



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 #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)