

Homily on Domestic Violence 11/15/15

In the Gospels we hear about how Jesus showed love and compassion for everyone but most especially for the poor and oppressed. He welcomed the foreigners, visited the sick and healed them, he touched the lepers, lifted up women, and reached out to children. We, as the Church of Jesus Christ, must imitate his works, demonstrating his love and compassion in our own time.

Among the many people suffer in our world, are those who often go unnoticed, and today I want to speak about them. I am referring to victims of domestic violence. You might wonder why are we talking about domestic violence. It doesn't seem to be that big a problem. In fact, it happens behind closed doors and in secret, so we tend not to see it. But studies show that domestic violence is rampant in the United States.

- The Center for Disease Control reports that a woman is battered by her partner in the United States every three seconds.

- The Center for Disease Control also reports more than 1 out of 4 women (30%) is battered or sexually assaulted by her partner at some time in her life time. That's alarming, more than 1 out of every 4 women.

- During the Vietnam War, 58,000 Americans died in the war. But at the same period of time, here in the United States, 54,000 women were murdered by their partners.

- More recently, in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, between 2000 and 2006, 3200 Americans were killed in those two wars, but during those same 6 years, more than 3 ½ times that many women, more than 10,000, were murdered by their partners here in the United States.

- In 2012, Chicago police reported: 566 DV calls per day. Imagine. I am sure that the police in your will tell you that the most frequent 911 call they receive is about domestic violence.

We might think this is not an appropriate topic to consider with children present. In fact, we need to talk about it with our children. They are exposed to violence almost daily, through the TV shows, movies, video games and songs, even cartoons and many witness bullying in their school. So talking with them about domestic violence is important.

This problem also affects our young people: a 2012 study in Chicago found that 1 out of 5 junior high school girls had been hit on a date.

- In 2015, a study by the American Association of Universities found that one out of four college girls is sexually assaulted or sexually harassed during her four years in college.

These statistics would indicate that there are women among us today who have been or still are victims of domestic violence. Our heart goes out to you. We hope you will be able to free yourselves from the abuse, and that your wounds will be healed.

Of course, men are also victims, but they are a small minority, perhaps 1 out of 10 victims is a man. For this reason, I am speaking primarily about women today but my intention is to include men as well.

We might think that domestic violence happens in other communities but not in ours. In fact, sociological studies show that domestic violence occurs equally in every community, no matter

whether black, brown or white or rich or poor, in the city or suburbs. Domestic violence is destroying families and inflicting suffering on women and some men and their children in every community. So we know it is here.

Many women victims of domestic violence are unaware they are victims. They may think their husbands are just difficult persons, and they may make excuses for them. They may see them as irascible and know they have to be not to push his buttons and set him off.

Perhaps they are unaware they are victims because they have never been hit. But domestic violence is much broader than physical abuse; it includes physical, emotional or verbal, economic and sexual abuse.

Its definition is any pattern of behavior that uses power and control of one person over another. And that power and control can be exercised in different ways; it can be physical, verbal or emotional, economical and sexual abuse.

We all know what **physical abuse is:** punching, slapping, kicking, pulling hair, throwing things, many ways.

Emotional abuse is a much harder to detect but it is more common. There are no bruises or broken bones, but many victims say it hurts even more than physical abuse because it devastates the human spirit. All the insults, constant criticism, belittling, fowl words, excessive jealousy and isolation from family and friends.

Economic abuse is more common among women who don't work outside the home. They don't have their own income and thus have to ask, if not plead, for every penny to buy what is needed for the house and family. Their partners can be as miserly as they want in order to control their partners. The wives may not even know how much he makes or where he banks and how much money he has.

Sexual abuse is perhaps more common today than in previous years, largely because of the easy access to pornography on the internet. Perpetrators might watch it and then oblige their wives watch it and even imitate it, and most women find this disgusting. Or maybe there is forced intimacy or intimacy denied. Some men are unfaithful and think nothing of it.

STORY - The preacher should add a story from his experience which exemplifies some of the forms of domestic violence. Here is a sample:

A man called me recently, very insistent. He wanted me to talk to him and his wife. I couldn't meet with him then, but we met in the chapel after Mass on Sunday. He said, "Father, I want you to talk to my wife here. She has always been unfaithful to me. She is always looking at other men. But this week was the last straw. I came home from work and found the back door of our apartment open. I know there was a man in our house, Father. I went out into the backyard and saw my neighbor by the alley and I asked if he had seen anyone back there. He said he thought he had. I know there was a man in my house, Father. Talk to her."

I asked him to step out and I asked her. "Has he always been this jealous with you?" "Oh, Father, we have been married ten years and have three children, and his jealousy has only gotten worse." "Well, when you were dating him, was he jealous then?" "Oh, yes, he was." "So why did you marry him?" "Well, I thought once we were married, we would be together day and night and the jealousy would disappear, but it hasn't." I said, "That's because it isn't jealousy. This is his way of

making you feel uncertain, insecure about yourself. He gets into your head so that everything you do you are wondering how he will react. What he will say or do.”

“Let me ask you,” I said, “Does he use bad words on you?” “Oh, Father, they are so horrible, I can’t even tell you what they are.” “Well, do you have a job and have some income?” “I did have a job but he made me quit. He said I was fraternizing with the men at the plant, so I had to quit.” “So does he give you money,” I asked. “Oh, Father, I have to plead for every penny just to buy food for the table and clothing for the children.” “Well, how is he sexually with you?” She said, “When he wants to, he can be affectionate.”

So, with her permission, she stepped out and he came in and I confronted him with all this. He surprised me because he admitted quite bit of this but not everything. So I invited him to come to our parish program that helps men who abuse their wives so they he understand their abusive behavior and make changes, and I invited her to attend our parish program for women who are abused so she would understand the dynamics of domestic violence and have the strength to resist it.

This is only one case, one configuration, and each case is different.

The good news about domestic violence is that it is **learned behavior**, meaning it is not inherited; it is not something we inherit in our genes. Since it is learned, it can be unlearned or changed. But men and women who abuse their partners don’t change easily. They are into denial. They may even think that the way they treat their partners is not only the best for themselves but for their victims as well. In their minds, their partners may need a slap or dressing down from time to time. These perpetrators need to be challenged and held accountable for their actions. But it is not easy for them change.

Some abusers make excuses. They might say, “Oh, I was drinking too much,” or “I am under a lot of stress, I’m unemployed,” or “I was abused as a child and traumatized, and sometimes I lose control.” All these reasons may aggravate their violence but they are not the cause. The cause is a decision to exercise power and control over another person. There are plenty of alcoholics who don’t abuse their wives and many men who don’t drink who do abuse their wives. Alcohol and abuse are different problems and each needs its own solution.

Some men even blame their victims, claiming that if their partners were better wives or mothers they wouldn’t get so mad. “Look at the house; it’s a mess, and the children are running wild, and the food is not prepared on time. I wouldn’t get mad if you did your job. You’re the problem. Basically they **blame the victim**, instead of taking responsibility for their own abusive behavior.

Sometimes there is a huge explosion. She may end up in the emergency room or maybe it is a yelling match, after which he knows he has gone too far. He may **apologize and ask for forgiveness.** He may kneel down and cry and promise never to do it again. She has to decide if she will forgive him. She is a Christian and believes in forgiveness and she wants to keep the family together. So she forgives him. She is surprised at his reaction. He seems changed. It’s like a honeymoon. He might bring her flowers and chocolates and be very attentive. She thinks he has changed. But slowly tensions build again until another explosion, and she is challenged again: should I forgive him this time too? I have known women who have lived in this cycle of domestic violence for more than 25 years. And each time he asks for forgiveness and promises to change, she thinks, maybe this time he means it. But often he doesn’t change. It is difficult.

We say: Why doesn’t she just leave? She can walk away. She doesn’t have to stay. But that is not easy either. Most victims of domestic violence **struggle to liberate themselves** from their abusers. There are many **reasons why victims** don’t leave.

1. One obvious reason is economic. Many women victims, even though they are working, do not believe they can earn enough to support themselves and their children, at least at life style they want for them. They believe they have to put up with the violence in order to survive economically.
2. Many women are embarrassed by their abuse. They don't want anyone to know; they have never told anyone and if they leave people will find out. Their fathers may have told them, "You marry that guy, don't come back to us with your problems." So they don't think they can go to their families. They are embarrassed to tell their girlfriends because they'll say, "how could stay with this guy so long?"

Many victims feel guilty. They blame themselves for the apparent failure of the marriage, or they feel guilty for having chosen the wrong partner, or maybe because they feel a lot of anger and resentment at the treatment they are suffering. They even feel guilty because they can't fix the relationship. So they stay.

3. Many women stay because they have internalized the abuse. For years he may have told her, "You are stupid; you could never make it on your own, you couldn't hold a job, you would never survive in the world, and look at you; you're fat; you're ugly, who would want you; you have to stay." And she believes it. Her self-esteem is on the floor. She is walking around half depressed. She doesn't have the strength to leave.
4. Some women stay because of fear. He may have told her: "You leave me, and you'll pay for it; you'll see." She knows he is a violent man. She sees the news and knows it happens. He may have a gun in the house. He may have said, "If you leave, I'll kill you, or I'll kill the children, or I'll kill myself." And she doesn't want any of those options. So she stays.
5. Some women stay because they see that their children love their fathers, and they don't want to tear their children from their fathers. Their husbands may even know that if they keep the children close to them, their wives will never leave. They can manipulate the children with gifts and attention so they will tell their mother, "Mommy, we don't want to leave daddy."

But I always tell women like this that raising their children in a violent home is one of the worst things a parent can do for the children. The boys grow up learning how to abuse women and the girls grow up learning how to be submissive to abuse. And when they find partners and get married, they might end up in a relation just like yours. Do you want that? And they all say, "No way. I don't want my children to suffer like I am." Well, then, you have to be strong and free yourself and free them.

6. Finally, some women stay because they made a promise here at the altar that they would stay in that marriage until death. They don't want to commit a sin. They don't want to offend God. But can you imagine Jesus walking down the road one day, and he comes across a woman with a black eye and her arm in a sling and he says, "What happened to you." "My husband beat me," she says. What would Jesus say to her? "You have to go back to him and work it out" or "Come with me and I will make you safe." I think that is what he would say, and that is what we have to say to victims of domestic violence. Come to us and we will help you free yourself from the violence. That is what we, the church of Jesus Christ, have to do. Show the compassion of Jesus to victims of domestic violence.

Unfortunately, our church has been somewhat complicit in all this, especially we priests. We have not talked about it. We have preached plenty about marriage. It's a beautiful sacrament: two

people joined in love to become one and to experience God's love and to radiate that love to the world. It's beautiful. But what happens when it doesn't work? We don't say much. How many of you have ever heard a sermon about domestic violence? (Those who have can raise their hands.) Not many. That's sad.

The good news is that the U.S. bishops have written a beautiful pastoral letter on domestic violence. It is called: "When I Call for Help." You can google it. It comes right up. In the first paragraph they write: We need to "state as clearly and strongly as we can that violence against women, inside or outside the home, is never justified, and it is a sin and often a crime." And then in the last paragraph they conclude: "We emphasize that no person is expected to stay in an abusive marriage." Those are words of liberation for many women and some men. "No one is expected to stay in an abusive marriage." That's the position of the Catholic Church and many people don't know it.

We have to set the record straight. The **church rejects all forms** of domestic violence and urges women to protect themselves and their children, even if that means a separation and divorce from their abusers. Our church must help protect them and assist them in freeing themselves from the violence.

As a community of faith we want to **reach out to every victim** of domestic violence. Many of you **know someone** who is experiencing domestic violence. You need to assure them they do not deserve such abuse. Tell them you are concerned about their safety and their children's and they have a right to be safe. We need to listen to them and respect their decisions, but assure them that we will support them whenever they decide to leave their abuser.

Your pastor wants to form a ministry to victims of domestic violence right here so that our community of faith reflects the compassion of Jesus. Everyone in our area should know that our parish is a safe haven for those who suffer any form of abuse in their homes. Moreover, we want to work to prevent domestic violence by helping our children and youth learn how to form healthy relationships and avoid interpersonal violence. We can do that in our religious education programs, parochial schools and marriage preparation programs.

As Jesus expressed his compassion for the poor and oppressed, including the women of his time, may we be seen as compassionate people ready to help victims of domestic violence free themselves from their pain and suffering. May those who live in darkness come to our parish and find light, may those living in despair find hope here in our parish. May those who feel that God has abandoned them discover that the love and compassion of Jesus is here, available to them.