

Every priest and deacon and often other parish staff members spend a lot of time working with people in the exact situation of being divorced and remarried that Jesus spoke about in today's gospel. Jesus is teaching a hard truth about marriage and divorce and remarriage which is often painful for us today. It is often painful because many people have never been taught, or have forgotten, or have chosen to ignore God's laws with regard to marriage. I am going to barely scratch the surface. If you have questions about a particular circumstance please ask me before having a freak-out session.

God created marriage and gave it to us for the mutual support of the spouses and their families. Since the beginning, it has been God's intention that the union between one man and one woman be lifelong, exclusive, and indissoluble: "what God has joined together, no human being must separate." God's intention for marriage was very simple but because of human weakness we have made it very complicated. We do what we want to do, when we want to do it, regardless of what the Church might teach. It also doesn't help that some of the ministers of the church seem to enjoy making things as complicated as possible.

What does the church say about divorce? Well, first, it upholds the teaching that marriage between a man and a woman is lifelong, exclusive, and indissoluble, meaning that marriage is a bond that cannot be broken. However, paragraph 1649 of the Catechism acknowledges that there are some situations in which living together becomes practically impossible. In such cases, the church permits the physical separation of the couple and their living apart. In our society this usually results in civil divorce. Here's the problem: even if the couple becomes legally separated or divorced under civil law, in the eyes of God they are still husband and wife. We cannot separate what God has joined together. Since the divorced couple remains husband and wife in the eyes of God, they cannot enter into another marriage. That is different from civil law. In the eyes of the civil law, the bond between divorced couples is legally dissolved and someone who gets remarried is legally married; in the eyes of the church that original bond remains, it cannot be dissolved until death. A new bond of marriage cannot be created when the first one still exists.

Many of us probably know people who have "gotten an annulment." What does that mean? What is an annulment? An annulment is a statement from the Church that a marriage never existed in the first place. This can be due to certain circumstances that were present or absent when the couple exchanged their wedding vows. If certain conditions were present or absent, the marriage would

be considered invalid. One thing I want to be crystal clear on. The validity or invalidity of the marriage does not affect the status of any children born to that couple. Getting an annulment does not have any effect on the status of the children born to that couple. Children are always a precious gift from God.

The Church always assumes that a marriage is valid unless it can be proven to be invalid. Determining the invalidity of a marriage is not something we can do as individuals. It has to be brought to the ministry of the Church through what is called the tribunal. If you have ever been through this process, you know it's not simple. Most of the annulment cases I have worked on have come up decades after the original marriage took place and now we have to go back and look at that moment of consent. This involves the testimony of witnesses, usually including the former spouse or spouses. This can be an incredibly painful process to go through and, depending on the complexities of the situation, it can take a very long time.

Part of the reason for the pain of these situations is that we are working against God's plan for the union of man and woman. Even in an invalid marriage, the couple lived together believing that they were husband and wife. Maybe they had children. A bond was formed, even if no marriage actually existed. When we try to tear those bonds apart, it is going to be painful. Annulments and separations are always painful, which is one of the reasons why the Church encourages her children to prepare well for marriage. Not only by attending marriage preparation classes – which are important – but most importantly by living a life of virtue, prayer, and faith.

A few points to remember. Catholics who are divorced but not remarried are still in full communion with the Church and may still fully participate in the sacraments including Holy Communion. Divorced Catholics who have gotten civilly remarried without an annulment are welcome and encouraged to participate in the life of the Church but they should refrain from receiving Holy Communion until after they go through the annulment process and receive a declaration of nullity, if one is granted. For those couples, this is a painful situation to be in but the Church's ministers will do what we can to help you through it. Anyone who is in this situation should contact the pastors in their home parishes and we will do our best to walk with you to see what can be done.

Today's gospel began with a very hard teaching. Sometimes the truth is hard and it doesn't do us any good to ignore it. The gospel concludes with a potential way to avoid getting into trouble in the first place. Jesus welcomes the children to him saying: "Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the

kingdom of God like a child will not enter it." Jesus is speaking about childlike trust and humility, the ability to trust that God has our best intentions at heart. There is still going to be suffering and struggles—there is no way around that in a world corrupted by sin. But if we try to live in accordance with the Church's teachings, things will go a lot smoother. And when they don't, Jesus will be there to help us carry our crosses and he will see us through.