



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 such as the “When Dating Hurts” podcast 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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October 2025

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.

September 2025

October is both Respect Life Month and Domestic Violence Awareness Month. To highlight this connection, the Office for Human Life has dedicated week four of their Respect Life resources to focusing on domestic violence. You can access their comprehensive Respect Life Month Tool Kit and more information on their page [here](#).

August 2025

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) No human person is born free from sin. A common sin is giving into the desire to control others. 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.

July 2025

This past month there were three shootings in North East Ohio involving domestic violence that I have been made aware of. I only saw one of them in the news and it makes me wonder how many other lives were lost to the scourge of domestic violence.

We are continuing our efforts to increase education and awareness about this very serious and troubling subject matter. It can be overwhelming but we must not remain silent. We as church are called to break the silence.

October is Domestic Violence awareness month and we will continue to share resources that can be highlighted in your parish bulletins or on websites. St. Dominic's will host an awareness session in October. If you would like to host a program please reach out to get on the calendar. Thank you for the willingness to remain open to this call for change.

June 2025

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") 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, 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 can prevent harm by educating themselves about coercive control and abuse. They can become proficient in recognizing and resisting coercive control tactics - tactics such as covertly isolating and controlling. Motivated parishioners and clergy can reach out to the Marriage and Family Office and 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.