

Again the Pharisees try to trap Jesus by asking about divorce. The Law of Moses permitted divorce decrees to be issued, but Jesus clarifies the purpose of this law. It is not an approval of divorce *per se*, but rather legislation to establish the status and protect the rights of ex-spouses in situations where separation has occurred. The legislation, says Jesus, is due to man's "hardness of heart." That is to say, his stubborn sinfulness. Jesus clarifies that divorce is a violation of the divine moral law established by God since the beginning of creation. Jesus emphasizes how in the institution of marriage, even though the man and woman decide to marry, it is *God Himself who joins their lives* into one thing, "one flesh." And what God has joined therefore, no man must separate.

Following this disputation with the Pharisees, Jesus continues the discussion privately with his apostles, reiterating the indissolubility of marriage. He clarifies that even though the Law of Moses allows the situation of divorce and separation, it does not permit remarriage following divorce: "*Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery*" (Mk 10:11).

In the "one body" which is formed by God when He joins a man and woman in Holy Matrimony, the man is the head, as we heard in the second reading on the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Eph 5:21-32), and the woman is the heart, as we hear in the first reading today (Gn 2:18-24). For God forms the woman from the "flesh" which He removes from the opening in man's side. We know from Christ's piercing on the Cross, that this flesh is his heart. The head and heart form one indissoluble life, each needing the other for its completion, each focused on the other for its own good.

Given the fallen condition of sin and selfishness in which we are born, marriage is never easy to live out. But given the new life of grace which comes through Baptism, marriage becomes the consecrated discipleship through which God's grace works to conquer sin and pride. It is so important that God not be deprived of this fundamental opportunity to work the salvation of His children. Even when the struggles and doubts may be intense, even if the situation has deteriorated on the human level to the point of "unworkable," this is very often the exact circumstance that God requires in order to break the sinful will of stubbornness, pride, and attachment. In the Sacrament of Matrimony, God's goal is holiness, redemption, and salvation, and even where a relationship may have "failed," resulting in temporary or permanent legal separation, the work of Matrimony does not end, the obligation of love, fidelity, and sacrifice continues.

Divorce solves nothing, and achieves nothing for salvation. Voluntary divorce is always a mortal sin. It is sometimes an unavoidable circumstance that must be tolerated as part of one's discipleship in carrying the Cross, but it does not nullify or end marriage. It is only the ongoing fidelity to one's vows, the ongoing love and respect for one's separated spouse, and the ongoing efforts to raise one's family in the midst of such difficulties, i.e. the ongoing graces of Matrimony, that bear fruits of holiness, not divorce. The words of Jesus are difficult to hear, but true: "*Because of the hardness of your hearts he wrote you this commandment [permitting divorce]*" (Mk 10:5).

For young couples who have decided to "live together" without getting married, it is perhaps understandable, in light of the difficult demands which Jesus sets forth, demands which are in fact *absolute*. Hesitation to fully commit is understandable. Nature is willing – man and woman "want" to get married and raise a family – but the will is weak. However, there is no "shortcut" or easy way to be married and raise a family, while at the same time accommodating to a lifestyle that wishes to be selfish and indulgent. Although, in most cultures some kind of "easy way" is always attempted, and distortions of marriage as articulated in the book of Genesis are commonplace. Affairs and (serial) polygamy are usually tolerated, and in our culture experimentation with every deviancy is promoted as a high achievement.

Young Catholics preparing for marriage do not receive wisdom or guidance from the secular society. They must look instead to the examples of their parents and grandparents. In the Church we must continually renew our Baptismal commitment to be faithful to God, and show that fidelity by the ongoing efforts to love and cherish one's spouse, and remember that elders have the obligation to help the young.

For young adults, be grateful for the time of being single, and use it wisely. Prepare carefully for marriage by learning responsibility and how to provide for yourself and others. When dating remember that you are interviewing someone for the most important job in your life, which is to find the best father or mother for your children. You are not looking primarily for someone to satisfy your needs, but must find someone with whom you can work as an equal, and who will be good for you and for your extended family. Do not become too serious too soon, be careful of becoming too emotionally attached, maintain healthy boundaries, and pay careful attention to the guidance of your parents and elders to any of your friendships. Avoid fornication; at this point you are *interviewing* candidates for a job, the physically binding contract only occurs on the day you come to the altar.

God has a simple plan for marriage: “*a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh*” (Mk 10:7, Gn 2:24). The first step is to grow in maturity and achieve educational and financial independence. The second step to find and marry your spouse through vows that allow God to join you to each other. The third step is to begin a life together in your home where you are head and heart, and welcome the children God sends, who each represent the “one flesh” that you have become.

Marriage is not easy, but by keeping spiritual perspective and relying on God’s grace which challenges and transforms, all things are possible. May God bless each of our families, and may He especially help those who facing difficulty.