

Safe in Faith: A pastoral response to domestic abuse in the Catholic Church

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“God does not ask us to
stay in unsafe spaces”

-“Mary” Catholic Domestic Abuse Survivor



We know from research and clinical practice that:

- ▶ Faith can be a source of support but also a source of difficulty
- ▶ Survivors of faith stay longer
- ▶ Survivors of faith benefit from faith literate support
- ▶ Attitudes and responses from clergy are extremely varied

Maggie's story

The background of the slide is white with abstract green geometric shapes on the right side. These shapes include overlapping triangles and polygons in various shades of green, from light lime to dark forest green. The shapes are layered, creating a sense of depth and movement. A thin, light grey line also runs diagonally across the white space, intersecting the green shapes.

What does a safe space look like?

- ▶ Confidentiality
- ▶ Safeguarding
- ▶ Boundaries
- ▶ 6 principles

Principle 1: A survivor-focused approach

*“Be a shepherd with the
smell of the sheep”*

-Pope Francis

Principle 2: A Safety-focused approach

Catholic Cannon Law:

“A spouse who occasions grave danger of soul or body to the other or to the children, or otherwise makes the common life unduly difficult, provides the other spouse with a reason to leave...”

CIC 1153

Principle 3: A Trauma -informed approach

- ▶ Theoretical understanding of trauma
- ▶ Understand the individual survivor's experience of trauma
- ▶ No quick fixes: comfort sitting with someone's pain

Principle 4: A non-judgemental, non-directive approach

- ▶ Respect the survivor's choices
- ▶ What happens if the survivor is employing damaging coping strategies?
- ▶ What happens if the survivor is employing coping strategies which don't sit well with Catholic teaching?
- ▶ What happens if the survivor keeps going back to their abuser?

Principle 5: A gender- informed approach

- ▶ Male victims and survivors exist
- ▶ Women are disproportionately and differently victimised
- ▶ Gender inequality is a cause of and effect of domestic abuse
- ▶ Domestic abuse is appropriately classed as a form of VAWG

Principle 6: An intersectional approach

- ▶ Understanding the intersections of oppression and abuse caused by difference, minoritisation and all forms of disadvantage
- ▶ Understanding and meeting the specific needs of minoritised groups of survivors

The Safe in Faith project, Caritas Westminster

- ▶ Specially trained group of Catholic priests and nuns for spiritual support (inspired by Jewish Women's Aid)
- ▶ Network of specially trained counsellors and psychotherapists for faith informed psychological support
- ▶ (Next steps) Volunteer peer support

Training includes:

- ▶ A basic understanding of the reality of domestic abuse
- ▶ Common spiritual questions and barriers
- ▶ Safe signposting
- ▶ Supporting the supporters

Some common spiritual questions

- ▶ Did God choose this path for me?
- ▶ Do I have to forgive my abuser?
- ▶ What kind of justice do I need for restoration? (criminal, social, eschatological)

Safe Signposting: The “Safe in Faith 4 Stages of Restoration”

- ▶ **Stage 1: Recognition** -Signpost to Safe in Faith counselling network and/or local domestic abuse services
- ▶ **Stage 2: Getting Safe** Current abuse (can include post separation abuse) Signpost to local domestic abuse services. Advice available from clinical supervision or Safeguarding services.
- ▶ **Stage 3: Healing** Historic abuse - Rebuilding relationships with self, with God, with others. Healing from trauma. Signpost (if required) to Safe in Faith counselling network
- ▶ **Stage 4: New Life** - Developing positive living as a survivor. Signpost (if desired) to opportunities to help others or create change

Supporting the supporters

- ▶ Ongoing training
- ▶ Robust signposting system/ links with DA services
- ▶ Ongoing support: clinical supervision or informal information and guidance
- ▶ Developing together with ongoing dialogue

A survivor's prayer

***“Lord, thank you,
I love you.***

***You guided me, I listened and today I
am free.”***

- Philippa, domestic abuse survivor



Further reading:

- ▶ Faith and VAWG Coalition (2020) “Keeping the Faith: What Survivors From Faith Communities Want Us To Know”
<https://www.standingtogether.org.uk/faith-vawg>
- ▶ Aghtaie, N., Mulvihill, N., Abrahams, H. and Hester, M. (2020) Defining and Enabling Justice for Victims/Survivors of Domestic Violence and Abuse. University of Bristol
- ▶ Pope Francis, (2016) Amoris Laetitia
https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf
- ▶ <https://catholicsocialteaching.uk>

