Columns
Social Justice



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Studying Catholic social teaching and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals through the program for sisters at Loyola University in New Orleans was an empowering experience for me, because these values reflected our congregation's charism so well.

I am a member of the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood and we are committed to being instruments of reconciliation, justice and peace and to preserve the integrity of creation. We are called to work with all people, recognizing that God is already present in every culture and religion. But we are also aware that in all cultures and religions people are thirsting for liberation from inequality, injustice, poverty, vulnerability and violence in all its forms.

So when one of the class requirements was to choose an issue that was important to us and then design a teaching project around it, I chose domestic violence, an issue about which I am passionate. I find women struggling with this issue very often in my counseling work because of its great prevalence in Tanzania. Many young women and men as well are deeply wounded, trying to let go of wounds of shame, unforgiveness, hatred, mistrust and betrayal inflicted by their families of origin, places where they expect to feel safe.

Some reasons why domestic violence is strong in Tanzania include the following:

- The influence of peers;
- There is sometimes a lack of respect and attention in families;
- Very low self-esteem/self-worth, where persons themselves feel inadequate and weak;
- Neglect by family;
- Various types of abuse;
- Witnessing violence in the home, in the media, or at home, which can be interpreted to give permission to become involved in violence;
- Access to weapons.

The physical and psychological effects on girls are that sexual abuse leads to unintended pregnancies and induced abortions; school dropout; and — in cases of rape — girls can become so fearful of men that they choose not to marry. The effects on the boys include increased aggressiveness, and the tendency to overcontrol others.

Understanding these issues also helped me in my work with young women in formation, both in our Precious Blood international novitiate, and with novices from other groups. I try to instill in them the attitude that respect for others' dignity and compassion are not just for our missionary work among the people, but it is a mission to ourselves and one another as well.

I encourage them to talk through differences with others who have hurt them, rather than judging or holding grudges. I emphasize that we cannot give to others the pathways to respect, reconciliation, peace and justice if we do not have them within ourselves. A novitiate of women from many cultures and experiences is a perfect place to learn these skills.

After choosing the issue of domestic violence, I prepared a workshop for 24 university students, building it around the Catholic social teaching and the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals I had learned. The students appreciated the opportunity to discuss these topics and were very open with one another — which is part of the healing process. Some even shared their personal experiences of violence at home or with extended family members. We all agreed that as social beings, nurturing relationships is very important, especially with our parents and all family members who nurture us from birth. We all need to feel loved and cared for so that we experience security and safety.

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When social cues tell us that others around us are calm and peaceful, our own psychological and even physiological responses relax. If we sense anger and threat or negative emotions, the opposite happens. We are alert, fearful and on the defensive.

We also talked about ways that healing can take place and of the need to learn how to practice positive and healthy, loving, respectful relationships in our families and among each other so that we do not perpetuate and inflict on others the pain we have experienced. Each person's healing depends on these commitments.

Knowing that culturally in Tanzania, teaching is sometimes most effective through song, I asked a student to help me compose a song with five sections about domestic violence in our society: violence, effects of domestic violence, eradicating

domestic violence, promoting peace and reconciliation, and caring for each other and the world.

Once the song was completed, I took 12 novices to different outstations in our parish, where they sang the song in Swahili. People were very moved by the song and message. After Mass several women wanted to talk about their own experiences described in the songs.

We all realized from this experience how much need there is for people to share the pain in their families and find ways to be healed themselves, and to heal the family and the world. I am so grateful for the time with Loyola where I had the chance to reflect on my work and the issues of my country. I see even more clearly now how important our congregational charism is to Tanzania.

This story appears in the **Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality** feature series. View the full series.