

**Confronting family violence:
A challenge for the church to make a difference
Bishop Vincent Long OFMConv**

Friends,

It is an honour for me to make a response to this public forum on an issue has been described recently by our Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull as a national disgrace. I am conscious, too, of the Royal Commission into family violence in Victoria for which Rosie Batty the Australian of the Year 2015 was a catalyst. Of course, the Royal Commission into institutional response to child sexual abuse is another call to action in order to root out violence and to provide a truly safe and healthy environment for the most vulnerable in our community. I thank the presenters, Paul Linossier, Donella Johnston, Charlie King and Sr Michelle Reid for their contribution to the forum. Their varied perspectives and insights have added depth, substance and richness to the discussion.

Domestic violence has often been considered a private issue and shrouded in silence. I was born and raised in Vietnam where family honour is paramount. I suspect this sense of family honour and reputation is common to many cultures. Even in places where it is not so strongly inculcated, one is often reluctant to air his or her family's dirty laundry in public. The result is that many choose to stay silent in the face of family violence. Even when domestic violence is reported, sometimes there are failures to protect victims adequately or to bring perpetrators to justice swiftly.

When current statistics point towards one in six women having experienced domestic violence in Australia, we know that even within church-based communities there are both victims and perpetrators. How the church and Christians respond to them is crucial in seeing justice, healing and transformation. In some cases, we have responded to domestic violence in wonderfully supportive ways for victims. However sadly there have been countless times when we have let women and children down, and sometimes put them even more at risk through disbelief, minimising the victim's experience, or staying silent.

This inadequate response must not continue. We believe that the first instinct of Christians must be a genuine compassion for those who have been harmed in our communities. We can support our communities to be equipped to be safe and affirming places for women to disclose abuse. Where justice will be sought, action will be taken and real support offered. Victims need to have confidence that they will be heard and believed. That family violence will not be excused, that victims will not be blamed.

Religion can be either a resource or a roadblock for battered women. As a resource, it can encourage women to resist mistreatment. As a roadblock, its misinterpretation can contribute to the victim's self-blame and suffering and to the abuser's rationalizations. A correct reading of Scripture leads people to an understanding of the equal dignity of men and women and to relationships based on mutuality and love. Biblical literalism and complementarianism, instead, provide the basis for systematic oppression or structural discrimination of women and lead communities –even church communities to protecting perpetrators of domestic violence while simultaneously heaping shame and scorn upon its victims.

Jesus always protected the vulnerable and exposed evil. He always respected the human dignity of women. Consistently, he spoke and acted in favour of the vulnerable; he challenged ingrained attitudes of prejudice and exclusion. We even see him breaking social taboos and expanding the boundaries of human love, acceptance and friendship.

Pope John Paul II reminds us that "Christ's way of acting, the Gospel of his words and deeds, is a consistent protest against whatever offends the dignity of women." We want to follow the example of Jesus: our model for equal, loving, and mutual human relationships. Clearly, Scriptures and the example of Jesus challenge us to act in favour of the victims of injustice and violence. But they also caution us against any attempt which would prevent oppressed individuals from accessing higher levels of inclusion and human flourishing.

Our presenters have strongly argued that the **root causes** of violence against women have often been found to be gender inequity and rigid gender stereotypes. Furthermore, they have pointed out to us that violent attitudes and behaviours have their root in the same place – the abuse of power and control of one person over another.

How can the church be the model of inclusion, empowerment and human flourishing, especially for those who are oppressed? Or as Donella Johnston asks, can church leaders who are mostly male be champions of change on the issue of family violence and its root causes of gender inequity and rigid gender stereotypes?

The example of Jesus in relating to women and caring for the most vulnerable even at the cost of defying cultural expectations provides us with the guiding principle in our work of rooting out injustice and violence. Religious leaders have a sacred duty in protecting the vulnerable and emulate the humble, inclusive and boundary-breaking leadership example of Jesus.

Furthermore, it pertains to us as believers to implement the full vision of his kingdom. Paul summarizes the kingdom vision of Jesus in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Jesus’ death brought with it equality for Jew and Gentile, but it was only with time and with extreme struggle and sacrifice on the church’s part that this part of the vision became a reality. It was also only centuries after Jesus’ life on earth that the practice of slavery was finally abolished, and yet we believe that the granting of equality to both Gentiles and slaves lies within the kingdom vision of Jesus.

Our work for the full realization of the kingdom in all its aspects remains to be accomplished. The vision and example of Jesus inspire us as we confront both the manifestations and the root causes of injustice and violence and make a difference to the society in which we live.