

**SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE:
A Pastoral Letter on Domestic Violence
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The human person, made in the image and likeness of God, is endowed with an inherent dignity that demands respect. Violence, in all its forms, gravely offends that dignity and is, at the same time, an offense against God. This is particularly true of the violence that takes place within the home. Abuse, whether physical, verbal, mental or sexual, that takes place among family members is known as "domestic violence," a tragic reflection of the violent society of our day. The Church raises her voice in denouncing the sin of domestic violence that erodes the dignity of the human person.

In this letter we address the Catholics of the Diocese of Las Cruces as well as the people of good will in the southern part of the State of New Mexico. We seek to raise consciousness regarding the tragic reality of domestic violence and to suggest ways to attain greater peace and harmony in our families.

**Part I
A Profile of Domestic Violence**

For 2000 years the Church has proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the joyful message that in Christ we have been reconciled to the Father and sealed with the Holy Spirit for eternal life. At its very core, the Good News proclaims the fullness of life in God. We preach the Gospel of life. It is from this perspective that we speak.

A. Domestic Violence in General

We cannot ignore the violence that is destroying our families and scarring our common humanity. This condition stands in stark contradiction to the Gospel of life. It crosses all socio-economic, religious, and ethnic boundaries. It is manifested in various forms: degrading comments, manipulation of financial resources to intimidate, the use of physical strength to bully and, ultimately, to injure or kill. These are only a few in a long list of its manifestations. The form may vary but the result is the same. Domestic violence exchanges the natural bonds of love and nurturing for the unnatural relationships of aggressors trampling mercilessly on the dignity, rights, and aspirations of those they have promised to love and cherish.

The nature of domestic violence has been a tragic element in the evolution of the world's civilizations and continues to be a plague of epidemic proportions. Many people in our society have experienced and continue to experience the terror of living in danger of being attacked by another family member. For generations, violence in the home was common and went virtually unchallenged. It took courageous women and men to bring the ugly reality of domestic violence into the public forum.

The plague of violence in the home is a learned behavior and is passed on from one generation to the next. This learned behavior is often triggered by alcohol or drugs. Sadly, we know very little

about the treatment and prevention of domestic violence. We tend to oversimplify the problem by reducing violence in the home to economic and/or social pressures that create stress within the family unit. Such is not the case. Indeed, domestic violence transcends economic and social class. Perpetrators and victims come from every walk of life, from the very poor to the very rich, and from the social outcasts to the most respected citizens of our communities. But there is still very much that we do not know about domestic violence.

We are told by experts that domestic violence is the most underestimated and under reported crime in the United States, and that it is the single most significant cause of injury to women, affecting about two million per year.¹ Some sources estimate that as many as four million women suffer some kind of battering every year.² If we take that number of women affected by violence, and if we further project that the average family size is 2.2 persons per household, the conclusion is that at least 8.8 million Americans are affected annually by this virulent evil.

B. Domestic Violence in New Mexico

In 1999 there were 16,596 victims of domestic violence identified by law enforcement agencies across the state of New Mexico. There were 13,184 new clients served by the 33 domestic violence service providers throughout the state. Fifty-seven percent (7,529) of the new clients were adult victims, 25 percent (3,313) were children, and 18 percent (2,342) were offenders.

A profile of reported domestic violence cases within the geographic boundaries of the Diocese of Las Cruces that encompasses the ten counties in southern New Mexico indicates that there were a total of 3,280 complaints registered during 1999.

The Las Cruces Victim Assistance Program data for the past three years indicate a 40 percent increase in cases reported to the Las Cruces Police Department.

La Casa, Inc., a shelter for victims of domestic violence in Doña Ana County, shows an increase in adult and child care days from 4,636 in 1994-95 to 16,638 in 1998-99, representing an increase of 278 percent. While this increase may be due, in part, to various factors such as population growth, increased reporting, and an increased awareness among the general public, we must recognize the possibility that domestic violence is growing.

Compounding the situation is the fact that children residing in homes where domestic violence occurs are themselves 50-55% of the time victims of physical or sexual abuse.³ The "nights of terror" and other horrors experienced by children contribute to life-long difficulties with self-esteem.⁴

Victims are not just numbers; they are thinking, feeling and often frightened individuals. Domestic violence has been, and continues to be, tolerated and minimized. This issue will be solved only when violence is uprooted from our culture – a culture that too often justifies and even glorifies violence.

Part II

God's Creation and Plan of Salvation

The accounts of creation found in Scripture make it clear that God created man and woman with equal dignity. Both reflect the divine glory and together they complement one another. Both derive their inherent dignity, personal goodness, and original beauty from the Creator who delights in the creation of man and woman and affirms their existence by exclaiming "how good" it is (cf. Gen. 1:31).

God blessed man and woman with the capacity to be co-creators and to be the foundational members of the family. In this blessing we find the theological and spiritual foundation of the family. They were to cultivate the earth together in mutual help, continuing the creative action of God.

A. The Fall and the Redemption of the Human Person

The dream that God had for man and woman was one of abundance of life. Original sin, however, gave way to fragmentation and broken relationships. Utter confidence in God and trust in one another was replaced by insecurity and fear. Sin transformed the original paradise that God created for man and woman into arid desolation and banishment where the most basic needs for the sustenance of life and bringing forth new life would now be achieved only through great effort (cf. Gen. 3: 16 - 19).

The consequence of this original fall is most dramatically portrayed in the story of Cain and Abel. Anger, resentment, and insecurity grew within the heart of Cain. After inviting Abel out for a walk, "...Cain turned on his brother Abel and killed him" (Gen. 4:8). With this example, Scripture teaches that violence and death are born within the human heart that is broken and wounded by insecurity, jealousy and fear.

We cannot understand domestic violence or any other types of violence merely as a sociological phenomenon, nor can we seek solutions through social efforts alone. Violence, at its very core, is a spiritual malaise and can only be fully eradicated through personal conversion leading to ongoing transformation.

In Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God made flesh, we have been adopted as sons and daughters of God. Through the great mystery of the Incarnation, the Son of God became intimately united with every human being. By sharing our broken and fragile human nature, Jesus Christ joined himself with each person and shares with us every human experience except sin, ultimately freeing us from the bondage of sin, death, and all the other consequences of sin. "It is in Christ and through his blood that we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven, so immeasurably generous is God's favor to us" (Eph. 1:7).

The redemption of Christ touches every aspect of human experience and brings about a transformation of the human heart. Our human hearts are no longer ruled by the wound of sin and hatred. We are not to seek domination of others. Human violence, rooted in insecurity and fear, can now be healed by the love of God that has been poured into our hearts (cf. Rom. 5:4).

In Jesus Christ, our restored relationships are based on respect and trust and, above all, on love – a sacrificial love that seeks the good of the other. This is the foundation of all our relationships, and in particular, of the relationship in Christian marriage and family life.

B. The Dignity and Mission of Marriage and Family Life

The Church teaches that God envisions marriage as an intimate community of the whole of life based on love.⁵ With the irrevocable personal consent they exchange, married persons make a gift of self to one another. Thus, marriage reflects God's unconditional and ever faithful love. Just as marriage is a sacred bond, so too family life is sacred, because in the family persons experience intimately the love of God. Accordingly, Pope John Paul II reminds us that ". . . the family has a mission to become more and more what it is, that is to say, a community of life and love in an effort that will find fulfillment, as will everything created and redeemed, in the [reign] of God."⁶ Violence occurring within the family severely limits the possibilities for a family to fulfill its mission to further God's reign of love and peace.

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. We join with the bishops of the United States and other groups to say that "violence in any form – physical, sexual, psychological, or verbal – is sinful; many times, it is a crime as well."⁷ Clearly, domestic violence is never justified, for it sacrilegiously fouls the sacred covenanted relationships of marriage.

Part III

The Church Seeks Forgiveness

The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church teaches that "The Church on earth is endowed already with a sanctity that is real though imperfect."⁸ However, the Church, too, is comprised of fallible and sinful human beings who, through sinfulness and errors, mar and distort that innate holiness. Our pastoral experience tells us that not only in the past, but even today, spouses – most often women – are exhorted over and over to forgive and forget spousal abuse. At times clergy tell those abused to resume marital life and thus be further victimized. In so doing clergy fail to acknowledge and validate the experience of victims. Well-meaning as they may be, these pastoral ministers do not recognize the insidious nature of domestic violence as emanating from a culture and an environment of domination and subordination. To encourage a victim to return to such an environment without the benefit of qualified professional help is irresponsible. When such errors are made or sinful actions are excused in God's name, the consequences are even more tragic.

We recognize that all too often Scripture is used incorrectly to justify husbands dominating their wives. Such is the case with the passage found in St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, "wives be submissive to your husbands" (Eph. 5: 22). This passage, which was shaped by its times and culture, reflects the highly hierarchical household which was part of the Greco-Roman empire in which St. Paul was writing. In that society, just as slaves had to submit to their masters, so, too, wives had to submit to their husbands. Fortunately, ours is a very different cultural setting wherein all persons are considered equal. The context of St. Paul's message, however, exhorts husbands and, indeed, all spouses to love one another as Christ loves the Church (Eph. 5:25). In

Christian marriage, spouses give their lives for one another as Christ gave his life for the Church. Husbands and wives love each other in a way in which they consider and treat each other as equals. This is the gospel mandate.

We understand that not only the Church but also society has responded inadequately to the social problem of domestic violence. We believe that the inadequacy of response by both Church and society results, at least in part, from an apparent close association between violence and patriarchy.⁹ We believe that any time one group is placed in a position of power to the exclusion of the other, the subordinated group is at risk. We concur with other Catholic bishops who suggest that the concentration of power and privilege in the hands of men "leads to the control and subordination of women, generating social inequality between the sexes."¹⁰ Furthermore, we are aware that Church ministers have failed, at times, to recognize domestic violence for what it is because of the way in which they, themselves, exercise power.

For this, we seek forgiveness.

Violence inflicted in the family on spouses, parents, children or siblings is intolerable and unconscionable. We ask the forgiveness of all persons affected by the inadequate response of the Church's pastoral leaders to violence which has occurred in homes and in the family – places meant to be of sanctuary for all persons.

Conclusion: A Message of Hope and Commitment

As the People of God in southern New Mexico, we hear the cry of the blood of Abel, the wail of Rachel, the anguished and stifled cries of the Holy Innocents as they mingle with the modern victims of violence. This violence must stop! We call on every member of society to be open to the power of graced living. We invite all to be aware of the scope of domestic violence and to be committed to find ways to end this nightmare. We dedicate our efforts to heal the victims and perpetrators of violence. We seek the combined wisdom of our brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations, those of other faiths, and all citizens of good will to help us find and establish strategies that promote authentic peace, justice, and harmony in our homes and families. Together, let us begin this new millennium with determination to bring about loving and respectful relationships within the family.

The development of this pastoral letter and the hearings that were held throughout our diocese have begun the dialogue. Now we must put that dialogue into action. Specifically we will:

- Create a safe and supportive environment within our Church family for victims and perpetrators of domestic violence to seek help.
- Renew our understanding of the biblical imperative of respect for human dignity and the natural obligations that spring from all relationships, especially marriage and family life.
- Establish pastoral guidelines to respond effectively to victims and perpetrators and to include pertinent references to the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and its special emphasis upon the rights of undocumented victims of domestic violence.
- Educate our pastoral leaders to respond with the spiritual, practical and compassionate support that will best assist victims and perpetrators of domestic violence.

- Embrace the teachable moments of sacrament preparation to raise awareness of domestic violence and its devastating impact upon all relationships, especially the sacred bond of marriage.
- Address the scope of domestic violence as it is significantly and tragically manifested here in New Mexico; including our own complicity as individuals, as a community, and as a religious organization.
- Establish networks with legal, medical and civic communities uniting our energies to support continuing changes in public opinion and policy.
- Recognize and challenge the culture of violence and degradation of all people as promoted through the irresponsible use of the internet, television, film, entertainment industry and our own behavior.

Alone we cannot even begin to propose solutions to the problem of domestic violence. With this pastoral letter, we begin a process together with persons of other faith communities, professionals with special expertise, and all citizens to create greater collaboration and develop strategies to eliminate this pervasive evil.

Promulgated the sixth day of July of 2001 on the Feast of Saint Maria Goretti,

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¹ Satya P. Krishnan, et. al, "Documenting Domestic Violence among Ethnically Diverse Populations: Results from a Preliminary Study," in *Family and Community Health*, (1997) 20(3), p. 2.

² Brian Ogawa, "Forward," in *Family Violence and Religion: An Interfaith Resource Guide*, Volcano, CA: Volcano Press, 1998, p. xi.

³ Joseph Koelling, *Domestic Violence in the Rural Setting: Implications for Youth Development and Special Issues of Concern*, course paper, 1998, p. 5.

⁴ Ruby Lemon, Roswell Hearing on Domestic Violence, January 30, 2001.

⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, December 7, 1965, no. 48.

⁶ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, "Apostolic Exhortation on the Family," December 15, 1981, no. 15.

⁷ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women*, 1992, p. 1.

⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," November 21, 1964, no. 48 §3.

⁹ Social Affairs Committee of the Assembly of Quebec Bishops, *A Heritage of Violence: A Pastoral Reflection on Conjugal Violence*, 1989, p. 34.

¹⁰ Ibid.