

32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Cycle C)  
[Healing for Separated & Divorced]  
All Saints Church, Syracuse, NY

Nov. 9 & 10, 2013  
Rev. Fred Daley

### Who Am I To Judge?

One of the most well known questions that Pope Francis has asked in his seven months in Office is: *"Who am I to judge?"* ...

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And that question is very pertinent for today's Homily, as our Diocese commemorates the 29<sup>th</sup> annual Healing Weekend for those affected by separation and divorce. And I would say that there is probably no one in here in church today that hasn't been affected by divorce: ourselves, a relative, a close friend, neighbor or co-worker...; and the closer we are to a situation of separation and divorce the more we know how painful and traumatic it can be for those going through the divorce and their children, families and friends.

My sisters and brothers, as Christians we are called to help those going through a divorce by accompanying them, listening and being available --- without judgment.

As Church we are called to be a community that cares and welcomes with open arms, those who are divorced ---- without judgment.

I can't think of a situation where the saying, "Don't judge others, until you have walked a mile in their shoes," fits better than the situation of divorce... .

I'm not married (of course, you knew that!) but in my almost 40 years of ministry I've had the privilege of accompanying numbers of couples as they prepare for marriage, have connected with countless couples experiencing serious difficulties in marriage and have journeyed with many persons through the divorce process and beyond, and I'd like to share a few reflections from my experience:

#1: Every couple that has come to me preparing for marriage, was deeply committed to the promise that their marriage was for life. I've never experienced a couple who took their vows lightly. I suppose there may be folks out there who were considering a 'five-year plan with a one-time-renewal option' – but I haven't encountered them!

Most Christian couples, as they exchange their vows, deeply respect the command of Jesus that marriage is for life. In today's Gospel, Jesus in no way was putting burdens on people's shoulders that they couldn't carry, but was *freeing women* and *bringing stability to the family*, at a time when women (and children) were treated as property along with the man's goats and sheep, etc., that he could dispose of at will. Jesus' command is a revolutionary call recognizing

the dignity of women. We certainly know – from everything for which Jesus stood – that his command doesn't mean that a couple should stay in a relationship when the relationship is causing deep emotional violence and pain to each partner and to their children; or, that a person abused should stay in a relationship no matter what; or, a couple should stay together if it becomes clear that they were never meant to be together.

And yet, religion has often used this passage from Scripture to increase peoples' burdens --- making them estranged from church and society...., just the opposite of what Jesus intended.

Yes, the Christian ideal that marriage is for life is beautiful and precious and must be proclaimed in our society where the average marriage lasts little longer than the average American car; and the deep and complex cultural issues underlying this must be addressed.

But it is important to recognize that Jesus proclaimed this command to recognize the equality of persons in marriage and to protect stability in the family – not to put heavy burdens on people!

#2: In my experience, most couples who have serious difficulties in their marriage, try very hard to work them out and see divorce as the last resort. The issues that bring a marriage to an end are often very, very complex. If I could make a recommendation, it is for couples to go for help early when the relationship is first in trouble. Getting help is a sign of a healthy relationship... too many couples, it seems, see the priest or counselor on the way to the lawyer's office – when the marriage is already dead and irretrievable.

#3: As I mentioned, the process of divorce is often emotionally painful for relatives and friends as well. The best way to help a person or couple going through a divorce is to be with them, listen to them, advise them to get professional assistance; but, my experience has been, that joining in the process of demonizing the other partner, just feeds into the pain and brokenness and has no positive results. We're – in the long run – not helping the people we care and love so much.

#4: As Church, we are the Body of Christ – the merciful, healing, compassionate and forgiving Jesus. The Jesus who loves us unconditionally and is the personification of mercy and understanding! But when it comes to divorce, the Church often comes across as hard, judgmental, legalistic and lacking the compassion that is so important. Here's an example: I heard just the other day of a woman who, after going through a very difficult divorce, wanted to go to Confession, the Sacrament of Reconciliation that she hadn't been to in many years, to ask for forgiveness; she looked to the Sacrament for cleansing and healing as she began to move on with her life. The experience was just the opposite, as the priest refused to give her absolution since she had gone through a divorce! That priest not only was failing to follow the present discipline of the church, but obviously did just the opposite of what Jesus would do.

Such senseless incidents just add to the confusion and misunderstanding concerning the Church's teachings as they relate to divorce. To this day so many divorced Catholics feel *unwelcome* in Church.... Today, I would like to briefly address some of the questions that people often have, and I invite all of us to reach out to Catholics who are separated from the Church because of divorce, and, please, share these reflections with them and welcome them home!

1. Can a separated or divorced Catholic receive Communion? Absolutely! A divorced person has as much right to receive Communion as does the Pope himself!
2. Can a divorced person remarry in the Catholic Church? The answer is yes, *if* the person goes through a Church process called an 'annulment' which would determine that there were certain elements in the marriage that would prevent it from being a fully Sacramental marriage – even though it is a legal marriage and the children are, obviously, legitimate. Some examples might be: as we know from psychology that there are some people who have the proper *intention* and *desire* to be married, but for any number of reasons may be *incapable* of making such a commitment. Such a marriage could be annulled. Emotional immaturity at the time of the marriage or some addiction or other struggle may have affected the marriage covenant, providing a basis for annulment.

My experience has been that for some persons, the annulment process can be a real source of healing; but – to be honest – for others, it can be very difficult, opening-up old wounds. Although 95% of annulments are granted, there can be many circumstances that make it impossible for a person to go through the process. Many people know in their hearts that theirs' was a true, real marriage... that fell apart over time, and they feel hypocritical going through a process to determine that it didn't exist.

3. How expensive is the annulment process? It varies from Diocese to Diocese; in the Syracuse Diocese the cost is \$600., which covers the salaries and administration fees of the Marriage Tribunal. When anyone at All Saints seeks an annulment, the Parish will pay the cost. If you have questions concerning the annulment process, just give me a call and I'd be happy to get together over a cup of coffee and discuss ways things can be worked out.
4. Can a person who is divorced and remarried outside the Catholic Church receive Communion? The present discipline of the Church is no – not without an annulment. I have two comments concerning this point:
  - a. I cannot imagine Jesus refusing anyone who truly desires to receive the Eucharist. It is not the role of the priest, bishop, pope or anyone else to judge the heart and soul of another person; and – in all humility – while I'm at All Saints, no one will ever be refused Communion.

This present discipline of the Church is of deep concern to many, including Pope Francis, who has called for a special Synod in Rome for October of next year, to “review the issue of divorced and remarried Catholics receiving Communion.” It’s been reported that the Pope has asked the bishops to receive input from the people of their dioceses prior to the Synod and to review with their people the recommendations the Synod will make before sending them on to the Pope. There is some hope here....

- b. My second comment concerning all the issues around marriage, divorce, remarriage and Communion apply to whenever we’re making serious ethical and moral decisions: A core teaching of the Church, that is often described as one of Catholicism’s best kept secrets, is the Church’s teaching called: ‘The Primacy of Conscience.’ In the process of moral decision-making, one must follow one’s conscience, one’s well-developed conscience.

I’d like to share the prayerful words of the Second Vatican Council’s *Pastoral Constitution of the Church in The Modern World*:

*“Deep within a person’s conscience one discovers a law which one has not laid upon one’s self but which one must obey. Its voice, ever calling the person to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in that person’s heart at the right moment... For one has in his or her heart a law inscribed by God... One’s conscience is one’s most secret core and one’s sanctuary. There one is alone with God whose voice echoes in that person’s depths.”* [Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 16, 1965].

And from that Council’s document: *“Declaration on Religious Freedom:”*

*“In all [one’s] activity a person is bound to follow his/her conscience in order that he/she may come to God, the end and purpose of life. It follows that he/she is not to be forced to act in manner contrary to his/her conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he/she to be restrained from acting in accordance with his/her conscience, especially in matters religious.”* [Vatican II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, #3, 1965].

And, the words Father Joseph Ratzinger, back in 1969 before he became Pope Benedict XVI, in which he was reflecting on the passages I just shared:

*“Above the pope as an expression of the binding claim of Church authority, stands one’s own conscience, which has to be obeyed first of all, if need be against the demands of Church authority.”* [Fr. Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI); from a commentary on *Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World)*; In *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (Vorgrimler, Herbert – Ed, Burns and Oats, 1969), p.134].

In conclusion, my brothers and sisters:

We, the Church, are here to be of support in these issues! If you have any questions or concerns, please give me a call.

If you know of someone alienated from the Church because of divorce, invite them to All Saints and be sure to tell them I'd be glad to meet with them.

A number of support groups for separated and divorced folks exist throughout our Diocese. Flyers listing times and locations are near the entrances, and if you think it might be a good idea to have a support group for separated and divorced people here in our parish, give me a call and we'll do everything we can to get one organized.

If you are having difficulty in marriage, give me a call – I'd be happy to sit down with you or to recommend folks with whom you might meet.

Finally, I invite us to pray together the Prayer for Healing that is in the pews. I ask that we all take a moment to call to mind, the people we know who have been affected by separation or divorce and hold them in our heart as we pray:

*O loving and creating God, bless families hurting from the pain of separation and divorce. We know that when two people are married, they mean it for life. Yet, at times, with some people, and some very complex situations, it just doesn't happen that way.*

*Give peace and courage to all who have experienced the disruption caused by divorce or separation. Help them to accept their feelings of rejection, loneliness and grief.*

*Help them, above all, to believe in Your presence, and to believe in the Church as a source of strength and compassion.*

*Help all of us to be sensitive to emotional, spiritual and physical needs of children who have divorced or separated parents. Enable us to reach out in love.*

*May our priests be aware of the pain of separated and divorced parishioners and always welcome them in parish spiritual and social activities.*

*Especially we pray, O God, that as we continue to recognize Jesus in the "breaking of the bread," we will carry Jesus with us and reach out to all our separated and divorced families with love, compassion and understanding.*

*Amen!*