Moral Evil Close to Home
Responding to Domestic Violence

Linda J. Strozdas

Intimate spousal abuse is an insidious moral evil that erodes and distorts love, trust, and care, thus betraying the very nexus of safety and the sacred space we call “home.” The author discusses the developmental aspects of the abusive male and offers some suggestions and resources grounded in the Christian tradition for addressing this frequently concealed problem.

Consider the following parish scenario: The bright Saturday morning sun contradicted the feelings of disbelief and helplessness that members of a suburban parish Pastoral Ministry Board experienced as they listened to the pastor’s opening comments regarding the tragedy of one of the neighborhood’s most prominent families. The deputy mayor, Jack Dorn, had allegedly murdered his wife and their eight-year-old twin sons. The Dorns were marginally active parishioners who sent their sons to the parish school. As the pastor and the Board members shared their memories and marginal contact with the Dorn family, what became surprising to them was their total lack of awareness that anything was amiss in the family. Their reflections led them to wonder if other family parishioners were experiencing similar distress that could erupt in such a violent response.

For the majority of the Board, this was their first confrontation with evildoing of this proportion in their serene surroundings. One older Board member remarked that what ran through his mind was the phrase from the old radio pro-

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gram, “Who knows what evil lies in the heart of man?” Though they could surmise that Mr. Dorn suffered from some psychological disorder, that possibility did not fully explain the perpetration of such conscious acts of pain and suffering that would lead to the death of his wife and children. In other words, also present was moral evil, a chain of deliberate acts of an individual that knowingly brought about pain, suffering, and the tragic loss of human life. The Board realized that both perspectives explain but do not necessarily resolve these tragic events. The parish and larger community also become culpable when they do not confront moral evil.

They realized that moral evil in the form of spousal abuse continues to have power because of the conspiracy of silence in families, churches, schools, the workplace, and culture. Over time and during further meetings, the Board became aware of other situations of family neglect and violence. The incident struck an all too familiar chord with other parishioners whom Board members regularly met in their parish ministries. Others confided instances of past and present child abuse; of intimate sexual, verbal, and emotional abuse; of the level of neglect they observed in some of the homebound to whom they brought Communion. Now they were speaking openly for the first time about a “quiet” evil that existed under their very noses but had been treated with silence or a well-intended response that encouraged the victimized spouse to forgive and forget, to save the “marriage” because of the children, or to remember they had married “for better or for worse.” As a result of their discussions, the pastor and Board created an ad hoc committee to investigate the moral and tragic aspects of spousal abuse, and to draw up a pastoral plan of education and pastoral response to both the victims and the perpetrators of domestic violence.

The preceding fictional scenario demonstrates that from time to time pastors and their parishes become painfully aware of domestic violence, a moral evil close to home. Poling defines domestic or family violence as: “…a pattern of assaultive or coercive behaviors, including physical, sexual and psychological attacks, as well as economic coercion, that persons use against members of their family or household” (Poling 2002, 15). Domestic violence may erupt between intimate partners, married or unmarried; between parents and children; or, between adult children and an elderly relative. Whatever the scenario, family violence distorts love, trust, and care—those fundamental aspects of intimate human relationships—and it betrays the very nexus of safety and the sacred
space we call “home.” This article confines itself to the psychological and moral aspects of spousal abuse in general and male violence in particular.

According to the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports, a woman in the U.S. is beaten by a spouse or boyfriend every fifteen seconds (Harmer, 70). While nearly seventy-five thousand men lost their lives during the Viet Nam War, the same number of women in the United States and Canada lost their lives to domestic violence during that same period (see Broken Vows). This corroborates with observations that family violence increases during times of economic depression and war (Poling, 16). Frederick (61) notes that, according to several reliable databases, victims of physical abuse by a spouse are female 85–95 percent of the time. It is equally true that men may also be victimized in a marital relationship, and so, in the first part of this article, I will demonstrate exactly how persons of either gender may take on an abusive-prone personality and how this “illness” dimension of spousal abuse can be prevented and, in some cases, respond to treatment. Additionally, I will examine how morally culpable a perpetrator who was exposed to violence-producing trauma at a young age may be. Furthermore, can and do abusive persons respond to treatment? What indicators might we follow to determine moral culpability of abusive persons who repeat abusive behaviors even after treatment?

Aware of the moral culpability as defined above and given these realities, what realistic expectations fall to pastors, pastoral staffs, and the parish in general for pastoral care of perpetrators who are also part of our faith community? Violence between spouses is not only an atrocity committed against the victim. Its traumatic impact ripples out to a couple’s children and other family members, both at the time of the abuse and after. Eventually, the whole community feels its toxic impact. The many victims, survivors, and perpetrators of domestic violence (who may likely be victims themselves), populate our churches and invite our care.

As the theory and practice of “care,” pastoral theology offers us psychological and theological frames. The discipline of pastoral theology also uses a method that places the usual professional and ordained care-giving ministry of the parish alongside care practiced by the entire parish. Working in concert, parishioners and pastoral staff can provide “the resources for survival and healing, trustworthy community, and empowerment for social justice work on behalf of others” (Poling, 20). Loren Townsend, pastoral theologian and pastoral counselor, employs a helpful method of hermeneutical circularity or an action-reflection-action model useful to structure a pastoral response to parish situations (Town-
send, 2000, 41–49). After exploring the illness-trauma predisposing factors of the abusive personality, we will return to the brief scenario above in the second half of this article as we adapt Townsend’s method of creative “theological imagining” to suggest some pastoral responses to spousal abuse (Townsend, 1996; 2000).

The Developmental Aspects of the Abusive Male Problem

Through the early 1970s the social sciences focused on humankind’s capacity for aggression toward strangers or enemies and whether or not such behavior was innate or learned. Some research focused on environmental and situational predisposing factors such as frustration, verbal and physical attack, arousal, violent role models, drugs, alcohol, excessive heat and overcrowding. Psychiatric explanations of the abusive male saw violence as the result of neurological dysfunction caused by the genes males inherited. Feminist and Womanist theorists explained wife assault as an expression of male power and control occurring because these behaviors were socially shaped (Dutton, 1998, 1–12). While taking these into consideration, the ongoing research of Donald D. Dutton examines the pathways from early childhood development to adult abusiveness. His description of a developmentally progressive mental illness cannot be separated from the emergence of a morally evil context that destroys individuals, their marriage, and family life.

First, Dutton linked the psychological profiles of abusive men with their partners’ reports of the form and the frequency of the individual man’s abusiveness. Then, he connected that profile to the abusive man’s memories of the way he was treated at home by both parents. From these reports, a triadic pattern emerged of early-life trauma. These three factors were: at a very young age abusers witnessed abuse; they were shamed, usually by their father; and, lastly, because of unpredictable parental emotional availability, they were insecurely attached to their parents. His studies next examined which single factor or which combination of the three factors might influence later childhood, teen, and adult violence the most. To his surprise, the least likely factor to determine later violent behavior was witnessing violence in the abuser’s family of origin. “Our first clue that something darker had transpired in the childhood of these men was the unexpected finding that they experienced high chronic levels of trauma symptoms and that these were strongly related to their memories of parental rejection and shaming, and abusiveness” (Dutton, 1998, 147).

Thus, a combination of shaming, emotional and physical abuse by the father, and insecure attachment to the mother was the source of trauma that produced
exaggerated separation anxiety, anger, difficulty regulating emotions and impulse control, an intense dependency on primary relationships, and an inability to tolerate being alone in young boys. Shame-producing verbal attacks like “You’re a bad boy” or “You’ll never amount to anything,” combined with being publicly humiliated, being punished in front of others, and being punished at random produced pervasive trauma symptoms. Further, shaming actions by the father were found to be more predictive of adult abusiveness than shaming by the mother. Thus, it was not paternal physical abuse by itself, but a lethal combination of shaming and physical abuse was required to generate later spousal abuse. “The combination not only models abusive actions, it attacks the boys’ sense of self” (Dutton 1998, 155).

The psychological impact of continual rejection, shaming, and insecure attachment may produce any combination of the following: (1) inflated self-esteem and, related to that, externalizing blame for inappropriate aggressive behavior; (2) a reliance on a relationship to “hold oneself together” and, related to that, jealousy and attachment anger; and (3) decreased empathy for victims of violence. Combined with physical abuse, the behavioral impact on the abused/shamed/rejected boy is frequent rage proneness related to verbal and emotional abuse; over-control of his environment; and intimate rage exemplified in sexual abuse, stalking, and terrorizing (Dutton 1998, 139–56). In summary, the biggest childhood contributors to adult abusiveness were (in order of importance): feeling rejected by one’s father, feeling a lack of warmth from one’s father, being physically abused by one’s father, being verbally abused by one’s father, and feeling rejected by one’s mother. These experiences produce a boy with a poor sense of male identity (Dutton, 1998, 144).

No child chooses such a trauma-related home environment or an abusive developmental trajectory. Such an environment usually nurtures, justifies, and reinforces violence toward others. The child receives no tools to discern morally correct behavior from morally incorrect behavior, creating at best a malformed moral conscience. Is the adult male who abuses his spouse morally culpable? The existence of a toxic environment and lack of moral instruction at home does not excuse abusive behaviors. The extent to which one can recover and learn from the customs, norms, moral teaching, and laws of school, community, church, and society in general, is the extent to which a perpetrator is morally responsible.

Some factors can diminish the abuser’s moral culpability. Severely impaired cognitive functioning present in some who are diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, or brain damage suffered by physical assault, an accident, tumor, or dementia, diminish moral culpability. When cognitive competency is established, it does happen on occasion that emotional damage in early childhood may have been so severe that even specially designed treatment programs do not prevent the abuser from recidivism. Dutton reports that, according to twenty-five treat-
ment outcome studies matched with police recidivism rates, 8 percent of male abusers who receive treatment fall into this category of recidivist.

Usually diagnoses such as extreme Borderline Personality Disorder or Antisocial Personality Disorder indicate to mental health treatment professionals that these individuals have lost their internal capacity or “radar” to feel with and for another. Combined with cognition, empathy for another’s plight is an essential human capacity. Working together, cognition and empathy shape one’s moral conscience that, in turn, guides moral decisions and behavior. When one actually loses that capacity for moral reasoning along the developmental trajectory varies from person to person. For that reason, educators, physicians, youth ministers, and others who work with young children and teens have a crucial role identifying vulnerable children and families. Personality disorders are in place by adolescence and require long-term treatment.

Other preventive measures and interventions can also be made. Early detection of potentially abusive persons in pre-marital programs might be one such preventive measure. For example, diocesan Pre-Cana workshops might mandate the administration of the Propensity for Abusiveness Scale (Dutton, 1995) to participants before marriage. Secondly, when dealing with abusive spouses, parishes, like the law, must hold perpetrators accountable for their behaviors that destroy the spouse and their children. As noted above, spousal abuse is at once a trauma-induced and developmentally progressive mental illness and a moral evil that erodes intimate relationships, the integrity of marriage, and the fabric of society. Those with pastoral responsibility need these facts and the expertise of those who treat victims and perpetrators to shape our pastoral care response to families and their children terrorized by spousal abuse.

**Developing Pastoral Care Responses for Families Traumatized by Spousal Abuse**

Resistance to evil is a form of liberated and critical consciousness that enables persons to stand against evil in silence, language and action” (Poling, 103). Parish-wide care of family members traumatized by spousal abuse does not end with referrals to professionals nor is it limited to understanding the etiology of wife-batterers. Instead, effective pastoral care is an incarnational, relational encounter (Townsend 2000, 149) that leads victimized families and their male perpetrators of abuse to full communion with the Body of Christ. The parish is called to participate in changing those structures, belief systems, and processes by which male spousal abuse is tolerated and, in some cases, unwittingly supported. Townsend proposes a hermeneutic of circularity that provides us with a conceptual tool to foster the inclusive, critical dialogue needed for effective pastoral care.
When caring Christian communities are “jarred” into an awareness of family distress, the entire worship community can be drawn into critical dialogue that produces reflection, choices, and meaningful action guided by the Gospel. This was the case for the pastor and pastoral board of our opening narrative. They found their understanding of spousal abuse inadequate. The perception of its pervasiveness in their parish community expanded. Out of this reflection, they recognized a need for change. They charged their ad hoc committee with the task of turning to their theological sources and faith tradition with their new questions surrounding care for victims and perpetrators of spousal abuse.

Let us imagine that among the resources they studied, the committee viewed “When You Preach, Remember Me,” and read the new edition of “When I Call for Help,” the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ pastoral statement on domestic violence. The bishops’ materials and other sources led the ad hoc committee to a new level of awareness that generated new options for responding to domestic violence. With the scope of their choices widened by consulting their faith tradition, the pastor, pastoral board, and parish are prepared and commit themselves to extend care in a new way to victims and perpetrators of spousal abuse. Through implementing their pastoral response to family violence, they break the silence that perpetuates the moral evil of spousal abuse. The diagram below illustrates the process (Townsend 1996, 353; 2000, 46).

**Hermeneutical Circulation**

5. The scope of action widens as we return to people’s stories with transformed meanings and actions.

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1. Pastoral experience in concrete social locations jars our frame of reference . . .

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2. We find our understanding inadequate, our perceptions expand, and we reflect on the need for change.

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4. This leads to a new level of awareness and new options for transformation.

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3. We turn to our theological sources and faith tradition with new questions.

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Interpretations of the Christian Tradition that Contribute to Spousal Abuse

At best, we can say that we have inherited an ambiguous tradition regarding the tolerance of male spousal abuse. Poling identifies three conflicting religious interpretations of male violence that are also supported by Western society and across several other cultures. These conflicting religious interpretations are: (1) male violence is a sign of God's pre-ordained hierarchy of the headship of men over women; (2) male violence is the consequence of the sinfulness of human nature (“the devil made me do it” mentality); and, (3) male violence is the use of force to attain dominance over women (Poling, 1997, 145). Numerous pastoral theologians challenge the church’s silence about interpersonal violence and its consequences in Christian marriage: Livingston (2002), Neuger (2001), Clark-Kroeger and Nason-Clark (2001), Brock and Parker (2001), Eugene and Poling (1998). They investigate many issues for our theological reflection. Some topics include the doctrines of forgiveness, reconciliation, authority, atonement, salvation, and such overly idealized images of God as benevolent all-powerful father and of Jesus as obedient son who accepts violence because the father wills it. They argue that those who uncritically followed these traditional doctrines have often supported passivity and acquiescence toward their own suffering and that of others.

An uncritical, ahistorical and non-contextual reading of the Scripture also may lead to a perpetuation of the moral evil of spousal abuse. Christie Cozad Neuger (2001) raises several points about the emergence of negative attitudes toward women in this regard. She notes that images of women in the Bible, adopted more frequently by the tradition, generally followed a pattern of extremes. Either women are portrayed extremely negatively or are overly idealized. For example, Eve not only unleashes evil into the world, but is also depicted as a temptress, along with Lot's wife, Potiphar's wife, and Bathsheeba. From these uncritical interpretations of Scripture, the tradition often assumed that women were responsible for men's sexual misconduct with them. At the same time, women were esteemed and honored for their virginity and for motherhood after marriage. Yet women are to

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be submissive to males and silent because only males had God-given authority. Women have inherited these attitudes and various other values of obedience, humility, vulnerability, being last, and the glorification of suffering through models such as Mary and the saints who were martyred or suffered for God’s glory (Neuger and Poling, 95–100).

Livingston examines the connections between Christian marriage and violence. He notes that the words “for better or for worse,” spoken in a sacramental context, can function within a violent relationship as a religious restraint against leaving an abusive partner. Livingston also explores the powerful yet inherently ambiguous symbol of the covenant, demonstrating that, when applied to marriage, it has often led pastors to embrace its ideal side of permanent commitment, loyalty, and love, while ignoring that it also defined relationships of slavery, possession, subordination, and social stratification. He argues that these powerful cultural and religious attitudes, conveyed by the classic symbol of marriage, have often led some pastors over the years to develop a “theology of reunion” rather than of “re-reconciliation or re-joining the community” (Livingston, 49). Such theologies encouraged battered women to return to dangerous and often life-threatening situations out of a misunderstanding of the covenantal nature of marriage.

These ambiguous and uncritical interpretations of Scripture and Christian doctrine have shaped the collective unconscious of our culture and have led to assumptions about gender roles in Christian marriage as well. To knowingly use Scripture uncritically to teach Christian doctrine, given what we know today about the potential for such teaching to reinforce male spousal abuse, is to subtly promote moral evil and anchor spousal abuse more securely and insidiously in family life. All religious traditions are called to proclaim that nothing can justify the use of violence in intimate relationships.

**Enabling Parish Response to Domestic Abuse**

Acknowledging and naming behaviors of spousal abuse as a moral evil in the parish community can easily be ignored because it is something that the community as a whole may not want to think about, or a matter in which they may not want to involve themselves (Poling, 147). We have trained ourselves not to see domestic spousal abuse. Even though it has reached epidemic proportions, its prevalence is ignored in our parishes. Through parish-wide education and
critical theological reflection, parishes can transform attitudes and parish structures that silently allow spousal abuse to fester and grow. Besides parental education programs that can also draw attention to some of the developmental risk factors of male spousal abuse, there are also environmental risk factors that parishes need to examine since they increase the likelihood of spousal abuse. In addition to economic depression and war, job loss, racism, substance abuse, street violence, immigration, and the stress of acculturation are some other contributing factors to intimate violence that parishioners may face. Parishes will need to tailor their response to intimate violence to their social location.

Kevin E. Frederick, associate pastor at Black Mountain Presbyterian Church of Black Mountain, North Carolina, offers the text of a sermon on domestic violence followed by the complete text of his church’s commitment to end spousal abuse (Frederick, 55–60; 61–71). The Black Mountain Presbyterian Church’s Response to Family Violence is a comprehensive pastoral plan and one example of a parish-wide response to intimate spousal abuse. The document begins with an extensive theological statement that grounds the plan in a critical analysis of Scripture and the subsequent Christian response to abuse as a matter of justice and righteousness. The theological statement redefines the parameters of forgiveness and reconciliation regarding the Church’s relationship with victims and their abusers. The second section presents Statements of Confession, Affirmation and Commitment on the part of church members to eradicate family violence. The third section, Strategy for Implementation: Who Needs What Information, offers detailed responsibilities of ministers, session members and advocates; congregational members; victims, perpetrators, and family members; and, lastly, church members. Because attempting to counsel couples in abusive relationships is inappropriate and may even be dangerous, the document concludes with guidelines for pastoral counseling, in A Position Statement on Couples Counseling in Families with Spousal Abuse. This final statement corroborates the research stating that couples counseling while appropriate for resolving some marital problems, is inappropriate because abuse is not a marital problem (Frederick, 61–71). In conclusion, this lengthy document is an example of a faith community’s stand against the moral evil of spousal abuse. It is an excellent resource for parishes developing a comprehensive pastoral response to intimate violence between spouses.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to highlight the presence of an insidious moral evil close to home: intimate spousal abuse. Second, I have identified spousal abuse as both a developmental traumatic mental illness and a moral evil, indicating the moral culpability of the abuser and the parish. As a moral evil, male spousal
abuse destroys lives, undermines Christian marriage, and erodes the fabric of society. When male spousal abuse goes unnoticed and unchallenged at the parish level and in society, victims continue to suffer and die. Townsend’s action-reflection-action method serves as a circular hermeneutic to guide a parish process aimed at responding to male spousal abuse. Finally, the article concludes with a brief discussion of one church’s clear, comprehensive, and detailed pastoral response to intimate violence.

References


