



The Church's Healing Ministry in Caring for Those Touched by the Trauma of Separation and Divorce

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May you have true friends to stand by you, both in joy and in sorrow.

—Rite of Marriage,¹ no. 37

Many Catholics who marry within the dioceses of the United States hear this simple but powerful prayer at the conclusion of their wedding ceremony. As part of the final blessing bestowed upon the couple, it captures well the Church's fervent prayer for both husband and wife as they begin their new life together. It expresses the hope of the entire Christian community that care, concern, and support will be present to them during their most joyful and most sorrowful times.

Newly married couples begin their lives together in anticipation that their marriages will last. What they desire

deeply within their hearts on their wedding day conforms to God's deepest desire for them. If a marital relationship subsequently ruptures—for any one of myriad reasons, and despite all attempts to remedy their situation—couples can find themselves in very uncertain and sometimes fearful circumstances.²

The Catholic Church's teaching and discipline regarding divorce are

¹ See *Rite of Marriage*, in *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, study ed. (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1990).

² A 2007 Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) study commissioned by the Committee on Marriage and Family Life of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) reported that 13 percent of adult Catholics in the United States are currently separated or divorced, a statistic that mirrors the incidence of divorce among the population of the United States generally. See CARA, *Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics*, October 2007, www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/marriage_report.pdf.

rooted in the words of Jesus, passed on to us in the Gospels (see Mt 19:3-9, Mk 10:2-12, and Lk 16:18). This teaching affirms that God’s plan for marriage—from the very dawn of Creation (see Gn 1:28 and 2:18-24)—is a partnership of mutual and lasting fidelity.³ Marriage is an irrevocable covenant brought about by the consent of the spouses, by which they agree to give and accept themselves completely through life’s inevitable challenges and celebrations. Accordingly, “between the baptized, ‘a ratified and consummated marriage cannot be dissolved through any human power or for any reason other than death.’”⁴ Because of the enduring sinfulness of the human condition, the Church recognizes that a separation of the spouses can later occur—often for very grave and unfortunate reasons—with the original marriage bond remaining.⁵

The above epigraph from the *Rite of Marriage* reflects St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans, wherein he exhorts the Christian community to “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15). It follows Paul’s moving reflection on the body of Christ and the role that each part of

the body exercises in supporting the others in loving communion. Persons who experience marital discord will naturally turn to the comfort of family and friends for initial support. As a family of faith, moreover, the entire Christian community—made present to the couple on their wedding day—is exhorted to accompany those who suffer from an irremediable marriage situation. Pope John Paul II was an especially strong proponent of the Church’s responsibility in this regard. In referring to persons who are separated or divorced but not remarried civilly, he stated that

The ecclesial community must support such people more than ever. It must give them much respect, solidarity, understanding and practical help, so that they can preserve their fidelity even in their difficult situation; and it must help them to cultivate the need to forgive which is inherent in Christian love, and to be ready perhaps to return to their former married life.⁶

Parishioners and parochial leaders might well ask themselves the following questions: How are separated and divorced persons treated in this parish? What is the prevalent attitude among most of the parishioners toward persons who are separated or civilly divorced? Pope John Paul II characterized the

3 See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2000), nos. 1603-1605, 1614.

4 CCC, no. 2382, quoting *Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition: New English Translation* (CIC) (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1998), c. 1141.

5 See CIC, cc. 1152-1153.

6 Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *On the Family (Familiaris Consortio)* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1982), no. 83.

fundamental Christian attitude that ought to permeate a parish's response to its members who suffer in this way: "let these men and women know that the Church loves them. . . . it is necessary to welcome them with charity and kindness."⁷ In his first encyclical, which he devoted to the meaning and exercise of Christian charity, Pope Benedict XVI further reflected on the role of the ecclesial exercise of charity: "as a community, the Church must practice love. Love thus needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community."⁸

Putting Faith in Practice

In 2005, to inaugurate its National Pastoral Initiative on Marriage, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops invited dioceses to conduct focus groups with married Catholics, including spouses who are separated or divorced. The focus groups presented recommendations for pastoral outreach to those who find themselves in this situation. "Many spoke of the need for resources (lists of counselors, reading materials, websites) that could be posted on a parish and/or diocesan website. . . . [They also indicated a need for] parish-based support groups. . . . [and] programs for divorce care . . . that reinforce Catholic teaching." Other participants recommended that

"parishes sponsor activities that are not always family-centered."⁹

Pastoral practices aimed at persons who are separated or divorced are best complemented by catechetical initiatives to form the entire parish community in becoming welcoming and encouraging examples of Christian evangelization.¹⁰ Often carried out with the assistance of the diocesan family life office, such initiatives can provide needed clarity in explaining truthfully the Church's teachings related to marriage and reconciliation and offer the needed correctives to contemporary cultural misconceptions. By means of such initiatives, brokenness can be healed, self-worth can be affirmed, and isolation can be overcome. Thus welcomed into the Body of Christ, the separated and divorced are able to draw closer to the Lord, are brought to discover the rich mercy of his promise of forgiveness, and remain ever confident of the Lord's commitment to shoulder their burdens along with them (see Mt 11:30).

Some separated and divorced Catholics express the mistaken notion that their situation objectively sets them outside the Catholic community. This could not be further from the

7 Pope John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Council for the Family (January 24, 1997), nos. 2 and 4, www.vatican.va.

8 Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical *God Is Love (Deus Caritas Est)* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006), no. 20.

9 For the complete focus group report, see www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/separated.shtml.

10 See United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005), no. 36.C.2.

truth. It is essential that divorced Catholics know that they are not excommunicated under church law and that their right and responsibility to participate in the life of the Church—which they possess by virtue of Baptism—does not cease with the breakup of their marital union.¹¹ In fact, participation in the life of the Church is essential for continued growth in the faith.

It is true that Catholics who are divorced and civilly remarried present a unique challenge for the Church's ministry. In fidelity to the teaching of Christ and the prescriptions of canon law, the civil union is invalid. Couples in these situations therefore "find themselves in a situation that objectively contravenes God's law."¹² They may not receive the Eucharist or exercise other official functions within the Church until their sinful situation is resolved. There are, however, many ways that divorced and civilly

remarried Catholics can and should remain active. These include prayerfully reflecting on the Word of God, attending Mass, fostering works of charity and justice, cultivating a spirit and practice of penance, and continuing to guide their children in the Catholic faith.¹³

Daily parish life offers pivotal moments for ongoing catechesis on the Church's teachings related to marriage and reconciliation. Adult faith formation programs, retreats, homilies, parish missions, and formation programs for newly married couples are suitable occasions to address marital difficulties as they arise. Because the pain and rupture of separation and divorce also extend beyond couples to other family members, children of separated and divorced Catholics should hold a special place within the Church's healing and catechetical ministries. Some divorced Catholics have expressed concern that their children's legitimacy will be affected by a subsequent declaration of nullity by a church court. These persons ought to be assured, however, that the children's legitimacy is not affected by such declarations.¹⁴ National and international programs developed specifically for separated and divorced persons can be adapted with great effect to assist families by attending to

11 See CCC, no. 1651.

12 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Concerning the Reception of Holy Communion by the Divorced and Remarried Members of the Faithful (*Annus Internationalis Familiae*) (September 14, 1994), no. 4, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_14091994_rec-holy-comm-by-divorced_en.html. See also Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, Declaration "Concerning the Admission to Holy Communion of Faithful Who Are Divorced and Remarried" (June 24, 2000), www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/intrptxt/documents/rc_pc_intrptxt_doc_20000706_declaration_en.html.

¹³ Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 84; see also CCC, no. 1651, and Pope Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *The Sacrament of Charity* (*Sacramentum Caritatis*) (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2007), no. 29.

¹⁴ See CIC, c. 1137.

their emotional needs and supporting parents in fulfilling their natural and ecclesiastical obligations toward their children.

A Future Filled with Hope

The Church's diverse response to Catholics who are separated or divorced is always exercised in fidelity to Christ's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage and the Church's vigilance concerning the possibility of giving scandal. Parish staffs, in collaboration with diocesan personnel, should work closely with Catholics who find themselves in these situations to explore the various options that are available for remedying their situations. In some instances, it will be helpful to discuss with a church tribunal official the possibility of petitioning a church court for a declaration of matrimonial nullity.¹⁵ Pastors and priests will also

want to work closely with spouses who were believed to have been instrumental in causing the breakup of their marriage for proper conscience formation and signs of repentance.¹⁶

The gospel message makes evident the truths that sin and suffering will continue to exist, even within marriages of well-intentioned Catholics, and that God's everlasting love is revealed in the Lord's unending promise of forgiveness and the hope of a new beginning. Christian hope "affords us joy even under trial,"¹⁷ permitting us to proclaim with the words of St. Paul, "Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction" (Rom 12:12).

15 See USCCB, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006), 288-289.

16 CCC, no. 2386.

17 CCC, no. 1820.

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