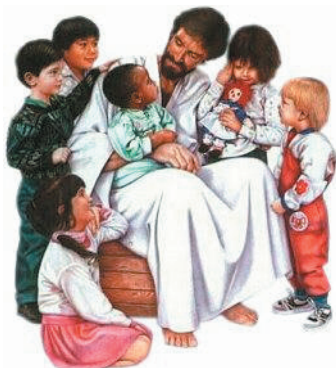


# SPEAKING FOR THOSE WHO HAVE NO VOICE



A PASTORAL LETTER ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE  
DIRECTED TOWARDS INFANTS AND CHILDREN

Most Rev. Ricardo Ramírez, C.S.B. • Bishop of Las Cruces  
December 7, 2005

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Dear Friends:

As a father reaches out to his children, I reach out to you. I reach out with the heart of Jesus. I speak about parenting in this letter. I speak about children. I have no first hand experience with parenting. However, I have been a child. During my childhood, my mother, my brother and I were blessed by the presence of my grandparents who were there to help us. Their wisdom and love have sustained me throughout my life. We also had the loving support of other family members as well as my godparents and neighbors who all played a role in our lives.

While some of you are blessed with the support of an extended family, others find themselves isolated. The majority of us can recall an adult, religious leader, teacher or catechist, who strongly influenced us with words of encouragement, guidance in making wise choices, and expanding our world beyond the immediate neighborhood. For those who feel isolated, I invite you to consider resources for assistance, such as Big Brothers, Big Sisters; Adopt a Grandparent; the Small Christian Communities or prayer groups within your parish; other community resources. I challenge you to become the influence every child needs.

One of the primary responsibilities of a parent is to be an example, a role model. Children do not share the mannerisms, expressions, and attitudes of their parents by accident. These are learned behaviors. Violence is a behavior that a parent can choose to teach or not to teach.

Parents, also instill in their children a sense of self-worth. Children have a right to be loved, respected, and encouraged to excel. If a child is beaten, neglected, belittled and insulted, he or she will grow up without a sense of self worth. Children from violent families grow up feeling anxious, depressed and face life-long self-esteem problems. Children without a positive self-image are more likely to be victims in the home, and without help, may remain the object of someone's abuse all of their lives.

I have spoken with teenage mothers who purposely became pregnant so they would have someone to love them unconditionally. These same teenagers told me they wish they had waited until they were older to have their children. I implore you parents to remind your children constantly that you love them unconditionally. Your loving, caring presence must be an integral part of your child's life; it is the greatest gift you can give them.

Parents, I encourage you to set boundaries for your children. Adults and children, though equal in dignity and value, are not equals, and so parents fail when they abdicate their parental authority and instead try to be "best buddies" to their children. Child abuse is precisely the failure to respect that person's dignity. It is your ultimate responsibility to establish rules and guidelines to keep your children safe, to protect them, and to help them become independent adults who have taken to heart the values you taught them.

Each of us also plays a major role in this process of eliminating violence against children.

I believe that abuse and neglect of innocent infants is not the intent of any parent. Abusing parents do not wake up one morning with the thought of hurting their baby or child. If you, as you read this letter, are concerned that you are an abusing parent, please know that I care about each and every one of you. I am here to receive and welcome you, to take your call, to listen to your story, to pray with you for a changed heart, to help you as best I can.

All of us together must unite and open our hearts to the cries of the innocent. This pastoral letter is a start.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ricardo Ramirez" with a small "S.B." or similar initials at the end.

Bishop Ricardo Ramírez, C.S.B.

## Introduction

On July 6, 2001, I published *Speaking the Unspeakable: A Pastoral Letter on Domestic Violence*. This document closed with the following challenge:

“With this pastoral letter, we begin a process together with persons of other faith communities, professionals with special expertise, and all citizens, to create greater collaboration and develop strategies to eliminate this pervasive evil.”<sup>1</sup>

Today I invite all people of good will to take the next step in the process of eliminating violence in the home as we seek to bring the resources of faith, professional intervention and our collective voice to save the most vulnerable among us - infant victims of domestic violence.

Every human person, made in the image and likeness of God, is endowed with an inherent dignity that demands respect. Domestic violence in all its forms offends the dignity of both the victim and the perpetrator. When that violence is directed against children, the most vulnerable and defenseless among us become the victims, and the crime reaches incomprehensible proportions.

As we struggle with the tragic reality of violence in the home, we broaden our support for the families, victims and perpetrators, as well as the communities left devastated in its wake. We reach out to victims, abusers, other family members and our faith communities. Together, we seek a peaceful community where children are protected and safe, and an environment is fostered in which violence cannot exist. The strength of our faith convictions and the guidance of Scripture are powerful tools that can foster the peace and harmony in our families and communities we aspire to have.

## I. The Reality

The tragedy of domestic violence in our society takes many forms and claims many victims. In the area covered by the Diocese of Las Cruces we have seen the horror that results when infants, the most defenseless among us, are victimized. The death of a child is always a tragedy, but deaths resulting from familial violence are exceptionally tragic. These deaths occur at the trusted hands of the same mothers and fathers who cried tears of joy in the delivery room.

Brianna Lopez was one of those infants. The *Las Cruces Sun News* reported, “There was no one willing to help Brianna when her father and uncle spent the night of July 19, 2003, tossing her around, causing the injuries that finally killed her. Her wounds were so graphic that hardened police officers who had investigated such crimes for 20 years needed counseling. Behind the immediate wounds were signs of constant abuse that spanned most of Brianna’s five months on earth.”<sup>2</sup>

From 2001 to August 2005, ten children have died at the hands of their parents and trusted family members in the southern ten counties of New Mexico. We have seen their faces in the newspapers. We pray for these infants, their families, and the perpetrators.

It becomes obvious that the younger the child the more likely he or she will be a victim. The following statistics for the State of New Mexico published in 2003<sup>3</sup> appall us:

- In 2003, there were 6,238 substantiated victims of children abuse and neglect in our state. This equates with the national average of 12.4 per 1000 children victims.
- 14.7 per 1,000 of these children were 0 -3 years old.
- 13.6 per 1,000 of these children were 4 – 7 years old.
- Parents caused 78% of the fatalities with women incurring a higher association

with abuse and neglect of younger victims. Fifty-five percent of offenders were mothers associated with victims aged 0-3. Forty-five percent of fathers who are offenders were associated with victims aged 0-3.

- Additionally, the parent's age appears to be a risk factor. Forty-four percent of female perpetrators were under age 30, and 33% of male perpetrators were under age 30.

We further grieve for those innocents whose abuse and neglect remains hidden, undocumented, and therefore unaddressed.

## II. The Causes

The causes of infant abuse, like all forms of abuse, are not simple. Often the best that researchers can do is to describe the people and the situations. Descriptions, however, do not reach root causes as the following indicate:<sup>4</sup>

*Child* - Younger children are more likely to be abused than older children; boys are more likely to be abused than girls; and children with health issues and special needs are at greater risk.

*Parent* - Those with little understanding of childhood development; parents younger than twenty-five; those who grew up in homes with violence; those who view corporal punishment, as the way to train children, are more likely to be abusers.

*Family* - In families with high stress levels due to size, financial difficulties, unemployment, substance abuse, and a history of violence - the children are more likely to be abused.

*Community* - Rural communities with fewer community services such as respite care for parents and recreation centers are at higher risk for infant abuse.

*Society* - Americans tend to have convictions around the value of corporal punishment, parenting as an instinct, and family privacy supersedes legal reporting requirements; these prevailing attitudes and others all contribute to the problem.

### III. A Spiritual Reflection

The teachings of Jesus convince us that domestic violence is against the will of God and offends the dignity of both the victim and the perpetrator. We look to these for guidance and for solutions. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus calls the children to his side.

*“People were bringing their little children to him [Jesus] to have him touch them, but the disciples were scolding them because of this. Jesus became indignant when he noticed it and said to them: **‘Let the children come to me and do not hinder them. It is to just such as these that the Reign of God belongs. I assure you - that whoever does not accept the reign of God like a little child shall not take part in it.’** Then he embraced the children and blessed them, placing his hands on them” (Mark 10:13-16).*

The image of Jesus embracing the children is a poignant one. Jesus “lays his hands” on the children with gentleness, with acceptance, with love. The Gospels, especially that of Mark, are filled with stories of people trying to touch, and to be touched by Jesus. How pleased these parents must have been to have Jesus touch their children so lovingly.

“Touch” is central to the sacraments of our Church. Touch is a key way we communicate love, and how we can also inflict hurt.

While we are not surprised to find a special place for children in the message and action of Jesus, his followers at that time in history were

surprised at his teaching. Children had a very low status. They were the weakest and most vulnerable members of the family and of society. In fact, thirty percent of children in those days died at birth or soon thereafter; sixty percent did not live past their sixteenth

*The Gospels are filled with stories of people trying to touch, and to be touched by Jesus.*

birthday. Until the age of maturity, the child was considered equal to a slave. In famine, elders were fed before the children.

In light of this attitude toward children, Jesus' embrace of them was a radical gesture. He teaches us that children are special not so much because they are innocent, but because they are dependent and vulnerable. Lacking legal or physical power, not being able to voice their feelings, they are at the mercy of others. Children belong to the Reign of God because they rely on God and not on their own powers. By laying his hands on them, Jesus recognizes their vulnerability, grants them safety, empowers them in the presence of the adults, and assures them of his love.

The often quoted and misinterpreted letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians gives us another lesson of how families should live, and relate in love with each other:

*"Defer to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be submissive to your husbands as if to the Lord because the husband is the head of his wife just as Christ is the head of his body the church, as well as its Savior. Husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the church. ... Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for that is what is expected of you 'Honor your father and mother'. ... Fathers, do not anger your children. Bring them up with the training and instruction befitting the Lord" (Ephesians 5:21- 6:4)*

In the early Church, all enjoyed a certain equality. Husbands, wives and children were to relate to one another in ways that would reflect that they had taken to heart the lessons of Jesus, the Lord. They respected one another in love out of reverence for Christ. Each member of the family, children included, enjoyed equal dignity and value. At the same time, parents had the responsibility and authority to teach and correct.

The Greco-Roman culture surrounded early Christian families with its patriarchal style. However, according to teachings of the Church, fathers were to take care not to provoke their children to anger or despair. The father's role as family leader did not mean domination, but service and forbearance. Masculinity and manhood in the Bible

are presented in ways that challenge us even today. A strong moral conclusion, which we draw from these biblical passages, is that parents and other caregivers are called to respect their children, correct and discipline them when necessary, but never hurt them, nor manipulate them for one's own purposes.

Biblical teachings force us to think of ourselves as bound together in community, and first of all, a community of faith. Families are not to be isolated – bound as we are to surrounding neighborhoods and to the community at large. Families need each other, need to support each other, need to “be there” for one another. When we welcome new, and especially young families into our communities – we pledge our support and our vigilance. It is an honor, privilege, and responsibility to be invited to be godparents for children, called to be at the side of godchildren and their parents, helping them, guiding them in their faith and being good role models.

#### **IV. Infant Abuse Prevention, Intervention, and Breaking the Cycle of Violence**

##### ***Prevention***

Prevention of all child abuse and neglect must be our ultimate goal. Factors contributing to the abuse and neglect of children seem to form a never-ending list and an insurmountable task. Primary strategies for eliminating infant and child abuse consist in recognizing and understanding the contributing factors, and then taking action to counter them. Overcoming multi-generational learned behaviors, patterns of abuse, addictive behaviors and other aberrations in the home, which cause abuse, require radical changes on the part of everyone involved.

The status which society bestows on children is a critical factor in determining how they are treated. While children in our country today are gaining a higher social status than ever before, and laws enacted for child protection are an encouraging result, the change is a slow and painful process.

The early catalyst for this change is largely attributable to one memorable legal case dating back to 1884. It involved “Mary Ellen,” a severely abused and neglected nine-year old girl from New York, and a courageous nurse who was outraged at the abusive treatment Mary Ellen had received. The nurse’s determination to protect Mary Ellen from further abuse brought this tragedy to the attention of the media, which brought about a quandary. In 1884, there was not a single law in our country for the protection of children. There was, however, legislation to protect animals. The solution to Mary Ellen’s predicament came when the courts determined that she could be considered a ‘member of the animal kingdom.’ The *Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals* then intervened to protect her from further harm. When the outraged public realized that animals had more rights than children, the *Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children* was established. The persistence of this nurse brought about change for Mary Ellen, and began the process of legal protection for children, which continues to evolve today.

What can we do? What must we do? As individuals, and as members of communities, we have the power to take steps to prevent child abuse:<sup>5</sup>

- **Understand the terms**

Child abuse includes physical, emotional and sexual abuse as well as physical or emotional neglect.

- **Understand the causes**

Most parents do not hurt or neglect their children intentionally; many were themselves abused or neglected; the very young parent may not know how to care for their babies or what they can reasonably expect from children at different stages of development.

- **Support programs that support families**

Programs for parental education, community centers, respite care services, and substance abuse treatment programs help to protect children by addressing

circumstances that place families at risk for child abuse and neglect.

- **Spread the word**

We can educate others in our communities about child abuse and neglect by being informed ourselves.

- **Strengthen the fabric of your community**

We can know our neighbors and their children. If possible, we can give stressed parents a break by offering to watch their children, or volunteering directly or indirectly with programs that contribute to prevention. In special need of support are single parents. How difficult it is for single parents to raise children in one-parent homes! Fathers may be less likely to ask for help.

- **Re-evaluate your parenting skills**

If you could benefit from help with parenting, do not be afraid or embarrassed to seek it. Getting help when you need it is an essential part of being a good parent. Talk to someone you trust, such as your child's teacher; take a parenting class; read a book about child development; find a professional who inspires your confidence. The most significant child abuse prevention strategy begins right in your family home.

- **Report suspected abuse and neglect**

The State of New Mexico requires everyone to report suspected child abuse or neglect.

- **Call 911.**

### ***Interventions***

Intervention is the legal and moral responsibility of the extended family and the community. Fatal child abuse may involve repeated abuse over a period of time or it may involve a single, impulsive incident. In cases of fatal neglect, the child's death results not from anything the caregiver does, but from a caregiver's failure not to act. It is inexcusable

that the death of a child should occur because someone did not act on time.

### ***Be ready in an unexpected situation***

We have all witnessed the screaming-child-in-the-supermarket scenario. Most parents and shoppers take the tantrum in stride. However, if we witness a scene where we believe a child is being, or is about to be physically or verbally abused, responding moves us beyond prevention to intervention. Professionals are better qualified than most of us to handle interventions, but there are some steps we can take in such a situation or a similar one: talk to the adult to get their attention away from the child. Be friendly. Say something like: “Children can really wear you out, can’t they?” or “My child (or nephew/niece) sometimes does the same thing.” “Can I help in any way – carry some packages?” “Do you need to call someone? You could use my cell phone.” Very important: If you see a child alone, stay with the child until the parent or guardian returns.

### ***Breaking the Cycle of Violence***

Sadly, domestic violence in the home is a learned behavior and one that is often passed on from one generation to the next. Children living with domestic violence are more likely to become abusers or victims themselves. They tend to copy the behavior of their parents. Boys learn from their fathers to be violent to women. Girls learn from their mothers that violence is to be expected, and even how to inflict it can become a norm.

## **V. Appeal to Parishioners – to everyone**

Since July 2001, we have worked hard to honor the commitments made to our Church and to the community in our earlier pastoral letter addressing domestic violence, *Speaking the Unspeakable*. I acknowledge that *Speaking the Unspeakable*, and *Speaking for Those Who Have No Voice* are not the end of our work to eliminate domestic violence.

With this letter, I believe that we are taking another important step. Let us go forward in our relentless efforts to ensure the protection of the most vulnerable among us – the smallest of our children.

#### Sources

<sup>1</sup> Speaking the Unspeakable: A Pastoral Letter on Domestic Violence, July 2001

<sup>2</sup> Child Abuse Series Isolation can often trigger abuse, By Heath Haussamen, Jan 30, 2005

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2003

<sup>4</sup> New Mexico State University Strengthening Families Initiative, reported in *Las Cruces Sun News*, Jan 30, 2005

<sup>5</sup> The National Clearinghouse on Abuse and Neglect

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