



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 #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 chooses 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 Lulich "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)