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The Sacrilege of Spousal Abuse

by

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"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. Since my last confession, I have beaten my wife twice." In the 20 years when I was a priest, among the thousands of confessions I heard all around this country, I never heard those words. I heard words about adultery, fornication, sexual perversions, self-abuse, lying, stealing, murder, assault (fighting) other people, gluttony, pride, fraud, deception, petty and grand larceny, robbery, burglary, embezzlement, abortion, contraception, blasphemy, cursing - and much more. Never spousal abuse. Some confessed arguments between spouses but I never had the intelligence to follow that one up: "Arguments that led to what?"

Confession is not only good for the soul; it establishes a firm purpose of attacking the problem so that it will not happen again ("firm purpose of amendment"). Otherwise it becomes nothing more than magic, superstition and ritual. But even if spousal abuse had been confessed, I wouldn't have known what to recommend as a penance. There is no evidence of this sin in any of the penitentials of the last 1400 years. The penance had to fit the sin so that the penitent could endeavor, by contrary practice, to overcome what he or she had failed to uphold in life.

For example, if a man confessed adultery, it would be dereliction of his duty for the confessor simply to assign a penance and forgive in the name of Christ and the Church. After all, the whole

community is present in that confessional in the person of the confessor because every sin in Catholic theology offends not only God but every member of the Church. By sin, the penitent has deprived the whole community of an example of goodness in life or by bad example, has scandalized members of the community. Sin is always communal as well as personal. For adultery, the confessor should impose a penance that will help the penitent to heal and to repair the damage done to the person sinned against without revealing to that other person what was actually done: added kindness and understanding of the spouse; attending a day of prayer and meditation with the guidance of a holy person; a day of complete fast and prayer and reflection on the sin and upon ways to repair it; a visit to a family counselor or support group (if such exists); real sacrifice and fasting in one's life in order to give money to the poor and destitute - or other good works; more loving attention to the other spouse by listening, by doing some work around the house, by somehow lessening the burden for the other. In all these cases, the penance must be authentic in order to bring about a change in the penitent's life and therefore repair the long term effects of that adultery in everyone's life.

Spousal abuse is clearly a communal as well as a personal sin. Even aside from the spouse-victim, the whole community is indirectly affected by the bad example and scandal, an increase in violence, a lessening of good in the community, nefarious effects on children and relatives and a host of other evils as well.

A Hidden Sin

But spousal abuse has been the hidden sin, either because one was too embarrassed or because it was not considered a sin. Strange reasoning. Suppose I hit a fellow worker: as a faithful Catholic I would know that it was wrong; I would have to confess it, apologize to the worker and make concrete amends to repair the damaged ego and the relationship to the degree possible. But when it comes to spousal abuse, no one confesses it because none of the clergy preached that it was wrong.

Maybe because the clergy never preached this kind of failing as sin; maybe because we considered it a "family matter" outside the prying eyes even of the Church and Confessor. But spousal abuse is a

sin - a sin against the marriage, a sin against charity, a sin against the dignity and honor due one's wife and husband.

In fact, such spousal abuse must be considered grievous sin (in Catholic theology, it is called "mortal or deadly sin") because it strikes at the very image and likeness of God in the other; and more to the point, that that other is the one whom one had vowed before God to foster, to love and take care. Spousal abuse is therefore a sin against the vows of marriage and as such, a sacrilege.

A sacrilege is an added quality of a sin which is more serious than in other circumstances. Thus, if I strike a human being in anger and hatred, I have grievously sinned against justice and charity because every person as God's image is entitled to respect and dignity, including bodily and psychological integrity. I have therefore seriously sinned against justice and charity. But if I knowingly strike a bishop or a nun because I hate religion or for following the dictates of his or her conscience, in addition to grievous sin, I commit sacrilege because of the special, vowed relationship between this person and God. Serious sin becomes even more serious.

So too in marriage. Marriage entails vows: a vow to love, honor, sacrifice for the other in good times and bad until death. Those vows are sacred or solemn because they are taken before God and the whole community and they are just as sacred as the vows of any monk or nun. One has promised to continue to love, to grow in love, to promote the good and dignity of the other spouse in every way one can with one's whole heart and soul until death. That is a very serious vow that endures from the day both spouses make it before God and the community until the day of one's death. Spousal abuse is therefore a heinous attack on that central vow of marriage, on one's own word, on God to whom one directly vowed and on the whole community before whom I have vowed this love. Marriage vows are always public, taken before each spouse, before the whole community (in the person of the minister) and before God. That's quite an audience. In every sense of the word, spousal abuse is not just serious sin; in addition, it is sacrilege or abuse of a sacred thing.

We have today discovered that this sin is terribly widespread in our society. Yet I have never heard a sermon on this very grave sin. I dare say, neither have others heard it in their Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant Churches; nor in Mosques or Synagogues across this land.

That has got to change.

The silence before this tragic sin must stop. Not because it is chic or "up to date" or the latest topic; but because the spousal abuse is inherently wrong, a grievous sin and a sacrilege against ourselves, against the community of the Church, particularly against the other spouse and above all against God, our loving Father.

There can be no forgiveness of this grievous sin without a firm purpose of amendment. Even if that means getting help from any and all sources available. The Church and the clergy have a deep obligation to preach this in and out of season.

Mark your calendars.....

1997
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