



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 #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, advice 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 is 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 patient and forgiving 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 unity and forgiveness 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 reconcile 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 conversion and reconciliation.
 ⇒ 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.
- Forgiving 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 assist 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 "welcoming to all" to the point that those who abuse feel comfortable *using the events to stalk and terrify their victims*. Or, similarly, being "friendly" 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 "open to hearing both sides", on "giving another chance" 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 “stop gossiping” 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 obey and comply 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*:

- Accepting 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.**
- Financially or socially supporting an abuser or their ‘holy cause’ “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 sty 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