

## Domestic Violence, Catholic Realities, and Immigrant Latinos

by Julia L. Perilla, PhD

For the past 20 years, I have had the privilege of working closely with Latino families affected by domestic violence. The context in which this work has occurred is Caminar Latino, a comprehensive, culture-specific program that offers support and reflection groups for Latina survivors, re-education groups for Latino men who have used violence against their families, and sharing groups for their sons and daughters. Since its inception, Caminar Latino has maintained close ties with faith communities and two Catholic parishes have provided space for the groups that meet weekly throughout the year. Despite the potentially explosive nature of our work, we have never had a single incident of aggression or violence on the premises. We believe that this is due, to a large degree, to the tremendous respect that immigrant Latinos have for the church – whether or not they are Catholic. This, of course, helps to enhance the safety of the women and children who attend the program and speaks to the importance of using a cultural framework to address the issue of domestic violence in our communities.

As a practicing Catholic for whom our Church's teaching regarding social justice issues have been at the center of her ethical and moral foundation, I was delighted to learn about a document first published in 1992. That year the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a key document that affirms many of the realities that confront my daily work: *When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women*. This statement from the Bishops reminds the reader about Jesus' love and respect for women and the biblical image of a kind, merciful, and loving God; names domestic violence a *sin*, and calls for all clergy, religious, and lay workers to obtain training so that parishes can enhance victim safety and batterer accountability. Obviously, this compelling statement has enormous potential to affect the lives of families affected by domestic violence for whom the Catholic Church teachings are a central guiding force. This, of course, is the case for millions of immigrant Latinos. So – why do we not hear more often about this document from the pulpit?

I suspect it has to do with our individual and collective reluctance to tamper with the institution of marriage, with “family secrets,” with our concern for bringing to light dynamics that may point to untenable situations within couples. Fortunately, the Bishops' letter provides an excellent roadmap for our Church's involvement through direct and caring action. A reading of the document will allay our fears and provide clear and scripturally-based guidelines for using the pulpit as a tool for justice making.

As to the impact of the Bishops' document on Latino communities' understanding of how our faith can inform our response to domestic violence, the evidence is contradictory. On the one hand, I have seen the remarkable effectiveness of a priest's or sister's suggestion to a Latina who is being abused by her partner to seek the support and guidance of our intervention program. I

have also worked with men who are sent by their parish priest to attend the men's intervention program. We often remark about the similar effectiveness of a priest's and a judge's "mandate" for a Latino man to seek help about the violence that he is perpetrating against his family. In both cases, the intervention of [male] figures who are challenging his use of violence carries great weight and is often quite effective.

On the other hand, however, I have heard about the response of priests or religious sisters when survivors shared their experiences of domestic violence. Rather than offering the comfort of God's unwavering love and the teachings about the importance of respect and equality within a couple, abused Latinas are often told that they must not do things to anger their spouse so he will not respond with violence. Instead of holding the batterer accountable for the violence he has committed against the woman he has promised to love, Latina survivors are reminded of the permanence of marriage, and the need to "bear their cross" for the good of their children and their family. This response is especially dangerous given that Latinas who have been abused will very often seek support and guidance first and foremost within the Church, because of their belief in its safety and wisdom. Obviously, it's not the absence of Church teachings or Episcopal guidance that prevents Catholic parishes from becoming the haven that many battered women consider them to be. It is often a lack of a thorough comprehension of its teachings.

I know that despite the human failings that are present in many Catholic parishes, our Church has created a document that affirms the basic human right of each person to live without violence in their home. As a Latina teacher, practitioner, and researcher of domestic violence whose work is conducted within a human rights and social justice approach, the Bishops' statement regarding this topic brings me comfort and hope.

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