

I9 Borderline Personality Disorder and Religion: An Unusual Marital Relationship

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand that religion or spirituality can influence the severity of psychopathology. Some studies suggest that strong religious beliefs can be found in people who experience more severe psychiatric symptoms.¹ In this context, several psychiatric disorders can become valid causes for marital incapacity

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating the importance of performing an accurate forensic psychiatric-psychological assessment of mental illness, which can reduce or exclude conscious ability to perform a legal act such as a marriage, leading to a declaration of nullity.

The Codex Iuris Canonici of the Catholic Church (CIC) establishes that a marriage can be annulled because of the recurrence of the consensual, and indirectly mental, incapacity to marry.²⁻⁴ These cases show diagnostic and judicial difficulties that may involve forensic psychiatric experts, considering that the CIC do not provide a strictly defined psychopathological connotation.^{5,6}

This report presents a case of a 35-year-old woman claiming for the declaration of nullity of her marriage that lasted two years. A forensic psychiatric examination was required: until the age of five, the woman was entrusted to her grandparents because her parents were unable to take care of her. She described her mother as “a Satanist” who had sex with different men and women during esoteric rites and was physically and emotionally abusive toward her. Her father was completely absent and disinterested in the family, so she was soon placed in an orphanage, then in a foster family. She reached higher education becoming a gynecologist. During University, she decided to live in a monastery because of constant fights with the adoptive parents. There, she said, she was harassed and dominated by a fellow nun, who became convinced that she acted under the influence of the devil. The nun forced her to experience several exorcisms and, jealous of her religious perfection, accused the woman of having set fire to the convent. Though the woman wanted to join the religious congregation, she met her future husband in a chat web. During the engagement, they did not have sexual contact and after the marriage, she avoided sexual encounters. She showed small emotional involvement in marital relations, stating that she got married “to fill some emotional void and to verify the validity of her possible vocational choice” for which she would have married anyone. Furthermore, she wanted to annul her marriage to found a religious order of her own.

At the psychiatric evaluation, she showed emotional instability, oscillating between reticence and exhibitionism as well as victimhood and manipulation of the setting. Hypoactivity and dysempathy were manifest in a context of pseudo-erotized, conflicting, and unstable interpersonal relationships. The expert indicated that at the time of the wedding until the present she was suffering from a pervasive psychopathological condition such as Borderline Disorder for which the woman was unable to assume the essential obligations of marriage.

This case provides attendees with a better knowledge of the several psychiatric reasons underlying the mental incapacity to perform a legal act as a marriage: personality disorders, alcohol dependences, psychosexual deviations, and psycho-affective immaturity. The social environment (family background, religious education) can influence the course of the illness and sometimes can modify the clinical picture. Thus, it is necessary not only to conduct a psychiatric examination, but also take into account the course of mental disorders, their severity, and the impact on the social functioning of the person. To establish that, it is often useful to supplement the material with psychological, neuropsychological, and imaging tests and sexual scales.

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