

PARISH SOCIAL MINISTRY

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IN THIS ISSUE:

Catholic Social Teaching:
Domestic Abuse
page 1

How to Get Started:
A Parish Response to
Domestic Violence
page 3

Additional Contacts
and Resources
page 3

Focus on the Parish:
St. Raymond de Penafort
page 4

Catholic Charities Impact
page 4

CCUSA Webinar on
Domestic Violence
page 4



Working to Reduce Poverty in America.



By Collen Mayer

As is the case for many women who experience homelessness, Tina was in a violent and abusive relationship and found herself without a place to live when she moved out of her apartment. When she showed up at a Catholic Worker house, Tina felt ashamed and guilty for the situation that she had left. Through conversations with my wife Aimee and other staff members, Tina began to see that domestic violence was not something she deserved or earned, but the product of a society that does not know how to deal with grief, mental illness, anger, and addiction.

In *When I Call for Help*, the U.S. bishops offer a new paradigm for understanding both domestic violence and the Church's appropriate response. This document is addressed to both those affected by domestic violence and those who seek to serve and support them. The bishops make the following observations:

article continues on page 2

1. **Domestic violence is the result of a wider culture of violence.** The bishops caution that abuse “cuts across all ethnic and economic backgrounds.” They speak definitively that violence in any form against a person “is never justified” and they affirm that *all persons* are worthy of love. Catholic social teaching continues to affirm that violence, in any form, runs contrary to the gospel of peace.
2. **The Church never expects someone to stay in an abusive relationship.** For faithful Catholics experiencing domestic violence, many struggle with how to reconcile their commitment to a life-long marriage with the violence they are experiencing. Some may even feel their marriage vows spoken before the Church compel them, and their children, to stay in a violent situation. The bishops acknowledge this very real crisis that abused persons may feel: “Persons may ask, ‘how do these violent acts relate to my promise to take my spouse for better or for worse?’” Yet the bishops answer this question unambiguously: “Acting to end the abuse does not violate the marriage promises,” and later, “[W]e emphasize that no person is expected to stay in an abusive relationship.”
3. **Domestic violence is often covered up by silence.** *When I Cry Out* acknowledges that families and communities often remain silent when they suspect that abuse is occurring. Extended family members hesitate to come forward with their suspicions of abuse not wanting to get involved. Others remain silent because they feel some loyalty to the abuser, or want to protect the image of a “healthy family”.
4. **Women who stay in abusive relationships often do so out of fear. Only the victim of domestic violence can ultimately decide whether to stay or leave, and if so, when.** Those who have never experienced domestic violence often misunderstand the complexity and difficulty of the decisions a domestic abuse victim has to make. Often, the victim feels like he or she is deciding between two dangerous alternatives, both of which jeopardize the safety of every person involved. Some people decide that it

is in their (and their children’s) best interest to stay in the situation. The bishops caution that as the Church ministers to victims of abuse, the ultimate decision about whether and when to leave the abuser lies wholly with the victim. The document offers tangible advice to those ministering to domestic abuse victims: “It is important to be honest with women about the risks involved (in leaving). 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.”

5. **Those who have experienced separation or divorce, especially as a result of domestic violence, should receive the support, healing, and love of the entire Church.**

Many women feel that they will be judged by their Church community if they experience separation or divorce, even as a result of domestic violence. Worse, some women wrongly believe that their abuse is a punishment from God for past sin. However, the bishops insist, “[T]his image of a harsh, cruel God runs contrary to the biblical image of a kind, merciful, and loving God” who does not inflict harm such as abuse as punishment for sin.

Catholic Social Teaching calls for solidarity with those who have been victims of violence so healing can begin. Women who have experienced violence should know of the prayers, support, and compassion of their Church community. The bishops assure all victims of abuse that “God promises to be present to us in our suffering.” And that presence comes through people who, like my wife and her fellow Catholic Workers did with Tina, *walk* with domestic abuse victims so they no longer self-identify as “victim”, but as survivor and more importantly as *child of God*. ■

Collen Mayer is Social Services Department Director for Catholic Charities of Tennessee.

How to Get Started: A Parish Response to Domestic Abuse

Sr. Betsy Van Deusen, CSJ

Domestic violence continues to be a devastating reality in our communities. Many parishes probably do not mention domestic violence because it is not a pleasant issue. However, most people sitting in a church in 2016 have been themselves, or know someone who has or will be impacted by domestic violence. The following are a few things that your parish can do to get started.

- Old English Common law stated, “A man can hit his wife with a stick as long as it is no bigger than his thumb,” and is the origin of the expression “Rule of Thumb.” Perhaps today, remove that expression from your vocabulary.
- Educate yourself on the signs of abuse. (There are great resources available on the internet to get started - www.womenshealth.gov/violence-against-women/am-i-being-abused/) Contact a local domestic violence program to learn what they do.
- Talk to your pastor or pastoral leader about domestic violence and gauge his/her interest in educating and supporting victims. Give them a copy of the USCCB’s *When I Call for Help*.

- October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Place a short information series in the parish bulletin with links and numbers.
- Place signs in the women’s bathroom stalls to provide state domestic violence hotline number for safe and confidential referrals available 24/7.

In some parishes there are extensive programs educating and serving victims of domestic violence. Great examples may be found at the Archdiocese of Chicago link in [“Additional Contacts and Resources” below. Local service providers can be a great resource and guide for ministry in your parish. We are called to “do what we can.” We hope that these suggestions will help our sisters and (sometimes) brothers in need. ■

Sr. Betsy VanDeusen, CSJ, is Director of Community Partnerships with Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Albany.

Additional Contacts and Resources

- **Archdiocese of Chicago Domestic Violence Outreach** - www.familyministries.org
- **Catholic for Family Peace** - www.catholicsfamilypeace.org
- **When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women** - www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/domestic-violence/when-i-call-for-help.cfm
- **National Domestic Violence Hotline** - www.thehotline.org 1-800-799-SAFE or 800-787-3224 (TTY)
- **Family Violence Prevention and Services Program, HHS, ACF** - www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb
- **Futures Without Violence** - www.futureswithoutviolence.org
- **National Center for Victims of Crime** - www.victimsofcrime.org
- **National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women** - www.vawnet.org
- **National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline** - www.loveisrespect.org
- **Office on Violence Against Women, DOJ** - www.ovw.usdoj.gov
- **Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network** - www.rainn.org
- **FaithTrust Institute** - www.faithtrustinstitute.org
- **National Coalition Against Domestic Violence** - www.ncadv.org



FOCUS ON THE PARISH:

St. Raymond de Penafort, Mount Prospect, IL

By Sheila Herlihy

When Fr. Chuck Dahm came and preached about domestic violence during all the weekend masses at St. Raymond de Penafort in Chicago, the parish council had been looking for a new Social Justice ministry to focus on, and it inspired the formation of a parish committee.

At the beginning the church tried to follow the precise model that Fr. Chuck's home parish had put into practice, and had professional counselors available. However, over three years, only about seven people took advantage of the service. John Monaco, who has served on St. Raymond's committee since its inception, and is also now on an arch-diocesan wide committee assisting Fr. Chuck, acknowledges that "the culture of one parish does not translate to the culture of another parish." There are three prongs to a successful approach to combating Domestic Violence: Awareness, Services, and Prevention.

Since that first weekend of preaching in 2010, the committee at St. Raymond's has reached out in many ways. Weekly mass is one of the only places where it is possible to touch victims, abusers, and witnesses all at once. During Domestic Violence Awareness month, the campus is covered in purple ribbons, and they have at least one homily focused on domestic violence.

One thing to remember as you think about your parish getting involved in Domestic Violence ministry is that no effort is too small. So frequently, victims feel isolated, and don't know where to seek help. Explicitly focusing on this issue in a parish context can give people a safe environment to speak out, even if it's just a sign in a bathroom or a mention in a homily. ■

Sheila Herlihy is coordinator of Justice and Charity at church of the Incarnation in Charlottesville, VA.

Catholic Charities Impact



101 Catholic Charities agencies operate ministries that specifically address the needs of domestic violence survivors.



23 Catholic Charities agencies participate in federal Family Violence Prevention and Services programs, directing more than \$10.3 million in these services in their local communities.



29 Catholic Charities agencies provide dedicated temporary shelter options for domestic violence survivors, and 27 agencies offer transitional shelter programs for this population.



Catholic Charities agencies also conduct educational outreach on domestic violence issues and provide counseling for domestic violence offenders to support them on a path to changed behavior.



"Domestic Violence is Real: Implementing a Parish Response"

a Webinar by Catholic Charities USA

More and more parishes are implementing programs to prevent and respond to domestic violence, often in collaboration with the 101 Catholic Charities agencies nationwide that operate ministries for those impacted by domestic violence.

Join Dr. Sharon O'Brien, Director of Catholics for Family Peace, and Laura Yeomans, Parish Partners Program Manager for Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington, for a webinar on how to implement a domestic violence outreach ministry at a parish.

This webinar is hosted by the Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA) Parish Social Ministry Leadership Team, and is an intentional follow-up to the national symposium on domestic violence at The Catholic University of America in July, and co-sponsored by CCUSA. The webinar will be held on Wednesday, October 26, at 1:00 PM EST. [Click here to register.](#)