

Is the Church saying that I must stay married to an abusive spouse and risk my safety?

Answer: NO. The Church recognizes that at times it may be necessary for a husband and wife to separate. For reasons of child custody and/or financial independence, it may be necessary to obtain a civil divorce. However, a civil divorce does not dissolve the marital bond to allow one to morally marry another (1 Cor. 7:10-11; cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1649).

Whether couples get married civilly or in the Catholic Church, they recite vows about how they will love and treat each other for the rest of their lives. For example, “To Have and to Hold from This Day Forward”, means that I promise to always love you and treat you with honor, respect and as the most precious person in my life until our death. However, when a couple gets married in the Catholic Church, they not only make a commitment but also a covenant or sacred promise to each other and to God that they will love as Christ loves us and be a visible sign of God’s love to the rest of the world. On our wedding day, we became a sacrament. A sacramental marriage is an instrument of God’s grace and we are called as a married couple to share God’s love and blessings with each other and whomever we come into contact with.

Therefore, when there is abuse in a marriage whether it is physical, emotional or both, the marriage covenant with each other and God is broken. If attempts to get professional help does not change the abusive behavior, their marriage is no longer a sign of God’s love and presence in the marriage. God explicitly showed us how to treat each other and how to love one another through the lived and concrete example of Jesus. Jesus’ dying on the cross for us was the ultimate sign of how much He loves us. Consequently, a married couple is challenged and expected to love each other unconditionally as God loves us.

Are we expected to stay in an abusive marriage because it is our Catholic belief that we made a vow on our wedding day to love each other until death? No, because God calls us to treat each other with unconditional love, dignity and respect. Not only could it be very unsafe, it is demoralizing emotionally and it impairs one’s dignity and sense of personal security. If there are children in the marriage, they are always affected and it is also very traumatic for them to witness the abuse. The children may also grow up thinking that it is normal or okay to treat others in the same abusive manner when they are in a relationship or get married in the future.

What about this statement..... “A civil divorce does not dissolve the marital bond to allow one to morally marry another”? It means that since we made a sacred covenant with each other and God when we got married, we must address that marital bond by going through the process of getting the marriage annulled. An accurate account of the abuse in the marriage must be documented in the annulment forms and submitted to the Marriage Tribunal. The Marriage Tribunal will evaluate and validate all of the documentations and annulment forms. The request for annulment is then denied or approved by the Marriage Tribunal. If the annulment is granted that person is free to marry again.