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Structural change within the Church is needed in the fight for justice

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Congregational Leader Sister Patty Fawkner SGS. Image: Sisters of the Good Samaritan.

The Plenary Council is an opportunity to amend structures of governance, language, and preaching, which would make a difference to all members of the People of God, writes Congregational Leader Patty Fawkner SGS.

Perhaps it wasn't by chance that the same day that Brittany Higgins and Grace Tame [spoke at the National Press Club](#), I attended a [WATAC](#) (Women and the Australian Church) [event](#) titled *Behind Stained Glass Doors: A Conversation about Domestic Violence and the Australian Church*.

Both events highlighted for me the necessity for structural change within Parliament, workplace and Church. Domestic or family violence is founded on gender equality and until structures are changed women will continue to be discriminated against and their safety will be compromised.

Violence against women is not a 'women's issue'. It is a whole societal and ecclesial issue. It is an issue of justice.

"Justice demands real change in our laws, as well as in our language, in our national culture, as well as our national conversation," Brittany Higgins said. Within the Church,

justice demands real change in canon law, as well as in our language, in our ecclesial culture, as well as our ecclesial conversation.

Grace Tame, as fiercely courageous as Brittany Higgins, said, "The Federal Government is prepared to spend over \$90 billion of taxpayers' money on submarines that *might* be ready by 2040 to combat a *potential* offshore threat; \$2.4 billion of that has already been wasted, gone. Now compare that to what they're prepared to spend on the very real epidemic of violence against women and children affecting one-in-four today here at home. Just \$1.1 billion in total."

The [Pathways to Intimate Partner Homicide project](#), by a team from the [Australian Institute of Criminology](#), reveals that a woman is murdered by her current or former partner every 10 days – yes, every 10 days. Sexual violence against Indigenous women or women with disabilities is significantly higher.

Imagine if that happened to, say, a serving or former soldier, it would be deemed a national emergency. Either we don't register the scale of the injustice of domestic violence or, if we see it, we accept such violence perpetrated against women as the norm.

Domestic violence is not postcode determined. It is not dependent upon levels of education or income. It is not dependent on faith adherence or religious practice. And it isn't about sex. It's about power and control.

What is it, the WATAC event asked, in our structures and Church culture that contribute to domestic violence?

Violence is often spiritualised. Perpetrators can use the Bible to justify their behaviour and forgiveness can be called upon as *the* Christian virtue that must come to the fore in domestic disputes. But examples of cheap forgiveness abound.

Perpetrators constantly urge their partners to forgive them and take them back. Forgiveness does not break the cycle of abuse.

I sat in the pews one Sunday morning when the presider urged the community to forgive the recently removed pastor who had been found guilty of the sexual abuse of children. There was no mention of justice, let alone concern, for the victim survivors. Cheap forgiveness.

This is akin to the Prime Minister Scott Morrison on the 14th anniversary of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations saying, "Sorry is not the hardest word to say, the hardest is I forgive you." The subtext is, get over it and move on. The onus to right the wrongs of the past falls on the victims. Once more, cheap forgiveness.

'Catholic guilt', with its concomitant shame, makes a potent contribution, leaving the victims of domestic violence feeling that they are the guilty player. A sense of guilt is

one component that keeps women imprisoned in dysfunctional, soul-destroying, body-damaging relationships.

The language we use for the deity and within the liturgy and hymnody is another example of structural abuse.

Decades ago, I made a proposal to my parish priest. I offered to re-do all the hymn sheets used on the then device of choice, the overhead projector(!), so that the exclusive language for hymns such as “Sons of God” could be changed to include women. My offer was declined.

As I said, that was a long time ago, but regrettably, though there has been some glacial movement, I haven’t noticed a huge surge in the use of inclusive language. The very first line of the latest draft of the [National Catholic Safeguarding Standards](#), says, “God has made us in *his* (italics mine) own image and likeness, placing human beings at the very centre of creation.” The clear and subliminal message is that God is male and the male represents God.

A theology and subsequent law which determines that women cannot be priests because of the specious argument that Jesus chose only male apostles is an example of insidious structural abuse within the Catholic Church. Decision-making within a clericalist, patriarchal culture is linked to ordination, where women have scant agency, and domestic violence feeds on women’s lack of agency.

Structural abuse occurs when women’s voice and experience is silence or quashed.

Only men are allowed to preach. How buoyed I was at the [first assembly of the Plenary Council](#) last year, when a number of brave women called for suitably qualified women to be allowed to preach and break open the Scriptural Word. This is not a grab for power, though many wish to caricature it as such.

I deeply admire Pope Francis, and one part of me appreciated his [acknowledgement](#) last month that women religious are often “treated unfairly, even within the Church; when they serve so much that they are reduced to servitude — at times, by men of the Church”. His solution, however, was limited.

Francis exhorted women religious to “fight” for justice, hence this article. Yet again, the onus is on the victims of injustice to right the injustice.

I wonder what structural change Francis could suggest so that women religious are not engaged as cheap labour within the Church workforce?

It occurs to me that the [Plenary Council in Australia](#) is a real opportunity to amend structures of governance, language, and preaching, that would make a real difference to the lives of, not only Australian Catholic women, but to all members of the People of God.

Though she definitely was not speaking directly to a Church audience, I reprise Grace Tame's words to all members of the Plenary Council: "We still have so much work to do. It's all well and good to change heart and minds with our conversations. But without structural change, we will continue to be at the mercy of systems which override them."

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