

What the Catholic Church teaches about domestic violence

The U.S. Catholic Bishops have made clear 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.” ([When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women](#), 2002)

Domestic violence and the permanence of marriage

Some abused women believe that Catholic Church teaching on the permanence of marriage requires them to stay in an abusive relationship. They may hesitate to seek a separation or divorce. They may fear that they cannot re-marry in the Catholic Church. The US Catholic bishops emphasize that “no person is expected to stay in an abusive marriage.” (WICFH, 2002). Violence and abuse, not divorce, break up a marriage. The abuser has already broken the marriage covenant through his or her abusive behavior. Abused persons who have divorced may want to investigate the possibility of seeking an annulment. Fr. Charles Dahm, Archdiocese of Chicago, gives an [excellent video summary](#) of Catholic response in his homily, "Let's Reach Out to Victims of Domestic Violence as Jesus Would"

What the Bible says

Abusive men may take a text from the Bible and distort it to support their right to batter. They often use Ephesians 5:22 (“Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord”) to justify their behavior. This passage (v. 21-33), however, refers to the mutual submission of husband and wife out of love for Christ. It means that husbands should love their wives as they love their own body, as Christ loves the Church. The Catholic bishops condemn the use of the Bible to support abusive behavior in any form. Men and women are created in God’s image. They are to treat each other with dignity and respect.

Forgiveness

Men who batter also cite the Bible to insist that their victims forgive them (see, for example, Matthew 6:9-15). A victim then feels guilty if she cannot do so. Forgiveness, however, does not mean forgetting the abuse or pretending that it didn’t happen. Neither is possible. Forgiveness is not permission to repeat the abuse. Rather, forgiveness means that the victim decides to let go of the experience, to move on with life and not to tolerate abuse of any kind again.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation offers an important opportunity to address these issues. While there are limitations to dealing with issues of abuse in the confessional due to the seal of confession and the absolute confidentiality that it implies, issues of time and place for a lengthy conversation, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is an important place to address domestic violence. For more detail, see the article by Fr. Stephen Dohner, Ph.D., at <http://www.usccb.org/about/laity-marriage-family-life-and-youth/womens-issues/confession-tips.cfm>

Pope Francis, in his 2016 exhortation, *The Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia)*, acknowledges that domestic violence exists in families in our Church and our parishes, and declares that it is not something we can turn a blind eye to. He reiterates Canon 1153, saying that in cases where a spouse and children are experiencing violence and abuse, “separation becomes inevitable” and even “morally necessary” for their safety. He expresses deep empathy for persons in those situations, “who have been forced by maltreatment from a husband or wife to interrupt their live together.”

Dr. Sharon O’Brien, Catholics For Family Peace Education and Research Initiative at the Catholic University of America, www.catholicsforfamilypeace.org, outlines how Catholics should view and respond to domestic violence:

- Abuse and violence can and does happen in “good Catholic families”. It is an equal opportunity destroyer across faiths, race, and socioeconomic classes.
- It is not “Catholic” to be abusive and violent nor is it “Catholic” to accept abuse and violence in the family. Abuse is based on an erroneous set of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, all of which can be changed.
- Whether one is the abuser, the abused, or the child witnessing the abuse, I would like them to know that God loves them, does not want them to suffer or cause suffering, and has not abandoned them – they can ask Him specifically for guidance as to the next right step.