

Pilsen priest crisscrosses archdiocese to talk about domestic violence

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The Rev. Chuck Dahm talks at churches throughout the Chicago archdiocese about domestic violence. | Lou Foglia / Sun-Times

The Rev. Chuck Dahm uses a simple orator's device to broach a topic that's taboo in some quarters of the Catholic church.

Speaking at churches all over the Chicago area, he tells parishioners: "Raise your hand if you've ever heard a sermon about domestic violence."

People tend to glance around. Sometimes, one or two hands go up.

"I tell them that the truth is the Catholic church doesn't expect anyone to stay in an abusive marriage," Dahm says. "And that is big news to a lot of Catholics because a lot of them think, 'I got married, and I have to stay no matter what.'"

"I also tell them the Catholic church has been somewhat complicit in this because we haven't talked about it very much. We talk a lot about marriage and what a beautiful sacrament it is, but we don't say much about when it doesn't work.

“Most Catholics know annulment is an option but not in relationship to domestic violence,” he says.

Annulment, required to remarry in the church, is the process by which the Catholic church declares a marriage invalid because the necessary conditions weren't there from the get-go.

“A ‘necessary condition’ is that there is love and respect,” Dahm says. “So somebody who is abusive — even verbally abusive — that constitutes a lack of a necessary conditions.”

In 2007, Dahm set out from his home parish of St. Pius V in Pilsen to crisscross the Archdiocese of Chicago in his Honda Civic. Since then, he estimates he has visited about 80 parishes to talk about domestic violence — most recently St. Edna Church in Arlington Heights. He plans to address parishioners at St. Francis of Assisi in Bolingbrook the last weekend of February.

St. Pius V has a long history of providing social services, ranging from immigration assistance to parenting classes. So 20 years ago, when Delores Tapia, a newly hired staff member, pointed out the prevalence of abused women in her caseload, it seemed only natural to start a program to deal with it, according to Dahm.

So, in 1995, Dahm established the HOPE domestic abuse program at St. Pius V. It has grown to include seven counselors who assist more than 200 abuse victims a year, as well as abusers and kids caught in the mix.

With the help of donations and city, state and federal grant money, the effort has grown into the nation's largest church-based domestic violence program, Dahm says.

In 2011, Dahm got a call from the archdiocese, then run by Cardinal Francis George, asking him to take on the mantle on behalf of the archdiocese. The offer came with no formal job description and no funding. Dahm created his own title: archdiocesan director of domestic violence outreach.

He got new business cards but continued to run the program at St. Pius and to keep putting miles on his Honda.

Two Sundays a month, the 78-year-old Dahm gives as many as six homilies on the subject. The following day, he meets with parishioners interested in setting up a program at the parish level to connect victims with help.

“I still run into resistance,” he says. “There are parishes that don't want me. I'll get the cold shoulder. There are priests who are afraid of this topic, or they don't think it's important. I have to be persistent. One phone call usually doesn't do it. Most priests are hesitant. But a lot of them come around.”

Dahm is trying to make the topic a part of the regular coursework at the Mundelein Seminary, the Chicago area's main training ground for priests.

“The reality is none of the priests were taught it,” he says. “I was never taught it.

“I’ve had priests tell me, ‘We don’t have that problem here. I’ve never had a victim come to me.’ And I say, ‘The reason you’ve never had anyone come to you is because you’ve never talked about it.’ ”

Dahm has the support of Archbishop Blase Cupich, who is scheduled to officiate a Mass at Holy Name Cathedral on domestic violence later this year — on Oct. 29.



The Rev. Father Chuck Dahm, of St. Pius V Church in Pilsen is a leader in the Chicago Archdiocese’s effort to address domestic violence. Lou Foglia / Sun-Times

The St. Pius V priest wants other priests to understand the issue is inescapable.

“The common view is that domestic violence happens around lower-educated and lower-economic levels,” says Dahm, who grew up in Elmhurst and says he never experienced domestic abuse in his own home. “But studies show that domestic violence happens at the same rate at every economic status. So when I go to Barrington or Glenview, I know it’s happening there just like I know it’s happening in my own backyard. It’s just more hidden.”

A few weeks ago, after speaking at St. Benedict Church in North Center, Dahm got a call from an abuse victim.

“The woman was very clear: ‘I don’t want you to tell anyone from the parish I am talking to you.’ ”

Dahm, who doesn't personally counsel victims, connected her with someone who could help.

"Victims often have a lot of shame and a tremendous amount of misplaced guilt," he says.

Feedback is overwhelmingly positive, he says, though not universal.

Several parents recently approached Dahm, concerned the subject matter was too heavy for kids in church.

"I told them that our children are exposed to violence all over in songs, cartoons, TV, movies, video games, bullies at school," he says. "We can't shield our kids from violence. We have to prepare them to deal with this. It's a reasonable thing."

Dahm is a pillar at his Pilsen parish. He served as pastor of St. Pius V for 21 years, until he stepped down and, in 2006, became associate pastor, a position he still holds. The archdiocese normally shifts priests from parish to parish every few years. But because a suitable Spanish-speaking replacement wasn't found, he was allowed to stay.

"The truth is there aren't enough services," says Kathleen Doherty, director of the Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women's Network, who works with Dahm. "One in four women is impacted in her life by domestic abuse. And the Chicago Police Department responds to more than 500 911 domestic violence calls every day."

Rebecca Darr, chief executive officer of Wings, the largest domestic violence agency in Illinois, runs a shelter for victims of domestic violence in the northwest suburbs and also works regularly with Dahm.

"What Father Dahm is doing, which I think is so phenomenal, is bringing in the men who are voluntarily coming in and want to change the way they treat their wives and girlfriends because they don't want to lose them," Darr says. "Most abusers don't go to treatment unless it's court-mandated. And then they go kicking or screaming."

"He's a priest, so you might think, 'Oh, that's what he's supposed to do.' But there are a lot of people in the faith community who don't put the time and energy into solving these social problems."

Dahm says he's suited for the job because he can't stand bullies.

"I have a lot of anger at people who take advantage of other people and anger about injustice and victimizing vulnerable people," he says.

He has no plans to stop.

"There are about 356 parishes. My goal is to visit them all. If I live long enough."