

Domestic abuse: the epidemic no one is talking about in parishes

By [Matt Hadro](#)/Catholic News Agency/EWTN News

Washington D.C., Oct 24, 2016 / 03:46 pm ([CNA/EWTN News](#)).- Domestic violence is a hidden epidemic that many clergy and laypersons are not properly trained to fight, says one priest who runs the country's largest parish-based ministry to counter the problem.

"When you start talking about it, that's when people will start coming forward," Fr. Chuck Dahm, O.P., who directs domestic violence outreach for the Archdiocese of Chicago, told CNA about the problem of domestic abuse.

The Church's hierarchy "has not been good in getting this into the training of clergy, deacons or priests," he said, even though a "beautiful" pastoral letter on the topic by the U.S. bishops, "[When I Call for Help](#)," exists.

"Most priests and bishops are unaware of it," he said. "And it should be taught and discussed in the seminaries, and it's not."

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. According to the CDC, "intimate partner violence" can be physical, sexual, or even emotional, as with instances of stalking or "psychological aggression."

27 percent of women in the U.S. have suffered intimate partner violence at some point, along with 12 percent of men, the CDC has reported.

There are many physical and psychological effects of domestic violence on victims – physical injuries and disabilities and bodily effects of stress, but also anxiety, depression, and trust issues. Children witnessing violence in the home may grow up with emotional problems like anger, or may even become abusers themselves when they are adults.

In his apostolic exhortation on the family, *Amoris laetitia*, Pope Francis wrote of the problem of domestic abuse:

“Unacceptable customs still need to be eliminated. I think particularly of the shameful ill-treatment to which women are sometimes subjected, domestic violence and various forms of enslavement which, rather than a show of masculine power, are craven acts of cowardice. The verbal, physical, and sexual violence that women endure in some marriages contradicts the very nature of the conjugal union.”

He also insisted upon the need for parishes and priests to be ready to deal properly with these problems: “Good pastoral training is important ‘especially in light of particular emergency situations arising from cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse,’” he added, citing the final document from the 2015 Synod on the Family.

Catholics are responding to this dire need, organizing a prayer campaign for domestic abuse victims while trying to spread awareness of the problem and educate clergy on how to properly deal with instances of abuse.

A symposium on domestic abuse took place in July at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., hosted by the university’s School of Social Service.

A “toolkit” for fighting domestic abuse [has been provided by the Catholics for Family Peace, Education, and Research Initiative](#), which includes prayers and directions for helping a victim of domestic abuse.

The group is asking everyone to pray at 3 p.m. daily for domestic abuse victims, and have called for a day of prayer on Oct. 28, the feast of St. Jude the Apostle, the patron saint of hopeless cases.

Fr. Chuck Dahm has created a parish-based ministry to combat domestic violence. A key part of his work is simply preaching about it, he says, because it is a widespread problem that hides in plain sight.

There is an “overwhelming lack of recognition that the problem is more frequent, more common than people think,” he told CNA. Many priests are completely unaware of cases of it, Fr. Chuck noted, although “there are people in their parishes who are suffering.”

“I have gone to 90 parishes in the Archdiocese of Chicago,” he said. “And after I preach about it, people walk out of the church and they tell me ‘thank you for talking about this. This is long overdue. And my sister, my daughter

is in it, or I grew up in it.' And this is so much more common than anybody realizes."

Priests must listen when victims tell them of their abuse they've suffered, he insisted.

"You always have to believe the victim," he said. "Victims do not exaggerate. If anything, they minimalize. So they have to be believed and supported."

In one case, he said, "a victim survivor" told him of how she went to her parish priest, who "was not receptive and said he couldn't do anything to help her."

"Well that's tragic," he said. "She went and told him about the abuse she was suffering. He didn't know how to handle it."

Another problem is when some priests tell an abuse victim to go to marriage counseling with her husband – which "is not appropriate," Fr. Chuck noted. "She needs domestic violence counseling and he needs perpetrator counseling," he said. "A lot of priests don't know that."

Fr. Chuck participated in the symposium on domestic abuse at Catholic University this past summer.

Since then he's seen the fruits of the conference, spreading awareness of the problem.

"A significant number went home with the plans of doing something in their diocese or their respective organizations," he said of conference participants.

The Archdiocese of Washington just held a workshop for priests to learn how to deal with incidents of domestic abuse and 31 priests attended, he said. Two representatives of Catholic Charities in Vermont are starting a workshop for priests there, and the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City held a workshop attended by several priests and a meeting for priests with Fr. Chuck.

"It's hard to get the priests to come to any kind of event like this," Fr. Chuck acknowledged.

Unfortunately, it's been negative incidents that have driven the conversation about domestic abuse, he said. For instance, when surveillance videos surfaced of former NFL running back Ray Rice punching his fiancée, and then

dragging her off an elevator while she was unconscious, the “subsequent outrage” after that and other incidents like it “helps create more awareness about the problem.”

Then “people feel a little bit more comfortable and required to speak out about this and do something about it,” Fr. Chuck explained. “The publicity about negative events or harmful events is quite helpful in raising awareness.”

“We’re really behind on this,” he said of the Church’s efforts to combat the problem, while noting at the same time that “we’re making progress.” There will be a Domestic Violence Awareness and Outreach Mass on Saturday Oct. 29 at Chicago’s Holy Name Cathedral, celebrated by Cardinal-designate Blase Cupich.

“Many times violence in the streets begins at home,” Cardinal-designate Cupich stated on the issue. “Adults and children are traumatized and alienated from the love and support they need by the violence they witness. We must respond to this tragedy.”