

Refusing to Be Silent:

An Interview with
Pastor and
Women's Advocate
Dr. José Vinces

We often ask, "Why does God let abuse happen?" But I think the Lord may be asking the church, "Why do you allow it?" Martin Luther King, Jr. said that if there is one thing this generation should repent of, it's the chilling silence of those who call themselves righteous. —Dr. José Vinces

*by Mary Gonsior and Megan Greulich, with
translation by Dr. Colleen Beebe Purisaca*

Dr. José M. Vinces is a husband, father, pastor, and lawyer. He is co-founder and executive director of Paz y Esperanza-Ecuador, a pioneering Christian organization located in Guayaquil that seeks justice on every level of society. Dr. Vinces has worked for over twenty years on pastoral and integral mission issues, which includes defending, from a Christian perspective, the rights of women and children victimized by sexual and domestic violence. His work focuses on educating and equipping evangelical pastors and lay leaders, so that they may be salt and light in the fight against sexual and domestic violence, both in and outside the church. He has also trained leaders in civil society as well as public officials such as judges, prosecutors, and police officers.

CBE sat down recently with Dr. Vinces to discuss the role of theology in ending and preventing violence against women and children. Dr. Colleen Beebe Purisaca, co-international director of Paz y Esperanza's sister organization in the U.S., Peace and Hope International, provided additional comments and simultaneous translation from Spanish to English.

Dr. José M. Vinces, pictured here at Park Avenue United Methodist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

CBE: *How did you get involved with your ministry to end domestic violence?*

JV: The starting point for me was studying what we in the church call “holistic mission,” learning that men and women have the same dignity. I come from Peru, where I grew up in a situation of conflict. Many women at that time—many strong women—became the heads of their households because they were widowed. These women contributed greatly to the peace-building in our country. So it was from that very experience of growing up in a country of violence, and reinforced by a theological perspective that is grounded in equality, [that I began my work].

As a holistic mission organization in Peru, initially we started working with innocents who were unjustly put into prison. And then we started getting into other areas of work [such as] providing services for victims of sexual and domestic violence, and defending their rights. But also, in terms of education, we learned that it is important to have some programs directed to church leaders and pastors, both women and men.

CBE: *What kinds of programs do you offer?*

JV: In my work in Ecuador, we have had two graduating classes from a training program which has been accredited by a seminary. Our purpose has been to incorporate our curriculum into seminaries. In Latin America we have very strong cultural traditions of patriarchy, and some theologies actually contribute to the problem. In Latin American seminaries, we are taught that women should submit. The Bible is used to justify much abuse. So we are experimenting with these training programs, to give another perspective to the traditional theological perspective. It’s the same thing CBE works on. The content of the program includes the context of how people have been in situations of violence, and the biblical perspective—we talk about Genesis, Ephesians, Galatians, etc.—and the inadequate patterns of behavior and the causes and consequences of violence.

We also talk about legal information. In Ecuador, we have laws that protect women, but there’s a lot of misinformation about those laws. So we train people to come alongside women who have been abused. We’ve trained leaders to lead public campaigns and accompany victims. They know the law, how to identify victims, and how to work with [public officials]. We also train prosecutors, judges, and police on how to work on these issues within the legal system because, unfortunately, there’s a lot of blaming of victims. So our intention is to give tools about international laws and how to monitor the enforcement of the laws. Then we try to talk to churches about how they can get involved. We think the church is co-responsible. And we’re thankful and happy to see that there’s a kind of awakening among our sisters in Christ. They are saying, “We have never heard this in church before.”

In Peru, we have a program called Women without Violence, Women in Development [in which we lead women’s workshops]. The first question we ask out of the gate is, “Who do you think has more value—women or men?” And 99% of these women say, “Men.”

So then we talk about their rights. There’s just a radical change when women learn about their rights. [As part of the program], we established formal networks between these women, and they started doing advocacy. They go and sit at police stations and monitor how police treat women there. Or they accompany women to the police station to help them make their complaint. So then the authorities have accountability and are forced to take action.

In all of our work, we have a circular model of services to solve this problem of abuse, with four main components: psychological assistance, legal help, pastoral care, and material aid. But both prayer and public advocacy have to be in every step of that. We have to approach the problem from a holistic perspective. And in Latin America at least, working on issues of peace building and justice is much easier to work for in secular society than it is within the church.

CBE: *Why is that?*

JV: Sometimes when we have an inadequate knowledge of what the Scriptures say—such as when we think the “head” is the authority figure—then the Bible can be used to mistreat, rather than free, women. So the churches are not going to do anything about injustice. That’s the foundational problem. In our office, 80% of our cases of domestic violence come from *within* the church. This is why we are very concerned with educating the church, and especially pastors, on the theology of these issues.

We have spoken with women who have been married twenty-five years, who break down and say, “I need help. What

...we try to talk to churches about how they can get involved. We think the church is co-responsible. And we’re thankful and happy to see that there’s a kind of awakening among our sisters in Christ. They are saying, “We have never heard this in church before.”

can I do? I talked to my pastor and he’s told me, ‘Keep praying, keep praying. One day he will change.’” We say, “Do you think that is right? What do you think?” And they respond with, “But if I leave him or if I report him, wouldn’t I be going against God’s will?” So we know violence exists within the church. But sadly, the church remains silent about it.

CBE: *What is that breaking point when women realize that they don’t have to accept the abuse?*

JV: At least in Latin America, there’s an economic dependence on husbands, in that they ask themselves, “If he leaves me, what will I do? I have four children, I have to give them food.” We have had very sad cases when women haven’t done anything about the abuse. They have preferred to defend their husbands who have sexually abused their children rather than leaving and reporting them because, “If your dad goes to prison, what are we going to do?” But we have seen cases where women have been educated that they are valuable as human beings and that it’s not God’s will that they

"But My Pastor Said..."

Too often pastors and church leaders encourage women to remain in abusive situations. Women who come to Paz y Esperanza have reported hearing the following from their pastors:

"God has given you your husband, you should accept him the way he is."

"This is a test from God. You should forgive him."

"If you report him or divorce him, what kind of testimony will that be?"

"If you denounce him, he won't come back to the Lord."

"He's your husband, you should forgive him."

"Even though he hit you, you're not as bad off as you could be."

"Children of God should not go to the worldly authorities, go to trial, or use the legal system."

"Wait on God, pray, and God will change things. Keep praying."

"You're shaming the father of your children."

"These are the consequences of getting pregnant and marrying a man who isn't a believer."

"The husband is the head of the household, you have to obey him."

"God gives the man power over your body."

"[As a pastor], if I report him, then my ministry will be ruined."

be abused. And there's a spark that goes off. We have a testimony where a woman realized [her worth and rights] and she said to her husband, "If you hit me again, [I will take action]." And her husband never touched her again.

You know better than I do that abuse is a vicious cycle. We have seen cases where, as a consequence of the beatings, a sister from a church who had been married for maybe thirty years had to go to a psychiatric treatment center. There's an extreme point when a

We visit directors of seminaries and say, "Look. Every day, newspapers show killings, murders, rapes. Do we think this is the kind of life God wants for his children? Don't you think that if we're called to promote life then we should do something?"

woman doesn't have her own will any more, when she doesn't have a choice any more. Sometimes we think, "Why don't you just leave him? God's will is to protect you. Leave him! And don't wait until he harms you more or even kills you!" But there's just a strong mentality that is so hard for them to break. Someone who has been beaten over the span of twenty years is not going to change overnight. Our work is to be patient. And our spiritual/pastoral care is so important to help break down [those incorrect

theologies]. Women have to be able to incarnate the truth that God doesn't tolerate violence. Only then are they able to take the legal steps and report their husbands. This is why we have to talk about the biblical theology along with the legal aspects. [When these are taught together], we have seen an awakening in the church.

CBE: *What other factors contribute to the prevalence of abuse in Peru and Ecuador?*

[Comment from Colleen Beebe Purisaca] In Peru, there was a twenty-year civil war, and rape and sexual abuse were actually used as weapons of war. In fact, the World Health Organization says Peru is one of the most dangerous countries for women, and 40% of women in Peru say they have been raped. The effects of the decades of violence linger, and the result is heightened incidences of domestic and sexual violence. Also, in certain cultures, incest is more acceptable. People simply don't talk about it, and victims are blamed.

Corrupt or ineffective legal systems contribute to the problem, too. These are systems where the police don't get paid enough, or don't know how to do their job, or are bribed not to do their job. The same problem exists with the prosecutors, and the medical forensics people, and the judges. So you have these systems on top of a total disregard for people who are poor. It's hard enough to get access to justice when you have money. If you don't have any money at all, then it's impossible. In Ecuador, for example, out of every 1,000 crimes reported, only five actually get convictions and sentencing. It's outrageous.

JV: Cultural jokes are also very common. A common phrase in Peru is, "The more he hits me, the more he loves me." People celebrate that and laugh at it. And people in the church will say this, too. The church does nothing to stop it. In Ecuador, they say, "A husband who kills is a husband."

Femicide, or the murder of women by men, is a huge problem. For example, a neighbor of ours killed his wife. She had filed a complaint against him that morning, but before they could come pick her up, he strangled her. And he killed his five-year-old daughter with a hammer. He was a professional man—this happens in all classes. It is a very difficult issue.

CBE: *What triggers this type of tragedy? Are alcohol or drugs involved? Is it simply rage-induced?*

JV: These are not justifications. We believe that all violence, whether sexual, physical, etc., has to do with an abuse of power. And there is no justification for it, no matter the extenuating circumstances.

Sometimes people criticize, “What are you doing with the husbands?” We acknowledge that we need to be working with husbands. However, we are working in the context of a system where even the government gives defense lawyers to the aggressors but the victims have no one to defend them. So we prefer to help those who have nothing, to help them understand their rights and achieve justice. And we *want* the church to be a part of this, to do its job.

CBE: *It sounds like perpetrators are more likely to have financial power and other kinds of power over their victims.*

JV: Yes, that’s true. One kind of their power is economic. But they also have cultural power, such as the widespread beliefs that the man is more valuable than the woman, that the man is dominant and macho, and that the woman has to subject herself to the man. These ideas are rooted in Latin American culture. And they are reinforced by this incorrect theology of male headship.

CBE: *But what does a father do when his daughter is abused?*

JV: Well, 80% of the cases we see come from within the family—the abusers are brothers, uncles, or fathers. But, I remember a case of a little girl from a rural area who had been abused, and the perpetrator came to the family and wanted to negotiate. He brought bags of potatoes to the father of the girl who had been raped, to negotiate so that he wouldn’t report the crime.

CBE: *So the daughter was seen as less valuable than bags of potatoes?*

JV: Yes, that’s it. We’ve had cases that have caused us extreme indignation. Parents have come to report the rape [of their child] to us, but only because the negotiations with the aggressor failed.

But there are very good parents too, who suffer a lot and do all they can do to make sure their children are defended. For example, there was a horrible case where an eight-year-old girl was raped and murdered by two men. Everyone knew who they were. The police investigated, and the evidence disappeared because the police were paid off. But the mom went to court, she held protests, she led an international campaign. She was the one really going to bat for her daughter, and she advocated on her behalf for years.

I think the challenge we have as Christians is how to learn from the networks of evil. Satan and his minions organize. They plan. Why don’t we as Christians unite and organize and plan against evil? Why don’t we create our own network of good? Sometimes working on issues of justice is to be a stone in a shoe of someone. And we have had to face some perpetrators who have a lot of economic and physical power. They have been authorities and officials, and even owners of radio stations who have threatened us with death. But nonetheless, that’s where we see God’s hand at work.

CBE: *What would this Christian network of good look like?*

JV: In Ecuador, we have started an evangelical network with the prerequisite that whatever we do goes on beyond the church—it must also affect the community. The context of violence in which we live in Ecuador, is a *holistic* problem and the church has huge responsibility. As Christians we should be the ones people are looking at to work against corruption. But we’re not doing that. So what we try to do is visit leaders and directors of seminaries and we say, “Look. Every day, newspapers show killings, murders, rapes. Do we think this is the kind of life God wants for his children? Don’t you think that if we’re called to promote life then we should do something? We don’t really know what we want to do, but we need to be concerned together about what is going on around us.” These conversations have led to conferences on the role of seminaries in working to end injustice and seminary curriculum that incorporates issues that have to do with daily life. And students have started writing theses on relevant topics. For example, there’s a seminary student who has been trained by us, and his thesis is on how the church can help children who have been sexually abused. So the institutions that form a part of this network can send their future pastors to our institutions to be trained on how respond to these issues. What happens when someone comes to a church who has been abused, or who has HIV, for example? Through the training and the network, we can refer them to specialized services.

CBE: *This is obviously exhausting and sometimes discouraging work. Are there certain Scripture verses that you hold onto, that encourage you? What kind of support do you have to keep working on this?*

JV: There’s a great blessing from the Lord for all of us who thirst and hunger for justice because justice is profoundly rooted in God’s heart. When God looks over the earth, he sees men and women and governments who do evil and injustice, and his heart becomes indignant. He detests the abuse of power and evil. But that’s not where it ends. He intervenes. And he uses us. It is a privilege. And I think our job as men and women is to imitate a God who loves justice. So when all types of evil come against you, it’s a paradox, because it is also a joyful and blessed thing to suffer for what is right. We must remember the Lord’s ministry. He freed the chains of the oppressed. He consoled and restored. He healed the pain of the people, of all the people. This is tiring work, and we may not always see change, but in the long run, the Lord responds. He has it all in his hands. He has our backs. And he consoles us in our tears of indignation, of impotence. They become tears of joy and of gratefulness to the Lord. Because he allows us to see that change is possible. It *is* possible. We need to show this to the world.



Mary Gonsior is operations manager for CBE. She lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she is active in her local church and neighborhood. Megan Greulich is editor of *Mutuality* magazine. She lives in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where she runs a cake business out of her home and volunteers with her church’s youth group.