

# Catholic Response to Sexual and Domestic Violence and Abuse

A report compiled by the Secretariat of Laity,  
Marriage, Family Life and Youth



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## Executive Summary

As the bishops of the United States expressed in the statement “When I Call for Help” (2002), violence, in all its forms, is sinful and must be eradicated by the whole Christian community. This report is compiled from a survey of leaders conducted in summer 2017 to better understand the Catholic Church’s response to the topic of sexual and domestic violence/abuse which spans all levels of the diocesan, parish, and the family as the domestic church throughout the United States.

While numerous programs have been initiated nationwide to keep children safe in parish/diocesan settings, the respondents – who work in different capacities for the Church – expressed a growing need for *awareness, education/training, and outreach* to victims and to persons who use sexual and domestic violence/abuse. The 2002 statement defines domestic violence as “any kind of behavior that a person uses to control an intimate partner through fear and intimidation. It includes physical, sexual, psychological, verbal, and economic abuse.”

Sexual and domestic violence and abuse is *widespread*, even in parish communities. Sexual violence can take many forms and range from degrees of harassment to rape. Studies show that 1 in 6 boys and 1 in 4 girls will be sexually abused before they turn 18. Survey responses underlined the need for parish personnel, clergy, and educators to address this problem openly and with professionalism. The *underlying issues or problems* that may be associated directly or indirectly with sexual and domestic violence/abuse should also be addressed in ways that form and inform the faithful at all ages.

Currently, diocesan Catholic Charities offices – where available – provide the most comprehensive services to victims of sexual and/or domestic abuse ranging from counseling to housing. A high percentage of respondents



The Catholic Church is committed to protecting the dignity of all human life. As the USCCB statement “When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women” (1992, 2002) says, “violence in any form – physical, sexual, psychological, or verbal – is sinful; often, it is a crime as well.” In addition, this statement calls the Christian community to work vigorously against violence and abuse, and affirms that “the Church can help break this cycle.”



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indicated that they are equipped to make referrals to professionals and agencies in their communities, when necessary. Every diocese also has a Victim Assistance Coordinator, who is available to assist adult victims/survivors of sexual by members of the clergy. However, the results of this survey encourage further efforts to provide ministerial guidance and support in the form of *prayer, preaching, and proactive pastoral care* for individuals and families suffering from the effects of sexual and domestic violence/abuse.

It is hoped that these survey results will inform continued conversation and efforts in order to respond more effectively to sexual and domestic violence/abuse experienced by God's children.



### Purpose

This survey originates from recent consultation and collaboration regarding the Catholic response to sexual and domestic violence. The purpose of the survey was to gather more information on current efforts around the country and areas in need of further attention with regard to an effective response from the Church to sexual and domestic violence and abuse.

This report is compiled from the responses received from individuals serving in various capacities in Catholic dioceses throughout the country. The hope is that the results will raise awareness of available resources and strategies in place as well as highlight those in need of further attention. At the same time, it should be recognized that this survey is limited and does not offer a full picture of Catholic efforts in the U.S. The leaders surveyed, as indicated below, represent a range of ministries and areas in the Church, but a different survey and approach would be necessary for a truly comprehensive and scientific account. This limitation should be kept in mind while considering the survey's results.

### Respondents

This nationwide survey was sent to marriage and family life diocesan directors and Natural Family Planning coordinators, pro-life diocesan directors and coordinators, safe-environment coordinators, victim assistance coordinators, Catholic Charities directors and personnel, and other leaders through the National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers and Catholics For Family Peace networks. These leaders were encouraged to share the survey with others when appropriate. Note that the survey was not sent specifically to pastors, other parish leaders, or Catholic school teachers and administrators, for example.

A total of **195** responses was recorded from **112** Catholic dioceses spanning from Alaska to Maine in the contiguous U.S., as well as Guam and Saipan. The dioceses also represented Eastern Churches of the Byzantine (Ukrainian, Ruthenian, and Romanian) and Maronite rites.

The breadth of the responses was encouraging. Survey respondents covered a wide range of diocesan leaders and staff including:

- personnel of Catholic Charities including directors, counselors, social workers and staff;
- directors and project coordinators for diocesan pro-life/respect life ministries;
- directors, coordinators and volunteers from diocesan offices for marriage and family life ministry, Natural Family Planning, and marriage preparation;
- directors from offices dealing with child, youth, and adult protection, victim assistance, domestic violence outreach, Hispanic ministry, and safe-environment programs.

Furthermore, a number of respondents included directors for faith formation and evangelization, social justice ministries, canonical affairs, human resources and educators. Finally, a small number of pastors and diocesan chancellors also participated. It is important to note that many parish and diocesan personnel cover more than one role in an office such as overseeing family life ministry and social justice or evangelization.

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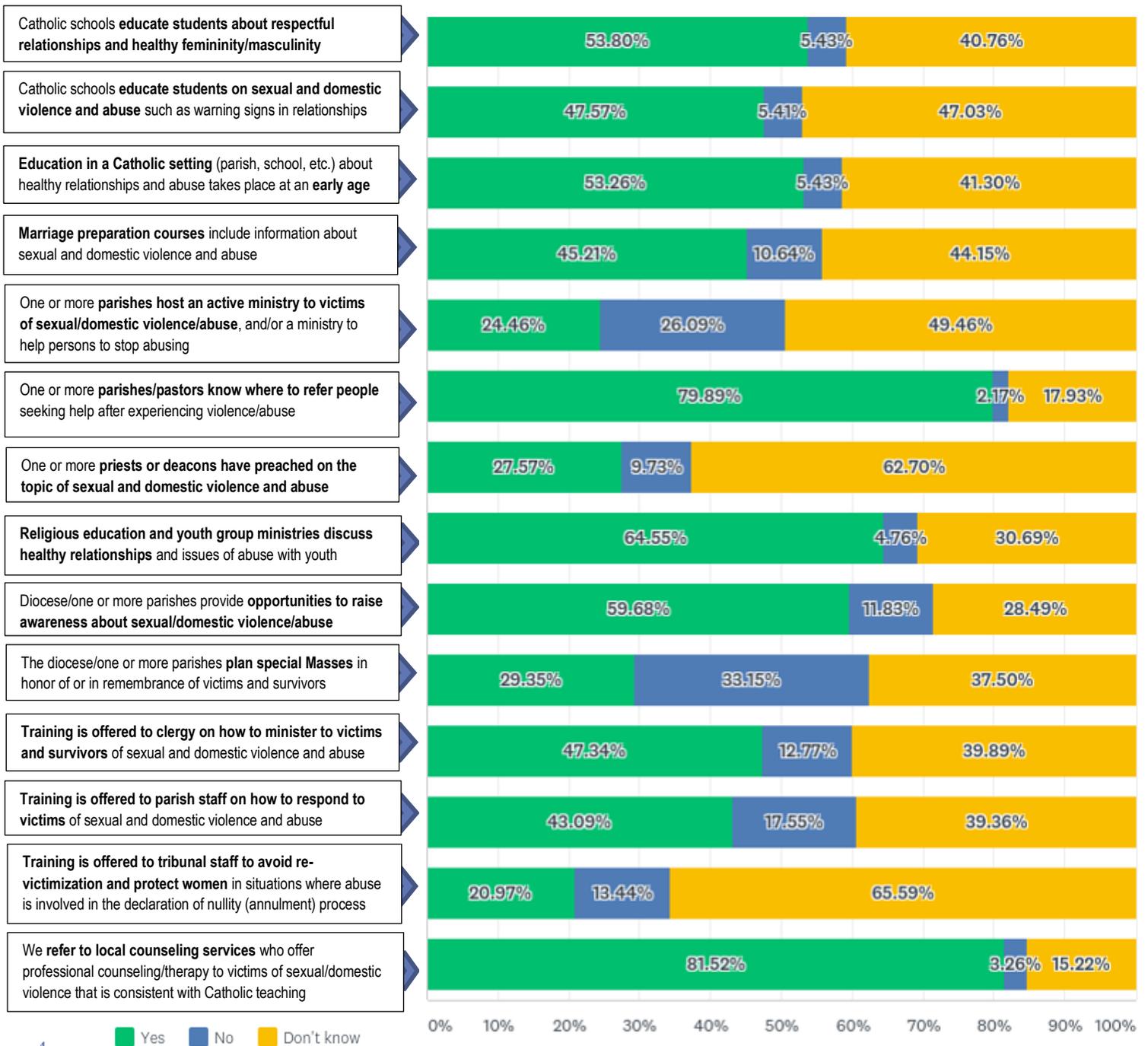


Notably, a number of survey respondents self-identified as dealing directly with *sexual abuse* such as victim services/assistance coordinators (21), safe-environment workers (34), and child/youth protection directors (12). Only four respondents self-identified specifically as *domestic violence/abuse* crisis workers whose duties also overlapped with other ministries.

### A Look at the Data

#### Activities on a Diocesan Level

SURVEY QUESTION: Please identify whether any of the following activities are taking place in your diocese.  
(190 responses)



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The data above demonstrates a few of the programs or services offered in local churches as reported by respondents based on their experience in ministry, as well as the areas for improvement. Below, the data is arranged in four categories, ranging from the most common services reported to the least common services:

<b>Most Common ≥ 70% yes</b>	<b>More Common 51-69% yes</b>	<b>Less Common 31-50% yes</b>	<b>Least Common ≤ 30% yes</b>
Respondents indicated making referrals to local counseling services	Religious education and youth groups discuss healthy relationships	Catholic schools educate on sexual and domestic violence/abuse	Special Masses in honor of victims or survivors
One or more parishes/pastors know where to refer victims of violence/abuse	Diocese/parish provide opportunities to raise awareness	Training is offered to clergy on how to minister to victims	Preaching on topic of sexual/domestic violence and abuse
	Catholic schools educate on respectful relationships, healthy masculinity/femininity	Marriage preparation courses that include information on sexual/domestic violence or abuse	Parish hosts active ministry or outreach to victims and/or abusers
	Education in Catholic setting about healthy relationships at early age	Training for parish staff on how to respond to victims	Training for tribunal staff to protect women in situations of abuse

Overall, it appears that the particular leaders who responded to this survey are confident that their office or ministry is connected with professional counseling services and make appropriate referrals as needed. A good percentage of leaders surveyed also indicated knowledge of one or more parish/pastor being capable of appropriate referrals. However, the full extent of awareness at the parish level and across dioceses was not measured in this survey. Also encouraging is the proactive work of early education and awareness that has begun in many dioceses and parishes where healthy relationship building and respect for the dignity of the human person as male and female is integrated into classes at Catholic schools, in religious education, and within the context of youth group discussion.

On the other hand, the specific topic of sexual and domestic violence or abuse appears to receive little attention by many educators and pastoral leaders according to the respondents. Although Article 12 of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* (USCCB, 2002) states that children are to be trained in “safe environment” programs, this survey illustrates a higher-level awareness regarding the *Charter’s* requirements is still needed. Awareness of opportunities for focused education, training, and awareness within forums such as parishes, schools, seminaries, and marriage preparation courses is limited, and this seems to demonstrate a need for a more direct and systematic approach to the issue within the Catholic community. Obstacles to taking a more direct approach may include sensitivity to the topic, unawareness or denial of the widespread nature of the issue – even in small communities – and unfamiliarity with the subject and its implications, among other reasons.



Lastly, the data seems to encourage greater awareness of the need for a direct response from clergy and the parish community in the form of preparation, prayer, preaching, and a proactive response towards victims and/or abusers. The Church's ministry towards persons afflicted by sexual and domestic violence or abuse can be a vehicle of God's healing and compassion for the suffering members of His flock. It is also worth noting that large percentages of respondents are unaware of the services that may or may not be offered in their local diocese to address sexual and domestic violence and abuse.

### Current Efforts

**SURVEY QUESTION:** Please share about current efforts in your diocese to help victims and survivors of sexual and domestic violence and abuse or efforts to help persons stop abusing. (145 responses)

In many dioceses, respondents noted that **Catholic Charities** is spearheading efforts to assist victims and survivors of sexual and domestic violence and abuse. The degree and kinds of service that local Catholic Charities offices provide varies from diocese to diocese and may include:

- **professional counseling to victims** with occasional counseling in grade schools
- **support to families** suffering from domestic violence which may include **affordable housing** for survivors of domestic violence
- **training workshops** for diocesan staff
- domestic violence **educational group for users** of violence in intimate partner relationships
- **TREM group** (trauma recovery empowerment model) for women survivors

Offentimes, other diocesan offices and ministries such as those that deal with safe environment, victim assistance, marriage & family life, respect life, and social concerns are also involved with education and awareness efforts. Special attention to this subject is also being promoted by other diocesan/parish groups such as diocesan councils of Catholic women and Hispanic/Latino support groups.

In a few dioceses, training seminars that focus on how to respond to domestic violence and assist victims and survivors as well as those who use violence are offered to seminarians, deacons, and priests as well as other parochial administration and staff. A training curriculum is sometimes used to assist with education and awareness.

Occasionally, a workshop addressing safety and public violence is offered on the parish level. One example is the program "Circles of Care" for grades K-12.

**Child and youth protection** is a priority for dioceses, parishes, and schools throughout the country. A few respondents noted having specific programs dealing with child advocacy and protection of minors which may intersect with issues of human trafficking. These programs include Stewards of Children, provided by Darkness to Light, and Protecting God's Children, provided by Virtus. Other training programs, for adults and minors, are also available and used by various dioceses.

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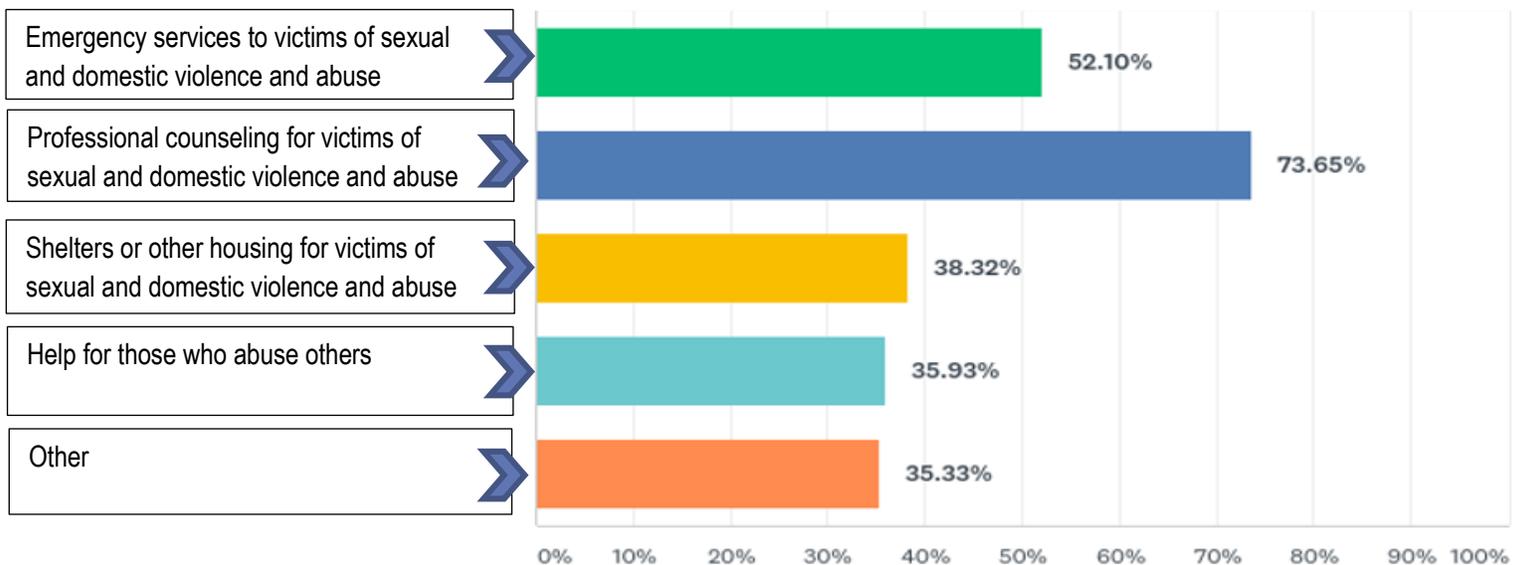
Diocesan offices tasked with ensuring safe environment measures typically offer safe environment training for parochial staff, as well as counseling to victims. Many dioceses offer a **Victim Assistance Coordinators/Counselors Program (VAC)** which provides assistance to victims of sexual abuse by clergy and individuals representing the Catholic Church. A few VAC programs provide retreats for men and women who have experienced any type of abuse as well as trauma recovery groups. Counselors are dually licensed in mental health and substance abuse.

There is a widespread recognition in the Church for **the need to collaborate with other agencies** on the local non-profit or/and federal level to address the concern of sexual and domestic violence and abuse. These may include:

- Local domestic violence shelters and residences for victims of abuse
- Crime victim service units
- Law enforcement
- Healthcare services
- Coalitions
- Child advocacy centers

### Services offered by Diocesan Catholic Charities

SURVEY QUESTION: To your knowledge, which of the following services are offered by Catholic Charities in your diocese? (167 responses)



Other services offered by diocesan Catholic Charities that may overlap with domestic violence and abuse include financial assistance to needy victims, ministry to incarcerated members of the faith community, collaboration with local agencies and task forces dedicated to addressing domestic violence, 24-hour helpline, anti-human trafficking



services, child advocacy and protection services, family stabilization and case management services, legal support, and clergy training. A number of Catholic Charities offices do not offer specific assistance for domestic violence but make referrals to local agencies. A small number of dioceses do not have a Catholic Charities office.

### How to Better Respond to Victims

**SURVEY QUESTION:** What would be helpful in order to better respond to the needs of survivors and victims of sexual and domestic violence and abuse? What resources, skills, collaborative relationships, etc., would help the Church better respond to those who have suffered sexual and domestic violence and abuse? (144 responses)

Survey respondents urged for a **more comprehensive response** to the issue of domestic violence. The areas that could be implemented and better developed are:

- **Awareness**: all efforts begin with a recognition of the problem, that it exists and is a real situation facing many families across diocesan and parish communities. This awareness begins at all levels, with special emphasis on the bishop, clergy, ministry leaders, and staff. Areas of need and concern should be communicated between diocesan and parochial staff and to the people of God such as with the use of homily guidelines for preaching on the issue within the context of a Gospel on marriage.
- **Education and Training**: trainings for clergy, diocesan and parish leaders, staff and administrators, lay ministers, marriage tribunal workers, and all the faithful who educate on the topic, providing guidelines on how best to respond to situations of sexual and domestic abuse, and ultimately, promoting a general awareness of the situation. Such efforts in the area of education may include:
  - providing a comprehensive listing of educational resources (such as Catholics For Family Peace) that instruct on how to respond to this crisis in a meaningful and appropriate manner to victims and survivors of sexual abuse and domestic violence, beyond standard reporting procedures
  - the use of a curriculum on healthy and unhealthy boundaries and relationships for children and youth in faith formation classes and Catholic schools
  - potential areas for education and awareness might include:
    - how to identify potential abusive situations and monitor behaviors
    - how to welcome victims and survivors into the parish community
    - how to advocate for the abused while respecting privacy
    - understanding the cycle of violence experienced by victims: why the victim stays in a relationship, why they go back to the abusive relationship
    - the symptoms and cycles of emotional, psychological, and physical abuse in marriage preparation courses since abusive behaviors can start early in the relationship
    - warning signs a relationship is in danger of becoming unhealthy or abusive
    - the related factors: alcoholism, incest, abortion, etc.
- **Spiritual Aid**: Spiritual support for victims can be provided in a variety of ways, including prayer services with a focus on healing and reconciliation, spiritual direction, prayer groups, and retreats.



- Collaboration with other organizations/ministries such as:
  - Catholic Charities, social service agencies, domestic violence and sexual assault response agencies
  - Local secular and faith-based organizations that are involved with these issues
- Resources: Funding is necessary for essential programs such as Catholic Charities and others to continue in their work. Funding can be used to offer resources such as:
  - Transitional housing/shelters: a primary need for women and families suffering domestic violence
  - Print and electronic resources for victims and the public
    - Bilingual, easy to read pamphlets, bulletin inserts
    - “When I Call for Help” resource cards placed in a confidential, easily accessible place, including confessionals
  - Trained professionals (Catholic or other), experts and specialists available to offer trainings and/or provide direct counseling and support to victims

### How to Better Respond to Abusers

SURVEY QUESTION: How can the Church help people who use violence and abuse to change their behavior? (135 responses)

One of the most difficult issues when addressing domestic violence is the conversion of the abuser’s behavior. Survey respondents suggested a few ways that the cycle of violence can be broken by helping individuals who use violence to break free from their aggressive behavior. These examples are also helpful to consider in a general effort to curb a culture of violence.

- Early Prevention
  - Promotion of chastity and healthy relationships at all levels and ages
  - Awareness and teaching against pornography and human trafficking
  - Awareness and teaching on healthy boundaries and sexual abuse prevention
  - Strong condemnation of all forms of attack on human dignity – from the pulpit, in education, and faith formation
  - Integration of this topic into marriage preparation classes
  - Parish-based preventative education:
    - Family-based programs that teach alternative ways of communication
    - Faith-based classes on anger management and other appropriate topics like building healthy relationships, self-awareness, etc.; preventative education often leads to changes in behavior and reduces harm
- Faith: efforts to break a pattern of violence can begin with a return to God by means of the sacrament of reconciliation when a desire for repentance and conversion is first expressed. This effort of promoting behavioral change can be further encouraged by:



- Prayer groups, small groups for reflection (12 step programs), witness of the saints who also struggled with addictions, violence, and anger
- Pastoral direction from priests, deacons, and pastoral ministers with the guidance of professional counselors
- On a parish level, prayers of the faithful and community prayer
- Formation in truth and love
- Collaboration with local organizations and services:
  - Intervention classes, partnering with law enforcement and social agencies; interdenominational resources and methods
  - Mental health therapy, professional counseling and mentorship services

### How to Prevent the Violence

SURVEY QUESTION: What would help the Church in identifying persons before they commit any act of sexual or domestic violence and abuse? (135 responses)

The task of identifying those who use violence, especially within the context of a parish community, poses many challenges. However, there are a few possible means of identifying a person who may be prone to exhibiting violence in the home.

- Recognition by means of **remote prevention** through:
  - Work with young people on dating violence, with clear definitions and examples of verbal, physical and psychological abuse
  - Developing healthy and constructive relationship skills and boundaries
  - Identifying the signs of a healthy/unhealthy relationship
- Recognition during **marriage preparation**:
  - Recognizing signs of abuse, power and control during the marriage preparation process with the use of:
    - Intake interview with clergy
    - Pre-marital tools to detect abuse (FOCCUS and other surveys should include questions that unveil situations of domestic violence and abuse)
    - Pre-marital counseling that reviews family history of abuse to identify "high-risk" individuals
    - Observation of couple interaction during marriage courses and at Pre-Cana retreat
- Recognition of '**red-flags**' can be learned by all through:
  - Further training, education, and awareness
    - Training at the diocesan and parish level (to all members of Church leadership, especially priests, deacons, religious, and pastoral ministers) by qualified professionals and law enforcement personnel on how to identify offenders and their victims



- Regular mandatory safe environment training for adults and children/youth focusing on the respect and dignity of each person, healthy boundaries, warning signs, and what to do if they are abused
- Background checks for all pastoral personnel will assist in identifying abusers working within the Church, as well as uncovering any red flags
- Continued implementation of the requirements in the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People for victim assistance and child protection
- Assistance from the local tribunal that may be able to identify abusers and victims when seeking annulments
- Learning historical patterns of violence that exist in parish families. It was cited that particular attention be given to single parent homes with the presence of dating/cohabitating partners
- Recognizing other forms of dysfunction in families such as: acts of public aggression, criminal history, alcohol problems, temperament/behavioral issues, patriarchal views of women, unemployment, stress, mental health issues, animal and pet mistreatment, alcohol and drug abuse, adult incest (as incest involving a minor is sexual abuse) and possibly abortion

### Additional Feedback

Respondents included additional comments that emphasized a few main points:

- Education and Awareness

For a number of respondents, the most important step towards eradicating sexual and domestic violence or abuse is focusing on education: talking, training, and teaching about the issue and how it can be eliminated starting with the faith community. A continuous conversation that involves clergy, seminarians, consecrated, and pastoral staff trickles down through the pews of the faithful in Church, at school, and during preparation for receiving the sacraments. One respondent spoke specifically of “working on the ground”, at the community level, where the family of God is gathered and is most affected. Strong Church communities can reinforce and strengthen families – especially suffering families – with prayerful support and resourcefulness.

- Priestly Ministry

By means of her pastors, the Church reminds the faithful of their baptismal call to holiness and a life of grace. Respondents recognized the urgent need for clergy to be well-informed of the threat that sexual and domestic violence/abuse poses to families and the parish community. Moreover, there is a necessity for trained clergy who can respond to the needs of victims and abusers in their own parish with courage, sensitivity, and compassion. The entire parish community benefits from hearing the subject treated by their clergy in appropriate ways either from the pulpit or at similar opportunities.



- Identify and Address Underlying/ Associated Problems

Many respondents pointed out how sexual and domestic violence/abuse is not an isolated event. Other issues related to sexual and domestic violence/abuse may include but are not limited to: mental health, pornography, abortion, cohabitation, divorce, adult incest (as incest with a minor is sexual abuse), substance abuse, prostitution, human trafficking, the hook-up culture – especially widespread on college campuses – a ‘throw-away’ culture, and a lack of respect for human dignity and the gift of sexuality. Recognizing the correlation between these issues may help to more effectively treat the problem of sexual/domestic violence in all its forms.

### Key Findings

#### Areas of Success, Areas of Improvement

**Areas of Success:** What is the Church doing well to deal with sexual and domestic abuse and violence?

- Across the board, **Catholic Charities** provides a great deal of help and resources for victims, survivors, and their families. Most notably, Catholic Charities offers professional counseling services for victims and survivors (as noted explicitly by over 70 respondents). Over 80% of respondents noted that they refer victims to local counseling and therapy services with at least one local parish or pastor knowledgeable of how to refer victims or survivors to local agencies and professionals.
- Many dioceses, parishes, and organizations noted a regular **collaboration with local agencies**, both secular and religious, such as women’s shelters, legal teams, crime victims centers, etc.
- Nearly 65% of respondents noted that **religious education, youth group, and young adult programs** discuss healthy relationships (including healthy masculinity/femininity) as part of their ministry.
- Many **Catholic schools** – elementary, middle, and high school – educate their students about respectful relationships, healthy femininity/masculinity, and sexual and domestic violence and abuse, as reported by roughly half of the respondents. It should be noted, however, that these numbers only reflect the respondents’ best estimation whereas educational professionals would supply more accurate numbers.

**Areas of Improvement:** Where is there room for growth in the Church’s approach to sexual and domestic violence and abuse?

- One area for growth is **raising awareness**. Many respondents expressed frustration that domestic violence and sexual abuse is happening in their communities but is not being brought to light because people (a) don’t believe/are in denial it is happening close to home or (b) are simply too afraid to speak about it. The need for clergy to address this problem from the pulpit and to be present to victims was made clear. This is supported by data from the survey: less than 1/3 of respondents reported priests or deacons preaching about sexual/domestic violence or abuse. Suggestions for increasing awareness include simple steps such as including contact information for local domestic violence agencies or Catholic Charities in parish bulletins and websites, and providing pamphlets in church vestibules, parish restrooms, and parish offices. April as



child abuse prevention month and October as respect life month and domestic violence awareness month provide great opportunities to share information on these issues.

- Another area for improvement, following directly from spreading awareness, is the need for **education**. Many respondents emphasized the necessity of educating people about (a) the immorality of domestic violence, (b) the stance of the Church regarding domestic violence, (c) identifying signs of domestic violence/abuse including related areas, such as pornography use, substance abuse, etc.), (d) how to appropriately respond to signs and victims of abuse, (e) available resources, local or national, that can be distributed to those in need.
  - Trainings or workshops are a necessary part of this education, particularly for clergy (beginning in seminary), including deacons, pastors, and bishops. Additionally, a little less than half (43%) of respondents reported that parish staff are well-trained to respond to victims of abuse who approach them for help. Ideally, all parish staff, regardless of their role, should be trained on how to recognize signs of sexual and domestic abuse/violence and take appropriate measures with the victims and abusers.
  - Training is not often offered to marriage tribunal workers regarding domestic abuse; many workers are not trained in identifying signs of abuse and offering help, protection, and resources for abused people working through the process of a declaration of nullity (only 21% of respondents reported trained tribunal workers).
- The inclusion of information about sexual and domestic violence and abuse in **marriage preparation** was noted by just under half (45%) of respondents. Addressing this early in a relationship could uncover warning signs of abuse in dating/engaged relationships. Hence, the need to include methods for recognizing abuse in a relationship is necessary during marriage preparation.
- A quarter of respondents (24.46%) are aware of an **active ministry of outreach** at the parish level to those who are victims and survivors of domestic and sexual abuse and violence (including resources and parish community support such as a special Mass in honor of victims) or to those who are guilty using abuse or violence by helping them stop their behaviors.

**Best Practices and Resources:** What are the best practices the Church is utilizing now in helping victims and survivors of abuse, according to survey respondents?

There are many programs and resources on the diocesan/parish level currently being used to inform and safeguard two main audiences: 1) children and youth with special emphasis on those who are on diocesan premises and/or are in contact with diocesan personnel, and 2) children or spouses within the home. Below are some of the resources indicated by respondents.

- Protecting Children and Youth in the Church/Diocese
  - VIRTUS: Protecting God's Children program - widespread program for diocesan personnel; mandatory for working with minors

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- Stewards of Children program - published by Darkness to Light; aims to educate adults (primarily child care professionals) to prevent, recognize, and react responsibly to child sexual abuse
  - Circle of Grace program - curriculum for grades K-12 developed by the Archdiocese of Omaha; focuses on healthy boundaries in relationships, how to identify and report abusive behavior
  - Safe and Sacred Environment Training - a product of Proud to Protect; provides safe environment training to diocesan and parish personnel
  - Victim Assistance Coordinators - on the diocesan/parish level to report cases of abuse by parish personnel
  - Other 'safe environment' programs - offered by any diocesan Office of Human Resources or Office of Safe Environment similar to the above; resources and curriculum may be produced by individual dioceses
- 
- Protecting Families and Spouses in the Home
    - Catholics For Family Peace - offers awareness tool kits for clergy and parishioner education
    - Restorative Justice programs - helps abusers and abusers stop and heal from their behavior

Currently, the Church in the U.S. does not offer or utilize many programs or targeted curriculums that deal directly with the issue of sexual and domestic violence/abuse. Instead, dioceses and parishes continue regular collaboration with local agencies, such as women's shelters, mental health institutions, and domestic violence groups to provide counseling, housing, physical healing, and legal help for victims, survivors, and their families. The Church continues to take this issue seriously and strives to assist with God's grace, all victims and those involved in situations of sexual and domestic violence and abuse.