

27th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (October 3, 2021)

If you have ever attended any church weddings, chances are very good that you have heard this Genesis reading and this gospel from Mark (at least part of it)—and for good reason. They remind us that marriage is at its root a sacred institution that comes to us from God himself. God made man and woman for each other; Jesus directly quotes Genesis in reaffirming that “a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one flesh.” Marriage is thus not simply allowed by government or the state; its origin is ultimately divine, not merely human. And our existence as male and female also finds its origin in God as Genesis affirms and Jesus once again explicitly reaffirms. These truths, these realities are certainly not something that our courts or other government officials can recreate or reshape on their own, despite the current attempts to legitimize same-sex marriage and transgender claims. I’ve already spoken about those two issues from this pulpit and so won’t repeat that for now.

But what we often do not hear at church weddings is the rest of what Jesus said to the Pharisees in response to their question about divorce. Yes, Moses permitted divorce, but Jesus said that was because of their hard-heartedness. That is when he quoted Genesis and then declared that “what God has joined together, no human being must separate.” This is why the Church teaches that genuine marriage, true marriage is indissoluble; it cannot be dissolved or ended by any mere human institution. The Church cannot ignore the very plain words of Jesus; she has no authority to allow what Jesus specifically forbids. Does this mean that spouses must always stay together no matter how serious the situation may be? No, that is not the case. The Catechism acknowledges, for example, that in the real world ‘there are some situations in which living together becomes practically impossible for a variety of reasons’ (n. 1649).

These readings give us a chance to reflect on these critical issues, and we need to do so because there are so many misunderstandings and misconceptions about both what the Church teaches and why she does so. For example, I’ve heard many times over the years people say that one who is divorced is excommunicated and thus unable to receive the sacraments by that fact alone. That is not true, and that misconception has caused so much needless anger and heartache. The fact of being divorced by itself doesn’t change a person’s status in the Church one tiny bit. The Church upholds the indissolubility of a genuine marriage because that is what Jesus taught. And so it follows that the state has no authority to dissolve a genuine marriage. That is why the Church does not recognize civil divorce decrees as having any such effect: because in the eyes of Christ and of his Bride the Church that he gave us to carry on his teaching, such a couple remains married.

So again: divorce by itself does not affect anyone’s standing in the Church. The problem comes in when a person attempts remarriage after divorce. Why is that a problem? Because of Jesus’ own words; once again, from today’s gospel: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” I fully realize these are hard words for many to hear, but we may not ignore these or any other challenging words that Christ speaks—not if we are serious about calling ourselves his disciples. What’s more, Jesus words make sense when we consider: 1) his clear teaching on the indissoluble nature of marriage; and 2) the very definition of adultery as marital relations between two people, at least one of whom is already married to someone else. That is why those

who attempt remarriage after divorce may not receive the sacraments—because their situation is, objectively speaking, contrary to Jesus’ words. Even so, however, such individuals are not excommunicated or considered outside the Church; they most certainly remain within the love of God and of the care and concern of the Church as well.

This is also why the Church has the annulment process. Without going into great detail for now: before a divorced person—Catholic or non-Catholic—can attempt marriage again, the Church needs to look at that person’s prior marriage to see if it was in fact a genuine and valid marriage to begin with. That involves much more than just going through a marriage ceremony; it also means that a person has the ability to enter into a lifelong marriage commitment and understands what it really means. If it can be found that some element necessary for a true marriage was in fact not present, then the Church can issue a decree of nullity meaning that it was not a true marriage to begin with—and thus the person may be free to enter a new marriage. By the way, a decree of nullity has no impact whatsoever on the legitimacy status of children born of that relationship; that is strictly a civil law matter and is unaffected by the Church’s annulment process.

This is only the briefest of introductions to this complicated subject; if any of you or someone you know has specific questions or may be thinking about the annulment process, please get in touch with me—I’d be very glad to be of whatever help I can. I’m fully aware that the Catholic Church stands pretty much alone in not allowing divorce and remarriage without the annulment process. But as I said before, the Church doesn’t have the luxury of ignoring or ‘wishing away’ Jesus’ clear teachings even if they be difficult to hear, even if the rest of society ignores them entirely. And I most sincerely hope and pray that you do not think that either the Church in general or I in particular are condemning or ‘judging’ those who have gone through the pain of divorce. I assure you with 1000% sincerity: that is most definitely NOT the case! Divorce has happened more than once within my own immediately family and to many relatives, close friends, parishioners and others who truly are good people who found themselves in very challenging circumstances for a whole variety of reasons. And a special tip of the hat to all those in single-parent households—know that you ‘are especially close to Jesus’ heart’ and deserving of our special attention and affection [CCC 1658].

Let’s always remember that all of us—whether married, divorced, widowed, single, priest or religious, adult or child—all of us are called to conversion and to holiness. We are all in need of the grace and healing power of God. And thanks be to God, we are all able by his grace to respond to that call and to know his healing and peace. Let’s never hesitate to pray for the help we need to carry whatever particular crosses come our way...and let’s remember with gratitude that we never have to carry them alone.