

In my short time as a priest, I have worked with a lot of people in the exact situation of being divorced and civilly remarried that Jesus spoke about in today's gospel. I have seen the pain that the words in today's gospel can cause. This pain is often caused because the people in this situation were never taught, or have forgotten, God's view of marriage. There is also a lot of confusion over the differences between a divorce and an annulment

From the beginning, it was 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." I'm going to take a very practical approach to this and keep it as simple as I can. God's intention for marriage was very simple but because of human weakness we have made it very complicated. If you want a more theological explanation, take a look at the marriage videos on Formed.org or from Bishop Barron. You can also read the section in the catechism which begins with paragraph number 1601. If you have questions about specific circumstances, please ask me or the pastor in your home parish and we'll try to answer them for you.

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. In the eyes of the civil law, someone who gets remarried is legally married; in the eyes of the church that person isn't married because 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. A civil divorce claims to dissolve an existing bond of marriage, but it actually doesn't. Neither does an annulment. An annulment says that what appeared to be a marriage never actually was a marriage so there is no bond there to dissolve. How does this work?

When a man and a woman get married, they exchange vows. We call that exchange of vows the couple's consent. It is that consent, that exchanging of marriage vows, that forms the marriage bond. If there is a flaw in that consent or if there are certain conditions that exist with either the bride or the groom, that bond cannot be formed. Under these circumstances, since a marriage bond was never formed, if the couple were to separate, they would be free to marry someone else. The marriage was "invalid" which means the couple was never married in the first place. We always assume that a marriage is valid unless it can be proven to be invalid.

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. We have to contact the former spouse or spouses in order to get their side of the story. We have to find witnesses that can testify to the circumstances of the marriage. 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. Divorced Catholics who have gotten civilly remarried are welcome and encouraged to participate in the life of the Church but they should refrain from receiving Holy Communion. I realize the pain that this can cause but I will do what I can to help you through it. Anyone who is in this situation should contact me or the pastor in their home parish and we will do our best to walk with you to see what can be done.

Today's gospel may seem lacking in compassion for those who are divorced and remarried. Jesus sometimes has to shake us awake to make us realize where

we need healing in our lives. Remember the people whom Jesus sought out, the people whom he chose to dine with. Jesus wants to heal all of us from whatever ails us. Give him that chance.

Today is respect-life Sunday and the entire month of October is devoted to the promotion of a culture of life. I have a whole other homily on the culture of life and it is on the parish website. For today, here are some questions to think about which might help us work towards a culture of life.. Do we realize how precious every person is? As we go about our day, do we treat the people we meet with the respect and dignity they deserve? How can we help those in our society who are struggling to welcome new life, like moms who are pregnant or parenting in difficult circumstances? How can we reach out to those having a hard time seeing the worth of their own lives? How do we reassure those at the end of life who are afraid they are a burden or feel like their lives don't have meaning?

Please spend some time today and throughout the month praying and even doing some extra fasting for all of those whose lives are in peril whether the threat comes at the beginning of life or at the end of life or at any point in between.