

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: A Call To Act

1. We the Bishops of the Antilles join our voices with all people of good will calling for an end to domestic violence in our region. We have heard the cries and witness the pain of countless persons, particularly women and children, who have been afflicted by domestic violence. We stand in solidarity with you and want you to know that you are beloved children of God and must be free to live your God given dignity. In this year when we have been invited by the Holy Father to reflect on our experiences of the family and to revision our ministry and support for the family we wish to offer the following pastoral reflections.

EVERY HUMAN PERSON IS ENDOWED WITH DIGNITY BY THE CREATOR GOD

2. We wish to affirm the teaching of Sacred Scripture that every human person has been made in the image and likeness of God and endowed with dignity. (Gen. 1:26). It is as male and female that we reflect the divine. With His breath God gave Adam and Eve the ability to

experience and share divine life (Gen. 2:7). 1:14). He gave us the right to become children of God (Jn. 1:12). He left us one commandment: to love one another (Jn. 13:34). Therefore the Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms that by their very nature, men and women are social beings. “This partnership of man and woman constitutes the first form of communion between persons. For by his innermost nature man is a social being; and if he does not enter into relations with others he can neither live nor develop his gifts.” (Vat. II, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 12) Thus every human person has been endowed by the Creator God with a dignity that is simply gift. Anything that attempts to devalue or destroy our human dignity is a violation of the gift we received through creation and redemption.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IS A SIN AGAINST THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

3. Domestic violence is a sin, a crime and a serious social problem. Violence in all forms and especially domestic violence is destructive and

hampers a person's ability to answer God's call to demonstrate His love. Violence goes against God's law and against the teaching of the Catholic Church. It is not a private family matter. It occurs in every social level of our society. Some hide the abuses better than others. It affects women, children and men. Girls and boys who witness this evil can grow up to believe that violence in relationships is acceptable behaviour or is unavoidable. They are robbed of the opportunity to live lives based on the imitation of Christ. They are made to join the silence and carry the shame for which they are not responsible.

4. It is called domestic violence because this violence occurs between people who are in a relationship where they hoped for love, affection and caring from each other. This violence can be physical, sexual, verbal, financial, psychological or emotional abuse. It can be perpetuated by either partner in the relationship. The assaults on women, especially those that result in death, are more commonly made public because of their tragic nature. However, both

women and men are subjected to intense forms of psychological and emotional violence by their partners. This suffering must not be underestimated. Neither should the effects of these various forms of violence between spouses on their children be understated. **Domestic violence is violence against the entire family.**

5. Domestic violence occurs at all social levels, it affects every type of family, cuts across religions and is also happening in families that are very active and prominent in church and society. There are many interrelated causes of domestic violence. We must therefore be careful in making unfounded assessments or offering quick solutions. While there can be common strands each case is different. The erroneous, underlying belief that women are inferior to men is certainly a significant contributing factor but also the ‘macho’ image that enables many Caribbean men to treat women with disrespect. Our minimal response and inadequate support services also contribute to the escalation of the problem. In addition to the need for immediate response, research is

essential to better understand the problem and the solutions that will end the violence.¹

6. The prominence of domestic violence in our Caribbean communities is alarming. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Crime Trends Survey (CTS) says, three of the top ten recorded rape rates in the world occur in the Caribbean.² All countries in the Caribbean for which comparable data are available³ experienced a rate of rape above the un-weighted average of the 102 countries assessed. This is of particular concern as most incidents of rape and child sexual abuse remain unreported; “forty-eight percent of adolescent girls reported that sexual initiation was ‘forced’ or ‘somewhat forced’ in nine Caribbean countries”.⁴

END THE SILENCE

¹ USCCB, *“When I call for help A pastoral response to domestic violence against women”*; 2002, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Website.

² The Bahamas, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Jamaica (UN/World Bank Report 2007) see figure 1.1.

³ Bahamas, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, Jamaica, St. Kitts/Nevis, Dominica, Barbados, and Trinidad & Tobago (UN/World Bank Report 2007)

⁴ Crime, Violence, and Development: Trends, Costs, and Policy Options in the Caribbean.

7. In our 1975 Pastoral Letter “*Justice and Peace in a New Caribbean*”, the AEC Bishops denounced the exploitation of women:

“...There is all too much evidence that, in many of our Caribbean societies, young girls and women are still being exploited in a shameful manner not only in conditions of employment but sometimes in terms demanded to obtain or retain it. As long as such practices persist among us, we have no right to speak of the achievement of women’s liberation.”⁵

In our Pastoral Letter On “*Crime and Violence*” (2003, ns. 17 & 18), we highlighted violence in the home as one significant contributor to the growing violence in our Caribbean societies. In our 2013 Workshop on domestic violence held in Guyana, our Justice and Peace Commission assisted participants from the AEC dioceses to understand and formulate pastoral plans to address domestic violence in our local churches.

⁵ AEC Bishops, “Justice and Peace in a New Caribbean”, n. 47, 1972.

8. Silence, regardless of the reason, condones domestic violence. It is a grave sin of omission. It neither helps the victim nor the perpetrator. Instead it devalues the dignity of both. It normalizes domestic violence for the next generation. It reaffirms a belief that violence is an acceptable form of behaviour in the Caribbean home. It betrays the victims and leaves them vulnerable. It empowers the perpetrator and undermines the function of society. Domestic violence is illegal in all of our territories according to their criminal and civil codes or specific laws. Accordingly, victims must be empowered by the State to prosecute and to be protected from future harm.

6

9. In the first act of domestic violence which we read about in Genesis, God challenged Cain, held him responsible and accountable. Today, we too must challenge perpetrators of domestic violence, hold them accountable, help them to face the consequence of their action and demand

⁶ See <http://caribbean.unwomen.org/en/caribbean-gbv-law-portal>

that they take the necessary steps to change their behaviour.

10. The purpose of these reflections is to reiterate our deep concern about violence against women, men and children in our Caribbean families and to identify some of the ways in which the Catholic Community, working with all people of good will, can break the silence and begin the journey towards ending domestic violence in our region.

END THE VIOLENCE

Be Informed:

11. The dynamics of family violence can be complex and very explosive. Pastors and Pastoral Teams must become acquainted with the services available for victims and perpetrators. They must develop a working knowledge of the Domestic Violence, Child Protection and Sexual Violence laws in our respective countries. They must also be familiar with Diocesan Policy and Protocol in place for handling such cases. Being uninformed or

failing to acknowledge the signs of domestic violence increase the risks to the victims. Considering that we all share the culture and society, we can all learn better to discern signs of abuse among people who seek help, even when these are members of the Pastoral Teams.

No Silence:

12. Create a parish atmosphere among clergy and laity where domestic violence is never justified nor excused and where the issues of domestic violence can be discussed openly, without judgement and with sensitivity in homilies and other conversations. The goal is to foster spiritual growth and to develop practical solutions. If families never hear a homily about domestic abuse it is less likely that there will be a request for much needed support from the Church. The victims, women, men and children, will continue to live with their pain, isolation and shame. There is a general tendency to blame the victims of domestic violence for their circumstances. This must end. Disclosing domestic abuse is not easy. If any member of

the family speaks out the family is helped. It requires courage. Treat victims with respect and take their disclosure seriously. Avoid sentimental clichés. LISTEN. Resist the need to fabricate solutions. Ensure that they receive legal support and protection.

Caution about premature reconciliation:

13. When a woman's safety is at risk, a marital separation is often one of the solutions a woman may have to seriously consider to end the ongoing battering. This is a time when the woman can be very vulnerable. Encouraging her to stay in the home or to have unsupported contact with the partner is worse. True reconciliation is only possible when the woman is safe; the man is held accountable for his actions, is taking responsibility for the abuse and is genuinely repentant. He has to be committed to seeking help in order to deal with the problem. Expressing regret is not enough. Domestic violence and abuse against children are criminal offences punishable under the law.

Scripture:

14. We note with sadness that some persons misuse scripture to justify a lifestyle of domination and abuse. There is nothing in our Sacred Scriptures that support the abuse or domination of women by men or any other kind of domination. Domestic violence is contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Instead, let us provide spiritual direction and prayer for those who are suffering from violence, especially our women and children, so that they can maintain and develop their relationships with God and with the church community, especially during difficult times.

Prevention:

15. We call upon all our relevant Commissions in the AEC and our Dioceses to collaborate to end domestic violence. The Commissions need to educate the community of faith about the destructive power of domestic violence; advocate for and support the implementation of laws which protect families against violence in

the home; initiate programmes to change attitudes that condone domestic violence; develop adequate support programmes that include information about services for victims available in the community. We must also challenge the macho culture which dehumanizes women and infects men with false views of women and relationships. Our Commissions will also initiate a conversation with civil and legal authorities to review laws and practices that may not adequately protect the victims of domestic violence.

Discussions on domestic violence and violence against women must be included in all of our education programmes beginning at the primary school and especially our marriage preparation courses. We must teach all our people to live, as Jesus did, in a commitment to non violence. Our Church, following in the footsteps of Jesus, must show leadership in making the Caribbean a safer place for all our citizens, especially our women and children who are most vulnerable.

Conclusion:

16. As leaders of the Catholic communities of the Caribbean we will collaborate with other community organizations, non-governmental organizations and governmental agencies to work towards the ending of the dehumanizing threat that is Domestic Violence. We will work together as people of faith to maintain the value of God's presence in women and men whom He has created to experience His love and share it with each other. We ask that all our parish communities work with people of good will to end the destructive force of domestic violence in our Caribbean Region. Let us commit to protect the vulnerable.

17. We place all of our efforts in the hands of the Holy Family, praying that all families may imitate their love.

18. Given at Montego Bay, Jamaica on the 25th day of April, 2015, Feast of St. Mark, Evangelist.