

Priest spreads the word about domestic violence plague

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By Virginia Mullery

Hiring Dolores Tapia as a pastoral counselor for St. Pius V Parish in 1996 changed Dominican Father Charles Dahm's life. "From the beginning, most of her clients were women who were being abused," he said. "I did not see the problem before that although it is right there under everyone's nose. One out of four women have been hit by their partners or have suffered verbal or emotional abuse."

Father Dahm was pastor of St. Pius V at that time, and immediately they began building a program to address domestic violence, which has grown to be the largest program of its kind in any parish in the U.S., he said. They now have seven full-time counselors on staff and services include one-on-one counseling, support groups, sessions with children who have been traumatized by violence in the home, prevention programs for youth groups and school children. Another facet is a group for men who have been abusers and want to change. Although the numbers in that group are usually small, the results are often dramatic, Dahm said. "We have had men speak from the pulpit on Father's Day about respect for women."

He said, the parish has done it all on their own and have found government and private funding to support an annual budget of \$450,000. Over the last three years, they have received sizable grants from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

Tapia, who now serves as director of family services, said she began and grew the program by asking the community, "What do you need?" What she learned was that women wanted to save their marriages but needed help with depression and emotional abuse. In cases of physical abuse, they have established contacts with shelters where women can be safe.

"We are all about prevention," she said, "and this fall, we have added anger management programs for teens. Like Father Dahm, she has gone out into the community to give workshops and encourage other parishes to institute programs. She relates the story of one couple from the parish, who came to see her when the husband wanted a divorce. It was all his wife's fault, he said, and he wanted Tapia to tell her the marriage was over. Instead, they were persuaded to try counseling. Seven months later, their marriage was intact and they are now leaders in the program.

What inspires her every day are these success stories: the husbands and wives with healthy marriages and the kids in those families who have grown up and are successful and who come back to thank her for helping their family.

Since he retired in 2007 and now serves as associate pastor at S. Pius V, which is in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago, Father Dahm has delved into the domestic violence issue with increased vigor and passion. He is continually nudging, urging, pushing other parishes to establish programs. He wants to see it spread throughout the archdiocese. Sometimes, he calls a parish out of the blue. Sometimes, he knows a pastor personally.

“It is a controversial issue,” he said. “There is a lot resistance because priests don’t see the problem.” Often, he gets responses such as, “No. Not now. I’ll get back to you.”

When he is invited in, it is usually to speak with the parish council or staff first. Then, he speaks at all the weekend Masses and, invariably, he said, women will come up to him after Mass, grateful that someone is recognizing what they face daily.

He has spoken at 60 churches and about 48 have established a program. One of the first, he said, was then Holy Family in Waukegan under pastor Father Gary Graf. Holy Family is now one of three sites under the umbrella Most Blessed Trinity Parish, with churches in North Chicago and Waukegan. Father Jacque Beltran is pastor. “They now have the most active program outside of us,” Dahm said.

In 2011, they converted a former rectory into House of Peace, a shelter for women and their children. Aida Segura is director of the House of Peace and family care services, which includes the Phoenix Program, a non-residential counseling program. In House of Peace, they can accommodate six or seven families for a six-month recovery program; and in the Phoenix group, they have served some 200 families, Segura said. “We have a 99 percent success rate.”

Segura, who has a degree from Loyola University and worked at St Pius V with Father Dahm before being hired to direct the House of Peace, said, “These programs empower women who then become a community of women supporting other women. They are women of faith who stand against violence.”

Eventually, Father Dahm realized he needed more support and the late Cardinal George agreed. He is now Director of Domestic Outreach for the archdiocese. He said they have formed committees representing different parishes and different areas and in October held a retreat for survivors at St. Giles in Oak Park. People who want to find out about programs and services

in the archdiocese can go to *archchicago.org* and click on “domestic violence.”

Catholic Charities did not have a domestic violence program until he approached them, Dahm said. In 2011, they began a formal program. Two years ago, he gave a workshop at Mundelein Seminary to alert future priests on the prevalence of the problem. However, it is not part of their curriculum, he said, and he has yet to do another. Neither is it part of the PreCana program. “They address conflict resolution,” he said, “but this is not conflict. It is power and control. It is not mutual.”

In domestic violence, he said passionately, a woman’s self-esteem is destroyed. They think they are ugly or incompetent. Often, they think it is their fault. Often, no one knows except the children. If Father Dahm, a native Chicagoan, who was ordained in 1964 and is a member of the Dominican Province of St. Albert the Great, has his way, everyone will know and they will know how to prevent and correct the problem and how to minister to those who have been abused. Until then, he will keep working as he has been for the past 19 years.

To reach the St. Pius V counselors, call 312-226-6161. To reach the Most Blessed Trinity program, call 847-623-2655.