



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.

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.