Church Teaching on Marriage and Domestic Abuse and Violence

John S. Grabowski, Ph.D.
Domestic Violence and the Church

An age old problem which the Church is now confronting directly

But there are resources in the tradition which highlight the moral evil of violence in marriage and in families
The Equal Dignity of Men and Women

“Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth.

God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female* he created them.

God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on the earth.”

--Genesis 1:26-28 (NABRE)
The Covenant of Marriage

- Depicted in many OT stories
- Explicit mentions of marriage as a covenant (cf. Prov. 2:17; Mal 2:14)
- The description of the creation of woman and her relationship with man in Genesis 2 (21-25) is full of covenantal language
- In spite of uneven divorce laws and the double standard for sexual morality, women were not viewed as property and had rights in the family and in marriage
Jesus & Women

- Jesus’ treatment of women = revolutionary
- Recipients of his teaching, healings, deliverance
- Included among disciples; first witnesses of the Resurrection
- Treated women “as persons” with unique dignity (cf. St. John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, nos. 12-16, 24)
Marriage as a Sacrament

- Jesus elevates and transforms marriage (John 2: 1-11)
- Jesus rejects the OT permission for men to divorce their wives (cf. Deut. 24:1-4). See 1 Cor. 7: 10-16; Mk. 10:1-12; Mt. 5: 31-32; 19: 3-9; Lk. 16:18.
- When the couple are baptized marriage = a sacramental sign of grace (cf. Eph. 5:31-33)
Spousal Submission

- The NT “household codes” enjoin the subordination of women to men (cf. Col. 3:18-4:1; Eph. 5:21-33; 1 Peter 2:17-3:9; 1 Tim. 2:8-15; 6:1-10; and Tit. 2:1-10).

- Subsequent Catholic teaching on marriage reiterated & reinforced this subordination.

- Qualified somewhat by Pope Pius XI in *Casti connubii* (1930) when he taught the primacy of women in the “order of love” (vs. their husbands who enjoy priority in the order of authority (cf. no. 15).
Spousal Submission

“Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church, he himself the savior of the body. As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. So [also] husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. ‘For this reason a man shall leave [his] father and [his] mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery [mysterion/sacramentum], but I speak in reference to Christ and the church. In any case, each one of you should love his wife as himself, and the wife should respect her husband.”

--Ephesians 5:21-33 NABRE
Mutual Submission

- John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, no. 24
- Verse 21 as the context
- Echos the “ethos” of spousal love “from the beginning” and captures the “style” Christ in the Gospels, relating to women as persons
Mutual Submission

“The author knows that this way of speaking, so profoundly rooted in the customs and religious tradition of the time, is to be understood and carried out in a new way: as a ‘mutual subjection out of reverence for Christ’ (cf. Eph 5:21)”

--MD, no. 24 (emphasis original)
Mutual Submission

“The ‘innovation’ of Christ is a fact: it constitutes the unambiguous content of the evangelical message and is the result of the Redemption. However, the awareness that in marriage there is mutual ‘subjection of the spouses out of reverence for Christ’, and not just that of the wife to the husband, must gradually establish itself in hearts, consciences, behavior and customs. This is a call which from that time onwards, does not cease to challenge succeeding generations; it is a call which people have to accept ever anew. Saint Paul not only wrote: ‘In Christ Jesus... there is no more man or woman’, but also wrote: ‘There is no more slave or freeman’. Yet how many generations were needed for such a principle to be realized in the history of humanity through the abolition of slavery! And what is one to say of the many forms of slavery to which individuals and peoples are subjected, which have not yet disappeared from history?”

--Mulieris dignitatem, no. 24
“Every form of sexual submission must be clearly rejected. This includes all improper interpretations of the passage in the Letter to the Ephesians where Paul tells women to ‘be subject to your husbands’ (Eph 5:22). This passage mirrors the cultural categories of the time, but our concern is not with its cultural matrix but with the revealed message that it conveys. As Saint John Paul II wisely observed: ‘Love excludes every kind of subjection whereby the wife might become a servant or a slave of the husband… The community or unity which they should establish through marriage is constituted by a reciprocal donation of self, which is also a mutual subjection’. Hence Paul goes on to say that “husbands should love their wives as their own bodies” (Eph 5:28). The biblical text is actually concerned with encouraging everyone to overcome a complacent individualism and to be constantly mindful of others: “Be subject to one another” (Eph 5:21). In marriage, this reciprocal “submission” takes on a special meaning, and is seen as a freely chosen mutual belonging marked by fidelity, respect and care. Sexuality is inseparably at the service of conjugal friendship, for it is meant to aid the fulfilment of the other.”

--Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, 156 (citing John Paul II’s General Audience of August 11, 1982)
Spousal Treatment in Marriage

“But one's partner for life, the mother of one's children, the source of one's every joy, should never be fettered with fear and threats, but with love and patience. What kind of marriage can there be when the wife is afraid of her husband? What sort of satisfaction could a husband himself have, if he lives with his wife as if she is a slave, and not a woman by her own free will.”

--St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 20 on Ephesians*

“He offered himself up for [the Church] who turned her back on Him and hated Him. In the same way,... as He [Christ] accomplished this not with threats, or terror, or anything else like that, but through His untiring love; so you also should behave toward your wife. Even if you see her belittling you, or despising and mocking you, still you will be able to subject her to yourself, through affection, kindness, and your great regard for her. There is no influence more powerful than the bond of love, especially for husband and wife.”

--St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 20 on Ephesians*
Spousal Treatment in Marriage

Aquinas denies the possibility of marital rape but still decries the use of violence in marriage: “The man who is just married has, in virtue of the betrothal, a certain right in her: wherefore, although he sins by using violence, he is not guilty of the crime of rape.” (ST, II-II, 154, a. 7, ad. 4)

But Pope Paul VI teaches: “Men rightly observe that a conjugal act imposed on one's partner without regard to his or her condition or personal and reasonable wishes in the matter, is no true act of love, and therefore offends the moral order in its particular application to the intimate relationship of husband and wife.” (Humanae vitae, 13)
“Then too, when we look at one of the most sensitive aspects of the situation of women in the world, how can we not mention the long and degrading history, albeit often an "underground" history, of violence against women in the area of sexuality? At the threshold of the Third Millennium we cannot remain indifferent and resigned before this phenomenon. The time has come to condemn vigorously the types of sexual violence which frequently have women for their object and to pass laws which effectively defend them from such violence.” (St. John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, 1995, 5)
“As pastors of the Catholic Church in the United States, we state as clearly and strongly as we can that violence against women, inside or outside the home, is *never* justified. Violence in any form”—physical, sexual, psychological, or verbal”—is sinful; often, it is a crime as well. We have called for a moral revolution to replace a culture of violence. We acknowledge that violence has many forms, many causes, and many victims—men as well as women”

--U.S.C.C.B. *When I Call for Help*
Current Church Teaching

“At this time, when so many families are separated or forced to emigrate, when so many are suffering due to poverty, corruption, domestic violence, drug trafficking, the crisis of values and increased crime, we come to Mary in search of consolation, strength and hope. She is the Mother of the true God, who invites us to stay with faith and charity beneath her mantle, so as ‘to overcome in this way all evil and to establish a more just and fraternal society.’

--Benedict XVI, Angelus Message in León, March 25, 2012
“As the Bishops of Mexico have pointed out, violence within families breeds new forms of social aggression, since ‘family relationships can also explain the tendency to a violent personality. This is often the case with families where communication is lacking, defensive attitudes predominate, the members are not supportive of one another, family activities that encourage participation are absent, the parental relationship is frequently conflictual and violent, and relationships between parents and children are marked by hostility. Violence within the family is a breeding-ground of resentment and hatred in the most basic human relationships’.”

--Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, 51 (citing *Que en Cristo Nuestra Paz Mexico tenga vida digna*, 67)
“Surely it is legitimate and right to reject older forms of the traditional family marked by authoritarianism and even violence, yet this should not lead to a disparagement of marriage itself, but rather to the rediscovery of its authentic meaning and its renewal. The strength of the family ‘lies in its capacity to love and to teach how to love. For all a family’s problems, it can always grow, beginning with love’.”

--Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 53 (citing the *Relation finalis* of the 2015 Synod)
"Unacceptable customs still need to be eliminated. I think particularly of the shameful ill-treatment to which women are sometimes subjected, domestic violence and various forms of enslavement which, rather than a show of masculine power, are craven acts of cowardice. The verbal, physical, and sexual violence that women endure in some marriages contradicts the very nature of the conjugal union."

--Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, 54
“In some cases, respect for one’s own dignity and the good of the children requires not giving in to excessive demands or preventing a grave injustice, violence or chronic ill-treatment. In such cases, ‘separation becomes inevitable. At times it even becomes morally necessary, precisely when it is a matter of removing the more vulnerable spouse or young children from serious injury due to abuse and violence, from humiliation and exploitation, and from disregard and indifference’. Even so, ‘separation must be considered as a last resort, after all other reasonable attempts at reconciliation have proved vain’.

- Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, 241 (citing his own catechesis of June 24, 2015 and *Familiaris consortio*, 83)
Current Church Teaching

- “If either of the spouses causes grave mental or physical danger to the other spouse or to the offspring or otherwise renders common life too difficult, that spouse gives the other a legitimate cause for leaving, either by decree of the local ordinary or even on his or her own authority if there is danger in delay.

  --Code of Canon Law, c. 1153
“Yet there are some situations in which living together becomes practically impossible for a variety of reasons. In such cases the Church permits the physical separation of the couple and their living apart. The spouses do not cease to be husband and wife before God and so are not free to contract a new union. In this difficult situation, the best solution would be, if possible, reconciliation. The Christian community is called to help these persons live out their situation in a Christian manner and in fidelity to their marriage bond which remains indissoluble.”

--Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1649
Conclusion

- Recent Church teaching applies the clear teaching of scripture on the equality of women and men in general and in the covenant/sacrament of marriage to the evils of domestic abuse and violence.

- These evils can require separation and even civil divorce to protect oneself or one’s children.

- Civil divorce does not break the bond of marriage in the eyes of the Church. A sacramental marriage which is validly concluded and physically consummated is absolutely indissoluble.

- A decree of nullity does not dissolve a valid sacramental marriage. In most cases it is a declaration that a valid sacramental marriage never existed because of some impediment or defect in consent.