



Respect
Dignity
Justice
Transformation
Hope

JESUS REJECTS VIOLENCE

Jesus' way of relating to women could not be more different from the toxic masculinity of the 'man box rules'. Consider the story of the woman threatened with stoning (*John 8:1-11*). A woman – but somehow not the man – caught committing adultery is dragged in front of Jesus in the temple by the Scribes and Pharisees in order to set a trap for Jesus. Her life hangs in the balance, but she is not allowed to speak. She is treated as a nonperson, disposable, just a tool in a power game.

Jesus uses his status as a male teacher to turn the situation around. He rejects the Scribes' and Pharisees' understanding of sin and God's response to it, which appears to justify violence against women. He actively intervenes to prevent it. 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 such violence.

In this story Jesus rejects the use of religious traditions to justify violence.

STRUCTURES OF SIN

Family and domestic violence is more than a matter of some men behaving badly. It involves direct violence, where the instigator of an act of violence can be traced to a person or persons, but it also involves structural and cultural dimensions in which we all may be implicated, sometimes unconsciously or involuntarily.

Structural violence is built into systems and institutions and their policies and practices. It can show up as the unequal distribution of power and privilege, unequal access to resources and life chances. Cultural violence involves social norms that make direct and structural violence seem natural or

right or at least acceptable.

Structural and cultural violence enable direct violence, then events of direct violence reinforce structural and cultural violence. Direct violence is like the tip of the iceberg. That is why in addition to addressing the personal sin of perpetrators of family and domestic violence, we must also name and confront structural and cultural violence as structures of sin.

Confronting structures of sin requires both personal and collective effort. Our systems, structures, laws and policies, culture and attitudes are a collective enterprise yet action for change requires personal commitment too. We can remain willfully ignorant of the damaging ways in which structures and culture can function as drivers or enablers of family and domestic violence or simply passively acquiesce in them. We may unconsciously internalise attitudes and narratives that are not consistent with the Good News of Jesus. On the other hand, we can instead choose to take responsibility, and to reflect critically on the drivers and enablers of family and domestic violence in Church communities and in Australian society.

Many things are needed, but here we want to reflect specifically on how Christian faith can be misused to justify, legitimise, or normalise violence against women and children.

In her research on violence in Christian families, University of Notre Dame Australia researcher Leonie Westenberg identifies three areas in which religious language can perpetuate domestic violence; "the first concerns women's submission and male leadership; the second centres on the sanctity of marriage; and the third connects the value of suffering to the virtue of forgiveness."

THE LIVES OF WOMEN ARE SACRED

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.

When we talk about marriage, we should consider how our words will be heard by and impact upon women and children living in situations of domestic violence. They are present in our parishes, schools, and communities. They need to hear that their lives are sacred, that they are worthy of respect, and that they should be afforded justice. Men need to understand that they do not have a biblical warrant to dominate and control women and children. They can play a positive role by having tough conversations about this with friends and relatives.

Marriage exists for the good of people; the people in the marriage, not just the institution itself, are worthy of respect. Perpetrators of violence and abuse in families are the ones who are undermining the sanctity of marriage, not those who leave marriages seeking safety, dignity and wellbeing for themselves and their children.

In *Amoris Laetitia* Pope Francis names "sexual manipulation, submission, and violence as fundamental distortions that contradict the very nature of marriage".³⁵ We need to demonstrate that we have heard and believe women when they speak of these realities.

Help is available both for victim-survivors and for perpetrators who want to change their behaviour. Many faith-based agencies and other social service organisations are involved in this work, and we should make sure that we speak about it and that our communities know about it.

EXCERPT FROM

2022-23 SOCIAL JUSTICE STATEMENT

Hard copies available in the church entrance

Online

The Statement and other resources at:

<https://socialjustice.catholic.org.au/2022/08/02/sjs2022-23/>

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