

# Religion & The Latina Domestic Violence Victim

**Encuentro Latino**  
National Institute on Family Violence

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It is important to recognize the often quite influential role that religion and spirituality can play in a Latina's life.

It is not uncommon for a Latina to seek guidance from her church leaders or from another spiritual advisor.

An understanding of the influence of religion is essential to providing culturally competent services.





## What Religion are Latinos?

Studies find that around 70% of Latinos self-identify as Catholic, with the rest identifying as another sect of Christianity.

However, it is important to not assume a Latino is a certain religion.

Always ask the client what religion they identify with and how they see their religion, as not all Catholics believe the same principles.



## RELIGION...

Has always played a very important role in the Hispanic/Latino communities.


As society becomes more educated on the effects of domestic violence, more faith communities are stepping out and denouncing it.





## Where do Latina victims flee to feel SAFE?

- Churches
- Family
- Health clinics
- Public schools/Head Start centers
- Community centers and mental health agencies
- Migrant and seasonal farmworker centers
- Refugee centers
- WIC programs
- Housing programs/resident centers/literacy and tutoring programs
- Friends/neighbors



## Nuestra Cultura y Tradiciones (Our Culture and Traditions)

- Folklore is defined as a people's manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, and proverbs
- Latino folk rituals, customs, and traditions based on religion or spiritual beliefs tend to stem from the Catholic religion

(Castro, 2001)



## The Family

- The family is often the center of Latino life and of Latino's cultural traditions and beliefs
- Latinos traditionally are family-centric (familism)
- In religious iconography in Latino Catholicism the mother is fundamental (example: the Virgin Mary)
- Mothers are considered the central focal point of the Latino family, they are the "nurturing spiritual figure"

(Stavans, 2007)



## Gender Roles

- Marianismo
  - Women are to emulate the Virgin Mary
  - Includes self-sacrifice and devotion to the family
  - Marianismo defines the role of women
- Machismo
  - Expectation that men will be womanizers, aggressive, and in control
  - Includes making decisions for the family





## Gender Roles

*“Urging women to emulate the virtues of the Virgin Mary in her purity and loyalty-has to some extent transformed Marianismo into a fountain of religious and spiritual strength”*

(Stavans, 2007, p.76)



## Spiritual Healers: Curanderas

- Traditional folk healers or shamans in Latino communities, who are dedicated to curing physical or spiritual illnesses
- Respected members of the community
- Highly religious and spiritual
- Translates as “healer” from Spanish
- Uses herbs and natural remedies
- Supernatural healing

(Revolution Health, 2006)





## Spiritual Traditions

### *Rezadores or Rezadoras*

- Spiritual leaders who lead the community in prayer for funerals, saint's day celebrations, and whenever the priest is unavailable

### *Shrines or Altarcitos (little altars)*

- Are in many homes and often take the place of a house of worship

(Castro, 2001)



## Religious Saints

- Mexico: La Virgen de Guadalupe (the Virgin Mary) is the most important religious symbol, surpassing even Jesus Christ
- Latino Caribbean cultures: La Virgen de Caridad del Cobre is the patron saint for Cubans
- Many Latinos are also devoted to various saints who are believed to make *milagros* (miracles)





## Interpretations: Religious Teachings

- Religious beliefs can be empowering or can provoke feelings of guilt, depression or defeat

### Examples:

“Turn the other cheek”- Matthew 5:39

“Wives, be submissive to your husbands”- Colossians 3:18

(Broderick, 2005)



## Interpretations, cont.

- Scriptures are often taken out of context by abusers:

<sup>22</sup> Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. <sup>23</sup>For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. <sup>24</sup>Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. (Ephesians 5:22-24, New International Version)

- However, the husband is also admonished to love his wife as himself.






## The Catholic Bishops

The Catholic Bishops have published several documents on the theme of domestic violence. In their 2002 document they state:

“We state clearly and strongly that violence against women, inside or outside the home, is NEVER justified...”

(U.S. Catholic Bishops, 2002, p.1)



## Till death do us part.... (Hasta que la muerte nos separe)

The traditional wedding vows state:

“ I, \_\_\_\_\_, take you \_\_\_\_\_, to be my wife/husband, according to God’s holy decree: to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to **love** and to **cherish, till death do us part:** and to that I pledge you my faithfulness.”

(U.S. Catholic Bishops, 2002)





## DIVORCE

- Criticism of divorce tends to be most intense among first generation immigrants
- Many avoid considering divorce for fear of criticism and judgment
- For many, marital incompatibility is not a sufficient reason for divorce
  - Domestic violence is often seen by outsiders as falling into the category of marital incompatibility
- Social stigma associated with divorce
- Annulments are possible in Catholicism

(Falicov, 2000, p.248)



### **● The controversy over whether divorce and remarriage is allowed according to the Bible:**

“The bible revolves primarily around Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. The phrase “except for marital unfaithfulness” is the only thing in scripture that possibly gives God’s permission for divorce and remarriage”

(House, 1990)



## Case example:

### Concepcion is a 62 year old Mexican domestic violence survivor who states:

“When, I went to my priest, at the age of 25, I told him what was happening to me and he responded by saying “mujer, esta es tu cruz” (“woman, this is your cross”) and proceeded to preach to me how my church (the Catholic parish) does not recognize divorce. I stayed, and when I came to this country I learned I had rights. I eventually left him when I was 45 years old.”



## Faith Leaders views on DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- “When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women” states:
  - “Domestic violence is never justified, for it sacrilegiously fouls the sacred covenanted relationships of marriage.”
  - “We must confront domestic violence, for it is a shameful exercise of power against those whose lives are entwined by ties of blood and family.”

(U.S. Bishops, 2002)





## Faith Leaders views on DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

“The Catholic Church teaches that violence against another person in any form fails to treat that person as someone worthy of love . . . 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 equal dignity of men and women and to relationships based on mutuality and love”

(U.S. Bishops, 2002)



## Faith Leaders as ADVOCATES

- “Domestic violence is a common social problem that comes veiled in excuses and cloaked in embarrassment, shame, and fear. Women who come are looking for help for their husbands. They say he drinks too much and has a problem with anger. The reality of her concerns and what usually lies beneath is that she is a victim of abuse.”
- “I’m someone who is a bridge for them, to get them through to safety. I connect them with resources, then I don’t have to worry about it.”

(Piaseck, 2006)





## Safety Planning

- Safety plans help assess personal risks and make decisions
- Victim's safety plan can be empowering
- Important to modifying and re-evaluating plans as circumstances change over time
- Important to include all sources of support, including faith communities

(National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, 2007)



## Making your parish a SAFE PLACE for abused victims

- Provide information about domestic violence and local resources
- Utilize parish bulletins, newsletters, and websites as marketing tools
- Establish a committee to continually update resources for victims
- Select staff to receive training on domestic violence
- Encourage priests, deacons, and lay members to become educated on domestic violence issues
- Observe "Domestic Violence Awareness Month"

(U.S. Bishops, 2002)





## Practice Concerns

It can be helpful to locate a priest or Christian pastor in your area that is against domestic violence and that can perhaps provide a link for the woman between her abuse and safety and her spiritual and religious needs.



## Practice Concerns

- First step—become aware of your own beliefs and preferences and how that might affect your ability to work with a client of a different religion
- Contact the Faith Trust Institute ([www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org)) to find out more information before making any judgments or giving advice to Latino clients regarding their practices.





## Practice Concerns

- A client may not be particularly religious or spiritual, but their parents or grandparents may be.
- Parental or grandparental attitudes and beliefs become internalized and can have a strong impact on a client's behavior.
- Ask a client about their family's beliefs and how this impacts their decisions.
- Not having family support can be a major barrier to a Latino client seeking help or leaving a abusive situation.



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# Encuentro Latino

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