

## **Eight Things You Have To Know About The Church's Teaching On Divorce** [Leila Miller](#) [March 24, 2017](#)

A few years ago, I noticed a flurry of Catholic couples divorcing or seriously considering it. I was incredulous and disheartened, especially since other Catholics seemed to be encouraging the divorces. It occurred to me that, although we often hear about the Catholic Church's teaching on marriage, we don't hear enough about its teaching on divorce. Since divorce casts such a large shadow on our culture, and since we are courageous truth-seekers (or hope to be!), let's shine a light on this teaching and share it with others. Here's 8 things you might not realize the Church teaches about divorce.

### **1. Divorce, understood as the dissolution of a marriage, is not possible between two baptized persons**

Guess who said that? Not just a vicar of Christ, but Jesus Christ himself! Jesus forbids divorce, decreeing that husband and wife are "no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder" (Matt. 19:6). St. Paul is consistent with Jesus' teaching:

To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband)—and that the husband should not divorce his wife" (1 Cor. 7:10-11).

The Church is clear that "a ratified and consummated marriage cannot be dissolved by any human power or for any reason other than death" ([CCC 2382](#)).

Note that when the Church grants an annulment it is not "divorce, Catholic-style." A divorce breaks (or tries to break) a real marital union; an annulment recognizes that no real marital union ever existed. Persons whose marriages are annulled by a Church tribunal never were bound in marriage to begin with, and so are free to marry in the Church even though they are civilly divorced.

### **2. Divorce and remarriage makes for adultery**

Since marital life ordinarily includes the marital act, remarriage after divorce creates the conditions for adultery. On this, Jesus did not mince words: "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery" (Luke 16:18; cf. Mark 10:6-8). And St. Paul, again, confirms:

A married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress (Rom. 7:2-3).

The Church is consistent on this: "Contracting a new union, even if it is recognized by civil law, adds to the gravity of the rupture: the remarried spouse is then in a situation of public and permanent adultery" ([CCC 2384](#)).

### **3. Divorce is a "grave offense against the natural law"**

The natural law is another term for the universal moral law of God. We are all bound to this unchanging moral truth, and there are few things more primal, more inherent in creation itself, than the marriage covenant. Marriage is the basis for the family, and the family is the foundation of every human society ([CCC 2384](#)).

### **4. Divorce "introduces disorder into the family and society"**

Divorce "claims to break the contract, to which the spouses freely consented, to live with each other till death" ([CCC 2384](#)), and human societies simply cannot flourish where marriages are broken and families shattered. The disorder of divorce "brings grave harm to the deserted spouse and to children traumatized by the separation of their parents and often torn between them" ([CCC 2385](#)).

### **5. Divorce is "contagious"**

Yes, the *Catechism* actually uses that word! Think "plague," "epidemic," "virus." And we have all seen how divorce spreads like a contagion, haven't we? Sometimes when a woman gets divorced, it plants a seed of that possibility in her friends who are feeling unsatisfied and "unhappy" in their own marriages. This can happen with men, too, who find younger or more "understanding" women elsewhere, and decide they are no longer compatible with their wives. The "contagious effect which makes [divorce] truly a plague on society" ([CCC 2385](#)) spreads the infection across entire communities, cultures, and even familial generations.

## 6. Divorce and separation are two different things

Divorce is an attempt to break the marriage bond (which as we see from no. 1, is not possible between baptized Christians), whereas separation is simply that—the cessation of common conjugal living between the spouses. In paragraph 2383, the *Catechism* reminds us that “the separation of spouses *while maintaining the marriage bond* can be legitimate in certain cases provided for by canon law” (emphasis mine). Physical and/or grave mental danger to spouse or children is cause for separation, as is adultery. “In all cases” conjugal living must be restored if and when the cause for separation ceases, unless the bishop establishes otherwise (cf. CIC 1151-1155).

## 7. Civil divorce may be “tolerated” under certain circumstances

Civil divorce is not embraced, but only “tolerated”—and only if there is no other possible way to secure legal/financial rights or care of the children ([CCC 2383](#)). Keep in mind that “tolerance” of a civil divorce does not touch the true bond of the marriage, which stands intact between the spouses and in the sight of God.

## 8. A spouse who is divorced unwillingly is not culpable for the breaking of conjugal life

It isn’t just a remarriage that constitutes a sin for divorced spouses, it’s the breaking of the conjugal life in the first place. The one who unjustly divorces his or her spouse is guilty of a grave sin—even if *there is no remarriage*—and should not approach Holy Communion. By contrast, the innocent spouse who remains faithful to his or her marriage vows is not culpable for the sin of divorce and, *assuming he or she is free from any other mortal sins*, is free to receive Holy Communion.

There is a considerable difference between a spouse who has sincerely tried to be faithful to the sacrament of marriage and is unjustly abandoned, and one who through his own grave fault destroys a canonically valid marriage ([CCC 2386](#)).

## We’re all responsible

As Catholics, we are called to a higher standard than the secular culture, and we must rejoice in and embrace Jesus’ insistence on the indissolubility of Christian marriage. The Church’s unbroken teaching reveres and protects the spouses, the children, extended families, society, and the order of creation itself. Our response to marriages, and families, crumbling around us should be a commitment to live, teach, and defend these little known and often rejected truths about the immorality and effects of divorce. As St. John Paul II said in a homily, “The person who does not decide to love forever will find it very difficult to really love for even one day” (*The Love Within Families*).