

## **Second Marriages** **(a subject for compassion and prayer)**

Could I commend a particular intention to your prayers, please? It is the situation of those members of our faith family whose marriages have sadly broken down, and also those who have subsequently entered into second marriages. It is a very complex and sensitive subject through which I hope to tread very carefully as I try to explain why our prayers, and our compassion, are needed.

In the middle of Eucharistic Prayer III are the words: “Grant that we, who are nourished by his body and blood, may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ.” At every Mass we hear Our Lord’s words of invitation: “Take this, all of you, and eat... Take this, all of you, and drink.” But there are those in our midst who cannot “take and eat” or “take and drink”, who are not able to be “nourished by his body and blood” and yet, we hope, still feel included in, and a part of, the communal celebration which they choose to attend as faithfully as the rest of us because it is important to them and because through the Holy Spirit, they, and we, thereby remain “one body, one spirit in Christ”.

It is a sad fact that marriages do break down, sometimes because of factors that existed before the marriage took place, or because of circumstances that developed afterwards, but which in either case have led to a situation in which, despite every effort, the relationship cannot be saved and the couple separate. Equally sadly at this point is the fact that the Catholic spouse(s) concerned cannot enter into a second relationship because, in the eyes of the Church, the vowed and sacramental bond of matrimony was entered into “till death do us part”. The only possible way out of the situation is through the granting of an annulment, but that will only happen if it can be proved (a process that is both rigorous and lengthy) that the marriage vows were invalid in the first place. If this cannot be proved, then in the eyes of the Church the couple are still married even though they may be separated.

What can seem particularly unfair, is the situation of the Catholic whose spouse was responsible for the breakdown of the marriage and where that marriage bond cannot be annulled. All of a sudden, and for no fault of their own, they must now remain single. At the moment there exists no moral position, and no canonical mechanism, by which the Church can deal with, or make allowances for, that person’s circumstances.

Upon the irreconcilable breakdown of a marriage, one of the spouses may begin divorce proceedings. It would be logical to presume that this would be the non-Catholic in a mixed marriage (given that the Church doesn’t accept divorce), but

even where both spouses are Catholic, one of them may pursue that avenue. The Church teaches that, on moral grounds, it is unacceptable for either a separated or a “divorced” Catholic to enter into another physical relationship or a second marriage, and that if they do they thereby exclude themselves from the sacraments.

**W**e often hear the rather unfortunate phrase “living in sin” applied to such a situation, but I think we have to be very careful before we make such a judgment. From a moral standpoint, we cannot condone the situation of two people living together in a physical relationship: it goes against both God’s moral law and the Church’s teaching - which are, of course, the same thing. If a couple knew this but freely chose to live together anyway despite the consequences, then, by definition, the resulting situation would be sinful because it involved serious matter, full knowledge and a choice freely taken. However in the case of those individuals who enter into the legal commitment of a second marriage, I think there are a number of factors that have to be taken into account before we use the word sin.

**W**hile there are people who are single by choice or by circumstance and who live a chaste lifestyle, such a calling is not the norm for most. It might, therefore, be very difficult for someone now on their own following the breakdown of their marriage, to avoid becoming emotionally involved with someone else. Should that involvement lead in the direction of a second marriage, the normal emotional processes that are at work are likely to be a far more immediate factor in their decision than any awareness they may have of the consequences for their sacramental life. And I say “may have” because I’m not overly convinced that people necessarily know these days what the Church’s teaching is in these matters and this could make even a decision made in conscience to be not as well informed as it should have been.<sup>1</sup> Because we are obliged to follow our conscience, the resulting decision cannot be sinful, though we may still be responsible for failing to inform our conscience properly and fully before the decision was made.<sup>2</sup>

**I**n the case of a religious vocation, a candidate is required to spend a number of years testing their vocation before any permanent commitment or vow is made, and yet we don’t insist on this with the vocation to married life which is supposed to be equally permanent.<sup>3</sup> With the best will in the world, people can genuinely make a mistake with the first marriage they enter into. The same can be true of the first career choice we make, but in that case we learn from our

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<sup>1</sup> “Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. . . . The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 1783.

<sup>2</sup> ref para’s 1790-1792 of the catechism.

<sup>3</sup> Even the traditional step of becoming engaged first is far from mandatory.

mistakes and can change our mind. Should there be a mechanism for allowing for a mistaken first choice in marriage given that a second chance isn't currently possible for Catholics? Human nature being what it is, they may have genuinely made a mistake despite a period of engagement and the challenging questions raised by a marriage preparation course. There may be factors in a mistaken choice that could be grounds for an annulment, but currently it is up to a tribunal to decide and the outcome is by no means guaranteed.

**I**n some countries where there is strict separation of church and state, couples take part in a civil ceremony first – by which they are legally married – and then celebrate the sacrament of matrimony in church. Is this a possible consideration in this country: that couples marry in a registry office first (and would therefore be at least legally married) and then come to church to have their union blessed, but possibly reserve the sacrament of matrimony itself (because of its “till death do us part” commitment) for some time later when the Church would be blessing a union which the passage of time had shown to be sound?

**W**hile two people who are simply living together are free to live apart if they want to be able to receive the sacraments (unless, of course, the situation is more complicated than that because of there being children), such a choice isn't possible for someone in a second marriage. In theory they could legally end the marriage through a civil divorce, put everything right through the sacrament of reconciliation, and so be able to receive communion once again, but the Church would never ask or expect them to do this and especially if there are children from the second relationship for whom a priority would be the love and support of a stable family unit. The only real option comes when the physical side of the relationship ceases and the couple are simply living together “as brother and sister”. There is then a place for the sacrament of reconciliation and for the Catholic involved to be able to start receiving communion once again.

**S**adly people get themselves into situations which simply cannot be resolved as they might like - there is no magic wand, it would be nice if there was, but there isn't.<sup>4</sup> Nor can we pick and choose from the Church's moral teaching (which is also God's moral teaching) according to what is convenient or what would be “nice”. When priests make expedient decisions in this area despite the fact that they don't have the authority to do so, not only does it muddy the waters of what is morally right or wrong, but there is a very real danger of giving scandal to those who know a person's situation and who see them receiving holy communion when they shouldn't be. It would be far better for all concerned,

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<sup>4</sup> It seems strange that those of us who are conscious of committing sin have immediate access to the sacrament of reconciliation and can have our sin forgiven, whereas those who have entered into a second marriage are not able to take care of any “sin” they may be aware of in that respect because they are not free to discontinue that involvement.

and for the witness that it gives, if - as the Church invites - people unable to receive communion (for this as for any other reason) simply came forward with everyone else and asked for a blessing (for the strength and encouragement of the sacrament - what we used to call “spiritual communion”).

One final thought concerns the experience of parish priests everywhere that, no matter what they say to parents during sacramental preparation programmes, no matter how much they talk about promises being made to God on behalf of their children, there are always some who will make all the right noises to get their babies “done” (i.e. baptised), or to have their children make their first holy communion, and then we never see them again. The fact that they have made promises to God doesn’t seem to faze them, nor the fact that they think they have successfully conned the priest into giving them what they wanted. Why do they want these sacraments for their children when they are only going to be one-off occasions and when the practice of their own faith is virtually non-existent? Here are people who are perfectly free to celebrate the sacraments and yet play fast and loose with them, and on the other hand there are those in second marriages who would dearly love to be able to receive the sacraments but are unable to because of circumstances they can do nothing about.

In everything I have said, I am not for a moment challenging or questioning Church teaching – quite the opposite in fact. What I am doing is musing out loud, as it were, about possibilities in light of the very sad situation in which so many people find themselves and, in many cases, through no fault of their own. If we believe in the power of prayer, then is it possible that we could pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit (if any of this is God’s will) for the “powers-that-be” whether in our own Bishops’ Conference and/or in Rome itself, to give consideration to:

- what can be done about the situation of those whose marriages have broken down and who are now faced with a life of celibacy as a result of something that may not have been their fault;
- whether allowances could be made for human failing and the possibility of a mistaken first choice in marriage;
- the possibility of sacramentalising a civil marriage at a later date.

All of these considerations would have as their principle purpose being able to restore – officially and soundly - as many as possible of the people we have been talking about to full communion with the Church.

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Fr Neil McNicholas