

Let's Talk About Respect...

As violence in Australia appears to be endemic it's heartening to see that the Australian Bishops have used their social justice statement, *"Respect: Confronting Violence and Abuse"* to condemn the scourge of domestic and family violence. In doing so they have underlined the importance of respect saying that...

“Relationships must be marked by respect and freedom rather than coercion and control.”

It's laudable that the Bishops have consulted widely thus providing invaluable insights from many sectors of society but especially women. It's also courageous as there would be those both in the Catholic community and beyond that might question the Bishops wisdom in tackling this sensitive subject of women and abuse. After all there are few things more disheartening than to come across mixed messages from religious leadership whom the media have unmasked and much of society condemned. The Plenary Council earlier this year was in disarray following a vote to elevate the role of women in the Church failed. Dozens of members, mainly women walked from the assembly floor in protest, some of them in tears. And then there was the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse that showed that until the 1990s, cover-up of abuse was universal Church practice. Notwithstanding these injustices and horrendous violations of trust against women and children this document deserves to be read, studied and hopefully will change attitudes.

At the heart of the document is a blunt reminder from Archbishop Timothy Costello, President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference...

"The message of the Gospel is not a message of domination of one person over another but a message of mutual esteem and kindness."

Stark statistics listed under the heading “Listening to Women and Children” provide the reader with an unambiguous reminder of the pervasive nature of violence. E.g. One woman is killed every nine days by a current or former partner¹ while one in six girls and one in nine boys were physically abused before the age of fifteen.² A staggering 65% of women with disabilities report experiencing at least one incident of violence since the age of fifteen and women with disabilities are twice as likely as women without disabilities to have experienced sexual violence.”

"Perpetrators are not beyond the reach of God's transforming love. They can change. And all of us must take responsibility for changing the cultural factors in our Church and society that have allowed violence against women and children to flourish."

More than 10,000 calls were made to elder abuse helplines in 2017/18 and women outnumbered men among these calls. Emotional and financial abuse were the most common types of elder abuse.³ People who identify as LGBTQI+, those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls were more vulnerable to violence.

It's bold but just and correct that the bishops dealt with the issue of spiritual violence. They write that "abused Christian women are more likely to remain in or return to unsafe relationships, citing religious beliefs to support such decisions. Christian women who suffer domestic violence display a tendency to use Christian symbolism and religious language to explain and tolerate abuse."⁴ The document makes it clear that the Bible cannot be interpreted to justify male power and control over women and children and that the Church does not support the idea that men are superior to women and entitled to dominate them.

“Whenever a woman or child is subjected to violence, abuse or coercive control, the image of God and the freedom of the children of God is violated.”

In a recent 'Eureka Street' article by Andrew Hamilton SJ the controversy about the travails of the Essendon Football Club



pointed out that what was needed was proper respect. Hamilton writes that *'Respect is properly due to persons. It recognizes that each human being is precious, has a unique value, and cannot be treated as a means to another end.'*⁵

The Bishop's statement highlights the findings of 'Our Watch' an independent organization created by federal and state governments. In the 'Our Watch', National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children (2010-2022) it states that the inequality between women and men is central to the drivers and enablers of family and domestic violence and is present where women and men do not have equal social status, power, resources or opportunities.' They have identified four major drivers of family and domestic violence...

- Condoning of violence among women;
- Men's control of decision making and limits to women's independence;
- Rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity;
- Male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance, and control.

Jesus uses his status as a male teacher to turn the situation of the woman caught in adultery around. He actively intervenes to prevent the Scribes and Pharisees' understanding of sin.

Jesus' response shows that an authentic understanding of the righteousness of God concerning relations between women and men is transformative and saves all concerned from violence.⁶

The statement concludes with a comprehensive list of agencies both national and state where people seeking help can get information, counseling and support. This is a useful directory for those in parishes with pastoral responsibilities.

Although there may well be a healthy skepticism from some questioning the bishops' authority to tackle this subject they need only to look at this document and they might glimpse a modicum of hope. *"Respect: Confronting Violence and Abuse"* the social justice statement from the Australian Catholic Bishops deserves a wide readership, discussion at a parish level and concrete grass-roots ideas for action to counteract this societal scourge.

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N.B. For comprehensive referencing consult the ACBC document 'Respect: Confronting Violence and Abuse'. Copies are available on line at www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au through your local parish or from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. GPO Box 368, Canberra ACT 2601.
Email: media@catholic.org.au

¹ Aust. Institute of Health and Welfare.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Westenber, "When She Calls for Help-Domestic Violence on Christian Families."

⁵ 'Eureka Street' Vol. 32 No. 20, 20 Oct 2022. Auth: A. Hamilton sj.

⁶ Michael O'Sullivan, "Reading John 7:53-8:11 as a Narrative Against Male Violence Against Women"...Theological Studies 71, no 1.



Prayer

Loving God, you made each of us in your image and likeness. Open our eyes to recognise one another as equals, replacing domination and control, violence, and abuse, with mutuality, reciprocity, respect, and freedom. Help us to love like you.

Jesus Christ, you rejected the use of religious traditions to justify violence.

Teach us to unmask manipulations of our faith used to justify violent, abusive, or coercive behaviour.

Teach us to be people who show tenderness, respect and care for others as you did.

Holy Spirit, you are with us always, showing us the way.

Move us to assist those who experience violence and abuse, and support their call for justice.

Empower us to hold perpetrators of violence and abuse responsible, encouraging them to change their behaviour.

AMEN

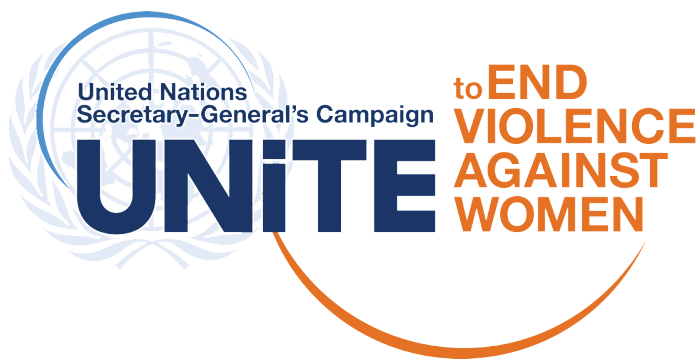
Pope's Prayer Intention for November

popesprayer.va

For children who suffer

We pray for children who are suffering, especially those who are homeless, orphans, and victims of war; may they be guaranteed access to education and the opportunity to experience family affection.





25 November – 10 December 2022

The UN Secretary-General's UNiTE by 2030 to End Violence against Women campaign (UNiTE), is a multi-year effort aimed at preventing and eliminating violence against women and girls (VAWG) around the world. Managed by UN Women, UNiTE calls all to wear the colour orange, mobilize people and raise awareness, and take action to prevent and end VAWG, not only once a year, on 25 November (the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women), but every month.

The UNiTE campaign has proclaimed the 25th of each month as “Orange Day”, a day to raise awareness and take action to end VAWG. As a bright and optimistic colour, orange represents a future free from violence against women and girls.

“Since mothers bestow life, and women keep the world [together], let us all make greater efforts to promote mothers and to protect women.

How much violence is directed against women. Enough. To hurt a woman is to insult God, who from a woman took on our humanity – not through an angel, not directly, but through a woman.”

- Pope Francis

Did you know?

- 1 in 3 women and girls experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, most frequently by an intimate partner.
- 137 women are killed by a member of their family every day.
- Fewer than 40 per cent of the women who experience violence seek help of any sort.
- In Australia, one in two women have experienced being sexual harassed, and women are almost three times more likely than men to have experienced violence inflicted by a partner since the age of fifteen.
- Family violence and/or intimate partner violence is the leading cause of serious injury, disability and death for women in Australia. On average, one woman a week is killed by her intimate male partner.
- 1 in 5 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women aged 15 and over has experienced physical violence in a 12-month period.
- Migrant and refugee women can be subjected to forms of violence that relate to their uncertain citizenship, where perpetrators threaten them with deportation or withhold access to passports, and can also be subject to violence from an extended range of perpetrators, including in-laws and siblings
- Domestic or family violence is a leading driver of homelessness for women.

