

# *Pastoral Challenges to Married Couples*

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**M**arriage and family are two of the most important areas of pastoral care in the Catholic Church. The theological tradition of the Church has always upheld certain unique and well-founded principles of marital ethics. This set of principles are an important part of the Church's magisterium; it has given direction to many generations of Christians in their marriage and family life. Nowadays, as human beings continue to make tremendous progress in economic growth and technology, their way of thinking and moral values have changed a lot too. Many Christians no longer consider the traditional moral values of the Church as the guiding principles of their lives. People attach greater importance to a materialistic way of life rather than to the salvation of their souls. They look apathetically upon the commandments of God and the rules of the Church. In addition, people fall under the influence of advertisements which glorify unbridled sexual satisfaction. It seems that the modern world is so flooded with sexual perversion and lust that it surpasses the abhorrent evils of Sodom. The complexity and volatility of modern society pose severe challenges to Christian marriage. As we can see from the news, concubinage, extra-marital relationships, online affairs and violence in the family are now rampant. The problems resulting from divorce, in particular, demand special attention.

For pastoral workers, the provision of pastoral care for married couples in modern society is a challenging task. However, the difficulties they encounter can also be opportunities to carry out their pastoral work in creative ways.

## **The Causes of Divorce**

1. Lack of Preparation for Both Husband and Wife

The rapid changes in society are a reflection of the rapid changes in human understanding. Such is the phenomenon among young people who are susceptible to modern trends. They follow the latest trends even in life-changing matters like marriage. They seek only romance and ignore the real meaning of love. This explains why some young people just follow their passions and get married without much preparation. Some get married because of “sympathy.” Some do so because they want to escape from their unhappy circumstances, such as quarrelling parents or a lack of parental love. Some young people get married because they are lonely; they may be introverted and have very few friends. Some others get married because of premarital sex; they become pregnant and are forced to set up a new family. All in all, these people get married for immature motives. Their marriages are not founded upon love and responsibility. In order to attain true love, a person needs to be mature, reliable and willing to sacrifice for the wellbeing of his spouse. Those who jump into marriage without careful preparation do not have a strong foundation for their relationship. Such marriages are vulnerable to the challenges of life and could easily end in divorce.

## 2. Different Religious Beliefs

The social circles of modern men and women are much wider than in the past. One can get in touch with people from all over the world and make friends with them. As they continue to expand their social circles, the chance for young people to find spouses of different religious faiths increases. This is why mixed marriages become the norm nowadays. The Church does not oppose mixed marriage, but regarding this issue, it upholds the following principle: “Difference of confession between the spouses does not constitute an insurmountable obstacle for marriage, when they succeed in placing in common what they have received from their respective communities, and learn from each other the way in which each lives in fidelity to Christ. But the difficulties of mixed marriages must not be underestimated. They arise from the fact that the separation of Christians has not yet been overcome. The spouses risk experiencing the tragedy of Christian disunity even in the heart of their own home. Disparity of cult can further aggravate these

difficulties. Differences about faith and the very notion of marriage, but also different religious mentalities, can become sources of tension in marriage, especially as regards the education of children. The temptation to religious indifference can then arise.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1634) The temptation to religious indifference is real as we can see from real-life examples. Many people make high-sounding promises before marriage, but they soon forget the promises they made. Therefore, couples with different religious faiths may easily show disrespect for each other’s religion. Conflicts become inevitable as they discover the differences in their mentality.

### 3. The Impact of Secularism

Plagued by the materialism and secularism of a fast-paced modern society, people lose their innocence and become self-centered. One of the signs of their selfishness is couples cheating on each other. This, of course, impairs the conjugal life of married couples. “The excellence of this institution is not everywhere reflected with equal brilliance, since polygamy, the plague of divorce, so-called free love and other disfigurements have an obscuring effect. In addition, married love is too often profaned by excessive self-love, the worship of pleasure and illicit practices against human generation. Moreover, serious disturbances are caused in families by modern economic conditions, by influences at once social and psychological, and by the demands of civil society.” (*Gaudium et Spes* 47) Couples living in poor socio-economic conditions face tremendous pressure in maintaining their livelihood and hence seldom have the chance to communicate with each other; as the traditional proverb says, “When poverty comes in the door, love flies out of the window.” Affluent families, however, are not free from challenges, in particular that of extra-marital relations. The love between couples suddenly dissipates owing to the partners’ own self-interest.

### 4. The Acceptance of Divorce in Society

—Divorce is not a recent invention—there were many cases of divorce throughout history. However, people’s attitude towards

divorce has changed drastically. In the past, it was taboo, and was difficult for people in the past to accept the idea of divorce. On the one hand, a divorced woman did not have any means to support herself. She did not have a place in society and had to face discrimination. Even her parents might not welcome her back into her family. At the same time, parents often encouraged reconciliation and discouraged divorce. They believed in a certain kind of “predetermination”—a woman should follow her husband wherever he goes. Hence divorce cases were very rare in the past.

In modern society, people are more educated and open-minded. Men and women are equal in their social status. Women no longer have to depend on their families or husbands to survive. They can participate more actively in society, have their own jobs and earn their own living. Whenever they encounter problems in their marriages, divorce becomes the easy way out. They do not think in the same way as people in the past, who often had to take into consideration how they would survive in society. Moreover, people in modern society show great respect for personal freedom and autonomy. It is not difficult for them to accept those who get divorced. Even parents would welcome their divorced children back into the family. Such general acceptance of divorce leads to the devaluing of marriage. People do not treat marriage as a serious matter—they come together when they love each other and break up when the love between them has cooled down. Such marriages, so vulnerable to conflicts and crises, often end up in divorce.

Pope Leo XIII wrote, “Since, then, nothing has such power to lay waste families and destroy the mainstay of kingdoms as the corruption of morals, it is easily seen that divorces are in the highest degree hostile to the prosperity of families and States, springing as they do from the depraved morals of the people, and, as experience shows us, opening out a way for every kind of evil-doing in public and in private life. Further still, if the matter be duly pondered, we shall clearly see these evils to be the more especially dangerous, because, divorce once being tolerated, there will be no restraint powerful enough to keep it within the bounds marked out or presumed. Great indeed is the force of example, and even greater still the might of passion. With such incitements it must needs follow that the eagerness for divorce, daily spreading by devious

ways, will seize upon the minds of many like a virulent contagious disease, or like a flood of water bursting through every barrier.” (*Arcanum* 29-30)

## **The Impact of Divorce**

Children are the first and the most unfortunate victims of divorce, for they lose the family love which is indispensable for their growth. Divorce is a traumatic experience for children and its impact is not to be underestimated. The separation of their parents force the children into a difficult situation—either they have to live with their father or the mother. As a consequence, they lose the love of the other parent, and this is a very painful decision for children at such a young age. From this, we can imagine the difficulties they have to face—they have to grow up in a single-parent household, and their education is greatly affected. We can also foresee the difficulties these children will have to face when they grow up.

The couple themselves are the victims of their divorce too. Many people see divorce as a kind of “liberation” for those suffering from unhappy marriages. However, they often overlook the problems divorce brings to the couple, such as a negative influence on society, and impediments to receiving the sacraments of the Church.

The burden for divorced women is particularly heavy because they lose the support of their spouses both in their lives and their work. The pressure is even heavier if they have to take care of their own children. Very often they can only depend on the support of their original families. Unfortunately, even their original families are not always supportive and sympathetic towards them. Instead, they are often rejected and looked down upon. All these make the situation of divorced women even worse.

The impact of divorce upon men is less serious because they are socially and financially more independent. However, this does not mean that they do not need care and support. Human beings experience different emotions in their lives. This is especially true for married couples because the love they experience in their relationship with their spouses can never be replaced by another person. Worse still, a divorced man may become hot-tempered,

insecure and narrow-minded, if he does not get enough support from others. He may easily give up on himself and dwell in self-pity, or he may go towards the other extreme, namely without the “bondage” of marriage, he can “set free” his sexual desire for women, and pursue whomever he wants. In this way, he becomes a threat to unmarried women, or even an intruder into other people’s marriages. Such destructive consequences of divorce for men can easily be foreseen.

### **Our Responsibility**

As a community with religious faith, the Church should, first of all, make use of the resources at her disposal to prepare and educate the Catholic laity about marriage and love. Pastoral care should be available both before and after marriage. The unity and inseparability in marriage are founded upon God’s divine institution. Nowadays, many couples suffer from the rapid development of society and the challenges this brings. This requires that the Church, in particular the parish, take the initiative to discover the problems and find out the solutions. The Church should make good use of different opportunities for couples to learn how to handle the problems that arise in their marriages, so that they will not consider divorce as the only possible alternative. The Church should provide more training for lay people in the areas of Christian faith, love, marriage and family, so that couples may go through the stages of courtship, marriage and family life under the guidance of the Church.

### **Conclusion**

God manifests His love for humankind through the institution of marriage. God calls us to fulfil our mission to procreate and to work for the wellbeing of the society. Let us join with others in our effort to maintain the inseparability of marriage, so that we may lead happy family lives, and help to foster the healthy development of society. In this way, we may help to reduce the chances for divorce and its negative impact on society. We will also help to protect children from the traumatic experience of their parents’ divorce. The progress of society and the hope of a bright future

depend very much on the steadfastness of marriage and of family life. It is through healthy marriages and a wholesome family life that men and women fulfil their God-given mission, “What God has joined together, no human being must separate.” “Be fruitful, and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it.” (Mt. 19:6; Gen. 1:28)