

If violence has its source in the human heart, then it is fundamental that nonviolence be practised before all else within families... From within families, the joy of love spills out into the world and radiates to the whole of society [17] An ethics of fraternity and peaceful coexistence between individuals and among peoples cannot be based on the logic of fear, violence and closed-mindedness, but on responsibility, respect and sincere dialogue. ...I plead with equal urgency for an end to domestic violence and to the abuse of women and children.

— Pope Francis, Message for World Day of Peace 2017, #5

13 November 2020

Dear Parish Priests of Victoria,

COVID-19 has created a range of social issues but has also worked to compound problems that existed long before this state of crisis. Catholic social service agencies are reporting more complexity and an increase in calls to helplines regarding domestic violence.

A recent [report](#) by Monash University Gender & Family Violence Prevention Centre also indicate disturbing trends:

- Perpetrators of violence have and are using COVID-19 to restrict women's movements, gain access to women's residences and coerce women into residing with them if they usually reside separately.
- Victim survivors have reported less ability to seek help, and
- Case workers report that violence has become more extreme, especially if perpetrator is at home 24/7, that people experiencing emotional abuse are now increasingly experiencing physical abuse and that more violence has been reported to include children

Catholic Social Services Victoria's Domestic Violence Working Group have been meeting regularly to respond and develop a whole-of-Church response to violence in the home. We write to make sure you know we stand to be a resource, and to request you to join with us in our work.

Many Catholic social service organisations work to respond to the situation of victim survivors, and together we long for a country and culture where violence in the home does not happen. To make this ideal closer to reality we must be intentional and create change at a community level. Government is funding service responses, but research shows faith communities have a significant role to play. The need to be aware of what constitutes as violence, to be able to identify and work through the factors that perpetuate such levels of violence in our communities, as well as being equipped to respond with Christian love and concern is an ongoing task for us all.

Together with social services and schools, parishes have a key role to play to be a part of a whole of Church approach to community awareness and prevention, and a just and compassionate response to violence in the home. COVID-19 has amplified and compounded the need for attentive action.

Why should the Church and our community be concerned?

Below are some [Australia-wide statistics](#) from before the pandemic from 2016:

- Intimate partner violence is considered the greatest health risk factor for women aged 25-44
- Since age 15, 1 in 6 women and 1 in 16 men have experienced physical and /or sexual violence by a current or previous partner
- 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men have experienced emotional abuse by a current or previous partner
- 1 in 5 women and 1 in 20 men have been sexually assaulted and/or threatened
- Family and domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness — 72,000 women, 34,000 children and 9,000 men sought homeless services due to Domestic Violence in 2016-17

The [Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence](#) identified some recommendations for the attention of faith communities:

- Recommendation 163: Develop training packages for faith leaders and communities
- Recommendation 164: Ensure the standards for specialist family violence providers take account of the needs of people in faith communities
- Recommendation 165: Faith leaders and communities examine how they respond to family violence

The Bishops of Victoria have taken these recommendations seriously. Their initial letter in 2016 was a part of a broader response to the Royal Commission into Family Violence in 2016 and was included in a set of resources Catholic Social Services Victoria developed to begin to build a more systematic response.

During 2020 we have been actively engaging with Government and updating this work with efforts to collate a suite of resources, using the knowledge and expertise of staff of our social service member organisations and in the dioceses' offices, with the aim, through partnership with you, to roll out an effective whole-of-Church response to violence in the home. Our focus will be on awareness and capacity building within our communities to respond to and prevent domestic violence.

Violence in a broad sense should not have any place in our society, but the widespread nature of domestic violence is of particular concern. Most forms of domestic and family violence are against the law, but all are a [violation of human rights](#), and have been widely decried by Church leaders.

Together, we can work to build a community and society that condemns all forms of violence, by responding empathically and compassionately to victim survivors and by responding to perpetrators of violence in ways that support and enable them to take responsibility for their actions, provides a therapeutic environment for reflection and change.

Yours sincerely,



Felicity Rorke **Chair**,
Catholic Social Services Domestic Violence Working Group