

THE CHALLENGE OF FAMILY HEALING was produced by **Family and Society - North**, a 1994 initiative of the **Roman Catholic Bishops of Northern Canada**. The resulting three-part message to the **Families of the North** was circulated in 1996 and 1997 to parishes in the Archdioceses of Grouard-McLennan and Keewatin and the Dioceses of Whitehorse, Labrador-Schefferville, Moosonee, Mackenzie-Fort Smith, Churchill-Hudson Bay and Prince George.

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THE CHALLENGE OF FAMILY HEALING

Part 1

A Message

From the Roman Catholic Bishops of Northern Canada

To the Families of the North

Approved October 16, 1996

In 1994 we, the Roman Catholic Bishops of Northern Canada, established a project entitled **Family and Society – North**. During the first phase of this project we discovered many strong and beautiful aspects of family life in the north. We encourage you, as families, to continue on your path of helping each other to be true “communities of life and love”.ⁱ

At the same time we became very aware of the deep suffering of many families. In too many homes this suffering is the result of violence between spouses. Family violence is of grave concern to us and presents all of us with a challenge. God calls us to build homes and communities marked by love and respect, not violence. We know that violence within families has a lasting impact on men, women and children and contributes to a climate of violence within the community. If we as communities respond in a holistic way to the challenge of this violence, it will be an important step towards creating the kind of safe, loving families and communities we all want.

Violence Towards Women

In this first letter we address violence towards women in marriage and in common-law relationships. We single out this aspect because there have been misunderstandings of Church teaching in this regard and many people continue to suffer because of these misunderstandings. We need to clarify this teaching and make sure the message of the Church is well understood. During the next several months we will explore other aspects of family violence.

Violence towards women takes several forms. It can be physical, emotional, sexual, spiritual, verbal, financial or several of these at the same time. All such violence has a lasting impact.

Church Teaching

God created men and women equal and both men and women deserve the utmost respect. Jesus repeatedly urged his followers to love one another. He showed profound respect for women in a society where women were treated as having less value than men.

By his defense of women, his healing of women and his choice of women to witness to his resurrection, Jesus showed that women and men are equally important to God.ⁱⁱ We know from all that Jesus said and did that he would never want any woman or child to be beaten up or hurt.

Violence against women is profoundly wrong and is unworthy of human beings. It is a serious social problem. It is a crime. It breaks the fifth commandment and is a sin.ⁱⁱⁱ

Some people have taken passages from the Bible and used them to support abusive violent behavior towards their wives. We reject this false interpretation of the Bible. When St. Paul talks about men loving their wives as they do their own bodies^{iv}, he does not mean that men can abuse their wives. In fact he goes on to say that “No one ever hates his own body. Instead he feeds it and takes care of it just as Christ does the Church”. He says to “Love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave his life for it”. The Bible must never be used to justify violence or neglect.

Because we in the Church believe so strongly in the sacredness of marriage, we have sometimes given the impression that a woman must stay in an abusive relationship, no matter how much she is shamed and physically hurt. **We want to make very clear that the Catholic Church teaches that a woman has the right and sometimes the duty to protect herself and her children by leaving a violent situation when it occurs.** This time apart provides protection and also gives the opportunity for both partners to seek help.

In addition, Church Law provides for a more lengthy temporary or even permanent separation when “either of the spouses causes serious danger of spirit or body to the other spouse or to the children”^v. We urge spouses to seek counseling to help them overcome their difficulties before taking such a step.

In a temporary or permanent separation, the couple remains married. Only a civil divorce and an acknowledgement by the Church of the invalidity of the marriage provides the freedom to “remarry” in the Church.^{vi}

The Challenge

Women, many of you have suffered greatly from abuse. We assure you that our Church does not insist that you stay in these situations. At the same time, we know that most of you want to stay in your relationship. You just want the violence to stop. We and our pastoral workers want to walk with you and support you in getting the help you need and in making the choices that are life-giving for you and for your families.

To the men who are violent, we Bishops speak from our hearts as men. We beg you to reflect on the attitude and behavior of Jesus towards women in the Gospels and to make every effort to follow his example. The reason people abuse is complex and is often rooted in previous experiences of pain or abuse. Changing abusive behavior requires help and we urge you to seek the help and support you need. Do not let your pride or your shame prevent you from seeking this help. The on-going cycle of violence and abuse must stop.

We know that many men are not violent. Our families and communities need the witness of your respect for women and children. Men who fall into violence need your support to make the necessary changes.

We Bishops, priests and pastoral workers commit ourselves to deepen our understanding of family violence. With you we will become aware of existing resources and help make them available so that we may all work together to meet this serious challenge to family life.

Let us pray that families and communities of the north will be known by how much each member loves, respects and supports the others.

To talk about this leaflet, contact your local priest or pastoral worker.

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. How is my family a “community of life and love”? How do I personally contribute to this kind of family?
2. Am I ever violent in what I say or do? Do I ever put down other people? Make them feel bad about themselves? Am I willing to seek help to overcome these violent tendencies?
3. If I am abused do I know what help is available to me? Do I have the courage to protect myself and my children?



THE CHALLENGE OF FAMILY HEALING

Part 2

A Message

From the Roman Catholic Bishops of Northern Canada

To the Families of the North

Approved February 19, 1997

In **The Challenge of Family Healing, Part One**, we, the Roman Catholic Bishops of Northern Canada, spoke of the deep suffering caused by family violence, especially violence towards women. We clearly stated that a woman has the right and sometimes the duty to protect herself and her children by leaving a violent relationship. We also urged offenders to seek the help and support they need to change their ways.

We have heard the voices of women, children and men who are caught in the web of family violence. Your pain has become our pain and the pain of the whole community.

In this message we will broaden our exploration of family violence with the **hope that our faith communities will take a more active part in the healing process.**

Faces of Family Violence

The primary victims of family violence are women, children, seniors and people with disabilities.^{vii} Pregnant women and their unborn children are particularly at risk. Twenty-one percent of abused women are assaulted during pregnancy.^{viii} Some men also experience violence in the home.

Victims of family violence experience physical, sexual, emotional, intellectual and/or spiritual abuse. Neglect, keeping back money and destroying or harming a person's precious belongings^{ix} are ways offenders often put down and frighten their victims. Generally, abuse of men is verbal and emotional. No matter what form it takes or who does it, violent behavior is serious and wrong.

In recent years we have learned that male and female **child abuse** of all forms is widespread throughout our society. Each year abuse causes the deaths of 50 children in Canada^x. This statistic does not include the unborn children who dies as a result of abortion. Countless other children suffer from physical, emotional and sexual violence to varying degrees. These children are scarred for life.

We are especially concerned about the children who are raised in violent homes^{xi}. When children see or overhear violence they often suffer from nightmares, fear and outbursts of anger. Paying attention becomes difficult and school work often suffers.

For a boy, violence in the home greatly increases the chances that he will act violently towards his girlfriends and marital partner. For a girl, it increases the chances that she will accept violence in her dating and marital relationships.

One mother tells this story^{xii}:

When my son was four or five, I saw him coming at me with his fists one time and he hit a brick wall twice, in front of me, to show me he was mad. I got scared, and I left him standing by the door when I ran upstairs. I ran upstairs and I started to cry. I just started to vibrate with all the memories of the times I had gotten beaten by his father and other men. He came over and he said, 'Mommy, what's the matter?' I said, 'I thought I saw your dad in that split second when you threw your fists at me'. And I started to think – it's starting all over again, even though you're five years old. Part of me tells me it's starting all over again.

As they grow older, children raised in violent homes often fight with their friends. They may rebel against adults, destroy property and get into conflict with the law. Adults are quick to blame children and teens for their behavior. Young people do need to be help responsible for their actions. **We believe, however, that it is even more important that we all set an example by creating homes and communities that are free from violence and truly respectful of life.**

Pope John Paul II reminds us that "Our treatment of children becomes a measure of our faithfulness to the Lord himself"^{xiii}.

Elder abuse is the most recent form of family violence to come to our awareness^{xiv}. Studies indicate that there may be almost as much abuse of elders as there is of children. It can include physical injury, threats, isolation, not allowing an older person to make decisions, keeping back medication or the basic necessities of life or taking their money, pension cheques or other possessions. In many cases the abusers are the victims' own children or grandchildren.

All victims are shamed by the abuse and tend to keep it secret.

One northern woman described her feelings this way^{xv}:

"I was putting on a pretty good front for the public, but inside I was dying. My self-esteem was nil and I felt like I was losing my sanity. I felt subhuman and very paranoid around him and other people. I was scared and depressed and felt like I was trapped in a corner with no way out. I have lost weight and do not look good. I tried to hide the bruises from the kids and other people because I was so embarrassed and so ashamed."

The Challenge

What darkness! Why are we painting this bleak picture? We know that many families are truly loving and striving to be non-violent. Statistics, however, suggest that in a congregation of 100 families, at least 30 of them live with physical violence in the home^{xvi}. We have a pastoral duty to speak out!

We bring this darkness into the light, even though we know it will cause pain. Unless we face it and examine it as a community we run the risk of “loving the darkness”^{xvii} and contributing to it.

Family violence concerns all of us. We are all part of the one Body of Christ and “if one part of the body suffers all the others parts suffer with it”^{xviii}. AS members of this Body we must support and protect those who are victims. We must challenge offenders and encourage them to get help. We must look at our society and challenge the attitudes and behaviours that give the message that violence is acceptable.

Attitudes that Support Violence

Family violence has deep roots in history and throughout society. Attitudes that contribute to and accept violence in our communities also contribute to violence among family members. One such attitude is that it is all right to put down or hurt certain individuals or groups of people and not others. Historically, women and children have been considered less important than men. They were even considered to be the possessions of men.

People of colour, with disabilities, on welfare and those who are homeless are other examples of people who are often put down. Acting and speaking as if some people do not deserve as much respect as others has become part of our institutions, conversations, jokes, advertising and decision-making. As an institution and individuals even we in the Church have contributed to this situation.

Acceptance of violence as a way to solve problems or as entertainment also contributes to violent behavior within our communities and families. We are particularly concerned about the influence of some television programs, videos and sports in promoting a culture of violence.

Specific Factors that Contribute to Abuse

- We are deeply concerned about the relationship between family violence and drug and alcohol abuse^{xix}. The abuser often drinks before, during and after the abuse. Alcohol does not cause violence. Some abusers, however, use alcohol as an excuse for it, saying, “I was drunk. I don’t remember.”
- Gambling, especially card games and bingo, is another addiction that contributes to family violence. Many parents who gamble neglect their children. As well, it is often when people are gambling that they gossip, which is a form of verbal abuse.
- Unresolved grief, stress and isolation are all factors in family violence. As individuals and as faith communities we need to find more ways of supporting people in these situations.

A Message of Hope

“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”^{xx}. In Jesus, Light and Life have come into the world. Through us, his followers, Jesus can reach out to victims of violence and help create life-giving homes and communities.

We emphasize, however, that God gave us freedom. As human beings, we have a choice when it comes to acting in violent ways. We can choose to get the help we need to stop these actions.

The path to a non-violent way of life includes emotional, physical, social and spiritual healing. Along this path of healing, we need to forgive. Forgiveness, however, takes time and often occurs in stages. Sometimes we need to let go of any guilt we might be carrying. Treatment, emotional healing, prayer and the sacraments can help bring us to the point of forgiveness and restored relationships.

Response

As Bishops, we long to respond to the challenge of family healing. We long for our local faith communities to also respond to this challenge. How can we work together to offer hope to those caught in this web of violence?

We want to speak in a particular way to you who are Aboriginal. You have experienced enormous cultural loss throughout this century. You have told us how these losses have hurt you and how our Canadian society continues to make you feel inferior. We now know that without intending it, we as members of the Church have contributed to your experience and for this we are deeply sorry. We commit ourselves to continue to work with you to bring about healing.

We have written a longer document that explores family violence in greater depth. In it we make some suggestions for what might be our specific contribution as members of the Church. We invite you to read and discuss this document and to respond according to your situation.

As followers of Jesus, we need to imagine and long for non-violent, respectful ways of living. Let each of us decide to speak and act toward each other in the way taught by Jesus. Let us support each other in the belief that with God's help we can restore balance, respect and love in our families.



THE CHALLENGE OF FAMILY HEALING

Part 3

A Message

From the Roman Catholic Bishops of Northern Canada To the Families of the North

Approved July 4, 1997

Through the project Family and Society – North, we, the Roman Catholic Bishops of Northern Canada, listened intently to the realities of family life. In this letter we share with you some of our understandings and beliefs about those realities. We want to offer you a message of encouragement and hope.

Importance of the Family

The Catholic Church teaches that the family is the most basic unit of both Church and society. In the words of Pope John Paul II, “the future of humanity and the Church passes through the family”^{xxi}. It is in the family that a person learns what it is to be human and to belong. It is in the family that a person learns to love and receive love, to grow in a sense of self-worth, to make mistakes and be forgiven, to laugh and enjoy life and much more! It is in the family that God touches the hearts of individuals and leads them to holiness.

Parents and others who raise children have a profound responsibility. You are “co-creators” with God of each child’s life, of the family unit and of society itself. You are the first and most important educators of your children and it is through you that they come to know God. Other individuals and institutions can assist you but no other person or institution can replace you^{xxii}. At times this responsibility feels overwhelming. As Church, we want to be with you and support you. Remember, too, that God is with you, even when you feel most alone.

Some Realities

We Bishops see the work of God in many northern families. You have lived through much hardship, yet you survive! You struggle; you come through difficult times; you keep trying to communicate with each other; you care for family members; you keep a sense of humour. In a word, you don’t give up!

Many of you open your families and adopt or care for children of other birth parents. Some of you are single parents, doing all that you can to provide your children with a loving, stable home. Many couples try throughout their lives to love, respect and forgive each other. Yes, we see much love, faith and joy and we praise our God who works in you.

We also see pain and confusion in many families. At one time, people throughout the community shared the same social and spiritual values. We thought it would always be like that. Now many people question and sometimes ridicule values that give meaning to our lives. Even members of our families make choices that take them down a different path.

In the midst of this confusion, we encourage you to keep talking and sharing with each other. Know, live and speak of what you believe, within your family and in your community. By your words, example and expectations, give your children a good foundation in your values and faith. At the same time, be open to other points of view. As your children grow older, listen carefully and respectfully as they develop and live their own values. Challenge each other in ways that show your love.

Parents and others who are raising children told us many fears. Because of loss of jobs and other changes in the economy, some fear they will not be able to meet their children's needs. Others wonder if their children will be safe. Others fear they will not be able to pass on to their children the values and skills that will help them in the future.

We have learned that the greatest gift parents can give their children is their love, respect and time. In addition, how can we, as faith communities, support families and help them to build the confidence and skills they need? Individuals or couples who have lived through difficulties can be a big help to families. Couples or single parents can find support by meeting and socializing with others who share their values.

Many people today live far from the support of their extended family. We encourage the development of family-like relationships in which affection and mutual support develop. We especially encourage friendships that bring together members of different generations. Single adults and seniors have a special contribution to make to young families.

In addition, many communities offer help for families going through difficult times. In some places, sessions on parenting skills are offered. We encourage you to make your needs known and to take advantage of what is available.

Jesus In Your Midst

The Gospel of Luke^{xxiii} tells a wonderful story that took place just after Jesus' resurrection. In it, Jesus walks along the road with two of his disciples as they return home, not knowing that Jesus had risen. They are very sad. Jesus asks them what they are talking about. They don't recognize him and begin to tell him all that they had hoped from Jesus and how he had just died a terrible death. By referring to Sacred Scriptures, Jesus tells them the meaning of his life, death and resurrection. The disciples invite him for supper and finally recognize him when he breaks the bread.

Just as Jesus was deeply present to his disciples on their way to Emmaus, he is also deeply present to you as you walk the path of life. He is with you in the good times and the difficult times. He is present in the ordinary things you do every day, like talking and listening to each other, cooking, eating, laughing, caring for a sick family member or visiting a grandparent. He is

present in the friend or professional person who helps you through a difficult time. He is with you as you celebrate special family events. Jesus is always there, loving you and ready to help you. By reading and talking about the Bible in your homes, you will come to know and recognize Jesus and the work of the Spirit in your lives.

Let us remember that times of fear and darkness are part of the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection. By facing and living those times with faith and by seeking the help we need, we too can live again with deeper joy and enthusiasm.

We invite you to take time as individuals and as families to open your hearts to Jesus in prayer and simple rituals. Tell him what you need and thank him for all you have received. Meal times and before going to bed at night are often good times to pray together. Develop the habit of speaking easily of Jesus and to him, just as you would a close friend.

Mission of the Family

After the disciples recognized Jesus during their meal together they were so excited that they ran all the way back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples! When we experience love and joy, we want to share it.

Pope John Paul II reminds us that families are called to “unleash the forces of good, the source of which is found in Christ”^{xxiv}.

Families are this force of good in our world when they show love, acceptance and forgiveness to each other. As well, the unselfish care of parents for each other and their children reminds other families of their call.

Families can be a force of good in many ways. Parents and children together can visit those who are elderly, sick or lonely. You can become a family that does not accept violence within the home, even in play. You can care for the earth by being a family that loves nature and uses energy wisely. You can discuss issues of poverty and work together for justice.

Young people have special gifts to offer. Your eagerness for life, your willingness to help each other, your concern for the environment and your insistence on fairness and honesty challenges us to live these values. In turn, we challenge you to explore the meaning of our faith as you search for your path. We challenge you to make your faith a living reality in today's world.

Conclusion

As Jesus walked with his disciples, so we, your Bishops, join you as you walk the path of life. We want to continue listening to your experiences of family and reflecting with you on the meaning of those experiences. We want to learn from you and to support you.

It is in the local faith communities that ways can best be developed to respond to the needs of families. We urge parish councils, priests, pastoral leaders and all the faithful to work together to

meet this challenge. Take seriously our previous messages on family violence. We offered many practical suggestions and we hope you have found ways to act on them.

We also encourage you to join with others in speaking out for public policies that support family life and children.

When we welcome a child into the faith community through baptism, we all commit ourselves to support the faith development of that child^{xxv}. Let us make that commitment visible in the on-going support we show to families!

ⁱ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 48

ⁱⁱ Examples: John 4; John 8:1-11; John 12:1-7; John 20:1-18; Luke 7:36-50; Luke 8:1-3; Luke 8:42-48; Matthew 15:21-28

ⁱⁱⁱ CCCB Permanent Council, *To Live Without Fear*, 1991

^{iv} Ephesians 5:21-22

^v *Cody of Canon Law*, Canon 1153

^{vi} *Cody of Canon Law*, Canon 1085

^{vii} Campbell, Colin. *Family Violence and Substance Abuse*. National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 1993

^{viii} Rodgers, Karen. *Wife Assault: The Findings of a National Survey*. National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 1994

^{ix} Campbell

^x Rogers, Rix, C.M., MSC. "The Anguish of Child Abuse – Is Prevention Possible?" *Transition* (September, 1995): 11

^{xi} *Wife Abuse – The Impact on Children*. The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 1996

^{xii} Quoted in NWT Status of Women. *We Must Take Care of Each Other: Women Talk About Abuse*. 1990, p.14

^{xiii} John Paul II. "Message to World Summit for Children", September 1990

^{xiv} "Education the Key to Stop Elder Abuse." *Transition* (September 1995): 12-13

^{xv} Quoted in NWT Satus of Women, p. 21

^{xvi} Rodgers

^{xvii} John 3:19

^{xviii} 1 Corinthians 12:26

^{xix} Campbell

^{xx} John 3:17

^{xxi} John Paul II. Letter to Families, #23, 1994

^{xxii} Vatican II. *Declaration on Christian Education*, #3, 1965

^{xxiii} Luke 24:24-35

^{xxiv} John Paul II. Letter to Families, #23, 1994

^{xxv} "Instruction on Infant Baptism", Rite of Baptism for Children. Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. 1989, p.251