**Domestic Violence Outreach**

**ARTICLE 6 – Religion and Domestic Violence**1

**A Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops**

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

* 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.
* The church condemns 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.
* Men who abuse can take Scripture out of context to justify their behavior, but Scripture 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 may also cite Scripture to insist that their victims forgive them. Forgiveness, however, does not mean forgetting the abuse or pretending that it did not happen. 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." However, God is a kind, merciful, and loving God. Jesus went out of his way to help suffering women. God promises to be present to us in our suffering, even when it is unjust.
* The church emphasizes 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 and fear that they cannot re-marry in the Church. Violence and abuse, not divorce, break up a marriage.

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

Church ministers have three goals, in the following order:

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

Church ministers are also encouraged 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 counseling to change his abusive behavior. Couple counseling is not appropriate and can endanger the victim's safety.

1”When I Call For Help” A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women, A Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops.