

## THE ISSUE OF DIVORCE (Mk 10:2-16)

Many times the questions posed to Jesus were to try to trap him into an answer that would either put him at odds with the Jewish or Roman authorities or would upset the crowds who were following him. Divorce was a sticky issue even back in the time of Jesus and even before Jesus, because Moses, who was the chief lawgiver of the Jewish people, had to deal with it. There was no easy answer about divorce even 3-4,000 years ago. And because divorce is such an uncomfortable situation to deal with, the hurt and the pain, the unfulfilled expectations, hopes and dreams, the broken promises, the damage done to the souls and spirits of the individuals involved if not also to their bodies, some of us would rather not face the reality that divorce affects every one of us. Statistically speaking, half of the adults in this church have been divorced, and the rest of us certainly know someone in our family or close friends who have been divorced.

Jesus' response to the question put to him today is to deflect it back to the Pharisees since they were the keepers of the law. Then he reminds them of God's plan for the union of man and woman, not as a way of judging or condemning, but to point out that in our weakness we fall short in living as God wants us to do. So, we are called to deal with humans in their weakness and fallibility and to bring the love, the mercy, the compassion, and the forgiveness of God into those parts of life which are difficult and messy.

The Catholic Church offers several ways in which it gives help and assistance to people so that they may enter into a life of unity and sustain that unity throughout their lives. The church offers pre-marriage courses, seminars, training, retreats, or encounter experiences to give the couple an opportunity to come to understand the sacredness of the vows and covenant which they will be making to each other, to the community and to God. We may think that marriage is exclusively between the man and the woman, but it affects family and friends and the society in which they live and work and play AND it is also a relationship with our almighty Lord who created us to live in the world in this way. The wedding day **is not** the marriage, although in many cases more planning, more work, more time and energy is spent on the wedding than on the marriage. The union, the becoming one flesh, occurs over time and not in an instant. The becoming one flesh is not only a physical act but also spiritual, mental, emotional and psychological encompassing the entire beings of the two in total commitment and service to one another. That sounds heavy, and it is, because marriage is the cornerstone of all society and carries great responsibility as well as great joy and happiness.

Fairy tales tell us that after the wedding they live "happily ever after." "Happily ever after" does not mean that there are no problems along the way, or differ-

ences of opinion sometimes resulting in arguments, or irritations at the way the other sometimes does things that gets under our skin --- and that's in the best of marriages. "Happily ever after" means that the love of God is found in the life of the couple so much so that another spirit is created, a spirit felt and sensed by others in their presence that is neither of the two people but at the same time both of the two. That is the reflection of the love of God the Father and God the Son from whom the Holy Spirit proceeds. I think of an aunt and uncle who were married later in life. She wasn't pretty in the eyes of the world; he was disabled and walked with a herky-jerky motion. But when the two of them were united in marriage, there was a warm, kind, gentle, and loving spirit about them that made it a joy to be in their presence --- a spirit that created a beauty about them.

Most of us want and expect our marriages to last forever, but we are not always prepared for the troubles and problems that enter into our day-to-day lives. We can lose sight of our destiny in life as being our union in love. There is a weekend experience called Marriage Encounter which seeks to revive the sparkle in the relationship, to bring back the joy and the love which may have become buried under the demands and distractions of daily life. Marriage Encounter has restored thousands upon thousands of marriages around the world and saved them from divorce. Sometimes problems in marriages can become overwhelming, and a couple may not be able to see a way out of their troubles. For many, the Retrouvaille experience has been a way for resolving seemingly irreconcilable issues in the privacy of a retreat-like encounter with one another and with God. The church offers several ways to give married couples the opportunity to continue in a loving, committed relationship. Still, half of all marriages end in divorce, but for those couples who live together before getting married, the divorce rate jumps to 70%. And with divorce come many strong feelings of guilt and failure and inadequacy, of not having done enough, of not being good enough. And those who become divorced may feel all alone and excluded from their church community and from the love and mercy and compassion of God. But they are still a part of the Body of Christ. Jesus did not judge or condemn the adulterous woman who was about to be stoned by the elders nor the woman at the well who had been married 5 times. Nor did Jesus excuse their ways but rather called them to a change of heart and to change their way of life. So, too, should we be compassionate and loving to those whose life has been shattered by divorce. Divorce is not an unforgivable sin but a tragic outcome of lives not totally committed to each other for whatever reason.

For those who are divorced, the church offers the annulment process to give them a path of healing for the wounds incurred in their life, both prior to and during the marriage. Then, with this healing, our hearts can be open to change the way we view relationships and what we seek from marriage. A common misperception about annulments is that people think that the church declares that the marriage never existed. And that is absolutely not true. The

church acknowledges that the marriage took place and was legal and valid. The annulment process is to determine whether or not certain conditions existed at the time of the marriage which would allow for the full graces of the sacrament to be present in order that the marriage could reflect the love of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Complete free will of the individuals is paramount to entering into this sacramental union, as is the understanding of what the vows and covenant entail as well as the intent for this to be a lifelong union. Mary and I have both received annulments after our divorces, and we would not have found the love and joy which we have today in our marriage if we had not done so. If we had married without the annulments, we would not be able to fully participate in the life of the church by receiving the sacraments. Let us not forget the children, the innocent victims of divorce. It is interesting that immediately after taking on the issue of divorce, Jesus talks about the special regard with which God holds the children. There is a special place in heaven for children. So often they are used as pawns in the legal battle between the divorcing couple. Minimally, children blame themselves for the breakup of their mom and dad, and they will try to do everything they can to fix it so that their family stays together. They will try to take care of their mom and dad, who are supposed to be the parents but so often don't act like it, to make them feel better or to assume more duties and responsibilities around the house. They are also uprooted from their homes and forced to spend their lives shuttling from one residence to the other. Their lives are in constant turmoil. No, don't forget the children; let us pray in a special way for them to wrap our arms around them just as Jesus did.

Divorce is not God's plan for marriage, but it exists and we, the Christian community, are called to deal with it and to bring God's love into the process. We are all God's children, loved one as much as the other by God, brothers and sisters of Christ.

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