Follow By Mary

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Washington D.C., Jun 23, 2019 / 04:12 pm (CNA).- This Sunday, in Catholic parishes across the country, one in four women sitting in the pews will have experienced severe physical violence in their own homes from their spouses or partners - including burns, choking, beating, or the use of a weapon against them. One in nine men will have experienced the same.

According to one priest who is an expert in the subject, priests in the U.S. are still not doing enough to address the issue.

“The Church has been complicit in this because we haven’t talked about it enough,” said Fr. Charles Dahm, a priest of the Chicago Archdiocese who leads its domestic violence outreach program.

Dahm was a priest at a large parish with a majority-Hispanic population near downtown Chicago for 21 years. During his time there, after hiring a counselor on his staff, he learned that many of his parishioners were victims of domestic abuse, he told CNA. He asked his counselor to train him in recognizing and responding to abuse, and he started to talk about domestic violence in his homilies.

“And the more I spoke about it, the more victims came to me,” he said. Word of Dahm’s parish ministry spread, as parishioners referred their relatives, neighbors and friends. Around the year 2000, the parish office was receiving an average of one victim of domestic violence every day, he said.

Today, he coordinates the Church’s response to domestic abuse at the Archdiocese of Chicago, educating and training priests and other Church leaders on how to prevent and respond to instances of domestic abuse. He travels to give homilies and workshops on the topic, and while he’s been to many parishes throughout his own archdiocese, Dahm said it has been difficult to get other dioceses to respond to his offers of help.

The clergy of the U.S., including the bishops, are largely ignorant about the existence of domestic violence, Dahm said.

“The studies show it’s rampant in the United States. Every pastor who stands up on Sunday looking out on his congregation - he is facing dozens if not scores of victims in his congregation in front of him, and he does not know how to speak to them.”

The ignorance surrounding domestic abuse has a variety of causes, Dahm noted. Priests have not been educated on domestic violence in the seminary, and so they do not expect to encounter it in the priesthood. If a priest does not talk about domestic violence, victims may not approach him about it, and he can therefore have a false sense that it does not exist in his parish. Priests are also overstretched and overworked, and can be weary about taking on new ministries, he added.

"It's a real travesty that...the clergy is resistant to this topic," he said.

### **Misunderstanding abuse as a Catholic**

There can also be misunderstandings among Catholics - lay people and clergy alike - about the prevalence of domestic violence and how to respond to it within the context of a Christian marriage.

For example, Dahm said, it is a mistake to think that because couples are religious and going to church, they are less likely to experience or perpetrate abuse.

A **2019 study** from the Institute for Family Studies and the Wheatley Institution of Brigham Young University found that while religion offers many benefits to couples, it unfortunately does not positively impact their rates of domestic violence.

"When it comes to domestic violence, religious couples in heterosexual relationships do not have an advantage over secular couples or less/mixed religious couples. Measures of intimate partner violence (IPV)—which includes physical abuse, as well as sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and controlling behaviors—do not differ in a statistically significant way by religiosity," the study noted.

Other misunderstandings about how to respond to domestic violence come from an incomplete understanding of the Catholic teaching about the permanence of marriage, or the role of suffering in the life of a Christian.

Sharon O'Brien is the director of Catholics For Family Peace, an education and research initiative that is part of the National Catholic School of Social Service's Consortium for Catholic Social Teaching at the Catholic University of America.

O'Brien told CNA that while marriage is meant to be a sacrament that lasts until the end of a person's or their partner's life, domestic violence can be a valid justification for a Catholic to seek at least physical separation from their spouse.

"Catholics I think are challenged to understand that abuse in a marriage is unacceptable," O'Brien said. "But it's sinful and it's usually criminal."

Greg Pope is the assistant general secretary for the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, which recently held their annual Day for Life, a day set aside for raising awareness of various pro-life issues. This year, they chose **domestic violence as the theme** of the day.

Pope told CNA that domestic violence "fundamentally undermines the Church's teaching on the inherent dignity of the human person and the complementarity of couples within a marriage."

He said that Catholic couples experiencing domestic abuse should know that Canon Law, the governing law of the Church, addresses domestic violence, and states: "If either of the spouses causes grave mental or physical danger to the other spouse or to the offspring or otherwise renders common life too difficult, that spouse gives the other a legitimate cause for leaving, either by decree of the local ordinary or even on his or her own authority if there is danger in delay." (Can. 1153 §1.)

"The Church does not force anyone to remain in an abusive relationship," Pope reiterated.

Furthermore, O'Brien said, Catholics can have a misunderstanding of the role of suffering in their lives, and some may think that the suffering they experience through domestic violence may be God's way of "punishing" them for some other sin.

"Yes, suffering exists and yes, we can offer it to the Lord, but we're not to seek suffering," O'Brien said, and Catholics should not tolerate abuse in the name of suffering.

"The other big deal with Catholics is understanding that this is not punishment," she added.

"Yes, maybe you had an abortion, or yes, maybe you all were engaged in relations before marriage...but experiencing domestic abuse is not punishment for some other sin, and you are called to address it, to figure out what to do," she said.

### **How the Church responds to domestic abuse**

In 1992, the Catholic bishops of the U.S. wrote **"When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women."**

In the document, the bishops clearly state Catholic Church teaching regarding domestic abuse. They also examine why abuse happens, how one can respond to it, and information on where and how abused women and men can seek help.

The document "was cutting edge in 1992 and is still incredibly relevant and appropriate," said Fr. Dahm. It has since been updated, but only in very minor ways.

“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,” the bishops stated in the document’s introduction.

But while the document is excellent, it is still a “really well-kept secret” of the Church, Dahm said, in that many priests and Church leaders do not know that it exists. He said part of his work over the years has been to bring this document to the attention of priests and seminarians during his workshops on domestic violence.

Catholics for Family Peace is another key part of the Church’s response in the United States.

“All the major religions have a national office where clergy and leaders can be trained on domestic abuse, and so we’re it for Catholics,” O’Brien noted.

“We work with dioceses to implement the 20 strategies in the (bishop’s) statement and to create a coordinated, compassionate response to domestic abuse,” she said. They also host several awareness-raising events during the month of October, which is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

Lauri Przybysz, co-founder of Catholics For Family Peace, told CNA that their mission extends beyond education and training for clergy and leaders to “education for engaged couples as they prepare for marriage, for them to understand what a healthy relationship means for their marriage, and just facts about domestic violence that a lot of people aren't aware of.”

“We actually have an education module that we can share with marriage preparation leaders... [that] has a little questionnaire that a couple can take to say, to identify: ‘Is there something in my relationship that could be better?’” she said.

They also educate teens on healthy dating and relationships, and they compile good secular resources that clergy can use too, because many of them do not have anything in them contrary to the Catholic faith, Przybysz said.

O’Brien also said that the archdioceses of both Chicago and Washington, D.C., have modeled some of the best responses to domestic violence.

Laura Yeomans is the program manager for the Parish Partners Program at Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. The website for the program includes a homily on domestic violence, a downloadable packet for pastors responding to domestic violence, definitions and explanations of domestic violence and Church teaching, as well as links to emergency resources for victims, among other things.

Yeomans and her team connect with priests and families at the parish level when they are notified about cases of domestic abuse, she said.

"We go out to the parish setting and we meet individually with families who are suffering domestic abuse," Yeomans said.

### **Basic do's and don'ts of responding to domestic violence**

While a natural response for pastors or Catholics who learn about a case of domestic abuse may be to call the police, Przybysz warned against it. If a perpetrator knows they have been found out, their violence could escalate to the point of killing their victim.

"It's about walking beside someone, giving them information about where they can find safety, when they decide to make the move," she said.

Yeomans seconded this advice. "When you're talking with family suffering, domestic abuse, it's very important that we not go in with an agenda," she said.

The first thing to do is listen, Yeomans said, and to say: "I believe you." Next, she said, ask: "What can I do? How can I help you? What step would you like to take?"

"It's very important not to say, 'You should forgive him,'" she said, because this gives the victim the false impression that they must continue enduring the abuse in the meantime. Forgiveness may come eventually, Yeomans said, but the first priority is the safety of the victim.

"Forgiveness is not permitting the abuse to continue," she said. "It is not allowing yourself and your children to be in danger."

Spreading awareness of domestic violence, and of the resources available, is one of the best things priests can do for their parishioners, Fr. Dahm said, because then they will know where to turn for help. He said he found it especially true among Hispanics and Latinos, especially those who had recently come to the United States and prefer going to the Church for help.

"It is absolutely true that Hispanics prefer to go to their parish," he said. "They feel more welcome, they feel safer, that was why in our parish we were so successful - people came to us from all over. I think that had a lot to do with the fact that people wanted to go to a place they trusted."

Yeomans said that besides speaking about domestic violence at Mass, priests should find out what resources are available to them locally. Once they know what domestic violence hotlines and resources are available, they can print flyers with information and hang them in parish bathrooms, and put informative inserts in their parish bulletins.

Another thing that Yeomans has seen priests do is to raise the question about domestic violence and healthy relationships during times like baptism class, when couples are already at Church to receive some education and information.

Pope said that in the UK, the bishops' goals for having domestic violence as the theme for their Day for Life was to raise awareness of the issue, to raise additional funds for resources, and to make domestic violence culturally unacceptable.

Fr. Dahm added that he is willing to travel throughout the United States to preach and give workshops on domestic violence in parishes.

"If there are bishops in dioceses who are interested, just tell me, and I will go there," he said.

By focusing on domestic violence, among other issues, as important pro-life issues, Pope said the bishops hope to help their people follow God's call in the Gospel of John more closely: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

*If you or a loved one are experiencing domestic violence, call the national domestic violence hotline at: 800-799-SAFE (7233) or 800-787-3224 (TTY). For more information, go to [www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org).*

*Domestic violence resources through the Archdiocese of Chicago are available at:*

**<https://pvm.archchicago.org/human-dignity-solidarity/domestic-violence-outreach>**

*Domestic violence resources, including the pastoral response packet, are available through Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. at:*

**<https://www.catholiccharitiesdc.org/familypeace/>**

*Catholics can also visit **[Catholics for Family Peace](#)** or **[For Your Marriage](#)** for additional information.*