Reaffirming Individual Dignity: Exposing Coercive Control

CAUTION: If you suspect that your loved one or a parishioner is a victim of abuse, proceed cautiously and remember that your own safety (and that of your own family) is also at risk.

Note that abuse counselors customarily have security measures in place before they attempt to help a victim. Others ordinarily have no such protection. Your own reputation, psychological well-being, and physical safety could be targeted when you help someone who is a victim.

Listen to podcasts that allow victims to tell their dating & domestic violence stories to become aware of the risks that could be involved in controlling relationships. Reach out to Cleveland's Family Justice Center, or other domestic abuse organizations, for guidance when you help a victim. One of the least risky ways that an outsider can help prevent coercive control and abuse is to encourage every person (no matter their marital status) to maintain historically important relationships meaningfully and independently.

For help, contact the **Cuyahoga County Family Justice Center** at 216-443-7345 or the National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-7233. Read USCCB's "When I call for Help" for more information on the Church's response to domestic violence.

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Segment #1

Hope and Healing - Reaffirming Individual Dignity: Exposing Coercive Control

Some abused spouses believe that the Catholic Church teaching on the permanence of marriage requires them to stay in an abusive relationship. They may hesitate to seek a separation or divorce. Well-meaning family members, fellow parishioners and clergy may further encourage a person to stay in an abusive relationship. However, the US Catholic Bishops emphasize that "no person is expected to stay in an abusive marriage". ("When I call for Help" https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/when-i-call-help-pastoral-response-domestic-violence). Violence and abuse, not divorce, break up a marriage. The abuser has already broken the marriage covenant through his or her abusive behavior.

Children suffer abuse *just by witnessing* one spouse abuse another. For the wellbeing of the children and of the target spouse, it is important to highlight that primary needs of victims are: being heard, being believed, having knowledgeable people available to speak with, eventually learning about coercive control, and, if needed and when ready, reasserting their own dignity and/or getting safely away from the abusive situation. Safety from abuse is a primary concern but it must be coordinated carefully, since any form of abuse can escalate the situation into violence. Clergy, family members and friends are all welcome to call domestic violence hotlines and shelters to get more information any step of the way.

Church clergy, family and fellow parishioners prevent harm by educating themselves about coercive control and abuse. They can become proficient in recognizing and resisting coercive control tactics - tactics such covertly controlling and isolating. Motivated parishioners and clergy are welcome to connect with local abuse victim centers for continued education.   This summer a team of trainers will be presenting to deacons and their wives at the St Lawrence institute and that presentation can be replicated at a deanery or parish. We will continue to have content in this newsletter also.

Stay tuned in the following months to learn more.

Segment #2

What is coercive control?

Coercive control is a term used to streamline observations of diverse spousal abuse tactics by comprehending that CONTROL and ISOLATION are the preliminary *goals* of *all* forms of abuse.

Many well-meaning outsiders focus on whether certain forms of abuse are occurring ("has he hit you?", etc.), rather than noticing the goal – which is the day-to-day control & the comparative isolation that the abuse is intended to cause.

The various *forms* of abuse are simply the tools that are used to degrade the target spouse until they comply with the objective of control and isolation. The tools and tactics that a controlling spouse uses can fall under the categories of emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, financial abuse, and physical abuse. Because no target actually wants to be controlled and isolated, the controlling spouse uses various escalating tactics of abuse until the target is coerced to comply with the control/isolation.

A controlling spouse frequently exploits the target's normal human emotions of fear of abandonment/loss (including taking away children) and fear of public shame. The controlling spouse can also exploit the target's fear for personal physical safety.

Many times, the forms of abuse are easily hidden from the public. However, the resulting control and comparative isolation may be more easily recognized by outsiders. Thus, control and isolation can serve as red flags of hidden abuse.

Control and isolation are used by a controlling spouse in order to maintain power over the target spouse. The control and isolation imposed greatly diminish a target spouse's autonomy, dignity, and liberty. A coercively controlled marriage is destructive.   It is not "teamwork", it is not "compromise", and it is not a "holy example" of "submission" - though it may claim to be those things.

Almost half of all women *and* men in the U.S. have experienced psychological aggression by their partner. One in four women, and one in seven men, have also experienced physical abuse by their partner. (National Domestic Violence Hotline statistics) Generally, no human being is born free from sin. A common sin is giving

into the desire to control others (St Augustine's City of God: *libido dominandi,* lust for domination). Catholic marriages are not immune to coercive control and abuse. Fortunately, the Catholic faith is noteworthy in its long history of defending truth, exposing untruth, championing human dignity, and emphasizing the primacy of respecting each person's uniqueness and free will in accepting even God's invitations. Church teaching is ideally situated to defend the innocent and to encourage healthy, sacred relationships which honor the dignity, autonomy and liberty of the individuals involved.

In the following months, stay tuned to learn more about how to identify and help prevent abuse and coercive control in marriage.

Segment #3

What is the "Control" of Coercive Control?

Coercive control is a term used to streamline observations of diverse spousal abuse tactics by comprehending that CONTROL and ISOLATION are the preliminary *goals* of *all* forms of abuse (emotional, spiritual, psychological, sexual, financial, and physical abuse). In this segment, the "control" aspect will be investigated.

The CONTROL in a coercively controlled marriage is a pattern of extensively controlling minute, detailed aspects of a target spouse's everyday life to such a degree that the target begins to lose their sense of self. Minute aspects of life are controlled, inspected, and discussed to an exhaustive degree. Day-to-day decisions - such as how to dust one's house, how to clean dishes, the frequency or order of vacuuming, creating vacuum lines/lawnmower lines, rules about how to shower, which soap to use and how, when to use the toilet, how much to sleep, minute details of what to eat and how to prepare it, extensive/minute details of childcare, etc. - are controlled exhaustively through much of the day, every day, in a coercively controlling relationship.

Influence over small daily activities seems unimportant, at first – and is, in fact, a part of compromise in most relationships. However, if an overarching, meticulous pattern of one-sided control becomes evident, something more is happening. Mundane activities involve small acts of spontaneous human creativity, dignity, and free will. If a pattern of abusive coercive control dominates, then these activities devolve into robotic capitulation to the controlling spouse's will. The problem with the activity is not the activity itself (nor how the activity is done), but that it is an incessant pattern of control in daily life that is being forced upon the target spouse in an abusive manner and with a frequency and invasiveness that takes away the target spouse's liberty, dignity, energy, and autonomy.

The target is coerced to go along with the control due to a system of rewards and punishments. The target hopes life will be better if they placate. Initially, minimal placating does abate bad days -- however, in abusive relationships a pattern emerges where the controller imposes more and more rules, and the target loses more and more freedom.

Controlling tactics commonly escalate to include control over the flow of outside information (such as which news sites the target can or cannot get information from) and control over communication with others (such as which relatives and old friends the target is persuaded to or deterred from speaking with). The controlling spouse likely will organize, expend, or supervise the target's independent alone time. The controlling spouse may also invade all of the target's private time with God, demanding when and how the target spouse must pray, even during private prayer.

Technology-facilitated abuse is common in current times. This includes using any technology (including Mass videos streamed online) to stalk, harass, monitor, bully, intimidate or control. It also includes a controlling spouse freely accessing the target's private email, text, phone, social media accounts and/or their private online search history in order to stalk, intimidate and control the target's communication with the outside world. A controlling spouse may impersonate their target in online conversations. In severe situations, a controlling spouse may install video cameras about the house/car or may even induce the target to think that a monitoring device has been implanted inside their body, thus causing the target to behave in a robotic and uncharacteristically controlled way, even in private.

As noted, video streaming of Masses can be exploited in technology-facilitated abuse. A controlling spouse is able to monitor from afar where a target goes to Mass, how they and/or the children act at that Mass, and with whom they sit and converse. To help prevent videoed Mass from being misused in this way, focus the camera only upon the priest/altar. Do not record the congregation (even during reception of Communion). Preferably, several non-videoed Mass options would be made available throughout the diocese each weekend. Scheduling and publicizing several options for weekend Masses which are entirely free of videography is a helpful way to assist both current victims and also survivors who are trying to rebuild their private spiritual lives away from the abusive person. Another way to be cognizant of technology-facilitated abuse is to be aware that offering a victim a phone line to use can be a lifeline to those victims whose own cell phones are closely monitored by their abuser.

Segment #4

Exposing Tactics of Isolation

Coercive control is a term used to streamline observations of diverse spousal abuse tactics by comprehending that CONTROL and ISOLATION are the preliminary *goals* of *all* forms of abuse (emotional, spiritual, psychological, sexual, financial, and physical abuse). In this segment, the "isolation" aspect will be investigated.

The ISOLATION in a coercively controlled marriage is a pattern of limiting with whom, how often, when and/or how a target spouse is able to speak with their family of origin and other historically important people. It is a malicious fracturing of attachment.

Isolation is one of the earliest indicators of future overt abuse. Initially, the target is very charmed, and love struck by all the demands for attention, but then quickly starts becoming more and more cut off from important others. The target becomes especially isolated from anyone who is skeptical of the controlling partner's behavior.

Isolation can be imposed in an overt manner, such as by explicitly demanding little or no contact with prior important people. However, it is more likely that the isolation will be accomplished covertly using emotional manipulation, psychological abuse and/or sabotaging previously important relationships.

It may be helpful to realize that in an abusive relationship, a target is allowed to have either integrity OR the relationship – they cannot have both. Loved ones may notice a target losing integrity, or losing wholeness, including losing meaningful connections with prior loved ones, in order to keep the relationship.

Since covert isolation may be difficult to ascertain, some early red flags of covert isolation are listed below, as well as some examples of the tactics that may be occurring behind the scenes. If several of these red flags are noticed and fit into an overall pattern of concern, it may be time to reach out for assistance.

Early red flags:

- The target's friends may be puzzled to find that certain topics of conversation may suddenly become tense, confusing, or outright prohibited - especially when conversation used to be easy and when those topics were never a problem before.
- Friends may also feel that the target's calendar is suddenly "suffocated", primarily filled with the controlling partner's priorities to the detriment of almost all other concerns.
- The target feels guilty for doing anything without the controlling partner. The target insists on bringing the controlling partner along to most places (or brings them unannounced). During the rare occasions when the target *does* schedule individual time with family or old friends, the target seems uncomfortable, frequently checks the time and phone texts during that visit. The target looks nervous, as if they have strict orders to return home at a certain time. The target may try to visit at odd hours, so as to avoid potentially agitating the controlling spouse.
- The target seems to feel that the controlling partner is entitled to all of the target's time and energy – *no matter what*.
- A friend may notice subtle changes in the nature of the goodwill of the friendship.
- As time progresses, the target may lose much of their old spontaneity, humor, concern, calm, self-esteem, joy, and independent thought. The target may seem like "a different person" to their old friends – who are shocked to realize that their old friend has become a person that "we'd never have been friends with".
- Rather quickly, friends feel confused and discarded enough to decrease their interactions.

Examples of covert isolation tactics:

- Emotional manipulation – the controlling spouse uses subtle rewards and punishments to get the target to want what they want. For example, the controlling spouse has a pattern of starting arguments just prior to a planned gathering of the target's family/friends, making the target less comfortable about going (possibly also bestowing special intimacy if the target actually cancels plans with their own family/friends). There may be a pattern of the controlling spouse inexplicably exhibiting several days of a sad/bad mood when the target does visit their own friends/family. This is combined with a pattern of bestowing good mood/praise/ affection/intimacy when the target visits the controlling spouse's preferred family/friends. Because good moods and intimacy can be hard to come by, the target begins to do anything to earn a good day. The target subconsciously

starts avoiding their own friends/family while at the same time feeling most comfortable and happy with the controller's friends/family.

- Psychological abuse -- the controlling spouse interrogates and scrutinizes their target's private conversation with family/friends to a degree that it does not allow the target spouse any privacy, autonomy, or freedom to have meaningful independent communication with their own family and friends. The controlling spouse is always "watching, listening and managing", even if they are not there. "Wrong" conversations are punished. The abusive questioning goes well beyond normal marital conversations and dips into an invasive, interrogation realm meant to destabilize the target's trust in their prior relationships.
- Relationship sabotage -- a more heinous example of covert isolation is when a controlling spouse inserts "concerns" about impropriety (such as infidelity or even incest) into the target's mind in order to disrupt the target's desire to meaningfully maintain their prior important, healthy, normal relationships. Even a suggestion of impropriety may cause a target spouse to have feelings of manufactured revulsion to privately maintaining prior healthy, important relationships.

Social encapsulation: "but I have lots of friends!" An important element of coercively controlled isolation is that the target spouse is not necessarily completely isolated from all social contact. In fact, "social encapsulation" is a more common method of isolation. "Social encapsulation" is a term used in cult literature, describing when a target is isolated from their own family/friends and is instead purposefully surrounded only by other cult members. Similarly, isolation in a coercively controlled marriage does not necessarily mean that the target is completely alone (although it may mean that). Instead, the target has been convinced by the controlling spouse to fill their lives mostly with people who agree with the controlling spouse – while also convincing them that any of the target's prior important relationships that question the controlling spouse's manipulation are the relationships which are unsuitable, unworkable, or shameful. Counterintuitive to the common understanding of isolation, the target spouse frequently becomes surrounded by many people – however, upon closer review, it becomes evident that the people surrounding the target include only those people who support the controlling spouse and encourage compliance to the controlling spouse's demands or views. **Remember: isolation does not mean one is *physically alone*. It means one is *essentially, effectively* alone.**

A note to a victim:
If a historically trustworthy person from your life prior to this marital relationship now mentions concerns about your relationship, listen independently with an open

mind. It can be perilous to dismiss the concerns of historically important people. The historically trustworthy person likely wants the best for you – particularly if that person is able to evaluate objectively. Consider that this historically important person may be recognizing guile that you might be missing or denying. There is little harm in taking time to do independent research, and to perhaps call a domestic abuse hotline anonymously to learn more about red flags to watch for. Listening and doing your own research does not mean you have to act upon what you learn.   In fact, research may reassure you that your relationship is, in fact, healthy. Stay curious! And remember, you are allowed to have your own private thoughts and feelings, separate from your spouse.

If multiple historically important people have raised concerns to you, evaluate yourself – might you be defending someone who is systematically removing people from your life who might have helped you recognize manipulation? Could your changing social world be evidence of a successful isolation technique?   Could it be that this is not a "communication problem" requiring "couples therapy" -- but actually evidence of psychological abuse requiring individual, trauma-informed mental health/abuse specialist to help untangle? The wrong diagnosis gives you the wrong treatment, and going to the wrong kind of counselor can make things worse. Take time alone to think, study and learn. No matter what kind of marriage you have, maintaining your independent supportive networks and your alone time is fundamental to your well-being.

Beware of being told to cut off your friends and family, for any reason. This is a warning sign. Don't allow your life to revolve around just one person. Ninety percent of people would *want* you to have friends and to spend time with family members.

Beware if you start to lose your identity in order to maintain the couple identity.

Segment #5

Are You Worried that a Family Member may be Experiencing Spousal Coercive Control/Abuse?

The tactics of coercive control that an abusive spouse uses to control a target spouse are often not physical or obvious. The tactics can be so hidden that you may not fully notice that someone you care about is experiencing them. Perpetrators of coercive control are skillful at concealing their abusive, controlling behavior. They typically mislead the target into hiding the controlling dynamic as well. Learning signs can help outsiders identify abuse.

Early elation turns into confusion
It is important to note that coercively controlled relationships seem ideal early in the relationship. Tactics labeled "mirroring" (pretending to share all of your values/faking compatibility), information mining (gleaned *in order to exploit you* rather than to bond with you), "love bombing" (intense affection/charm, acting like a "knight in shining armor" or a "fairytale princess") and romantic covetousness (using up all time and emotional energy) secure the loyalty of the target and sometimes the target's friends/family.   In the beginning of the relationship, the target is elated and love struck. However, in a coercively controlled /abusive relationship, these tactics of loyalty-building quickly alternate with emotional manipulation, isolation, and control. Family may notice that a target's early elation at the new relationship is soon followed by looks of exhaustion, confusion, defensiveness, hollowness, anxiety, depression, fear, and subtle humiliation - all while still presenting themselves as happy and claiming that the relationship is "great!".

It is common for the target to feel that the controlling spouse "wears two masks" or has a "Dr Jekyll/Mr Hyde split personality". If this is part of an ongoing pattern, however, then it is more likely that it is an illusion of "two personalities" and is actually part of the emotional manipulation. The nice times of affection are used as a bribe, to draw the target back in after abuse/control and to keep the target hoping to get back to more "normal" good times again - if they just submit to the control. The nice parts are just as manipulative as the abusive parts. They are not real affection.

Decisions that are out-of-character

Often, a target must give the appearance that they are willing & happy to comply with the controlling spouse because of how the controlling spouse will react if they don't. Though the target may maintain an "illusion of autonomy"** (see definition below) and a veneer of happiness, you may note that the target continuously makes decisions that do not make sense, are out of character, and that increasingly overlook their own/their children's needs.   See the lists below for other possible red flags that an outsider may notice in the target spouse's altered behavior.

Concerning patterns over time
Abuse/coercive control is a pattern of behavior – not an isolated incident. If your loved one is showing patterns of behavior indicating that they may be a target of abuse, educate yourself on the tactics used by coercive controllers. Reach out to a domestic abuse hotline or to a trauma-informed/abuse mental health professional for help determining what may be occurring and how you can best help. Note that couple's counseling is *explicitly contraindicated* in situations of abuse, since couple's therapy can inadvertently worsen a hidden abusive situation.

Concerning patterns of new behavior in a target of spousal abuse:
- **They are always trying to please or calm their controlling spouse.**
- **They seem to have less and less meaningful connection with their prior family/friends.**
- **Their controlling spouse constantly calls or texts them when they are out.**
- **They say that their spouse insists on coming with them.**
- **They no longer have alone time.**
- **They lose their sense of spontaneity, humor, concern, calm, self-esteem, joy, and independent thought.**
- **They change from being a loving, concerned family member into someone who barely communicates with you. They look confused and exhausted but are defensive.**
- **They use scripture and Church teaching out of context to defend these changes.**
- **They become very defensive regarding their controlling spouse and their new way of life.**

Further details of patterns of behavior change in a target of abuse:

Communication changes:
- Communication within historically important relationships becomes strained.

- An increasing lack of meaningful communication with family of origin/historical friends.
- Family/friends have an escalating sense that conversation is no longer private. If a private conversation does occur, it seems to be subject to later interrogation and intense scrutiny by the controlling spouse.
- Increasingly odd, out-of-character, or off-putting email/text responses to prior friends/family that may indicate that the controlling spouse monitors the target spouse's written communication (signs of technology-facilitated abuse).

Relationship changes:
- The target suddenly seems happiest with the controlling spouse's family/friends while at the same time suddenly uncomfortable having much meaningful connection with their own family/friends.
- Historically important relationships suddenly become subject to negative scrutiny.
- Historically happy events suddenly become subject to negative scrutiny. The target may question their family in a new, accusatory way leaving the family feeling unsettled and confused. A controlling spouse works to reinterpret the target's private memories in a negative light in order to disrupt the bonds of prior relationships.
- The target's time, friends, money, talents, and children are consistently exploited primarily for the controlling spouse's gain.

Autonomy/thought changes:
- The controller becomes the main focus of the target's life and concern.
- The target has intense empathy solely for the controlling spouse's emotions and desires to the detriment of any other point of view.
- A pathological loyalty to the controller and the controller's ideas. The target consistently "JADEs" (Justifies, Argues, Defends, or Excuses) any of their controlling spouse's negative behavior and actions.
- When family/friends raise concerns, the target voices "thought terminating clichés"** (see definition below).
- The target displays a growing loss of self-confidence and an increasing dependence upon the controlling spouse for decision making, including on ideas of right and wrong.

Identity/personality-trait shifts:

- A blurring of identities - the target loses main areas of their own identity and seems to assume the controlling spouse's identity.
- The target, who was a humble, courteous, other-centered, and concerned family member prior to this relationship has now become increasingly distant, dismissive, and seemingly conceited.
- May develop a problematic level of rumination, regret, anxiety, fearfulness, sadness, confusion, self-blame, self-doubt, hypervigilance, exhaustion, frustration, and social anxiety – usually compounded by problems sleeping, changes in appetite and difficulty concentrating. Can develop a dissociation from their own needs, wants and their true nature.

Definitions

Illusion of autonomy: A target *thinks* that he/she makes a certain decision independently, when in actuality the target only made the decision due to the controlling person's covert emotional /psychological manipulation. The target may have elusive feelings of losing parts of him/herself but proceeds to convince themselves that they really do want each of these uncharacteristic, illogical decisions. In the end, a pattern emerges where the target repeatedly acts against their own best interest (or against the best interest of their children/those they love) in order to provide even a small benefit to the controlling spouse.

Thought terminating cliches: complex human issues are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed. These become the start and finish of any ideological analysis. Unlike easily memorized phrases used by schools or the Church to provide a starting point to open up discussion and thought, these cliches are taught by a controlling spouse *in order to evade* analytical discussion or thought. (*Cults Inside Out: How People Get In and Can Get Out*, by Rick Alan Ross).

Final note for worried family and friends: Assertiveness, awareness, setting limits and imposing consequences upon the abuser is needed. Supporting victims in being authentic, gaining agency and having clarity on the situation is helpful.   Ask open ended questions. Don't assume words mean what they used to mean, since controlling spouses twist meanings. If you notice a pattern of the above concerns but the target maintains things are "great", you may want to gently ask for details. Ask the target: "What did you mean when you said 'my spouse is always thoughtful' or 'I'm so much healthier now' or 'this is what we want' or 'of course I have alone

time'." Gently and curiously ask for details. You may discover the coercion below the veneer.

Segment #6

Grandparent Alienation

A growing trend in the western world – including in Catholic communities - is the development of grandparents being unjustly cut off from relationships with their grandchildren. These grandparents and grandchildren silently suffer a 'living grief' which the Catholic community can soften by recognizing that these situations exist and by offering knowledgeable support to those suffering from its effects. This can also be referred to as "grandchild alienation".

Artificially imposed dislike and alienation from one's family of origin is a well-known tactic in spousal abuse/coercive control and in other cult-like situations. It is a cruel ploy of control and isolation that leads to the suffering of many innocent victims well beyond the target spouse. One-sided therapy sessions can exacerbate the situation.

In spousal abuse situations, a controlling daughter-in-law or son-in-law alienates children from the grandparents on the target spouse's side of the family. This is accomplished by deliberately distorting a grandparent's normal, imperfect behavior into monstrous behavior. Commonly, the children are alienated solely from the target spouse's set of grandparents /family, while the other set of grandparents /family is extolled, visited, and lauded. This bullying, dividing tactic can lead to confusion and grief for the alienated grandparent, the grandchild, and extended family. Occasionally, the children are in fact alienated from family on both sides.

A common control tactic is to misuse the concept of "boundaries". In therapeutic, clinical use, boundaries are mutual agreements that facilitate healthy relationships, mutual respect, and negotiation. In unreasonable alienation, "boundaries" morph into one-sided demands with no reciprocity, are used to end trust, to stop normal discussion and to justify relationship cut offs.

A culture that encourages the breaking of intergenerational bonds is neither healthy nor sustainable. Despite this, there are situations where safety requires separation.

Delineating unreasonable alienation from reasonable estrangement is necessary:

- **Unreasonable alienation** is an artificially imposed, irrational separation from a previously positive relationship that is disproportionate to the actual experience with that person. The relationship had been a close and loving bond prior to the current breach. Alienation typically involves a target separating from several previously positive relationships for vague reasons. Typical alienating behaviors practiced by a controlling spouse against a target grandparent may include: denigrating the target grandparent; limiting contact with the target grandparent; interfering with communication with the target grandparent; undermining grandchild's relationship with target grandparent; interfering with target grandparent visits by imposing invasive, irrational, numerous, and frequently varying rules then asking the grandchild to spy on/report on the grandparent's inability to flawlessly comply with the multiple rules; emotionally manipulating the grandchild to reject the grandparent in order to be loved. (The grandchild may suppress their love for their grandparent because it is emotionally safer for them to conform to the alienating parent's version of reality). It has been found that people who are unreasonably alienated from a generally good parent/grandparent tend to completely severe the relationship, imposing no contact, little explanation (other than one-sided accusations) and no room for normal discussion or authentic reconciliation.

- **Reasonable estrangement** is a voluntary separation from a person who has been enduringly and severely abusive. Reasonable estrangement typically involves separating from only the one person who is abusive, and is done for specific, persistent, and serious reasons. The estranged person generally removes themselves from places that the abusive person may be. It has been found that people who are reasonably estranged from severely abusive parents/grandparents actually work to *keep the relationship*, but to *just stop the abuse* – so they likely will maintain some kind of limited contact or visits, leaving room for discussion and authentic reconciliation, while still being mindful and resistant to any bullying dynamics. This is evidenced by adult children visiting a severely abusive parent in prison. Generally, people do want to know and see their family of origin.

Noting the difference between authentic reconciliation and a performance of 'reconciliation' is warranted. It is paramount that spiritual leaders can assess the difference for the sake of those they advise.

True reconciliation facilitates mutual healing; it is a reestablishment of trust and authenticity on both parts. It is an invitation to a deeper connection, and a renewal of recognition of the dignity of each individual involved. An authentic reconciliation grows slowly, and it becomes stronger with time and honesty. It builds two-way responsibility and offers space and care.

A performative 'reconciliation', on the other hand, is a thin reestablishment of contact for the purposes of further coercive leverage or exploitation of the relationship. A sign of a performative 'reconciliation' is that the target is not allowed to disagree, not allowed to discuss the past, and not allowed to set boundaries themselves. There is lopsided power and rules are imposed by one party only. Performative 'reconciliation' is typically focused on public image management and is transactional: it coincides with a public event (such as just before a baptism, wedding or other family event) or it coincides with a sudden need (babysitting or money). Performative 'reconciliation' is a reestablishment of control over the target wrapped in pious words. This kind of 'reconciliation' tends to be renewed and revoked easily and repeatedly. Furthermore, with each revocation, the punishment of alienation becomes more and more cruel and limiting. Performative 'reconciliations' do not uphold the dignity of each individual involved.

Remember: in cases of clear abuse, ongoing exploitation or unrepentant cruelty, advise must be focused on safety, not forgiveness.

What are the signs of an alienated grandchild?

We can learn from Bill Eddy, LCSW, JD in his work on alienated children in divorce situations. These children are unreasonably alienated from a good parent by an upset parent using false claims of abuse or misbehavior. It becomes important for attorneys, counselors, judges, and mediators (including spiritual leaders) to understand signs of abuse versus signs of alienation. The below are excerpts and summaries from Bill Eddy's book "Don't Alienate the Kids: Raising Resilient Children While Avoiding High Conflict Divorce" (pg 43, 271, 288, 289)

An unreasonably alienated child is one who expresses, freely and persistently, unreasonable negative feelings and beliefs toward a parent that are significantly disproportionate to the child's actual experience with that parent. These children have not been abused or mistreated, but nevertheless have emotionally intense feelings with vague, superficial, or minor reasons for them. The child may complain of being afraid of the rejected parent, however the child's behavior shows

just the opposite. It becomes clear that the child feels confident in blaming or rejecting the parent without any fear or remorse. These behaviors *are different from those of truly abused children,* who are often extra careful *not to offend* an abusive parent, hesitant to disclose abuse and often recant even though it's true.

Unreasonably alienated children generally show intensely negative emotions and an absence of ambivalence. The child develops intensely negative emotions toward anyone an upset parent dislikes, but the child does not consciously know why. This may explain the vague or minor reasons given by alienated children for intensely rejecting a good parent.

On the contrary, Mr. Eddy notes that children of obviously violent and abusive parents (such as parents in prison for violent crime against the other parent) usually continue to feel an attachment to that violent, imprisoned parent and in many cases, are eager to go to the prison to see that parent. He has found that most abused kids want their parents to stop the abuse, *but want to keep their relationship*. The request to give up the relationship entirely is rather unique to unreasonable alienation cases.   Although abuse can cause a child to cut off contact with a parent, many times Mr. Eddy has found that the child still wants to maintain the relationship, but just stop the abuse. Whereas in alienation, the entire relationship is more likely to be cut off. Intense rejection can be a sign of unreasonable alienation rather than abuse, though must be taken as just one fact and thoroughly investigated.

Children in high-conflict families are like prisoners in a war zone. They will say and do whatever they think is necessary to survive. All of their reactions are based on their fear of the abusive parent. Children will say everything is fine, when it really isn't. And they say everything is awful with a parent who they feel secure with, in order to placate a parent with whom they feel insecure. If professionals don't realize this, they will make matters much worse, rather than better.

Approaches by professionals fail when they are too aggressive *or too passive* in the situation of alienation. The children are the victims of the ongoing conflict. Assertiveness, awareness, setting limits and imposing consequences upon the abuser is needed. Supporting victims in being authentic, gaining agency and having clarity on the situation is helpful.   Read Bill Eddy's books to learn more.

Bill Eddy, "Don't Alienate the Kids: Raising Resilient Children While Avoiding High Conflict Divorce", copywrite 2010.

Empirical Studies of Alienation, 2ⁿᵈ Ed, for more information.

Below is a Canadian website that is informative and supportive on the subject of grandparent grief over grandchild alienation :
https://cdndifferencemakersga.weebly.com/

Another helpful resource is Families Divided TV on YouTube; here an informational video by social worker and attorney Bill Eddy explaining the difference between reasonable estrangement and unreasonable alienation:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eu4EGs88Ihs

A research study on the effects on a family of origin when a loved one is a victim of a cult or cultish relationship: *Journal of Family Violence* (June 2025) "Caring in the Shadows: Emotional and Caregiving Challenges Faced by Families of Individuals in Coercively Controlling Groups and Relationships", by Almendros, Gonzalez-Espejito, Najera, Garcia-Sanchez.

Segment #7

Cults and Cultish Relationships

Intro: What is a cult/cultish relationship?

A cultish group or relationship is one in which the target is exploited and manipulated instead of being treated in a way that is respectful to autonomy, dignity and free will. In a cultish relationship, the target is not accepted as a whole, integrated person. Instead, they are coerced to choose between their own integrity and the relationship. The target must give up much of themselves in order to maintain the relationship. The target is tricked into distrusting their own emotions and instincts. The target is misled from thinking independently and is discouraged from reading outside information. The target is encouraged to confess errors and sins. These self-confessions are then used for shame, humiliation, and coercion - rather than for forgiveness and fresh starts. The target is pulled away from prior important relationships in a malicious fracturing of attachment. Over time, the target may lose their own personality and will. The target may then become a 'deployable agent' of the cult/cultish person, behaving in a way unrecognizable to prior family and friends. The target does not freely and knowingly choose this kind of controlled, isolated life. Instead, they are tricked into giving up their autonomy and relationships so slowly over time that they do not realize their own transformation. There are many more characteristics of cults/cultish relationships, however being aware of the effects that they have upon the target is a good starting point.

Cults are not always stand-alone groups. Cultish groups can form within legitimate religious institutions. Insular cultish pocket groups can grow inside Catholicism. Cultish groups borrow spiritual authority from a legitimate religions' leaders and offices. The cultish group may ask for endorsement of an activity or business that the cult operates. It is important to recognize when these situations may be occurring.

Note: The word 'cult' in this document does not refer to the academic, formal and ever-developing definition of the term cult, nor does it refer to the definition of cult meaning a neutral system of shared beliefs. Rather, in this document, the term 'cult' or 'cultish' refers to the more colloquial understanding of an unhealthy group or relationship – one

which relies on negative psychological tactics of deception such as: coercive persuasion/thought reform narrowing perspective, manipulative milieu control, exploitation, violation of privacy and conscience, destruction of self-esteem, outright deceit, isolation and social encapsulation. This is the opposite of Vatican II's teaching that religious freedom requires "immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom." (Declaration on Religious Freedom, Dignitatis Humanae, Vatican II).

How does the concept of cults relate to marital abuse?

Abusive, coercively controlling marital relationships can be thought of as cultish relationships. They have been called "cults of one", "one-on-one cults", or "family cults".   Moreover, cultish spouses can intensify the situation of abuse by creating a cult-like group of sycophantic supporters protecting the abusive dynamic. These anti-communities support the abusive spouse, uphold the target in cutting out their own family of origin, and discourage the target from reading outside information. The anti-community reinforces the new cultic persona of the target spouse. The anti-community – knowingly or not – participates in the "refreeze" portion of Edgar Schein's Classic Process of Coercive Persuasion: unfreeze target (from old life), change target drastically, then refreeze target (into new life of social encapsulation, surrounded only by those 'friends' who will not challenge the new ideology).

What makes a person vulnerable to a cultish groups/relationships?

All humans are vulnerable to cultish relationships due to our innate tendency toward needing community. Cultish leaders exploit this need, leveraging vulnerable times in naïve target's lives. Some vulnerabilities to being manipulated are uncontrollable. Other vulnerabilities can be tempered. It is vital to learn about both kinds of these vulnerabilities.

Some vulnerabilities beyond one's control are: feeling extremely lonely, rejected, lost or worried; times of grieving (such as after the death of a loved one or the disintegration of a family); and times of uncertainty (such as losing a prior community of belonging). These vulnerabilities cannot be avoided, so the best one can do is to acknowledge the sensitive times and determine to share themselves with others more carefully than usual.

On the other hand, there are some personal vulnerabilities that can be remedied. A key modifiable vulnerability is lacking knowledge of (or ability to apply the

knowledge of) warning signs of a cult/cultish relationship. Self-education can easily diminish this vulnerability. Learning to quickly recognize signs of manipulation and covert coercion – namely control and social encapsulation -- can help protect a person from falling for this kind of deceit.

Another modifiable personal vulnerability is accidentally being blinded by a person or group promoting theology or ideology that one agrees with. Assessing a friendship/dating relationship for healthy patterns is similar to assessing a group. Step One is to assess whether the group (or person) functions in a healthy way – that it treats the people around it, especially those it may consider subordinate, in a noncoercive, dignified way. Step Two is determining whether the group's (or person's) ideology matches what one is looking for.   A common error is to skip Step One – assessing character -- and only focus on Step Two – theological/ideological alignment. It is only too easy to identify so strongly with a group's theology/ideology that one overlooks warnings that character is poor. The more that one identifies with a particular group, the more likely one will want to overlook warning signs of coercion and only focus on the "good" things the group does. Yes, one can be excited to join a group that is theologically or ideologically like oneself. But, first, assess the character of the person/group. Assess dignity: How do the members treat each other? How do the spouses treat each other? How do parents treat their children? How do they treat hired help such as janitors, waitresses, maintenance men? Assess image management vs integrity: Do member's public personas match what you have heard about their private lives? Have you seen a pattern indicating that public church actions conflict drastically with how they act at home? Assess autonomy: Are members encouraged to read outside information and think outside the box? Are the members encouraged to meaningfully maintain relationships with family of origin and other prior important people? Do any of the members seem to be fearful of stepping out of line, or seem to be walking on eggshells? Does the group tend to focus on the emotions and needs of one member at the expense of others? These questions can help begin to assess the character of a person or group.

What makes a community vulnerable to cultish groups?

Going beyond the personal level, groups also have a responsibility to be cognizant of manipulative behavior. Several factors may cause a community to be more at-risk.

Small: Small or otherwise insular communities can be prone to shifting into a cultic group (or empowering an abusive marriage). This is because one disordered or ill-intentioned person can change a small community's nature more quickly than a large community's. This is especially true if the community is blind (or choses to turn a blind eye) to red flags.

Membership loss: Communities that feel they are failing or losing members are particularly vulnerable to ill-intentioned actors exploiting the group's anxiety over membership. An exploitative actor may promote themselves/their own family as the group's heroic new future, subtly changing the original focus and nature of the group into one that mainly serves to benefit the bad actor and only secondarily fulfills the group's original goals.

Rigid rules: Communities that are high on the scale of rigidity and control of daily life require one to be more alert to any coercive or deceptive tactics of manipulation, loss of autonomy/dignity or loss of prior relationships. These tactics could morph a group from one that is "strict but healthy" into an unhealthy, cultish group that represses the unique people within it. Members contemplating freely joining higher-control groups have more responsibility than others to be vigilant in sensing signs of deception, isolation and social encapsulation, because the high control itself is already a red flag of an unhealthy group/relationship. The same can be said of communities high on the scale of seclusion from the world to determine if it is a situation freely chosen to be "alone but healthy" versus isolated, degraded and deceived.

Little, ideologically connected communities can be idyllic, peaceful places to thrive. They can be a blessing in a chaotic world. However, they can only remain safe if members become aware of and reject manipulative, abusive, cultish actions. Good, healthy groups enhance prior important relationships, honor member's dignity, time and autonomy, promote critical, independent thinking and respect privacy of thought.

Everyone would do well to be aware of signs of cultish behavior.

How to help prevent vulnerability to cults/cultish relationships?

1) Public awareness. Public awareness is the first key. It is the responsibility of every person and every group to be aware of what differentiates a good, healthy

small group or relationship from a cultish group/relationship, in order to keep themselves and those they love safe and whole. Here are some simple clues:

Prior relationships:
- A healthy group/relationship enhances prior important relationships. Most people would *want* another person to meaningfully and independently maintain prior important relationships.
- In a cult or cultish relationship, the target's past healthy relationships are crowded out, discouraged, mocked, sabotaged, maliciously fractured, or outright disallowed. One's freedom to maintain meaningful, trusting, open and independent prior healthy relationships is dismantled. Relationships disassembled include one's relationship with oneself, with God and with family of origin and past good friends.

Autonomy in time and research:
- In a healthy group/relationship, the target has autonomy to plan out their day, read outside materials and research differing opinions. It is like an open marketplace of ideas wherein discussion and reflection are valued activities. If it is a healthy group with a more rigid or secluded scenario, there was explicit knowledge of that situation ahead of time, leading to a free, informed consent of the rigidity and isolation, and the person is free to change their mind. There is no deception, no changing of the goal posts and no entrapment.
- In a cult/cultish relationship, the day's calendar is deceptively suffocated with cult events, cult thoughts and cultish leader's needs so that the target has no time or energy for much else. Independent reading/researching of differing opinions is discouraged, disallowed, crowded out, or thoroughly interrogated.

Independent thought:
- In a healthy group/relationship, the target maintains the dignity of independent and private thoughts which do not have to be shared.
- In a cult or cultish relationship, it is common to be extensively interrogated about private thoughts, outside conversations or outside reading. The interrogation serves as a memory manipulation. The memory of these private thoughts, outside conversations, and outside reading becomes twisted into negative events in order to disparage ideas that are outside of the cult/cultish relationship.

2) Human formation. A more comprehensive way to prevent vulnerability to cults/cultish relationships is to encourage all people to concentrate on their own human formation.

Human formation includes the connection with oneself, one's values and one's prior relationships – all necessary for maintaining the integrity conducive to human flourishing. Cults and cultish relationships tend to keep a target so busy with daily demands that the target cannot nurture these connections. These unconnected targets can be more easily controlled and manipulated into performing the cult/cultish spouse's desires. Cults/cultish relationships also may focus on a target's spiritual formation *so as to prevent* the human formation of an autonomous, aware, clear-thinking, well-grounded and well-connected person who might be able to resist the cult/cultish spousal demands.

The significance of developing sound human formation *before emphasizing spiritual formation* is a concept that was discussed by Saint John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*.   This topic will be more fully discussed in the next segment.

Resources:
Saint John Paul II 1992 Apostolic Exhortation: *Pastores Dabo Vobis*
Janja Lalich "Taking Back Your Life: Recovering from Cults and Abusive Relationships"
Rick Alan Ross "Cults Inside Out: How People Get In and Can Get Out"
International Cultic Studies Association – "support for families" page
Report on the Pastoral Visitation of the Covenant Community the Servants of Christ the King, requested by The Most Reverend Albert H. Ottenweller, Bishop of Steubenville (1991)
Cultic Studies Journal, 1999, Volume 16 No. 2, pg 83-179 Controversial Catholic Movements (discusses a charismatic community in Steubenville, Ohio among others)
Dr. Christine Marie Cocchiola, Coercive Control Consulting Institute
Tears of Eden (spiritual abuse support)

Segment #8

Prioritizing Human Formation

Foundations of Integrity - *Pastores Dabo Vobis*

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Saint John Paul II introduced four levels to the integral formation of balanced, holy, effective clergymen. Most of his discussion also applies to laity. The four levels to formation are human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral development. Saint John Paul II noted that there is *a particular order* to the development of the four levels. Basic, solid human formation is necessary prior to emphasis on spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is necessary prior to intellectual formation. Intellectual formation is necessary prior to pastoral formation. It is then a lifelong duty to continue to mature in all four levels.

Lay people are expected to fulfill their role in the ecclesial mission, just as priests are expected to fulfill theirs. The teaching in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* geared towards priests can provide helpful insights into the formation of a cohesively integrated, self-aware, emotionally stable, well balanced, holy, mature Catholic lay person – a "man for all seasons". This lay person is someone who is able to live in reality, resist manipulation, and serve God and others with his whole being.

What is human formation?

Human formation is the basis of all formation. It is the foundational layer of development that must be initiated prior to working on other, higher formation efforts. Solid human formation results in a person who is able to assert their own dignity and protect the dignity of others. It is a whole person, who is "strong and free, capable of bearing the weight of … responsibilities".

Basic human formation includes rudimentary personal psychological, natural work that is accessible by reason alone. Though it can be elevated by divine revelation, access to human formation by reason means that this work of formation is attainable by all.

In *Pastores, Saint John Paul II details many qualities of human formation for priests, for example: love truth; be loyal; have a sense of justice; be true to one's word; be genuinely compassionate; have integrity; be balanced in judgement and behavior; be "hospitable, sincere, prudent, discrete, generous, capable of opening oneself to relationships; quick to understand, forgive, console".* He emphasizes that *"human maturity...requires a clear and strong training in freedom"*, an *"obedience to the truth of one's being"* and an *"authentic realization of self".* He writes that this training in freedom *"requires the person to be truly a master of oneself"* but cautions that one must be master of oneself without becoming individualistic or selfish.

Saint John Paul II's words apply to laity as well. Drawing conclusions from Saint John Paul II's words, a lay person with solid human formation will: strive to see and accept objective reality; seek moral and transcendent values; develop self-esteem without becoming self-centered; consistently treat oneself with respect and dignity; consistently treat others with respect and dignity; promote the true good in others; think with honesty, authenticity, independence, freedom and integrity; remain curious and open to learning; have the ability to examine one's conscience; act in a way that is thankful and loyal to those who have loved and cared for him/her; and honoring and meaningfully maintaining historically important relationships with family and friends. *It is notable that these qualities combine to build a person who has strong defenses against succumbing to* manipulation.

All aspects of oneself must be integrated. The aspects must not become isolated and contradict each other. Saint John Paul II noted that there must be a "*unity of one's internal life and external actions*" and a "*firmness in essentials*".

What are the fruits of solid human formation?

Basic human formation for a Catholic person is exemplified in a healthy relationship with oneself (living with integrity and freedom), a healthy relationship with God (secure in God's love and in returning the love to Him), and a healthy relationship with prior friends and family of origin (faithfully honoring obligations). This anchoring of being true to oneself and to past relationships allows one to form new relationships while maintaining autonomy, dignity and integrity.

Dr Peter Malinowski, a Catholic clinical psychologist, gives the following understanding of the achievement of human formation: "human formation is the lifelong process of natural development, aided by grace, by which a person integrates all aspects of his interior emotional, cognitive, relational, bodily life in an

ordered way, conformed with right reason and natural law, so that he is freed from natural impediments to trust God as His beloved child and to embrace God's love. In return, because he possesses himself, he can love God, neighbor and himself with all his natural being in an ordered, intimate, personal and mature way."

Good human formation helps to develop and sustain a grounded, autonomous, clear-thinking individual who is sincerely connected to the people who love him and can have open conversation with him. Maturing human formation beyond the basic level will be a life-long process.

Becoming well formed on a human level finds its completion in spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation, including for those in the common priesthood of the laity. Being properly formed and integrated oneself, one is able to give oneself to Christ and to evangelize the Gospel to others.

What are the results of poor human formation?

Poor human formation can lead to disorder, an unstable spiritual life, and sometimes can lead to unnecessarily accepting or even promoting abuse and manipulation. This is due to the fact that having weak human formation can contribute to being unable to stand up for one's own dignity and the dignity of others. Placing spiritual and intellectual formation efforts above basic human formation can lead to further distortion.

At best, extolling spiritual formation without basic human formation may lead to what is colloquially referred to as virtue signaling. Emphasizing acts of piety *instead of* developing basic human psychology (behavioral and mental processes) can lead to confusion and empty spirituality. Not only can this stunt the depth of that person's relationship with God, but it can also damage their relationship with others when their actions of piety conflict with poor behavior. Furthermore, it affects evangelization efforts. Empty spirituality is easily sensed and shunned by people (including secular people) who may have healthier human formation than the Catholics attempting to evangelize to them. God can work through anyone, including through poorly formed evangelizers. However, since Jesus Christ Himself models dignity and wholeness of being, developing oneself into an integrated, well-ordered human being makes one a more credible witness to the Gospel.

At the extreme (but not uncommon) end of an unbalanced formation scale, empty spirituality pushed at the expense of human formation can be used as a tool of

coercion. Ill-intentioned actors can purposefully press acts of empty spirituality upon those who do not have strong human formation, leading to cultish behavior and spiritual abuse. Cults and cultish, abusive relationships sometimes focus on a target's spiritual formation *so as to prevent* the human formation of an autonomous, aware, clear-thinking, well-grounded and well-connected person who might resist demands. These relationships prefer targets who are not well connected to themselves or to their family of origin so that they can be more easily manipulated. Unaware, unformed people may accidentally see external spirituality as a sign of hope and strength, even when in some situations it is actually being used as a threat to dignity. Assessing character (patterns of behavior revealing human formation) is more important than being impressed with external spiritual acts.

For the safety and dignity of all, preserving one's integrity in human formation – knowing who oneself is and remaining connected with prior important people in one's life -- is valuable. Being well formed oneself will help one assess others' character more clearly.

In the next segment, the concepts of spiritual abuse and spiritual bypass will be discussed. Spiritual abuse and spiritual bypass can both be understood as spiritual formation emphasized *at the expense of* basic human formation.

Resources:
Saint John Paul II, 1992 Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis ("I Will Give You Shepherds")*
Janja Lalich, Rick Alan Ross
Dr Peter Malinowski (Souls and Hearts; Interior Integration for Catholics)
International Cultic Studies Association – "support for families" page
Tears of Eden (spiritual abuse support)

Segment #9

Spiritual Bypass and Spiritual Abuse

In the past segment, an order to character formation was discussed. In healthy, orderly development, basic human formation is foundational, followed by spiritual formation. When development is disordered, spiritual formation might be emphasized *at the expense of* basic human formation. When wholly disordered, spiritual acts are emphasized *in order to prevent* the person from becoming an autonomous, aware, clear-thinking, unmanipulable, well-grounded and well-connected person. Spiritual bypass and spiritual abuse are manifestations of this kind of disorder. Below, the focus will be resisting this in order to foster healthier marriages within the Catholic church.

Church Communities Must Become Adept at Recognizing Spiritual Abuse

People who act in controlling, manipulative, abusive, bullying ways frequently weaponize medical, psychiatric *and spiritual* systems in order to serve their own power and control over their target. Due to its spiritual nature, the church community is vulnerable to being misused by these high-conflict people.

The Church's teachings on empathy, acceptance, forgiveness, and tolerance can be manipulated inappropriately to confuse well-meaning, unaware members and clergy into tolerating and even promoting people who bully.

The same empathy that heals good people can enable dangerous ones, to the detriment of their targets. An ill-intentioned actor can trick unaware people into believing that they – the predatory actor – are the victim. Once this false victim story is absorbed, a majority of the community will likely be manipulated into supporting the bullying behavior. People uneducated about coercive control give irresponsible advice and support the wrong person, making the situation worse. This is particularly true if the community promotes blind acceptance, forgiveness and tolerance, which can get the situation backward, helping the wrong person in the wrong way while hurting the innocent target. The community may even suppress any minority who can see and understand the reality of the situation.

Fortunately, unfamiliarity can be corrected with training. Be aware that teachings on empathy, acceptance, forgiveness and tolerance can easily be manipulated by predatory actors. Mitigate this risk by presenting the above virtues with the equally important virtues of prudence in recognizing signs of coercion, discernment of character patterns, and fortitude in protecting the innocent.

Secular authors on these topics are Bill Eddy (high-conflict personality disorders), Evan Stark (coercive control), Rick Allan Ross and Janja Lalich (escaping cult-like relationships).   Scholastic and Thomistic thought likely will elevate the previously mentioned secular research with the Catholic church's profound understanding on the nature of a human being and on the sinfulness that is common to all humanity. Some Catholic psychologists, therapists and thinkers are working in this track.

As a church community, it is advisable to become educated on topics of coercive control and its various manifestations of abuse (including spiritual abuse) in order to reduce the church community's vulnerability.

What is Spiritual Bypass?

Spiritual bypass is using pious, religious language to avoid dealing with a problem. It is a process of evading moral responsibility while tricking oneself or others into false spiritual contentment.

Frequently, difficult virtues are avoided by substituting technically correct, but inferior, virtues. Promoting the wrong (easier) virtue at the wrong time and/or for the wrong reasons is the negative of Aristotle's advice to act in a nuanced, wise way, with the right virtue at the right time and for the right reason for each unique situation.

One who is spiritually bypassing may use spiritual platitudes to feel good about oneself while actually disconnecting from difficult situations and abandoning innocent people in their pain. It is often a moral laziness, a lack of courage and a choice to remain ignorant to challenging situations.

People frequently spiritually bypass when confronted with abusive situations in their parish. They feel it is more polite or virtuous to look the other way. To make matters worse, the abusive person typically knows how to utilize the person's natural tendency to spiritual bypass. The abusive person will help his/her supporters feel OK with overlooking his/her bad behavior. In fact, the abusive

person can even sway the person who is spiritually bypassing feel morally superior for having used a virtue - despite it being the wrong virtue, at the wrong time, for the wrong reason and despite harming others in the process.   (See Segment 12 for how to better deal with being told about a situation of possible abuse.)

A sign of spiritual bypass is that it costs a person little to use a spiritually bypassing virtue. It does not cost much to side with an abusive person who is in power and controlling the narrative. It costs much more to recognize and side with the vulnerable, the silenced, the weak and the oppressed. It takes wisdom to understand who the vulnerable people are, and courage to see them and to stand with them.

Many examples of spiritual bypass and abuse are given at the end of this segment.

What is Spiritual Abuse?

Spiritual abuse in marriage is when a controlling spouse uses religious texts, traditions, or beliefs to control and isolate the target spouse. Like the wolf dressed in sheep's clothing, a controlling spouse can obscure their control and isolation under a twisting of Christian language. This twisting may even fool unaware friends or clergy into supporting and enabling the spouse's controlling, isolating behavior.

A common method of spiritual abuse is when scripture verses, parts of a homily, or Catechism sentences are taken out of context in order to rationalize abusive, controlling behavior. These verses are used to confuse and manipulate a naïve, vulnerable target into compliance. Any time parts of a passage are emphasized that conflict with the overall context of Church teaching on the dignity and free will of each individual, that teaching should be questioned.

A second method of spiritual abuse is invading a target's relationship with God. All of a target's private time with God may become organized, supervised, criticized, or otherwise invaded by the controlling spouse, controlling when and how the target must pray, even privately.

A final method to be aware of is when religious structure is misused by a controlling spouse to denigrate and shame target. The controlling spouse may extract confessions of embarrassing sins and then repeatedly reference the disclosed sin to destroy the target's self-worth. The controlling spouse may use the pressure of public shame of revealing the target's sins or the public shame of a failed marriage

as fear tactics to prevent a target from seeking outside support or from leaving an abusive relationship. Using universal tendencies toward guilt and shame as emotional levers to control and manipulate is in contradiction to the traditional idea of holiness in Christianity which does *not* require nor expect perfection.

Marriage Must Not Cancel the Dignity of the Individual

The modern Church is in the challenging situation of protecting the institution of marriage within a larger, secular culture – while at the same time protecting the dignity of the individuals within the marriage. Strong individuals with autonomy have the ability to build strong marriages. Placing the institution of marriage on a pedestal without regularly addressing the dignity and autonomy of the individuals within the marriage can lead to problems.

It is important to recognize when well-meaning teachings are protecting marriage and when they are, in fact, enabling abusive, undignified behavior.

Any time teachings about marriage result in *isolation from safe people*, it is protecting someone's control, and it is contributing to abuse.
Any time teachings about marriage result in a target *silencing concerns over patterns of behavior,* it is protecting someone's control, and it is contributing to abuse.
Any time teachings about marriage result in *fear of seeking outside information or of seeking help*, it is protecting someone's control, and it is contributing to abuse.

It is not safe or helpful to say: "this advice is not meant for those in abusive marriages". If the advice is bad for those in abuse situations, it is bad for everyone for the following reasons. It is more likely that a spouse from an unhealthy marriage would be listening to the Church for help than a spouse from a healthy marriage. Spouses who are targets of abuse are rarely able to see (or ready to admit to themselves) that they are, in fact, in an abusive situation. Abusive spouses will seek out spiritual marriage talks that endorse their bad behavior. These realities must be kept in mind.

Instead of teaching lessons that could easily be used by abusive persons, consider teachings that are good for everyone in any situation. Advice about maintaining one's own dignity, autonomy, ability to read independently and to meaningfully maintain prior important relationships can go much further in supporting the development of healthy people and healthy marriages than teachings only focused

on submission, headship, helpmates, fertility, silent endurance of suffering and 'leave and cleave'.

A human person is much more complex to understand than a few verses of scripture taken without context can address. The Catholic Church has always taught that the overall context of individual dignity and autonomy is important. This theme, largely missing from some Catholic marriage talks lately, must be reasserted.

Examples of spiritual bypass/abuse in unhealthy Catholic marriages

Clergy and parishioners can support truth, autonomy and dignity in confusing situations by becoming aware of common examples of spiritual bypass and spiritual abuse. (Catechism 2297: against reign of terror can be helpful in this context).

Regarding Forgiveness:

Teachings on forgiveness are frequently exploited by abusive spouses.

In order to help prevent this, a careful assessment of the situation is in order. In cases of clear abuse, ongoing coercion, exploitation or unrepentant cruelty, advise must be focused on safety and clarity, not forgiveness. Remember that USCCB's "When I Call for Help" document specifies that forgiveness (even once it is offered) does not require putting oneself or one's children back into harm's way.

When safety is secured and healing is at a point where forgiveness becomes appropriate to discuss, care still must be taken. Forgiveness *is* an important spiritual task, but it must be done morally - for the right reason, by the right person, and at the right time. Beware of advocating for a premature forgiveness that mimics a denial of reality. French author Alain Besancon explains that *a moral forgiveness must be promoted, rather than using the idea of forgiveness as an evasion of a more difficult virtue.* The avoidant kind of forgiveness does not do the hard work of acknowledging the sin. Premature, avoidant forgiveness can actually be an act of injustice, cowardice, complicity, and laziness on the part of the person advocating for it. Frequently, a person using the avoidant kind of forgiveness may also add self-congratulation for "being so forgiving" to the list of wrongs.

Forgiveness is frequently accompanied by the delicate areas of reconnection, trust, closeness, transparency and reconciliation. Even if forgiveness is offered, the other things do not have to be pushed. Trust must be earned over years, not demanded or blindly given. Closeness, transparency and openness must be earned over years of a relationship, not demanded or blindly given.   Reconnection and reconciliation are slow invitations to a deeper connection over years – it is not a premature forcing together that could place a victim back under control of an abuser.

As a last caveat on forgiveness, note that reconciliation can be misused *as a tool of manipulation*. Watch for signs of someone truly attempting reconciliation versus someone appropriating the idea of reconciliation for their own benefit and control. If a true reconciliation if offered, it is an invitation to a deeper connection which slowly builds trust over time while respecting each individual's safety and needs. If a performative 'reconciliation' is offered, it is not genuine but is instead coercive leverage, lopsided power, exploitation of the relationship, sudden invasion of privacy, and public image management cloaked in pious words.

Regarding Other Common "Wrong Virtue Wrong Time" Pitfalls:

Pitfall 1: Misplaced patience, unity, forgiveness or reconciliation:

- Encouraging a victim to be <u>patient and forgiving</u> *so as not to deal with the victim's problem.*
    - ⇒ Instead, **prudent clarity** in recognizing abuse dynamics, **accountability** of the abuser and **fortitude** in protection of the victim was called for.
- Blindly encouraging <u>unity and forgiveness</u> *in order to preserve an image of a marriage* in the community *to the detriment of the individuals within the marriage.*
    - ⇒ Instead, support the **dignity of the individuals** involved by helping a victim and children gain clarity, reassert their dignity and get to safety if needed.
- Encouraging a terrified or confused victim to <u>reconcile</u> with an abuser.
    - ⇒ Instead **study abuse dynamics** to recognize and teach others about potentially dangerous situations. Offer a **kind listening ear**, ask gentle questions to **help a victim understand their own emotions and intuitions,** pray with the victim, and offer the victim a telephone with which to safely **call domestic abuse services** (a victim's own phone is likely monitored).

- Celebrating an abuser's "repentance" prematurely is a common flaw for Church communities who thrive on stories of <u>conversion and reconciliation</u>.
    - ⇒ Instead, experts advocate watching and waiting *for years* of good action prior to any celebration of change in an abuser. Frequently it is a shallow apology that was offered. **Patience in watching for long term behavioral change** will, if fruitful, result in a true repentance worth celebrating.
- <u>Forgiving</u> a sin that was not, in fact, committed against you and *leaving the victim unheard, unsupported and worse off than before*.
    - ⇒ Instead, practice **wisdom and fortitude** in helping the victim feel able to discuss the harm being endured. Help the victim gain clarity, realize the choices available to them and assistance them in getting safety if needed. Actively listen, gently ask the victim if they would like to speak more, or if they would like you to help them contact someone more knowledgeable.

Pitfall 2: Misplaced magnanimity without discernment:
- Being "<u>welcoming to all</u>" to the point that those who abuse feel comfortable *using the events to stalk and terrify their victims*. Or, similarly, being "<u>friendly</u>" by passing information to the abuser *in order not to appear impolite* in conversation.
    - ⇒ Use **knowledge, prudence and justice** to keep your eyes open, watch for patterns, protect the community, alert trusted parishioners while maintaining privacy of victim. At events, **speak often on the dignity of each individual**, the importance of privacy of thought, of autonomy to read outside information, and of meaningfully keeping independent relationships with prior friends and family. **Ill-intentioned actors will not feel as welcome if there are frequent announcements foiling their efforts at control and isolation.**

Pitfall 3: False "neutrality":
- *Priding oneself* on being "<u>open to hearing both sides</u>", on "<u>giving another chance</u>" or otherwise advocating for false justice on behalf of a manipulator *without watching for patterns of action and victim reactions over time*.
    - ⇒ Instead, watch and recognize chronic manipulation and lies, acknowledge a victim's fear, and **set limits**. Beware both of being drawn in to fight for a manipulator - but also beware of hiding behind passivity as if it were prudent holiness. These situations are complex. **True neutrality lies in helping individuals recognize and maintain their own and their children's dignity, autonomy and clarity,** which can be promoted by

maintaining time for independent research and for prior important relationships.

Pitfall 4: Calling real concerns "gossip":
- Telling a victim to "<u>stop gossiping</u>" when in fact the victim is asking for help.
  - ⇒ Beware of calling information "gossip" in order to avoid acknowledging a frightening situation to yourself. Instead of quickly criticizing a speculative venial sin, **recognize** when it may actually be a call for help. **Courageously** provide a listening, knowledgeable ear to a victim's concerns and continue to study warning signs of abuse. **Humbly refer** to more knowledgeable support people when concerned.

Pitfall 5: Emphasizing obedience without discernment:
- Encouraging children/spouse to <u>obey and comply</u> with ever-changing and demanding rules that are enforced by abuse and isolation.
  - ⇒ Instead of advocating for misplaced obedience, offer a victim safe time and space away from the abuser. **Have literature on coercive control available** in a safe, private place to help victims discern their own situation over time. If indicated, offer a phone line so the victim can **call a domestic abuse** counseling service.

Pitfall 6: Applauding public display of 'good' actions *while ignoring bad*:
- <u>Accepting</u> a person's self-promoting image management and public display of 'holy' actions *while deciding to overlook poor or dangerous character*.
  - ⇒ Instead, give yourself a long **time to assess** situations in the parish so that you can see patterns of those who live with authenticity, clarity and humility. Use the time to gain knowledge about coercion and abuse dynamics to help you **discern a performative masquerade that enables private abuse** from more authentic virtue that matches private life. **Use the knowledge to build church leadership carefully.**
- <u>Financially or socially supporting an abuser or their 'holy cause'</u> "for the good it does" *while choosing not to see that this support enables private abuse and places the targets at further risk of confusion and harm*.
  - ⇒ Instead, **learn about manipulative patterns** to help discern if public displays are being used to fool and entrap victim(s) in a false narrative. Public good works should match what happens in private life. Many victims have said that the public praise their abuser received made the private abuse that they endured feel much more confusing and created worse harm. Good works need to be done by the Church community -

but will be more successful long term if done by **people of good character**. Hold an abuser accountable for malicious actions and help victims and the community gain clarity.

Pitfall 7: Negating valid concern with platitudes
- Dismissing a person's concerns with misleading platitudes such as "marriage is hard".
    ⇒ Life can be hard – loved ones die, illnesses occur, worries abound – and a person might be married while enduring these life hardships. *But marriage itself should not add to the hardship.* Marriage may add complexity in life, in terms of more relationships to balance and more loved ones to care for, but *complexity is not the same as hardship or abuse*. In general, being married should help an individual through difficult life situations. Marriage should help a person become more of who they are and should enhance prior important relationships. *If marriage is causing an individual to lose their identity, become closed minded to new ideas or destroys prior important relationships, these are signs of an abusive marriage* – not a 'hard' marriage.

Lastly: the pitfall of Scripture manipulation:
- Overlooking manipulations of Scripture *without attempting to prevent its exploitation*.
    ⇒ Consistently remind parishioners that scriptural versus must be understood **in the context of the entire Bible and magisterium of the Church and** that anyone using versus out of the overall context may be manipulating the verse**. Remind them that the dignity of each individual person and their autonomy to decide for themselves is part of every verse**. God offers invitations, not tyranny.
    ⇒ **Become aware of scripture passages commonly manipulated** in spousal abuse situations, such as those listed below:

-- "2 become 1" applied to coercing one spouse to lose their uniqueness completely

-- "leave and cleave" or "leave your father and mother and follow Me" turns into *cruelly* and *completely* severing historically meaningful family relationships *in order to follow the abuser* or to *control the family of origin.* A culture that encourages the breaking of intergenerational bonds is neither healthy nor sustainable. Scriptures were written in a time when one usually remained deeply connected to family of origin on both sides of the marriage throughout life (typically even sharing

households and villages) so "leave and cleave" must have a more nuanced meaning than modern notions of "cut off". Even when Abraham left his family of origin upon God's command, he left with enough good will and continued caring correspondence that years later the family willingly provided his son with a wife. Similarly, even in the vocation of priesthood, where a man gives his life to the Church, his family of origin is still encouraged to hold an important and ongoing role in the priest's life.

-- "submission" and "headship" applied to a household revolving mainly around the emotions of one person; and to a target spouse having little to no autonomy or allowance for private, unmonitored, independent thought/research/action, or little to no meaningful, independent relationships with prior important people in their life.

-- "forgive 70x7 times" applied to compelling a victim to accept an abuser back into their life

-- "leaving the 99 to find the lost sheep" applied to bringing an abuser back into the fold or telling an abuser where his victim is hiding. A pattern of behavior change over a period of years is necessary before accepting a previously abusive person back into reach of victims.

-- "preparing the fatted calf for the prodigal son" erroneously applied to giving an unrepentant, consistently abusive person financial support or social support that prevents the person from feeling the consequences of their own actions. This can be thought of as sending the 'fatted calf' to the pig stye before 'the son' has reformed.

-- Jesus' crucifixion applied to accepting abuse from a spouse. Many times, abusers use Jesus' and other martyrs' acceptance of abuse and death to convince their target that it is "virtuous" to immediately capitulate to abusive spousal demands and to help to hide the abuser's bad behavior from others. Instead, living with integrity and protecting oneself and one's children, if at all possible, are obligations that need consideration. Even Jesus and many martyrs fled abusive situations prior to the extreme situations at the end of their lives. The extreme situations at the end of their lives were many times accepted only as a last resort. In the case of Jesus, his acceptance of the suffering actually publicly exposed sin and saved mankind from it. There is much more to virtuous suffering than simple capitulation, particularly when there is obligation and ability to defend dignity.

More resources:
Books by Bill Eddy, Janja Lalich, Rick Alan Ross, Evan Stark
Tears of Eden
Sheila Wray Gregoire, Bare Marriage
Steven R Tracy, "To Heal or Harm", Mending the Soul Ministries

Segment #10

High Conflict Personalities

About 80-90% of people are trustworthy in that they are who they say they are and will do what they say they will do and who will otherwise follow most of the social rules that help everyone live together relatively peacefully.

Another 10% of people are the reverse of the majority – they turn societal norms upside down by lacking empathy, remorse and/or self-control. These 10% can ruin others' lives, reputations, self-esteem, career, finances, sanity, and physical health with their pattern of unrestrained, aggressive behavior. Unsurprisingly, this 10% is overrepresented in perpetrators of domestic abuse, cultish relationships and leaders of cultish groups. Reacting appropriately to this 10% usually requires the complete opposite tactics compared to how a situation would normally be handled with the 80-90% majority.

High-Conflict Personalities and their Targets of Blame

People in the destructive 10% category discussed are said to have a "**High-Conflict Personality**" (**HCP**). They have a life-long pattern of externalizing inner turbulence by pinning it onto innocent targets (who are discussed in the next paragraph). Over time, HCPs show a pattern of lack of remorse, lack of empathy or lack of self-control. The HCPs are preoccupied with their public image - which is very different from their non-public character. They like to wear the mask of a hero leader, but over time it is noticeable that they rarely have consistent values beyond self-promotion. HCPs tend to set numerous, unreasonable limits upon others, imposing excessive, unreasonable consequences if a limit is crossed – while those around the HCPs tend to be persuaded by the HCP to misapply empathy by setting little to no limits on the HCP's bad behavior and to almost never impose any consequences upon the HCP.

When HCPs have the drive to dominate or destroy another person they act like adult bullies. HCP's choose innocent "**Targets of Blame**" that they mercilessly attack, often for months or years, even if the initial conflict was minor. The initial conflict that the HCP creates or escalates is not really about the Target, or about the stated issue, although it may look that way from the outside. HCPs are persuasive

blamers who frame situations backward and convince others to get it backward, too, creating an "anti-community" of Negative Advocates around themselves.

Negative Advocates and the Church Community

Many people and institutions assume that others operate in a reasonable way, following social rules. People get caught off guard and become confused when they encounter an HCP, since the HCP manipulates trust and subtly breaks social rules. Often, well-meaning people inadvertently become a **Negative Advocates** for the HCP against the innocent Target of Blame, unquestioningly adopting and supporting the HCP's story. Empathy that should be bestowed by the community upon the innocent Target is instead cunningly redirected by and towards the HCP. Empathy, misused this way, makes a high conflict bully situation crueler.

Negative Advocates accidentally enable and escalate the high-conflict, bullying, abusive behavior. They make the situation worse by not understanding that the HCP is living and playing by different rules. They do not realize that in an HCP bully situation, the HCP's stated issue is not the issue – *the HCP's personality is the issue*.

The Church community is one group that is presently particularly vulnerable to being manipulated by HCPs. This vulnerability is due to a combination of the Church's mission to welcome, support, empathize and forgive anyone who claims to share their mission - combined with the modern breakdown of the old screening processes and accountability methods that used to exist in tight-knit family communities. Screening for HCPs is now up to the individual.

What is the Church's plan for furthering her mission while being targeted for misuse by individuals who have ill-intent? Awareness is step one. Limiting the power of bullying behavior is step two.

It is proper for individuals within the Church community to become aware of high-conflict personalities in order to protect themselves and to help deescalate damaging situations. HCP bullies are addicted to power and prestige. Having more power and prestige will only make them worse and cause their innocent victims to suffer more. Communities know not to give alcohol to an alcoholic. Communities can also learn not to give power, prestige and control to high conflict personalities. More about negative and positive advocates will be discussed in Segment 12.

How to spot a High-Conflict Personality

High-conflict personalities have four enduring, primary characteristics: lots of all-or-nothing thinking (little nuance), intense unmanaged emotions, extreme behavior/threats (stalking, controlling, lying, violence) and a preoccupation with bullying and blaming innocent Targets of Blame. With HCPs, "the issue is not the issue" – instead, their high-conflict pattern of behavior is the real issue.

It is easy to fall for an HCPs charms. HCPs often have a dual persona – they are a sugar-coated person in public and a completely different person in private. An HCP often can appear more persuasive while lying than an honest person appears when telling the truth. Learning red flags of an HCP can help prevent falling for the con.

One red flag indicating an HCP is that they do something *extremely negative* that 90% of people would *never* do - such as destroy child's favorite toy; angrily and suddenly yell very loudly at a gathering; demand special treatment in a public setting; hit a random stranger; isolate their spouse from prior important relationships.

Another red flag is that one may sense a sudden, inexplicable emotional impulse to "fight, flight, freeze or fawn" in the presence of an HCP, though one feels silly about feeling this way around the HCP and cannot explain why do. "Fight, flight or freeze" responses are self-explanatory. The "fawn" response is the inexplicable urge to over-flatter someone. A person's intuition and emotion may be responding to subtle manipulations by the HCP that their mind has not caught up to yet.

A third red flag is an intense increase of turmoil within a community after the HCP joins it, though it will not seem like the turmoil is coming from them. HCPs tend look for and subtly escalate conflicts that are just under the surface of communities.

These are all hints that one should give pause before trusting that person with public support or with any position of prestige, power, or authority. Patterns emerge over months and years, and it is best to wait and watch.

In general, remember not to "over-do" responses to any person (or that person's family) in the beginning years of a relationship. Do not over-flatter, over-care, over-help, over-invite, over-engage, or over-attend to dramatics. Do not publicly promote someone new or someone with a pattern of concerning traits. Do not make it easy to quickly ascend to multiple positions of public spotlight (many times,

their spouse or children may be used as pawns for their own image, also). In general, move slowly, hire slowly, select volunteers slowly, limit public spotlight options.

Stay tuned next week to learn more about personality disorders associated with HCP behavior.

The above are summaries and excerpts from the following authors. For more information, see their complete works:
- 5 Types of People Who Can Ruin Your Life: Identifying and Dealing with Narcissists, Sociopaths, and Other High-Conflict Personalities, by Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq., copywrite 2018
- Dating Radar: Why Your Brain Says Yes to 'The One' Who Will Make Your Life Hell", by Bill Eddy & Megan Hunter, copywrite 2017
- Dr Peter Malinoski, Catholic trauma therapist, SoulsAndHearts.com

Segment #11

High Conflict + Personality Disorder

In these segments, the 10% of the population that makes up high-conflict personality (HCP) is being explored in order to better protect our Church communities from unnecessary turmoil.   As a reminder from last month's segment, HCPs do something *extremely negative* that 90% of people would *never* do. They tend to have a dual-persona – charming in public and very difficult at home or among close relations. They increase turmoil within a community. They have a life-long pattern of all-or-nothing thinking, intense unmanaged emotions, extreme behavior, and a preoccupation with blaming others (their innocent Targets of Blame).

Many HCPs tend to also exhibit traits of one or more personality disorders. Learning these personality disorder traits can help make sense of confusing interactions with high-conflict people.

Personality disorders associated with HCPs

Certain personality disorders (those termed Cluster B) exhibit characteristics that are more likely to draw those with the disorder into intense, ongoing conflicts on a regular basis – essentially, high-conflict personality (HCP) behavior. Understanding signs of these personality disorders can help us anticipate behaviors and needs, as well as risks to ourselves and others.

Disclaimers: Personality disorders include many other, specific criteria not listed here and must be diagnosed by a professional. Disorders describe an enduring pattern of traits, rather than a reaction to an isolated incident. People may have disordered traits without having a full disorder. The disorders do not define the whole person. Some therapists are working on a "parts theory" understanding of personality, where a person has various parts to themselves, some of which (or many of which) may include disordered parts. Not all those with a personality disorder have a high-conflict personality, since some keep to themselves and have no Targets of Blame. The people with *both* personality disorder *and* high-conflict personality will be discussed here as they are more likely to cause unnecessary turmoil in a community.

The general public is welcome to become aware of the *possibilities* of the various personality disorder/high-conflict traits. The people who exhibit *the combination* of both a pattern of enduring personality disorder traits *and* a high-conflict personality (have Targets of Blame) make up the 10% of people who can easily ruin lives of those around them. Awareness about these patterns can help a community function well by being able to recognize possible patterns, understand how others may think, interact more carefully with others and not get emotionally hooked or conned.

There are 5 personality disorders that may also exhibit high-conflict personality:

- Narcissistic *and* high-conflict personality:
  - Charming at first but have a life-long pattern of believing they are hugely superior to others, demanding constant undeserved respect and attention. They often treat others with contempt. They insult, humiliate, mislead, and lack empathy for their Targets of Blame.
  - Common conflict traits: arrogance, superiority, lack of empathy, insulting, self-centered
  - Narcissist's worst fear: being seen as inferior
  - 6.2% of general population has narcissistic personality disorder (~22 million people in North America) - and likely half of those are *also* HCPs.

- Borderline *and* high-conflict personality:
  - Friendly at first but have a life-long pattern of suddenly and unpredictably shifting moods, making it feel like a split personality. They tend to settle into the negative state more often than the friendly state. They are very sensitive to rejection, frequently perceive abandonment in ordinary daily life events, and react to that perceived rejection with rage, control, and manipulation. The reaction is disproportionate to the event. One minute they are charming, friendly, and reasonable -- then the next they are screaming, blaming, attacking, crying, and/or seeking revenge for minor trigger event – then soon after, they are friends again without much recognition of the previous interactions. When they are angry, they can launch vicious attacks against their Targets of Blame (physically, verbally, legally, or socially).
  - Common conflict traits: sudden intense anger, wide mood swings, revenge, and vindication
  - (Note: this *BORDERLINE* personality disorder is different from a *BIPOLAR* personality disorder. In bipolar, the mood swings are less likely to be

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related to any trigger event. Also, in bipolar, a person has longer periods of depression or elevated mood, with long periods of stability in between, as compared to the quicker shifts of borderline.)
- o Borderline's worst fear: being abandoned.
- o 5.9% of the general population has borderline personality disorder (~20 million people in North America) – more than half of those likely *also* have HCP.

- Antisocial ("against-society", AKA Sociopathic) *and* high-conflict personality:
  - o Charismatic and charming at first, but they are the ultimate con artist and master manipulator. They are characterized by a lack of conscience, deceitfulness, and a willingness to be cruel to achieve their goals. They are insincere and have dishonest relationships to get what they want, though it is not obvious to others at first. Their public personality is a cover for their life-long drive to dominate others through lying, fast talking, stealing (including from their own family), publicly humiliating people, psychological cruelty, dragging innocent people through court, physically injuring them and in extreme cases murdering them. Antisocial HCPs have potential to be very dangerous. They violate social rules and norms without remorse and are said to have no conscience. They seem to enjoy conflict. They are "like toddlers" in that if you stand in their way, they will push you aside, destroy your reputation or even kill you to get what they want – all with no remorse. Targeting people is what antisocial HCPs do.
  - o Antisocial HCPs often hook people by telling sad, dramatic stories of victimization. They gain entry into a community by asking for a helping hand. They prey upon innocent people in vulnerable periods of life, because those people are codependent and inclined to please, help, trust, and want to be close to a dynamic and charming person. Antisocial HCPs recruit many Negative Advocates who will defend them and try to make it seem like the Target of Blame is the problem. Antisocial HCPs will turn your own family, your own friends, your own community, and usually your own children against you. Antisocial HCPs tend to become worse if they attend counseling, since they learn to mimic the counseling language of empathy and caring in order to manipulate others further. (Sometimes, antisocial personality disorder is considered an extreme subcategory of narcissistic personality disorder.)
  - o Common traits: criminality, lying, cruelty, fearless, enjoys bullying/hurting others, likes to dominate
  - o Antisocial/sociopath's worst fear: being dominated by others

- 3.6% of the general population has antisocial personality disorder (~13 million people in North America; almost 1 out of every 25 people) – *most of these* also have HCP.
- Note: Beware of being told to cut off your friends and family, for any reason. This is a warning sign. Don't allow your life to revolve around just one person. **Ninety percent of people would <u>want</u> you to have your friends and to spend time with your family members**.

- Histrionic *and* high-conflict personality:
  - Exciting and dramatic at first, but often tell wild, extreme, and sometimes totally false stories with gross exaggerations that generally are lacking in detail. They tend to be flamboyant and like to be center of attention. Constantly dramatic with superficial, short-lived emotions that come and go quickly and are not organized. They tend to have shallow relationships. Dramatic intimacy, telling people to keep something secret while ironically telling everyone about it themselves. They spread rumors but will say they are "not allowed to tell who told them". Their actions don't follow their words (they threaten to never see someone again - but quickly resume the relationship anyway). They act helpless and seek others to care for them and their problems. They think people care more about them than they do. Over time they can be emotionally draining and harmful to those around them, particularly their Targets of Blame. Comes from the word "hysteria".
  - Common traits: excessive drama, highly emotional, exaggerates, demands attention, may lie
  - Histrionics' worst fear: being ignored
  - 1.8% of US population has histrionic personality disorder (~6 million people in North America) – *many of those* are also HCPs

- Paranoid *and* high-conflict personality:
  - Life-long pattern of being deeply suspicious, constantly fearing betrayal, imagining complex conspiracies against them, and possibly launching preemptive attacks against their Targets of Blame. This is a pattern of fear, rather than isolated, occasional incidents of reasonable fear.
  - Common traits: extreme fearfulness, mistrusts everyone, fears conspiracies and betrayals
  - Paranoid's worst fear: being betrayed.

- 4.4% of US population has paranoid personality disorder (~16 million people in North America) – but *only few of those* also have HCP (more often, they prefer not to engage with others).

For more information:
⇒ 5 Types of People Who Can Ruin Your Life: Identifying and Dealing with Narcissists, Sociopaths, and Other High-Conflict Personalities, by Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq., copywrite 2018
⇒ It's All Your Fault! 12 Tips for Managing People Who Blame Others for Everything, by Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq., copywrite 2008

Segment #12

Conclusion - Become a Positive Advocate

In the past eleven segments many topics were examined in order to better protect our Church communities from unnecessary turmoil. Specifically, the "adult bully" traits of coercive control, spousal abuse, cults/cultish relationships, spiritual abuse and high-conflict personality disorders were all explored.

To simplify the concluding discussion of this document, these traits will be consolidated into the term "high-conflict personality bully" (or "HCP bully"). Equipping our Church with knowledge about HCP bullies can help support the dignity of every individual and the development of truly healthy marriages. It can also help us identify and curb bullying tendencies within ourselves. Knowing how to become a Positive Advocate will help greatly in forming healthy individuals, families and communities who can better evangelize the Gospel message.

How to Spot and Stop a Bully

Frequently, high-conflict bullying people cause the most turmoil when well-meaning people inadvertently become Negative Advocates, supporting the HCP bully and the HCP bully's story, while wrongly condemning the bully's innocent targets. These well-meaning people confuse a person mimicking victimhood with a genuine victim, thus accidentally enabling and escalating high-conflict, abusive behavior into a problem that can further harm not only the bully's target, but also negatively affect an entire community over the long term.

HCP bullies rely on people's naivety and tolerance in order to maintain and grow power. Since Church communities are encouraged to be very welcoming, forgiving, conflict-averse, self-doubting, self-blaming people, they are vulnerable to accidentally becoming recruited as Negative Advocates if they blindly offer these virtues without discernment. Gullibility in a parish innocently contributes to an HCP's bullying ability and helps the HCP bully succeed at getting more power in the Church community - making the situation worse for the innocent targets instead of better.

The first solution is for parishioners to become educated on common tactics used by HCP bullies so as to recognize the manipulations and not support them or those

efforts. Control of day-to-day life and sabotage of prior important relationships are two major tactics that can be easily noticed by outsiders. Tactics that outsiders may only see hints of include deceit, use of fear, use of shame and a public image that contrasts greatly with private reality.

The second solution is in standing strong with others against HCP bullying tactics. A reasonable caution is not promoting people (or their family) until several years of good character in both public and in private spheres is confirmed. Another helpful effort is to frequently vocally support the dignity of every individual to have autonomy in critical thinking, the ability to read outside information, and independence in maintaining prior relationships. An HCP bully will likely move on to a more naïve community if people promote his/her family slowly, expose manipulative tactics and help innocent targets learn how to maintain autonomy.

Awareness of the issue of HCP bullies and Negative Advocates is increasing in the legal and judicial spheres – places that HCP bullies used to easily prey upon. Awareness in Church communities is needed, too, in order to help recognize, expose, and resist the HCP bully behavior there as well.

More Information about Negative Advocates

Learning more about characteristics of Negative Advocates can help avoid accidentally becoming one.

Negative Advocates are the enablers of the HCP bully who unconsciously get the situation backward. Without much question and without doing much individual research, a Negative Advocate naively jumps to conclusions and sincerely adopts the HCP bully's opinions and emotions. They shut down alternative information. They ignore red flags (such as lack of self-control or lack of remorse). If Negative Advocates notice the HCP's bullying behavior at all, they disregard it or minimize it as a merely a ridiculous quirk. They simply cannot imagine that the HCP bully would accuse their own victim of being the bully.

Negative Advocates quickly advocate strongly for the HCP bully's inaccurate or false story. The Negative Advocate gets directly involved in the HCP bully's conflict by aggressively attacking the HCP bully's perceived enemy (the innocent Target of Blame). Even though they are not normally a bully themselves, the Negative Advocate will find themselves acting like a bully on behalf of the HCP bully. Because they get emotionally hooked and try to "protect" the "victim" HCP from their "evil"

Target of Blame – they are helping the wrong person in the wrong way.   One of the first warning signs that a person is a Negative Advocate is that they tend to get highly and disproportionately emotional over a small issue on behalf of the HCP bully.

Negative Advocates can get so emotionally hooked that they can even turn against their own family of origin on behalf of the HCP bully. An HCP bully's love interest/spouse frequently becomes this kind of adamant Negative Advocate.

Negative Advocates tend to hold more sway over public opinion than the original HCP bully – which is why the HCP bully recruits them. HCP bullies are usually able to recruit new Negative Advocates on a regular basis – at least for a short time (several years). The more Negative Advocates there are, the more likely the HCP bully will continue to attack their innocent Target of Blame and never resolve the dispute. As people slowly realize the reality of the situation, they tend to quietly distance themselves from the HCP bully without blowing the whistle on the bullying behavior. Since it only takes one Negative Advocate to validate the cognitive distortions of an HCP bully, one Negative Advocate is enough for them to continue their blame and bullying of their innocent victim.

Innocent Targets of Blame are often caught by surprise by presence of and the intensity of the HCP bully's Negative Advocates. In a cruel twist, many of the Negative Advocates might have been the Target's prior friends, whom the HCP bully cunningly and slowly misled over months or years before the Target even knew what was happening. The Targets of Blame are often overwhelmed and devastated. The Negative Advocates will suddenly approach the Target of Blame and try to persuade them to change their behavior to accommodate the HCP bully. The Negative Advocate may assist the HCP bully in spreading rumors or legal claims against the Target of Blame. This is sometimes referred to as "abuse-by-proxy". The same types of behavior that the HCP bully engaged in is now supported by more than just one person – and it becomes a mob against the innocent Target of Blame who only belatedly realizes what has happened.

Societally, Negative Advocates are harmful. First, Negative Advocates fail to hold the HCP bully accountable, which lets the HCP bully (and their Target) know that there will be no meaningful social consequences to the bad behavior. Second, Negative Advocates fail to resist the HCP bully's attempts to gain power and prestige. In fact, they tend to get personally involved with the HCP in the wrong

way, offering practical, emotional or financial support *to the HCP bully* placing the entire community on a wrong (and likely harmful) track for years to come.

Negative Advocates can be equated to enablers or codependents of an alcoholic or drug addict. By siding with the HCP bully, the Negative Advocates enable the HCP to remain "sick", stuck in their dysfunctional behavior, emotions, and thoughts by reinforcing them. This often encourages the HCP bully to become more aggressive in their negative behavior towards their innocent Targets of Blame.   On a hopeful note, if these advocates were to stop enabling HCP bullies, the number of disputes and the harm caused by those disputes would be greatly reduced.

Become a Positive Advocate

No one should suffer an HCP bully alone, particularly within the Church community – thus it is important to learn to be a Positive Advocate. Supportive, knowledgeable people within faithful communities can have more influence than they realize. The following are traits of a Positive Advocate.

Positive Advocates support a victim with friendship, a listening ear, and interest in gaining more knowledge about how best to understand abuse dynamics and how to help support and guide the victim. Positive Advocates regularly ask themselves if the facts they are operating on are true. They think about a person's pattern of behavior over many years, monitoring character. They are aware that an HCP bully's public persona conflicts with their private life, so Positive Advocates pay attention to how people promoting themselves treat their own children, their own family of origin, their in-laws and their old friends. Positive Advocates double- and triple- check from multiple, diverse educational sources – including reading books, articles and research -- all while ensuring that they are not putting the potential victim in further danger. They do not minimize, normalize or dismiss what is happening. They continue to try to help the victim understand the situation, plan ahead, compile information, give plenty of time to discuss the situation, and help the victim find resources.

Positive advocates remain a consistent, though slightly distant support. They do not get emotionally hooked. They do not attack anyone on behalf of the victim but instead are actively spending time and energy reading and researching to understand the situation and to help the victim help themselves.

Positive Advocates are aware that neutrality helps a bully. They keep an eye out for patterns of behavior over years. Once certain pattern emerges, they help the true story be heard by exposing how the HCP bully is playing the victim. They help hold the HCP bully accountable with social consequences. All the while, they are still reading and learning and watching to double check their own interpretation of events.

A caveat: Christian and Catholic communities that learn about abuse dynamics sometimes fall into the trap of focusing on educating and "reforming" HCP abusers – rather than on educating and supporting general parishioners to recognize abuse dynamics and patterns. Frequently, this leads only to helping an abuser learn how to better hide their abuse behind a Christian façade, that only further hurts their innocent targets. On the other hand, generally exposing *the dynamics of abuse* can help the most. Exposing coercive dynamics helps victims/targets recognize and understand the pattern that tricked them, can help the victim and supporters find clarity and dignity, can help the victim work towards safety and can hold the abusive person accountable for actions, possibly influencing real reform in future.

Identifying a Genuine Victim vs Mimicking Victimhood

Determining lies from truth is a difficult and complex issue that counselors, attorneys, judges and other mediators grapple with. Although a comprehensive, universal, definitive manual to determining truth from lies is not possible, many indicators have been relied upon to build understanding.

A genuine victim's story is usually detailed, unchanging, nuanced, and may take time to understand. The victim's later actions match the words of their story. If a friend tries to change the subject to another topic, the genuine victim will likely be hurt and ask to return to speaking about the original topic. This is because for a genuine victim, the "issue" really *is* the issue, and the victim is truly trying to solve a problem.   If the victim's story is not respected at first, they will try to produce more and more true, factual information for examination.

On the other hand, an HCP bully's story mimicking victimhood is usually simple, vague (or contains rehearsed details), attractively and emotionally told, and is told differently to different people (tailoring fabrications for each person). The HCP bully's story is frequently accompanied by tears or suggestive body movements. The HCP bully's later actions may not match the words from their story. If a friend tries to change the subject to another topic, an HCP bully mimicking victimhood is

likely to *allow* the change in subject, particularly if some empathy or respect was given first. This is because for an HCP bully, the "issue" *is not* the issue – the issue is actually the personality disorder. The HCP bully is OK with "issues" remaining unresolved, since for them the real issue was gaining respect/allies, not resolving an issue. If the HCP bully mimicking victimhood is not respected at first, they will exhibit escalating emotions and increasingly dramatic emotional facts.

Scholars have identified two paths to persuasion, a central and a peripheral path. The central path to persuasion involves facts, ideas, and reasoning. Though accompanied by emotion, the facts are the center of the story. HCP bullies – since their stories are largely fabricated or exaggerated, cannot rely on facts. HCP bullies rely heavily on the peripheral path to persuasion. The peripheral path to persuasion involves coaxing the listener's subconscious awareness with a variety of ancillary factors: attractiveness of messenger, aggressiveness of messenger/language intensity, confidence of messenger, number of arguments made, shorter and simpler sentences, use of distractions, social role/group identification, and emotional appeal. These ancillary factors are substituted for logic and facts.

Conclusion

Reaffirm individual dignity, even – and especially – within marriage.

This includes encouraging all individuals to: maintain their autonomy and privacy in thinking; freely and confidentially read outside information about coercive control dynamics; and meaningfully and independently maintain prior important, healthy relationships.

For more information:
- 5 Types of People Who Can Ruin Your Life: Identifying and Dealing with Narcissists, Sociopaths, and Other High-Conflict Personalities, by Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq., copywrite 2018
- It's All Your Fault! 12 Tips for Managing People Who Blame Others for Everything, by Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq., copywrite 2008
- Our New World of Adult Bullies: How to Spot Them - How to Stop Them", by Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq., copywrite 2024
- The Academy of Professional Family Mediators, National Conflict Resolution Center