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**THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION**

It’s interesting how a slight change of word can convey a large shift in meaning. For example, the words ‘house’ and ‘home’ might seem to someone learning English as near enough the same but they’re not. ‘House’ indicates a building, a structure, a place in which people dwell, more specifically, a shared space for a family to live together. But the word ‘home’ implies all of that and more – it’s synonymous with intimacy, belonging, peace, joy and wellbeing. The birth of a child, or even the arrival of a puppy, can, we say, turn a ‘house into a home’.

Imagine that assumed worldview being twisted out of shape and turned inside out. Your house, your home, the place you belong, has now become a place of fear. The trauma of an abusive husband, or violent partner, shatters the tranquillity of your former life, and home is no longer where the heart is but, instead, has become a dark shadow of itself, a place you endure because you have to, walking on eggshells lest you unwittingly fall prey to the next fit of rage, another physical assault, who knows what for you or your cowering children. The person you married, the love of your life, the one with whom you formed the closest bond of trust is the one person you now find yourself avoiding as much as possible, because you must do whatever you can to keep life and limb together. Home is where the hurt is.

This has been, and continues to be, the lived reality for numerous women in Brazil, where nearly a third of women surveyed in 2017 said that during the previous year they had suffered gender-based violence. To make matters worse, this is often at the hands of the ‘man of the house’ or another family member, giving the word ‘home’ a grotesque connotation compared to the image that most people hold dear about their most fundamental place of belonging. The problem has been especially acute in Ariquemes in north-west Brazil, a fast-growing city of 100,000 people in which a rapid influx of workers from elsewhere led to social fragmentation often played out in household violence on vulnerable women.

Thankfully, in 2010, the local church took the lead in harnessing the resources of local civic leaders, police and other agencies to address this distressing phenomenon. And now, some eight years later, the Casa Noeli dos Santossafe house has taken in over 1500 abused women. Ranging from a one-night stay after fleeing abuse at home, up to a three-month stay while they reassess their options and rebuild their shattered lives, the safe house offers a crucial sanctuary for those women who are vulnerable and desperate, often along with their traumatised children.

Rev Elineide Ferreira is the main driving force behind Casa Noeli, assisted by her sister, Eliane, who, in the past, suffered horrific violence at the hands of her ex-husband. Their work has made a huge difference to many women in the area, and, as a sign of how it is valued, has been supported since 2012 by the Christian Council of Churches of Brazil (CONIC). It is a vivid example of Paul’s image of the church as the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 where all the members are interconnected and who, in their mutual ministry, weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice, a chapter that is fittingly followed by the apostle’s reflections on a more excellent way, the way of love. We in PCI are part of that wider body of Christ and that places an obligation on us to play our part in addressing the needs of Casa Noelithrough raised awareness, financial support and intercessory prayer, giving thanks to God for what we can do together in the fellowship of his Son and Spirit.

If our sisters (and brothers) in Brazil have reaped a bitter harvest through gender-based violence, let us bring forth the fruits of the Spirit for their edification and example – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control (Galatians 5:22). A ‘safe house’ is where people are literally ‘built up’ by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and his ‘edifying’ Spirit.

**Prayer**

Living and eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we praise you for the wonders of creation, the manifold ways in which you gift us with goodness, and sustain us day by day. We thank you for those gifts of yours which enhance our lives, whose true value we may not appreciate until or unless they were absent – healthy bodies, loving families, circles of friendship and fellowship that enrich our lives and remind us of your blessings. And we give you thanks, especially, for the gift of Christ’s new creation, in which grace leads to faith, and the church exists to share the good news of lives lived anew by the work of your Spirit.

Yet with that privilege, there comes a deeper sense of responsibility, for you call us to show the compassion of Christ through deeds of loving service and in prayers of intercession. We pray today for those in dire need through no fault of their own, especially those who are the victims of gender-based violence. And we ask also that those who perpetrate violence, may yet be challenged to confess their wrongs and change their lives for the better.

We pray especially for the women of Ariquemes, where many of the problems in wider society literally come close to home. We ponder the tragedy of those who have found that home is where the hurt is, that a place of nurture has taken on a different nature, violence, trauma, and fear. For those who were desperate, we give you thanks that Casa Noeli has been a safe house, a place of safety and sanctuary, a breathing space from misery and despair. Bless the work of Elineide Ferreira and her team, who run the scheme in which screams of panic give way to a sense of respite and relief, the prospect that things don’t have to be as they were; that a community is at hand to protect and to care.

And where many have already made, or are making the journey from trauma to trust, from darkness to light, we pray that others, who still suffer at home, may find the courage to step from one threshold to another, where hands are offered to help and to hold, rather than to strike or to hit. May vulnerable women, and also their children, make a new start on a better path, built up once more by the fruits of the Spirit in a caring community where your compassion is evident. And in that work of recovery, may we be channels of your peace; praying, working, sharing, giving generously – loving one another as sisters and brothers of Christ our peace. Amen.