

A Catholic response to Domestic Violence

Leela Ramdeen, Chair, CCSJ, Archdiocese of Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

Domestic Violence (DV) is **NOT** part of God's plan for us, His children. The challenge for Catholics, particularly during the Year of Faith, is to allow the Holy Spirit to work in and through us so that we can be true witnesses to our faith and promote integral human development of all our people. We are called to defend and promote the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person – made in God's image and likeness. We can only eliminate DV if we join forces to "*Do Justice*" for all – remembering that DV is an all pervasive social problem that affects all strata of society and all ethnic groups in our societies – although a small 2010 study in part of TT found that "working class" and lower middle income classes showed the greatest prevalence of DV. Alcohol and drug abuse were found to be the major perceived cause, followed by infidelity and then communication difficulties." (West Indian med. J. vol. 59 Mona Jan, 2010).

It is estimated that worldwide at least 2 million women are assaulted by their partners each year. On 26 March 2013 Trinidad and Tobago hosted the inaugural Caribbean Conference on *Domestic Violence and Gender Equality: Protecting Women and girls*. It was held in Tobago. The presentation by Thomas Smitham, Chargé d'Affaires at the US Embassy, is worth reading: <http://trinidad.usembassy.gov/speeches/remarks-by-cda-thomas-smitham-march-26-2013.html>

He rightly said that: "Ending domestic violence is not a gender-specific concern. Both men and women should be united in the fight against domestic violence as an intolerable violation of human dignity...Domestic violence is not cultural, it's criminal. ... let's also focus on the economic costs of domestic violence. As long as domestic violence exists, a community cannot prosper fully... If women are free from violence, their families will flourish... when families flourish, communities and nations will flourish... Domestic violence holds back entire societies."

The UN Secretary General's Unite campaign in TT states that DV is "endemic throughout T&T" (Nov 2010). Years ago, my father, an Attorney-at-Law, was retained to defend 2 teenagers. Their father was an alcoholic who abused his wife and family almost on a daily basis. On one occasion he was chasing his wife and children with a cutlass. He fell and hit his head while their 2 children were trying to restrain him. A neighbour tied him to a tree hoping to release him when he sobered-up. He died. The children were charged with his murder. My father's submission of self-defence was successful.

All the neighbours talked about how they would often see the man cursing and beating his family. Yet no one sought to reach out to help that family when there were clear signs of strife. God never abandons us, so too, we must never abandon either the victims or the perpetrators of domestic violence. The perpetrators/abusers need treatment e.g. see The Domestic Violence Intervention Project (DVIP) in London, UK which has been running programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence since 1992.

One of the problems we face is that if the *criminal justice system* is deficient and does not hold men accountable for their actions, many will continue to perpetrate crimes against women and

children. See e.g. the following study: Intimate Partner Violence and Homicide and Domestic Homicide in T&T. An overview of spousal homicide cases for the period 1995-2006 – by Dr T. Bartholomew & Ms Z. Marshall, Deakin Univ. & UWI. They looked at 143 cases “where the homicide was documented as resulting from a domestic dispute among partners (married, common law or visiting relationships).

On 2 May 2013, the headline in TT Express read: “*Children to testify: Father charged with setting mom on fire.*” In March last year a 31 year old man doused his 27 year old wife with a flammable liquid and set her alight. She was burnt on her face, neck, chest and hands and has also suffered internal injuries and was a patient at the Intensive Care and burns unit in San Fernando General Hospital.

DV has health, social and economic consequences for the entire society. Former Archbishop Edward Gilbert used to remind the Faithful that Catholics are called not only to have a vertical relationship with God, but also a horizontal relationship with our neighbour. We are called to love God and love our neighbour. Our neighbour is anyone who has need of us.

Read Fr Charles W. Dahm, O.P.’s article: *Parishes: Let’s stop ignoring domestic violence*: <http://www.uscatholic.org/church/2011/08/lets-stop-ignoring-domestic-violence>. Inter alia, he said:

“It’s time for parishes to help battered spouses and their children step out of the shadows and get the assistance they need. In their pastoral letter on domestic violence, ‘*When I Call for Help*’ (1992/2002) the U.S. Catholic bishops ‘state as clearly and strongly as we can that violence against women, inside or outside the home, is never justified. Violence in any form – physical, sexual, psychological or verbal – is sinful; often it is a crime as well.’ And they draw an important conclusion: ‘We emphasize that no person is expected to stay in an abusive marriage...’ Men are also battered, but they account for fewer than 8 percent of all victims...

“Although the bishops have urged all clergy and lay ministers to reach out to victims of domestic violence, Catholic parishes and institutions have largely ignored that call. Rarely is domestic violence mentioned in a homily, let alone addressed as the main topic... Domestic violence happens in every parish, community, and economic class, and in every ethnic group...And in times of economic or family crisis, the incidence of domestic violence increases.”

In our own Caribbean region, our Bishops are concerned about the level and nature of Crime and violence, including domestic violence. You may recall the 30 Nov 2003 Pastoral Letter of the AEC on Crime and Violence – entitled: Justice and Peace shall embrace: www.aecrc.org/documents/JusticeandPeaceshallembbrace.doc

In paragraphs 15 and 16 they identify “Who are violent” “Why are they violent.” They outline some factors which “sociologists usually link to recent increases in crime in the Caribbean:

* increased urbanization and high population density (decline in agriculture);

- * increased income inequality between rich and poor;
- * increased migration (and corresponding family disintegration);
- * increased deportation from other countries of convicted criminals;
- * increased unemployment (a growing urban wageless class);
- * declining living standards;
- * level of economic discrimination (exclusion based on skin colour, family ties, regional identity, language differences, social circumstances and religion).”

If we are to embrace Cardinal Cardijn’s *SEE/JUDGE/ACT* methodology, we would do well to reflect on these and other factors so that we can take appropriate action in our Dioceses. If we are to locate what we see/experience, within a Catholic frame of reference, we must be aware of what our Church teaches about relationships – within and outside of marriage. We also need to be able to identify domestic violence so that we can develop appropriate responses. Literature, such as the following, must form part of our school curriculum, as well as the work of e.g. parish ministries such as engaged and marriage encounter teams, social justice teams etc. It is taken from: <http://foryourmarriage.org/everymarriage/overcoming-obstacles/domestic-violence/>

“Domestic violence, has no place in a healthy relationship, whether the couple is dating, engaged, married or cohabiting. **What is domestic violence?** Domestic violence is any kind of behaviour that a person uses, or threatens to use, to control an intimate partner. The two key elements are threat and control. Domestic violence can take various forms:

Physical – Violent actions such as hitting, beating, pushing, and kicking. In many cases physical abuse becomes more frequent and severe over time.

Sexual – Includes any sexual acts that are forced on one partner by the other

Psychological – Includes a wide range of behaviors such as intimidation, isolating the victim from friends and family, controlling where the victim goes, making the victim feel guilty or crazy, and making unreasonable demands

Emotional – Undermining an individual’s self-esteem, constant criticism, insults, put-downs, and name-calling

Economic – Examples include limiting the victim’s access to family income, preventing the victim from working or forcing the victim to work, destroying the victim’s property, and making all the financial decisions.”

(See also Definition in *Declaration in the Elimination of Violence Against Women*: “the term ‘violence against women’ means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life).

Let us share some of the intervention **strategies** that are being employed in our countries to address domestic violence e.g.

- Developing programmes – nationally and at **parish level** - to empower women/men/boys/girls and to address the root causes of DV. For us Catholics and people of faith, such programmes must include prayer in all its forms. We know we can do nothing without God's grace, so we must pray incessantly that He will help us all to realise our vocation to live holy, virtuous lives free from violence and filled with love for God, self, each other and for creation. CCSJ encourages parishes to promote "Adopt a Family" programmes as a way of reaching out to those in need. Victims need e.g. tips for protection, how to leave safely. Parishes should run sessions for parishioners to study documents such as the US Bishops' "When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women."
- Clergy must speak out against DV and provide healing ministries/outreach programmes in their parishes to address this social ill. As Julia Perilla writes: "Silence from the pulpit on the topic of domestic abuse can indeed become a roadblock for victims and lend support to their victimization." (The role of Churches in preventing DV: Can Churches really do anything about DV? <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/resources/articles/Role-of-Churches.pdf>). Listen to a Sermon by Rev Charles W. Dahm O.P., Archdiocese of Chicago, Director of DV (*Let's reach out to victims of DV as Jesus would:* <http://stpiousvparish.org/en/cchd>).
- Providing services, particularly in at-risk areas where there is a high prevalence of DV e.g. counselling facilities, doctors, nurses, social workers.
- Organising parenting programmes that will assist them e.g. in socializing children in such a way that they learn to love and respect themselves and others.
- Including in the curriculum/programme of Catholic schools, first communion and confirmation classes programmes/Tertiary level educational institutions to address bullying, DV and violence in schools, values and virtues etc. Many of our children who come from homes in which DV is rampant, suffer in silence and need support.
- Collaborating with our Governments – national and local government, police services, health care providers, child welfare agencies, religious leaders, employers, the business community, professional associations such as lawyers, doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, NGOs, CBOs, FBOs etc to promote effective coordination of DV prevention and response – e.g. in TT there is a former Assistant Commissioner of Police, Mrs Margaret Sampson-Brown, who is our current Manager of the Victim and Witness Support Unit of the TT. Amnesty International reported in 2012 – under-reporting of cases of gender-based violence in TT is linked to "inadequate police training and the slowness of the justice system". And see US Dept. of State's Country Reports.
- **Lobbying for** e.g.
 - a. Government policies e.g. social policies and practices that will address DV. Mainstreaming DV requires inter-Ministerial action – including monitoring and evaluation processes;

- b. Public education programmes. Asha Kambon, former Coordinator of the Network of NGOs of TT for the Advancement of Women, rightly said (1 Nov 1003) that “changing societal norms and attitudes about the status of women is a long term undertaking as it is in every society”. There is a need for a coordinated community response e.g. to ensure victim(s) safety – including children, rehabilitation of both abuser and victim, tracking, networking, supportive infrastructure ;
- c. an improvement of our countries’ capacity to collect, analyse and use data and research on DV – to facilitate the elimination of this scourge to society, identifying and sharing “best practices”;
- d. increased coordination between various Government and non-State agencies in addressing DV e.g. Coalition Against DV, Rape Crisis of T&T, Men Against Violence Against Women;
- e. an analysis of legislation/state protection/ structures in place to address DV and their effectiveness e.g. Children Act, Domestic Violence Act, Offences against the Persons Act, Legal Aid. Too often protection orders are breached – at times with fatal consequences. And see obstacles such as backlog of cases/lengthy delays;
- f. an improvement of our criminal justice system to address DV;
- g. the use of our countries’ resources to establish support services e.g. hotlines, shelters/safe houses/drop-in centres for victims and their children, rehabilitation centres and programmes aimed at combatting drug, alcohol and other substance abuse which often fuel DV;
- h. Media advocacy (including Catholic Media) aimed at eliminating DV. The media “plays a pivotal role in both influencing and changing social norms and behaviour. Repeated exposure to violence in the media has been associated with increased incidence of aggression, especially in children. In the area of domestic violence, media campaigns can help to reverse social attitudes that tolerate violence against women by questioning patterns of violent behaviour accepted by families and societies. Collaboration with the media needs to focus on creating new messages and new responses to reduce domestic violence... The media can also play a critical role in other types of advocacy, such as legislative reform; positive media attention can generate necessary public support for a reform effort. (UNICEF).

NB: None of these strategies will be successful on its own, but if implemented, monitored and evaluated in a coordinated manner, we may be able to see a reduction/elimination of DV in our communities.

I end with the words of Archbishop Lwanga, Archbishop of Kampala, who stood alongside Catholic Bishops from Ireland and Uganda and spoke to packed crowd of Ugandans: “All of us have the right to be loved, educated and be given a decent life. When domestic violence is practised, this basic right, which we all share and has been bestowed by God, is denied. . . . The Church cannot keep quiet when the domestic church, the family, is being ravaged by the evil of domestic violence. . . . Today, we the Catholic Bishops of Uganda, launch our Advent Programme to tackle and respond to domestic violence <http://raisingvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/downloads/resources/ThroughtheVoiceofFaithFINALFeb2013.pdf>