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Domestic violence and faith *by Patricia Broderick*

I believe resilience and growth for a Mexican-American woman experiencing domestic violence are unleashed when she clarifies the meaning of her own faith and spirituality. After 20 years of working with this population, I believe that identifying and nurturing the faith and spirituality of an abused Mexican woman empowers her toward ownership of her life and increases her health and hope as she tries to give her children a better life.

Can a woman's faith help her cope with domestic violence? Yes, if that faith experience is located in a context that teaches that domestic violence is not a punishment from God that requires submission to an abusive husband. An enhanced ability to detect how her faith is deeply embedded in her life can provide an avenue through which she can begin to deal with her abusive relationship.

For the past six years, I was a pastoral counselor at St. Pius V, a Mexican Catholic parish in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood. I met two amazing women there who taught me about faith and resilience in the midst of domestic violence.

I interviewed Irene and Josefina after working with them at St. Pius. Both women are undocumented Catholic Mexican women who immigrated to the United States within the last 15

years. Both Josefina and Irene are Catholics and mothers of eight children (three and five children, respectively), who sought help from the domestic violence program offered at the parish titled HOPE (Hay Opciones Para Ella or "There Are Options For Her").

In the HOPE program, we help our clients gain financial independence as a precursor to leaving their abusive relationship. Both women's self-esteem increased when they dared to enter the workplace. With an amplified sense of power and self-worth, they could recognize their husbands' manipulative behavior. They learned to trust their own feelings.

Irene agreed that she feels joyful despite her problems. She explained, "Sometimes I don't know where it all comes from, but I am not as afraid as before, and I see my life differently. I know God is there. I can't see God, but God is here, everywhere. God is always with me, God loves me, and I talk to God about everything that happens. I know now that God will always be faithful to me and accepts me as I am. My God is tender. As a child I wanted to see God, but now I feel I am seeing God when I help my children, when I can use my hands to help other people."

RESOURCES:

<http://www.ncadv.org>

The National Coalition Against Domestic

Violence is dedicated to educating families, practitioners and policymakers about domestic violence and to advocating for change via innovative support programs and legislation.

<http://www.endabuse.org>

The Family Violence Prevention fund Web site has a breadth of information related to helping people in domestic violence and in advocating for more awareness of these issues at state and national policy levels.

<http://www.usccb.org/laity/help.shtml>

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2002 issued a statement paper titled "When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women." This site contains that statement and a PowerPoint presentation that addressed the various issues related to empowering Catholics to take action against domestic violence in their parishes.

FREELY MADE DECISION

Both of these women are freely staying in their relationships until they feel financially and emotionally ready to leave them. Josefina stays because she has not found a higher paying job to maintain the family economically. Irene has young children to raise, and although she has regular cleaning jobs, she is not able to work full time and take care of the children as she wishes. The women still struggle with a lack of extended family support, and they worry about how their undocumented status would affect their mobility and housing options.

Both women report that they have been able to protect their children from their husbands' violence and employ orders of protection to reduce their husbands' behavior. Despite these encouraging signs, they add that their husbands are alcoholics and are still threatening to them.

Each of these women credits her progress to the H.O.P.E. program and being accompanied in her life by a good God. Domestic violence education and the development of their belief in an ever-present God have helped Josefina and Irene reconstruct their lives. They say that their children have helped keep them focused on God and on staying safe. Today, both women stand poised to balance an understanding of themselves, their cultural and religious heritage, and the welfare of their children with the dynamics of domestic violence. They know they have options.

WHAT CHURCHES CAN DO

At the institutional level, religious leaders and educators must condemn domestic violence and distinguish a healthy marriage from an abusive one. Mexican women feel safe in their churches and have great respect for their priests and for persons working at a church. Because of this, these leaders

have an opportunity and duty to clarify religious beliefs and traditional practices in a way that women are freed from a sense of guilt and are empowered to seek the help they need. Churches also can be a starting place for sharing information about the dynamics of domestic violence. Because authority is vested in religious leaders, their work toward the prevention of violence by stressing the equality and dignity of women is crucial.

THE NEED FOR FAITH-BASED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SUPPORT GROUPS

My interviews with Josefina and Irene emphasize the importance of bringing women who experience domestic violence into relationship with one another. In the context of a support group, a woman begins to recognize what is happening to her and that she is not alone. This fundamental notion of helping women find and build relationships is at the heart of gospel community.

Women who recognize a sacred presence in their lives begin to take action based on more hopeful attitudes and behaviors. Today, Josefina and Irene are in a community and a relationship with God from which they draw strength. Their stories suggest the importance of empowering women to make their own choices rather than objectively deciding that separation from the abuser is the preferred intervention.

As we finished our interview, Josefina reflected, "Talking with you I feel like I've had a long rest. I like talking about what I plan to do for my children. I feel happy inside, like something beautiful is coming out from inside me. It's like I'm grateful for everything. I always look to God for help, and I go into the church to ask for help every morning early when I go to work. And I know God is helping me through this."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

⇒ Research shows that women caught in a domestic violence situation do not decide to leave it immediately. On the average, they will leave seven times before leaving finally. In your ministry context and knowing your community, write a list of reasons you think this could be true. Realizing this, how would this knowledge affect your work with women in domestic violence?

⇒ Spirituality is a recognized support for a woman experiencing domestic violence in her intimate relationship. How can you help a woman who has an underdeveloped relationship with God develop and strengthen her spirituality as a resource for her situation?

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Serving the dying *by Stephen Faller*

As a hospital chaplain, it is not unusual to serve people who are actively dying, i.e., in their last hours of life. Doing so is always a profound experience, but there were two patients whom I will never forget. They are united in my mind, not only because they were on the same oncology unit at the same time, but because of the contrast in their faith responses to impending death.

It was clear that they had lived in different worlds: one in wealth and privilege, the other in poverty. Both were Protestant, one of a Mainline

denomination and the other of an urban, apostolic congregation. There is no reason to think that these women knew each other, but they were sisters in Christ.

What distinguished them was the contrast in how each experienced and expressed her suffering. The woman who had lived most of her life in poverty chanted a mantra through her worse pain: "Thank you, Jesus, thank you, Jesus." She was sweating and laboring and the mantra gave her a focus, and, I can hope, a comfort. The other woman was distraught and angry. She cried out and shouted, "Why am I still here? What's the point

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