

Divorce and Remarriage – A Pastoral Approach – WWJD?

One of the agonies of our time for Roman Catholics – indeed for all Christians – is over what to do when one divorces and wants to remarry in view of what Jesus said about marriage and divorce. It is now common knowledge that in Orthodox churches, the pastoral approach taken is that the clergy will not celebrate a second sacramental marriage after a divorce, unless the spouse is now deceased, but that they generally will accept the new union and give the “new couple” a simple “blessing”. That couple can then walk away and carry on with their lives knowing that they have remarried “before God” and in their own religious tradition and church.

The situation is not so comforting for Roman Catholics, given that our Church does not offer such a “blessing” lest the blessing convey the impression that a Sacrament of Marriage has once again been celebrated. In the decades since Vatican Council II there may have been priests who, after having walked with a couple and prepared them – as we do for any couple seeking to marry in the Church – actually did give a blessing in the “orthodox fashion” contrary to our hierarchy’s express instruction not to do so lest there be confusion.

This exceptional pastoral practice gave the mistaken impression that, despite the formal “discipline” and teaching of our Church on the case of members in “irregular” marriage situations; there could be some priests who might “bless” second marriages in our Church. It is gradually coming to be known that a couple seeking to remarry after one or both have divorced cannot remarry in the Church without having recourse to the Marriage Tribunal, and that except in certain cases there is no guarantee as to the outcome.

Why make such a fuss over the remarriage of divorced people? The simple reason is that Jesus made clear and unequivocal declarations about marriage, divorce, and the hardness of human hearts. For Christians who want to be assured they are doing the will of God, it is helpful to be able to have recourse to one’s pastor, and to the teaching authority of the Church, in order to align one’s conscience in accord with Jesus’ teaching and pastoral practice. In addition, there is the added “complication” that Roman Catholics are “Communion” Christians who normally receive Holy Communion during regular Sunday worship. At first view, it is difficult when in an unblest second Marriage to go to Church but refrain from receiving Holy Communion.

For many if not most RC Christians, it can happen that they come to view their reception of the Lord Jesus in Holy Communion as a primarily personal and private matter. They don’t see why being divorced and remarried outside the Church would make them ineligible to continue receiving Holy Communion unless their situation is remedied or unless they are willing to live as celibates, as brother and sister. With time we have come to understand, through much hardship, that when we receive Holy Communion, we not only receive the Lord Jesus in his living, glorious Body and Blood, but we also receive his Bride, the Church, the communion of all the baptized. To her Jesus entrusted the “keys of Peter” to continue pastoring his people until the end. We cannot honour the Lord Jesus while we hold his Church or her teaching and discipline in contempt.

Sadly, in addressing these challenges faced by the faithful who divorce; we do not always speak with a united voice. Some priests insist on following strictly our Church’s “teaching and discipline” on the matter without giving proper explanation or compassionate accompaniment. Others put the emphasis on the couple’s individual Christian dignity and “right to receive the sacraments”, and give them to understand that in the end it is entirely up to them in their own conscience to decide what to do. Finally, there are priests who try to walk with the faithful and help them understand as fully as they are able under their circumstances what our Church teaches and why she does so, what our Church intends for the faithful to do and for what reasons. In this way, they may indeed act in accord with their conscience, but a conscience fully informed in accord with Jesus’ teaching and with docility to the Lord’s “shepherding” at the hands of the apostles and their successors.

Typically, faithful Catholics in such circumstances very much want to be married “in the Church” and at the same time they want to be truly faithful to the Lord, whom they love very much, and to obey his Church, which they also love very much. They can find peace by doing their best to understand why our Church’s teaching and discipline are what they are. It is not the place of any priest to dictate people’s behaviour. Their role is to try to convey Jesus’ teaching, witness, and example; not to impose public disciplinary measures on anyone – outside of the situation of public scandal – such as when anyone’s public situation or behaviour would be a flagrant violation of the truth of the Gospel such as to generally discourage proper behaviour.

From Fr. Gilles A. Surprenant – Family Life Chaplain – Diocesan Centre for Marriage, Life, & Family

It is our duty as priests to assure that folks understand how the Lord continues to speak and act through his Church and what He has to say to them about their situation in life and their membership in his Church. As baptized and confirmed Christians we have both privileges and responsibilities. We must act in accord with a conscience duly informed and in accord with God's will. The outcome remains between our conscience and the Lord, who expects us to "carry our cross as He did" and offers us nothing less than Himself to sustain us.

We may know of couples where one or both are divorced, they remarried "outside the Church", and now receive Holy Communion. Without knowing the actual circumstances of their situation, we observe an apparent contradiction in those situations between what should be and what is. We have no right to judge because that is for God to do. All we can do is pray for them and entrust the situation to the Lord. When in doubt we can also try to seek clarification from the couple themselves or the pastor. When there is a complaint or a serious doubt about the couple's intentions; it is the responsibility of the pastor to speak with them to clarify the situation.

When we commune, we commune not only with the Lord Jesus who transfuses us with the divine life He has with the Father in the Holy Spirit, but we commune as well with his Bride the Church – the Mystical Body of all the baptized – and make our own all that she is, teaches, and does. It doesn't make sense to receive Holy Communion just to receive Jesus, even with the best of intentions; while overtly flaunting the discipline and teaching of his Church. She only tries to interpret for us the divine will in the various circumstances of our lives, and in the end such disregard for the Sacraments can amount to contempt for the Lord Himself.

As He once said to his apostles, "It is not you they have rejected, but it is me they have rejected, and he who rejects me rejects the Father who has sent me." Whenever we are inclined to reject or criticize the teaching and discipline of the Church, we risk rejecting the authority Jesus entrusted to his apostles and their successors and setting ourselves up as a substitute authority. One who won't obey lawful authority can't wield authority. By doing that, we refuse to adopt Jesus' way of obedience to his Father in his own human life in favour of the road of one who will not obey, will not serve, will not give way to a greater will. That is the road of Lucifer, Satan; not the road to holiness, of conversion and repentance, to which Jesus calls us all without exception.

We must remember that God never stops loving or forgiving us. Jesus came that we might have life in abundance and that our joy may be complete. He called people then and He calls us now to "Repent and believe the Good News!" When the faithful are unable to request Holy Communion – as with children or catechumens who are preparing for their Initiation – they may request a blessing in the communion line to help them receive Jesus in a "spiritual communion". Or they may stay in their seat and enter into this state of contemplation by honouring Jesus' teaching and welcoming Him into their hearts. This approach has a long and traditional history in our Church and has brought and continues to bring great comfort and strength to members in such situations. It is a way of obedience which imitates Jesus and assures them that they are doing their best in accord with their conscience to do the will of God. They are doing their part in the ongoing mission of our Lord Jesus today as members of his Body and Bride the Church, which is what He asks all of us sinners to do with Him.

We know it is likely that there are in every parish members who are divorced and remarried outside the Church. We don't know the full truth of their situation and agree to give them the benefit of the doubt. We trust in the integrity of all our priests and that they try to help all the faithful have as clear a conscience as they can before the Lord. Where others appear to be in irregular marriage situations and yet receive Holy Communion, we can only commend them to the Lord's mercy, and continue to do our best to do the full will of God.

When someone shares with us that they struggle with their situation, we can kindly listen and show them compassion by letting the person pour out all their feelings and thoughts in their struggle. We can ask them what they understand of our Church's teaching, discipline, and practice to help us know and do the will of God. It is best to avoid taking a "judicial" approach, such as "telling them what to do". The challenge is to see with them what willingness they may have to know and do the will of God for them in their personal circumstances but also in their membership in his Body, the Church, for the sake of his mission in the world.

As we receive others in their vulnerable and fragile moments, we can do as Jesus did with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. May we all find comfort and strength in the love of God poured out for us in his only begotten Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and in the ongoing outpouring of his Holy Spirit for our ongoing conversion and the ongoing renewal of his Bride the Church, for the salvation of the whole world!