

Readings: [Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time | USCCB](#)

The day had finally come. She was nervous and excited to meet him in person. They met online a few weeks earlier and by now felt like they knew each other for years from the hundreds of text messages and countless long nights on the phone. He too was excited; it had been a long time since he had meet someone with whom the conversation just happened so organically. That first date exceeded their expectations, and it only affirmed what each one was suspecting: this could be the one! They dated for a few months, dealt with more ups than downs, and were soon engaged.

Marriage prep was good. They did all the required meetings, went on their retreat, filled out their paperwork. Both were practicing Catholic though perhaps they could have been a little more involved in their faith. The wedding day went as both had hoped, a wonderful celebration and the afterparty was lively. The years went by and their marriage continued. By then they had two children and struggled with what every other marriage struggles with... those moments of tension and disagreement that come with misunderstandings, miscommunication, finances, in-laws... *but unperceived* those moments were becoming more and more frequent, and less and less civil. Before they knew it, out of their mouths came words and insults they never thought they would be yelling at each other, then came the strong grasping, then the shoving, slapping, punching, kicking, and scratching.

He never thought he would ever be capable of doing something like that... and couldn't understand how insensitive, manipulative, and

indifferent he felt. Any sense of care would disappear at the onset of a rising argument.

She never thought she would tolerate an abusive relationship... and was disappointed at herself at how powerless she felt. She always thought she would never let a man treat her like that. Before this, she herself couldn't understand how a woman couldn't just walk away, but unexplainably, she just couldn't, she just couldn't leave, and felt embarrassed by it so did the best to keep it hidden...

Despite how toxic the relationship had become, both decided to stay... maybe out of fear, for the sake of the kids... to avoid divorce... to be faithful and *respect* the sacrament they received...

We often talk about the beauty and ideals of marriage... how marriage is the will of God for it mirrors the relationship between Christ and the Church and the relationship of the trinity... how marriage provides stability for the raising of the family which is the building block of society and therefore marriage as a civil and religious institution needs to be upheld, and therefore things like divorce goes against the will of God... but we don't often talk about what happens when this ideal, for whatever the reasons, is not achieved and the couple falls victim to abuse, to domestic violence. It's an uncomfortable, taboo topic, it's even difficult for me to make eye contact as I bring it up with you... we prefer to think of it as a private matter.

There is a hidden camera TV show called "What would you do?" that explores how people react in different situations. In one of their episodes, they had two actors pretend to be a couple in a pretty heated

argument which escalades to violence. In the first scenario the aggressor was the man who grabbed the woman forcefully. Some of the onlookers got involved, but many, though visibly uncomfortable, chose to not do or say anything.

Then they switched the roles, where the woman was the aggressor, and the victim was the man. In that case, very few got involved, and most ignored it, some even laughing at the situation...

When they revealed it was staged and there were hidden cameras, they interviewed the witnesses to ask them why they didn't get involved, why they didn't say anything when it was clearly more than just an argument and got physical, and the same answer kept coming up: it is none of my business...

According to the National Coalition for Domestic Violence, an average of 20 people every minute are physically abused by their partner. That is 1 in 4 woman and 1 in 9 men, and consequently 1 in 15 children are eyewitnesses to it, not to mention those kids who also bear the front of abuse within those relationships, so it is more common than we would like to think.

Many of us have probably witnessed, known someone, or have had direct experience with domestic violence at either front. Regardless, abuse of any kind; verbal, emotional, neglect, physical, will always be a result of the *breakdown of relationship*, and that is a *direct attack against life* and thus a direct attack *against God* – the case Jesus has been making in the gospels these past few Sundays.

In this case, the example given to us is focused on divorce and marriage, which Jesus uses as an opportunity to teach us about what it means to be *in relationship with*, and to do so, he takes us *to the beginning* of creation.

Anytime scripture speaks about relationship, be it the breakdown or ideals of, it always draws its understanding from the very familiar creation story, it has become central to how we understand human nature. There is a lot of symbolism in it, but today I'd like to focus on one word: *partner*. *"It is not good for the man to be alone... I will make a suitable partner for him."*

The Hebrew word "partner" is עֵזֶר ('e zer). In some bibles it is translated as **helper**, but it also means **blessing**, or **deliverance**, and this partner is given to man following the realization that it is not good for man to be alone. What is the significance of this word, partner?

That as human beings, we need other people because only in relating to others do we come to a deeper reflection on who we are. Think about your own friendship or relationships... a friend or partner can bring out the best and worst in you, you learn so much about yourself. That means that without human relationships, we are not fully realized... and if we are not fully realized, then we are in danger of never finding our identity, or of losing it.

This is not spiritual talk, it goes to the core of our anthropology. We know that things like solitary confinement, extreme isolation and the deprivation of human contact takes a real and harsh toll on the whole person. In reading scientific journals, scientists observe that when people

are deprived from human contact, they experience extreme anxiety, depression, anger, panic, violence, paranoia, psychosis, and self-harm... so we understand, from Genesis and the sciences, that the human person *necessarily needs companionship*.

In faith language, we say that God has given us each other as **partners**, to the full extent of its Hebrew meaning: that we **help** each other discover our identity, **save** each other from the dangers of solitude, and thus, a partner is a **blessing**. We have a model for respecting life which is applicable to all relationships but specially in marriage because of the unique structure.

Unfortunately, many marriages experience the opposite. Instead of a help they find a hindrance. Instead of salvation they find enslavement. Instead of a blessing, they find a curse, and who was supposed to be a partner becomes a rival, one to dominate, or one who dominates. When we stop seeing each other as partners, and right relationship is torn, the outcome is almost always violence.

If this happens to a marriage, which should be this unbreakable bond, what then? Is it a cross to bear? Are people to endure for the sake of the kids? Are they stay out of respect for the sacrament?

The first step in any struggling marriage is to always seek conversion and support. There are many things that can harden the heart: routine, stress, miscommunication... but just as things can become obstacles to a relationship, there are things to help foster, strengthen, rebuild, and restore that partnership. It begins with seeking God as the source of grace which is present in the sacrament, only the grace of God

can reconcile a broken partnership. But God's grace can only work in a *willing* heart, so both persons in the marriage must desire restoration. There are many strong marriages today that have overcome the experience of domestic violence, who can attest to how a marriage and family is worth fighting for, there is hope.

However, in some cases, especially when the aggressor is not willing or capable of being a partner, and the life of the other and or children is at risk, then the victim has the right to be removed from that environment. The respect for the life, safety and dignity of the victim surpasses the respect for the sacrament. For those experiencing domestic violence, abuse is not a cross that you or anyone should ever have to bear. Reach out, there is help, you are not alone.

For those who have fallen into the sin of abuse, know that this is not who you are. God can completely restore a hardened heart, if you are willing. Let the community help you, you are not alone.

Domestic violence is a difficult experience, one that cannot be overcome alone. That is where we, if we are the witnesses, come in. If you witness or find out that someone is going through domestic abuse, what would you do?

As Christians, we live-in a partnership with Christ in the Church, that means we are to be partners for each other an. If we are a pro-life Church, then any direct attack against life and relationship must be addressed because when one member of the body suffers, the whole body suffers, it is not a private affair, and it can be as simple as letting someone we know is struggling that they are not alone.

Let this respect life Sunday remind us of the need to always be good partners towards each other, that is, a source of help, salvation, and blessing to someone else.

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