

Healing Marriages of Control and Trust Issues

Interview With Catholic Psychiatrist Richard Fitzgibbons by
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WEST CONSHOHOCKEN, Pennsylvania, JAN. 28, 2010 (Zenit.org) — More marriages and families these days are affected by control and trust issues, says Richard Fitzgibbons, but through the sacraments and practice of virtue these problems can be overcome.

This was the theme of a recent webinar in a series sponsored by the Institute for Marital Healing, which offers resources for couples, counselors and clergy on the topics of parenting, manhood, family life and marriage.

Fitzgibbons, the director of the institute, has worked with thousands of couples and has spoken and written extensively on these topics. In 2008, he was also appointed as a consultant for the Holy See's Congregation for Clergy.

In this interview with ZENIT, Fitzgibbons speaks about modern causes of trust issues, the distinction between being strong and being controlling, and particular virtues that provide an antidote to these problems.

ZENIT: You mention that the most popular section on your Web site is the page about the controlling spouse or relative. Why do you think there is such an interest in this topic?

Fitzgibbons: We had expected that the most frequently visited chapter would be the angry spouse or relative and were surprised initially by the response to the controlling spouse chapter.

As I thought and prayed about this interest, I came to a deeper understanding of the serious personal and cultural factors that are contributing to the tendency to dominate or not trust others that results in a need to control.

ZENIT: Could you describe briefly some of the characteristics of the controlling person?

Fitzgibbons: The worst character weakness in the person who gives in to the tendency to control, and all of us can at times, is that of treating a spouse, who is a great gift from God, with a lack of respect.

The controlling person becomes turned in and thereby fails to see the goodness in his/her spouse.

The other major weakness is that of giving in quickly to excessive anger. Controlling spouses and relatives are also irritable and often sad because it is, in fact, not possible to control anyone since we all have inherent dignity and strength as children of God.

Finally, controlling tendencies damage healthy, cheerful self-giving in marriage and reinforce selfishness, a major cause of controlling behaviors.

ZENIT: What harm can be caused by controlling spouses or relatives?

Fitzgibbons: Controlling behaviors damage the marital friendship, romantic love and betrothed love, three essential areas of marital self-giving which [St.] John Paul II describes in “Love and Responsibility.”

The lack of respect leads the other spouse to feel sad, angry, mistrustful and insecure. Unless this conflict is addressed properly and corrected, serious conflicts can develop including depressive illness, anxiety disorders, substance abuse, infidelity and separation and divorce.

ZENIT: In our fast-paced society, where people are required to control or manage so many aspects of their lives — finances, health, job, family, etc. — isn’t a controlling nature more of a benefit, even a necessity for survival? Do you see a positive side of this type of personality?

Fitzgibbons: Yes, confidence and strength are healthy personality traits that enable us to respond to the many challenges in the great Sacrament of Matrimony and family life.

However, daily growth in virtues is necessary so that a spouse doesn’t cross over a line with these gifts and become controlling.

The virtues that are essential to balancing the gift of strength are gentleness, humility, meekness, self-denial and faith.

A major goal in marriage is to be strong and confident, but not controlling. I encourage many strong husbands to pray to St. Peter to protect them so that they are not controlling leaders in the home.

ZENIT: You state that there are often trust issues at the heart of the controlling personality. Could you say more about this?

Fitzgibbons: A major cause of the tendency to control or dominate is the result of damage to a person’s ability to trust or feel safe in childhood.

Subsequently, spouses can unconsciously be driven by fear to act in a controlling manner, that is, they only feel safe when they are in control, which, of course, they never are common childhood conflicts in the past were alcoholism, parental fighting and the experience of a controlling parent.

More recent causes of severe damage to childhood trust are the divorce culture, day care, and the epidemic of selfishness in parents in large part due to the contraceptive mentality. Also, insecure men engage in controlling behaviors in an attempt to bolster their male confidence. In young adults the hook-up culture is also severely damaging their ability to trust without their realizing it.

Finally, an important spiritual factor that should not be overlooked is described in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “Every man experiences evil around him and within himself. This experience makes itself felt in the relationships between man and woman. Their union has always been threatened by discord, a spirit of domination, infidelity, jealousy, and conflicts that can escalate into hatred and separation” (CCC, 1606).

ZENIT: How can a person begin to address these issues, and change the controlling nature? How can a loved one assist someone who may be seen as controlling?

Fitzgibbons: The first step is that this serious marital weakness needs to be uncovered.

If spouses trusted God more with their marriages, they would not fear pointing out this difficulty and asking for change.

Needed change can occur by a commitment to grow in trust in God and in one's spouse, by a forgiveness process with those who have damaged trust in childhood, by a decision to stop repeating controlling behaviors of a parent, by meditating regularly that the Lord is in control and by growth in numerous virtues including respect, faith, gentleness, humility, magnanimity and love.

The role of faith can be very effective in addressing this serious character weakness. We have seen remarkable improvement in the struggle against this harmful character weakness through the graces in the Sacrament of reconciliation. We encourage controlling Catholic couples to seek healing in this powerful Sacrament.

Also, controlling wives benefit from deepening their relationship with Our Lady, from turning to her as a role model and acquiring her virtues described by St. Louis de Montfort in "True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin."

Controlling husbands can benefit from meditating upon St. Joseph and asking him to help them to be gentle, protective, sensitive, cheerfully giving leaders of their marriages and families.

ZENIT: As a psychiatrist, when would you suggest seeking outside help, from a priest or a counselor, to heal the person's emotional wounds?

Fitzgibbons: I recommend going to a priest before going to a counselor because far too many mental health professionals support the present culture of selfishness.

Brad Wilcox, a young Catholic sociologist at the University of Virginia has written about the mental health field's influence upon marriage: "The psychological revolution's focus on individual fulfillment and personal growth resulted in marriage as being seen as a vehicle for a self-oriented ethic of romance, intimacy, and fulfillment.

"In this new psychological approach to married life, one's primary obligation was not to one's family but to one's self; hence, marital success was defined not by successfully meeting obligations to one's spouse and children but by a strong sense of subjective happiness in marriage — usually to be found in and through an intense, emotional relationship with one's spouse."

We believe that a sincere commitment by each spouse to grow in self-knowledge and in virtues daily can resolve the controlling spouse conflict without the need for marital therapy. However, newer marital referral sources faithful to Christ's teaching on marriage are available at the Catholic Therapists and the Catholic Psychotherapy Web sites.

Our Lady's intercession at Cana led to the Lord's first miracle to bring more joy into a young marriage. We encourage Catholic couples struggling with control and selfishness conflicts to turn to her for another miracle for their marriage.

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