

The Enabler: When Helping Actually Harms

Saint Thérèse, after recovering from her oversensitivity, taught her novices, “Do not allow kindness to degenerate into weakness.” Mistaking weakness for kindness is not an uncommon problem. People often consider themselves kind and considerate but in truth their actions have little to do with kindness and a lot to do with fear—fear of displeasing others such that they do not do the loving thing but rather enable irresponsible behavior. People from families with addiction often find themselves as adults drawn to addictive people and aren’t aware of the part they play in these unhealthy relationships. They enable the unhealthy behavior whereby they make it possible for the behavior to continue, no matter how much they complain about it to others or reproach the addict. Fear often keeps people from doing the right thing, but blindness is also involved, as well as the discomfort of changing.

Enabling someone to abuse you—whether by drug use, sexual abuse, mental or physical abuse, or monetarily—is the same as abusing yourself. In other words, the woman is being taken advantage of but since she considers herself a kind person, she doesn’t see herself as responsible for this turn of events.

There is a wonderful book by Angelyn Miller called: *The Enabler: When Helping Hurts the Ones You Love*. I highly recommend this book to those who can identify with enabling behavior.

Angelyn Miller warns:

When we prevent someone from experiencing the negative consequences of their behavior, we actually make it comfortable for them to continue being alcoholic, sexually addicted, chronically depressed, selfish, or dependent in some other way. In our misguided efforts to help, we deprive people of the motivation to change.

Dependents become masters at getting others to perform for them. They play on the guilt of the enabler. Angelyn Miller notes:

“A dependent is one who is unwilling to accept responsibility for his or her own situation. A dependent expects others to provide for his or her well-being.”

Sadly, this is often the case with those seeking help in many parishes where people come for a free handout. Many are simply wanting the Church to support their dependency. It is something I had to come to terms with, for living in a large parish in a big city, we daily had to deal with those wanting help. It was difficult to discern who had legitimate needs from those who were simply using the system, so to speak, to support their dependency, not seeking help. He is looking for someone to support his dependency. Granted there are people in need of our Christian support and I am not denigrating them. I am only speaking about those who play upon a person’s Christianity in order to have their dependency supported. It is these people whom the above quote from Thessalonians addresses. **Parents, priests, and those who minister to the needy should never do for others what they should and could do for themselves.**

There are parents who like enabling their children. Why? Because they equate being needed with being loved. They promote weakness in their children by assuming their responsibilities in their need to be needed. Doing this they foster a feeling of incompetence in their children. And the children carry this dysfunction into their adulthood. I cannot recommend highly enough Angelyn Miller’s book. For enablers, attendance at Adult Children meetings or Codependents Anonymous can be helpful.