



## **WELCOMING PEOPLE WITH PARTICULAR MARITAL STATUS**

The Church is facing a delicate situation today in her concern for couples who have begun a new relationship following the failure of a first marriage recognized by the Church. Among these couples are believers who wish to have God's blessing for their new commitment. Through their faith they seek an expression for the love which they have for each other. The memory of a previous failure makes them particularly conscious of the implications of their new union and they wish to proceed with the best possible conditions. In these situations, some couples ask for the Lord's support and that of the Christian community. They hope for the Church's understanding and eventually her welcome. This commentary is addressed to priests, permanent deacons, and lay pastoral workers who receive particular requests from these couples who wish to be accompanied in their new relationship.

### **Expectations**

Some couples have followed a Christian preparatory process for their new commitment. Others wish to have their union recognized and blessed during a religious celebration or a time of prayer which could have various forms. At the time they meet with a priest, a permanent deacon, or pastoral agent, some couples ask us to pray with them for the success of their new relationship. Others have asked to have a cleric bless them during the celebration that follows their civil ceremony. Finally, some couples have asked to have a celebration that resembles, as closely as possible, the liturgy of a Catholic marriage, and which could be held in a church or chapel.

## Welcoming

How do the pastors and those responsible for pastoral activity receive and respond to such requests? The question is certainly complex and we should not dismiss the opportunity to address these issues out of respect for the couples and their commitment to each other. At the same time, it is an occasion to clarify and deepen the understanding of a Christian marriage. A pastoral judgment should not be restricted to legal considerations, for many couples with these particular marital situations have suffered deep wounds, often feel rejected, and deserve the consideration of the Christian community and its pastors.

## Considerations

On one hand, we are facing a profoundly human reality: the reciprocal love of a woman and a man. On the other, we believe that marriage is a gift from God and we must respect this offering in the spirit of our ecclesial tradition. With these conditions in mind, how do we reconcile circumstances that appear to be diametrically opposed? We will address several aspects concurrently so that ... *steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.*<sup>1</sup>

### *A complex situation*

Many believers involved in a new union are seriously committed to each other. Their relationship has often been the means to heal wounds inflicted by the failed marriage and divorce. This new involvement has restored their self-confidence, their confidence in others, and their capacity to love again. It appears that a new flame has burst forth from the cinders of the previous relationship.

To accompany these couples and express the Lord's mercy, we must first of all recognize the importance and grandeur of human love. However the main challenge will always be to accompany these couples without any ambiguity or confusion with the sacrament of marriage.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 85:10.

### *The indissolubility of marriage*

We believe that a Christian marriage is a life-long commitment. We believe that marriage is indissoluble and we may never untie the bond created between the original spouses or attempt to ignore it. This commitment does not only involve the spouses, but also God himself: *So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.*<sup>2</sup> This covenant is inscribed within God's Covenant with His people through Christ. It is also a tangible sign of the union of Christ with the Church. It supposes perseverance as God intended through creative fidelity and with the conviction that God never abandons those whom He encompasses with His love. As St. Paul said, *"This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the Church."*<sup>3</sup>

According to the principles of our Church, it is our responsibility to accompany those who have begun this new commitment with the greatest respect for the nature of the sacrament of marriage which they previously received. It is equally important to remember that other couples struggle with difficult marital situations and yet they continue to persevere by relying on God's benevolence and the Church's solidarity. We must not lose sight of the different character of this new union.

### *Community support*

It may happen that these couples feel unwelcome in their Christian community and face prejudice and rejection. A categorical statement, without any nuances, may give the impression that there is no place for separated or remarried people within the Church. However, on July 25, 2005, Pope Benedict XVI spoke to priests from the Diocese of Aosta and shared his reflections on this issue. Emphasizing that *"There is no quick solution,"* the Pope affirmed that *"even if they cannot partake of sacramental communion, those who are divorced and remarried are not excluded from the love of the Church and the love of Christ."*<sup>4</sup> (free translation)

Since some couples will approach other Christian denominations to have their union recognized, these questions must be addressed by the Catholic community. In these

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<sup>2</sup> Mt 19:6.

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 5:32.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Homily to the clergy of the Diocese of Aosta, July 25, 2005.

situations, what assistance should we offer a Christian community and its leaders to help them understand the profound meaning of the Church's theological tradition on marriage and conjugal love and engage in a constructive dialogue? How do we help these couples participate in the life of the Church in a particular way and pursue their baptismal commitment? How do we develop a welcoming attitude toward those who have not been successful, at this time, in attaining the proposed Christian ideal?

### **Sensitive Points**

In the course of every process with these couples, it is important to consider the following aspects:

- The sacrament of marriage is God's gift which the Church receives as the Lord has offered it. The sacrament of marriage has already been celebrated by at least one member of the couple.
- The couple – or at least one of the two – has a previous marital or family situation which was part of their lives and has profoundly affected them. They have certain obligations toward their first commitment, particularly caring for children, forgiveness, and support for the former spouse who may be in need.
- Every initiative will not only impact on these couples, who have brought their request to the community, but also on other Christians and on the Church as a whole. We must particularly remember other couples who courageously persevere despite difficult marital circumstances, and those who choose not to remarry in order to remain faithful to their first commitment.
- In our search for truth, we must explore the possibility of an annulment of the previous marriage.

### **Accompanying Paths**

Accompanying couples in these particular situations, whether at the moment of their re-commitment or along their journeys when they express the desire to return to the Church, constitutes a privileged pastoral moment. From the beginning, these couples are aware of Jesus Christ's merciful welcome. Welcoming and listening are essential components in all accompanying processes.

We then begin to clarify the situation and systematically prevent any confusion in the

understanding of a Christian marriage. We must always remain conscious that the failure of a sacramental marriage constitutes a wound that affects the entire ecclesial community.

When they approach the Lord, these couples must learn how to pray from within this new commitment. This process may include the person who accompanies the couple. However, it is important that the couple themselves address the Lord directly from within their hearts since they will be better suited to judge what is meaningful for them, as guided by the Holy Spirit.

All faith journeys have their source in Baptism. By reconnecting with the grace of their Baptism, these couples will be able to construct their lives and commitments in the light of God's initial call and of their vocation to follow Christ and to witness to Him.

### **From Exclusion to Participation**

There are many wounded brothers and sisters who have called upon the Church for support and comfort. Some doors are obviously closed to them. One example would be a type of celebration of their new commitment that could be confused with a sacramental marriage or more explicitly, because of the significance of this sacrament, with Eucharistic communion. These restrictions could perhaps be misunderstood as a punishment or total exclusion by the Church. However, this is not the case for couples in these particular marital situations are our brothers and sisters. Despite certain restrictions, they are always welcome among us for prayers, various celebrations, listening to God's Word and participating in social commitments and community activities.<sup>5</sup>

Many opportunities are open to these couples so that they may benefit not only from their pastor's welcome, but also from their community's support. Thus embraced, they will certainly discover that the Lord waits for them at this particular moment of their lives.

Discussions such as these can only take place in truth, for our pastoral approach must present the Christian marriage as God's gift to His children. We express our care for truth and justice for those who pursue their commitment despite inevitable life tensions. It is important that

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<sup>5</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Faith # 1651.

pastoral accompaniment acknowledges the Lord's merciful welcome as He is always close to those who suffer. The goal of all pastoral works with couples in these particular marital circumstances should aim to combine love with truth, justice, and peace.

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#### **For further reflection**

- JOHN PAUL II. Encyclical letter, *Familiaris consortio*, with particular attention to No. 83 and 84.
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