

'You never know when the next attack is coming'

Nothing could have prepared Adelaide* for the nightmare that was 18 years of her life.

She had married that many years ago, having checked off the stereotypical "Catholic" boxes: she had saved sex for marriage, was wed to a Catholic man, and was open to having as many children as the Lord gave them.

But just weeks after their wedding date, things began turning out quite differently than she expected. Like most domestic abuse victims, she didn't realize how harmful and manipulative her husband's actions were at first.

"It is like boiling a frog," said Adelaide. "The stories I could tell you about what it was like, you would say: 'That's insane. You know that's nuts, right?' This many years, looking backward, yes I do. But when you're in the middle of it, no."

The Nightmare

In 2016, intimate partner violence was the leading type of violence experienced by women, according to Statistics Canada. That year, more than 93,000 victims of intimate partner violence reported the abuse to police; 79 per cent of them were women.

For Adelaide, it didn't start with drunken tirades or threats of violence. It started when her husband would become bothered by seemingly trivial actions one day, and not bothered about them at all the next, with Adelaide's mind in constant circles trying to avoid anything that might cause him to give her the silent treatment or fly into an angry rage.

"I was newly married, I was pregnant already, and Catholic. I went into this fully expecting this grand sacrament to be a grace and a blessing and the whole thing, and I thought: 'Well, if that bothers him, I won't do it anymore,'" she said. "What you begin to realize after a very long time is, it isn't about the deed. It's about the control."

He became increasingly manipulative, verbally abusive, would spend long hours out of the home (she would later find out he was often not at work when he said he would be), and refused Adelaide money for diapers while buying himself expensive clothing and packs of cigarettes.

He stopped going to work, forcing Adelaide to work various part-time jobs where she would receive calls from crying children saying their father was home in an angry rage. Many years later, she learned he had sexually abused them as well.

Though every domestic abuse victim has a different, harrowing story, their accounts have similar threads of manipulation and control.

"The stress of being in an abusive relationship is crazy. You're always on high alert, in fight or flight mode, because you never know when the next attack is coming," Laura* said.

Laura's husband of six years was verbally and financially abusive, yelling inches from her face, greatly overspending their money, blaming her for gaps in their finances, and keeping secret e-mail accounts and relationships with other women.

Once they separated (and divorce proceedings and custody battles over their young daughter were under way), she began to realize how her sense of self-worth had been systematically dismembered.

"It's hard to leave because you've been so demolished by the ongoing power and control and you don't know what life looks like outside of that anymore."

Failed by the system

"It was a lot easier to get married than to get out of the marriage," said Laura.

Laura and Adelaide felt medical staff, the court system, and even the Church largely failed them.

"Even Catholic women get told: 'You just need to have more sex. You need to make him better dinners. You need to be dressed up when he comes home from work.' That's advice from the 1950s," said Laura.

"But there are a lot of problems out there. He was really into porn. That's not too big of a problem is it? Oh yeah, it's huge. He was watching porn, going on Craigslist, and making connections with people."

One day after Laura first discovered photos of another woman on her husband's phone, she went to her parish.

"I remember how broken I was when I found out he had an affair. I was like: 'God, how could this happen?'"

She sought solace in the confessional. When she admitted she didn't know how to confront her husband, the priest replied: "Are you sure you want to blow up your marriage?"

That was the last time Laura sought help from the Church; she turned to online

groups, where she could get advice and remain anonymous. Later, she tried to volunteer at her parish, but was rejected because of her “marital situation.”

“There was nothing like: ‘I’m sorry for what you’ve gone through, is there anything I can do to help you?’ They don’t even care for me as a person.”

Adelaide found priests she encountered also seemed to lack understanding. When she was working several part-time jobs and getting four hours of sleep at night, she asked for financial assistance to care for herself and five children.

One pastor said he couldn’t help because he didn’t want to appear to support divorce; another said he had to first check the story with her husband.

“I’ve done what God and the Church have asked. I was generous with life. I got married in my 30s and still managed to have five children. I still put them first and above all things. To have a pastor, who is worried about the collection plate and his financial responsibility to the parish, say ‘I’m going to talk to your husband,’ means he doesn’t understand the monumental effort it took to get away.”

She did find one priest who would listen with compassion. He helped pay for her children to go to school and affirmed her for providing for them and raising them as faithful young Catholics.

“I get that pastors are in a difficult situation. They only hear one side of the story,” she said.

But “we used to sit right in the front row and be very engaged” in the parish.

“As the years have gone on, we sit further and further back and we are slightly disconnected from the community. We’ll never be the family that’s asked to bring the gifts.”

A few years after their separations, both women are still dealing with an “uncaring, emotionless” court system over divorce proceedings and child custody.

Finding support

Not every abuse victim has a poor encounter with the Church. Agnes Drewniak, operations manager at Domestic Abuse Services – Our Lady of Good Counsel Society in Surrey, B.C., said in the four years she’s served abuse victims, she’s noticed a difference.

While some pastors or communities have been judgmental, an increasing number of people seem to be aware of the issue.

“It used to be that priests would say: ‘Don’t get divorced. The kids will suffer.’ Now I am hearing from a client who left not long ago that she confided to a priest. He said: ‘This is not a good situation for you to be in. You have to look for help. It’s not OK for him to treat you this way.’”

In 2017, DAS received 144 abuse-related calls to their seven-day-a-week helpline.

“We have a lot of clients who are calling our helpline because they got the number from their priests,” she said.

DAS also offers a second-stage house which can shelter up to four women (and their children) who have left first-stage emergency housing and still need temporary help.

“Most of the women who come to our house have been through emotional and financial abuse. Physical and sexual abuse also happen, but that’s a smaller percentage. More of it is manipulation, jealousy, extreme control. Women are not allowed to go to work or to see their friends. There are threats to property, or threats that the kids will be taken away from them.”

Drewniak said there are at least 20 first-stage emergency housing options in the Lower Mainland, plus many second-stage houses for women fleeing abuse and needing counselling and employment to get back on their feet. Yet, she says, “that’s still not enough.”

Last year, 50 women applied to live at Eva’s House; 37 had to be turned away for lack of space.

With October recognized across North America as Domestic Abuse Awareness Month, Drewniak hopes speaking about the issue can help abuse victims feel more supported and less judged by churches and communities.

“It happens everywhere, and unfortunately also in Catholic families,” she said. “If you suspect that someone might be abused, let them know you are ready to talk to them. Offer them help. Let them know you are there and they won’t be judged if they disclose something.”

Courage to speak

While awareness, support groups, and housing exist for female victims of domestic abuse, it’s remarkably difficult for male victims to get help.

“There not only isn’t any knowledge of it, but the knowledge that exists is backwards and really harmful,” Louis* said.

Louis – 5’10” and about 200 pounds – faced 30 years of constant yelling, insults, scratches to the face, and beatings with fists and heavy objects from his wife.

“Nobody believes it. Nobody wants to hear it. ‘It’s not possible. Your wife is half your size,’” said Louis. But even “drops of water can wear through solid granite, if they go long enough.”

He said physical violence was nothing compared to the ridicule. “If I could have made a deal, ‘Don’t say anything; don’t run me down; don’t call me fat; don’t call me weak; don’t call me stupid; don’t call me a failure; don’t say any of that, and you can hit me once a day,’ I would have taken that in a heartbeat.”

Louis found no support from friends, family, or the Church. When he confided in his father, the response was: “How dare you traduce the good name of a woman?”

When his pastor noticed deep, red scratches on his neck and asked Louis about them, he felt ashamed and lied, saying he had been playing hockey.

“If it’s a guy attacking you, you can fight back. You can lose, but you can feel that at least you fought back and did your best. But you can’t do that if a woman is attacking you. You just have to take it.”

Only a psychiatrist believed Louis’ accounts of abuse and offered help. Louis also discovered two films – one was the play-turned-film *The Browning Version* – that touched on domestic abuse toward men and made him feel he was not alone.

While support groups for women exist, the same kind of group for men is much harder to find, and Louis feels if he found one, he likely would not go.

“As soon as you get a men’s rights groups, the feminists attack them,” he said. “If you say you are abused, they say you’re attacking feminism.”

He believes if courts can’t keep abusive spouses away from each other, the Church has little power to step in.

Though abandoned, not abandoning

Despite the lack of support from the Church, Adelaide, Laura, and Louis have not abandoned their faith.

“Back then, I was destroyed. Now I’m shaken, but I know Jesus is real,” Laura said. “I’m still concerned for my daughter, for her safety. I hope the legal system will step in when I need it to, and I know God is taking care of her and her angels are surrounding her. I’m sure my angel is also with her, making sure she’s OK. That’s the most I can do, and in the meantime, help her develop boundaries and show that we can live in truth in our house.”

(*Names have been changed to protect privacy)

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

- The leading type of violence experienced by women in 2016
- More than 93,000 victims reported abuse to police
- 79 per cent (73,500) were women

(Statistics Canada)

- Housed 13 women and 19 children in 2017
- 50 women in total had applied for housing
- 37 had to be turned away
- Helpline received 144 abuse-related calls

(Domestic Abuse Services – Our Lady of Good Counsel Society)