

Blood-Stained Glass: Intimate Partner Violence Within the Catholic Church

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Abstract

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a pervasive issue that affects those from all faiths and backgrounds. This study reflects on the resistance and hesitancy researchers face when attempting to initiate dialogue around domestic abuse and highlights the social, cultural, and theological factors that contribute to this silence. By focusing on the attitudes of faith leaders within the Roman Catholic Church, this research examines the Church’s role in counseling survivors of domestic abuse. The study also explores how the Church’s history with scandal, denial of IPV as a prevalent issue, and the lack of formal training among pastoral staff shape its response to survivors. Analysis of Church doctrine, current responses—or lack thereof—and the lived experience of pastoral staff and survivors suggests a flawed system that fails to adequately support members of the community. Equipping pastoral staff with the necessary knowledge and confidence to address IPV can ultimately lead to increased awareness and advocacy, more effective support, and the implementation and improvement of pastoral training regarding IPV.

Importance in Current Culture

- **Importance of Church Officials**
 - Church officials are often a primary point of contact and support.
 - Despite this, a study conducted in 1987 by Bowker and Maurer concluded that 39% of women who consulted clergy members found their help ineffective
- **Impact of Training**
 - Many pastors have revealed that they feel inadequate in their role as pastoral counselors
 - A study conducted by Zust et al. displayed that 77.8% to 80% of the pastors in both 2005 and 2015 felt ill-prepared to counsel victims of domestic violence
- **Consequences for Counselors**
 - Pastoral staff may experience burnout and vicarious trauma as a result of improper training and support
 - Vicarious trauma occurs when individuals internalize the trauma experienced by those they are helping
 - When overwhelmed and fatigued, they may be less patient, less compassionate, and more irritable, which can strain relationships with congregants and potentially lead to ethical missteps.

Relevant Findings

- **Church’s Fear of Scandal**
 - The child sex abuse scandal likely influences response to intimate partner violence within its communities.
 - After public backlash, the Church may be inclined to manage IPV issues internally to avoid further reputational harm.
- **Couples Counseling**
 - In situations of intimate terrorism—repeated intimidation used to establish control by one partner in a relationship—encouraging survivors to pursue couples counseling is potentially dangerous and fatal.
- **Emphasis on Forgiveness Versus Safety**
 - Religious institutions that emphasize forgiveness must be cautious not to pressure survivors into reconciling with their abusers at the expense of their physical or mental health.
 - Many Christian leaders experienced in counseling expressed deep concern about divorce, viewing it as a last resort, and hoped the marriage could be repaired with support.
- **Denial and Dismissal of Problem**
 - Some faith leaders believe religious attendees are less likely to engage in IPV, often estimating its prevalence much lower than in the general population or denying the issue outright.
- **Scared to Take Action**
 - Some officials may recognize domestic violence in their congregations, but limited resources and inadequate training can make them hesitant to address it.
 - Out of five different Ohio dioceses—Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati, Steubenville, and Youngstown—only Cincinnati addressed intimate partner violence on its website and provided dedicated resources for its pastoral staff.

Conclusion

Open dialogue is essential in addressing intimate partner violence (IPV), especially within the Roman Catholic Church, where faith leaders can play a powerful role in supporting survivors and fostering safe, respectful communities. When pastoral staff receive proper IPV training, they can offer trauma-informed counseling, connect survivors to critical resources, and challenge harmful theological messages. While organizations like the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) publicly condemn IPV and call for action, a significant gap exists between rhetoric and practice. The USCCB often provides idealistic strategies without offering much guidance on steps for implementation, leaving many church leaders ill-equipped to respond effectively. To bridge this gap, comprehensive IPV training is necessary, including education on recognizing abuse, referral protocols, and addressing religious misconceptions that may retraumatize survivors. Furthermore, pastoral staff must engage congregations in ongoing conversations about IPV, integrating awareness into sermons, marriage preparation, and church programming. Doing so not only normalizes these vital discussions but also signals to survivors that the Church is a place of support rather than silence. With intentional education and open dialogue, the Catholic Church can move toward a more responsive and survivor-centered approach to IPV.

References

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