Opinion
Guest Voices



by Constance Phelps

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In early July, in the suburbs around my hometown of Baltimore, Maryland, there were two domestic violence murders: a nurse and mother in her 30s and a 15-year-old whose mother was trying to escape abuse. The teenager played violin, and his allegedly murderous stepfather was a decorated ex-Marine and police officer. Both

victims were regular people, killed by our epidemic of domestic violence.

The COVID-19 lockdown has caused a worldwide spike in violence against women, according to surveys around the world. Baltimore City experienced a 35% increase in domestic aggravated assaults from early 2020 to early 2021. While some consider the problem intractable and outside the purview of the Catholic Church, daily parish activities abound with lost opportunities to reshape the cultural and moral environment in which abuse flourishes. It was my experience of domestic violence, and the struggle to survive emotionally and spiritually afterwards, that brought me back to Catholicism as an adult.

Parish life appears to have an uneasy and myopic relationship with domestic abuse. A few years ago I heard a homily about divorce by a well-meaning priest, who referenced some justifications for ending a marriage, but failed to mention abuse as one of them. The more churches I visited, the more evident it became that this oversight was systemic.

The actual experience of being both a churchgoing Catholic and domestic abuse survivor is too often one of frustrated invisibility, listening to homilies that you know are inadvertently pressuring people to stay in abusive and dangerous situations. Vague homilies warn against judgment, state that we are all sinners and imply that all our sins are equal, and then turn that idea into a prescription for blanket forgiveness and forbearance. If you "judge," you are a wayward soul unable to love your enemies.

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The stories used to support these morality tales frequently involve getting cut off on the road, being ignored by a boss or a friend, or a minor irritation with a family member. I've always wondered at the bland problems of those pretend homily-people, even as I look at Jesus hanging emaciated and bleeding from the cross and know that his world and theirs don’t have much in common.

According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, one in four American women have experienced physical abuse in a relationship. Emotional/verbal abuse is even more common, and often accompanies assault or coercion. While women overwhelmingly are the targets of the most serious forms of abuse, men experience

abuse as well. The common perception that domestic abuse is about *those people* not *these people* is a myth, one domestic violence myth among so many that still seem to be prevalent in our culture, including clerical culture.

There is enough low-hanging fruit for improvement on this issue in Christianity to supply a juice bar. It's right at our fingertips.

The first thing we could do would be to use the words "domestic abuse" in a church service. I have heard specific prayers for prisoners, the sick, the homeless, the unemployed, victims of street violence, of racism and child sexual abuse, of COVID-19 and poverty, of just about any other type of suffering, but never one mention of domestic violence that was not brought about by my own pestering. This omission sends victims and perpetrators the message that their situation is unmentionable, or not actually a problem, and that it should remain a secret.

Domestic violence experts say abusive behavior is rooted not so much in anger and emotion as in the abuser's belief in their right to power and primacy in the relationship. Abuse is a system of manipulation toward control of the partner, in which abusers may use flattery, isolation, affection, violence, financial pressure, sexual assault, gaslighting and, yes, religious or spiritual beliefs.

Frequently, abusers hold psychologically and culturally based value systems that reinforce their belief that they deserve both dominance and impunity in their personal relationships — even if they would never say such a thing out loud. Our simplistic public discourse about family in Christianity sidesteps the magnitude of daily realities many parishioners are facing and fails to explicitly teach justice and equality in marriage. It also fails to call out interpersonal cruelty in relationships as a sin. Those failures can make the church blindly complicit in abusive situations, even when such complicity disregards the justice and love described in Scripture.

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Abuse by someone you love is a spiritual crisis because the abuser is a core element of your life. It shreds your essential self — your spirit — from that very privileged

position of trust, vulnerability and intimacy. "Love is patient, love is kind ..." starts 1 Corinthians 13: 4-8, which over time demonstrated to me that what I was experiencing in my marriage was not love. Ephesians 6:13-20 taught me how to survive that crisis: "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ..." Truth, righteousness (right action), peace, a voice — all are prohibited in abusive relationships.

Scripture helped me understand and negotiate the situation I was living through, but it is unlikely that I would have acquired that understanding through a homily in a Catholic or mainline Protestant church. Can't we dig a little deeper?

Homilies are a principal vehicle for real-time moral guidance, and there is so much to explore that could improve how churches address domestic abuse. What is the difference between

judgment and healthy discernment? Isn't there a tension between the oft-cited scriptural admonition to offer the other cheek for a slap (Matthew 5:39) and much less quoted verses about mutual care in marital relationships (Ephesians 5:25-33), the dignity and worth of each individual (Luke 12:6-7; Psalm 139) and resisting oppression (Isaiah 58:6-7; John 2, 13-20)? Have certain passages been taken out of their historical context? Is divorce so shameful it's worth all levels of misery to avoid? Does forgiveness have to mean forgetting and re-exposing oneself to possible harm, or are there other avenues? Is real repentance demonstrated through words or a concrete and sustained turning away from actions and beliefs that harm others?

Simplified explanations of Scripture obfuscate the rich layers of meaning that the Gospel's complexity can bring to the deeply painful realities in our everyday lives.

In our urgency to participate in washing the worst thing someone has done off their hands so that they can feel closer to God, do we run right past the person who was the object, the receptacle of that worst action? Religious absolution of abusers does not erase the harm caused. Someone is still struggling with it.

Catholicism greets us with artistic representations of a spiritual mother blithely suppressing the serpent Satan under her foot; her arms open to us, offering an embrace of love and safety. I hunger for that reassuring symbolism and for a church that can match the symbolism with trauma-aware ideology. Survivors of all types of

trauma benefit from the consistency and predicable ritual of daily Mass, which can be a home base of regular connection with divine and human belonging, peace and truth.

For people who have been cut off by abuse from social and familial connections, their parish and their priest may be the only moral havens from a home life that, like mine, inexplicably turned into a place where right and wrong no longer existed.

In entering the literal shrine of the church and Mass, survivors may be looking for some indication from God, through the pastor or other parishioners, that someone will care enough to see them and accompany them back into a moral universe in which they matter as a visible child of God. The parish priest is likely to never know who that is unless he signals that he is open and willing to talk about the issue.

Catholics for Family Peace and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops have plenty of information for parishes about both supporting congregants experiencing domestic abuse and avoiding some of the pitfalls through which Christianity and Scripture can be used as tools of oppression.

But the messages do not seem to have filtered down.

The Catholics for Family Peace website contains a draft letter for laity to send to their diocese requesting a Mass in honor of Domestic Violence Awareness Month in October. I sent a request, but never heard back. In the church, October and the rest of the year should be a time of spiritual and pastoral care for the real-life needs of Catholics who have suffered domestic abuse, but also a chance for priests to become informed and unafraid of facing the demon of abuse.