

CATHOLIC *Remarriage*

Notes for the Pastoral Minister

At the November 2004 meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), a proposal was accepted for a National Pastoral Initiative on Marriage that aims to strengthen the marriages of U. S. Catholics. In an addendum to the proposal, Bishop J. Kevin Boland, chair of the Committee on Marriage and Family Life at the USCCB, cited the following statistics from 2004:

- More than 80% of adults say that having a good marriage is absolutely necessary for them to consider their life a success (Family Research Council).
- There has been a 48% drop in church-recorded marriages over the past twenty years, according to the 2004 Official Catholic Directory.
- In the same twenty-year period, the annual rate of all marriages in the U. S. declined by 24% (National Center for Health Statistics).
- In 2003, there were 232,000 marriages recorded in U. S. Catholic churches; over 80% of those seeking to be married in the church participated in a marriage preparation program (USCCB surveys).
- Catholics are still less likely to get divorced than Protestants, by 25% to 39% (Barna Group Research Report).
- Among all adults who have been married, 35% have also been divorced. Of those who have divorced, 18% have done so more than once (Barna Group Research Report).

- Among the baby-boom generation, born between 1946 and 1960, 46% of married couples have already lived through divorce (Barna Group Research Report).
- The median age of a first marriage is twenty-five for women and twenty-seven for men (National Marriage Project).
- On average, people who end their first marriage do so in their early thirties (Barna Group Research Report).
- For the average couple marrying in recent years, the lifetime probability of divorce remains close to 50% (National Marriage Project).
- Being well educated, having a decent income, coming from an intact family, being religiously observant, and marrying after age twenty-five without having a baby first are all factors that lower one's chances of divorce to less than 50% (National Marriage Project).
- The number of annulment cases brought to diocesan and regional tribunals worldwide in 2002 was 54,247. Of this number, the total in the U. S. was 30,845 (Vatican Statistical Yearbook of the Catholic Church).

Obviously, as a priest, deacon, or lay pastoral minister charged with helping couples prepare for marriage in the Catholic church, you face an immense task. The enormity of this task is even more apparent when it comes to assisting people who have endured the heartache of divorce as they prepare for a new marriage or convalidation. In its most common form, convalidation is when a civilly married couple renews their consent (marriage vows) in the presence of the church's minister, thereby entering into a valid Christian (or sacramental) marriage. Sometimes this is a very simple and private event. Other times, a couple chooses a more public celebration. Occasionally a marriage is validated by sanation. This is done by the action of a bishop, the Holy See, or the proper delegate of either. Because sanation does not require the renewal of consent by either party, you will not likely be working with couples utilizing this process.

As you know, anyone who is preparing for a second marriage or convalidation in the Roman Catholic church must receive a declaration of nullity from a diocesan tribunal before the second marriage or convalidation can take place. This declaration of nullity is simply a statement acknowledging that the first marriage was somehow flawed at its inception. What appeared to be a valid Christian marriage, in fact, was not. Increasingly, annulment comes with a requirement that the person receiving it must participate in some form of pastoral counseling prior to contracting a second marriage or convalidation in the church.

The couples you work with present a wide range of circumstances and needs. Many are already living together, some for many years. Other couples are already well into a second civil marriage and now seek convalidation in the church. Still other couples you work with have one

partner preparing for a second marriage while the other partner prepares for his or her first marriage. Similarly, many couples seek convalidation of an already well established civil marriage that is a first for one partner while a second for the other. Yet other couples have one partner who has been divorced and the other widowed. Assisting all these couples, with their wide array of circumstances and needs is complicated at best. At worst, it is dizzying and exhausting. This book is meant to help you.

Using This Resource

Catholic Remarriage is a resource for pastoral counseling and so differs significantly from other marriage preparation resources. You may find it best to use it alongside select pieces of the marriage preparation resource *Before I Do* or something like it. It is meant to assist you in your work, enhancing your effort, not comprising it. The leader's guide to *Before I Do* provides many useful ideas concerning how to work with a couple, dealing with resistance and other issues of being a good facilitator. It suggests how to greet the couple, what to expect, and how to keep the sessions flowing. I urge you to consult it as you begin your work with this book.

Catholic Remarriage can be used by you or in a well developed and well supervised couple-to-couple program. While the book is written with individual couples in mind, you may find it beneficial to adapt some of the chapters and exercises for use in small groups of two or more couples with similar circumstances. Use the book in a flexible manner, picking and choosing which sections to use with each couple or small group and in which order. Consider it raw material that you can custom fit according to the particular needs of individual couples. Most of the exercises should be completed by each partner individually and then discussed together with you.

The offerings of this book flow from assessing the relationship, to identifying problem areas, to addressing specific problems couples might be facing. Not all couples will benefit from each chapter, nor from every exercise within any given chapter. Again, it will fall largely to you to determine how much of the material to use and when to use it. For instance, a couple that has been married for thirteen years and exhibits excellent communication skills will have very different needs than a couple preparing to begin what will be a second marriage for both of the partners. A couple for whom the coming marriage is a first for one partner and a second for the other may need yet a different set of materials or at least different emphases. Many couples will benefit from working through all the chapters, no matter what their situation. The chapters are arranged as follows.

1. Christian Marriage: Our Context and Our Goal

The opening chapter sets the stage for all the work of this book. Because the goal here is for a couple to enter and be successful at Christian marriage, it is important to talk about just what that means. The chapter addresses marriage as a sacramental covenant and helps the couple to explore together with you, just how they can appropriate that meaning in their relationship.

2. Assessing Your Relationship

This chapter allows a couple to look at what went wrong in a previous marriage and identify any areas where closure still needs to be worked out. At the same time, the chapter assesses the strengths and weaknesses of a couple concerning communication and conflict resolution. At the end of the chapter, both you and the couple should have a good idea of what areas require additional attention.

3. Creating Relationship Resiliency

This chapter looks at the present relationship of the couple and takes each partner through a process of understanding how solid, healthy relationships are built and sustained. At the same time, the couple will be able to understand if there are any outstanding challenges facing them concerning how resilient their present relationship is.

4. Communicating and Negotiating Effectively

This chapter takes the couple through a process of understanding how to communicate better, especially when there is tension. It helps them to develop skills for negotiating fairly in order to get their individual and shared needs met.

5. Dealing with Conflict

This chapter will explore with the couple how each partner approaches conflict. It also looks at the gifts, challenges, and pitfalls of their approach, and how they might be able to manage conflict more successfully.

6. Parenting in Blended Families

This chapter will allow couples who have children to explore the challenges and promises of a blended family as well as the skills and efforts needed in parenting with former spouses.

7. Cultivating a Forgiving Spirit

This is a chapter on spirituality, and one that may be greatly needed by your couple. Having endured the breakup of a marriage, it is quite possible that one or both of the partners will experience a difficult time with trust and forgiveness. This chapter can assist in the process of letting go and moving on.

8. Growing into a Mature Spirituality

This chapter emphasizes how important spirituality is in maintaining a mature relationship. It asks the couple to consider some themes that link them with the wider church.

Each session concludes with a case illustration and a section on spirituality. The case illustrations are presented with the hope that the couple will be able to further explore any unresolved issues that face them by looking at another couple's situation. A mature spirituality is a very important characteristic to any successful marriage and it is important that the couple takes responsibility for it together.

Of Special Concern

First Marriage / Second Marriage

Most of the material presented here is written for those who have experienced divorce. But many times there will be one person who has never been married before preparing to marry someone who has been married and divorced. Such a couple needs special attention when using this material. While much of the work will fall to the previously married partner, it is crucial that the two work together as much as possible.

The person for whom this is a first marriage may sometimes feel at a disadvantage because he or she doesn't know firsthand the experience of being married. He or she also can never fully appreciate how the partner

was wounded by the events that led to the failure of the first marriage. He or she may not fully grasp the fear or uncertainty which the other partner brings. At the same time, the partner who has lived through divorce will likely have fears and vulnerabilities about sharing the history of the failed marriage. It is crucial to remember and to help the couple understand that both partners bring their own unique psychological and spiritual baggage. Each has her or his own complex history, assumptions, and expectations. Both bring fear and uncertainty, hope and commitment. They just come from different starting points.

Cohabiting Couples

Couples who are living together and now seek a second marriage in the church have some specific needs that will need to be addressed. *Getting Married, Living Together: A Guide for Engaged Couples* is a small resource booklet that will help you in working with these couples.

Death vs. Divorce

While two people may be entering a second marriage, if one does so following death and the other divorce, they will obviously be dealing with different concerns, fears and doubts. It is important to keep these situations distinct. Those who are entering a second marriage after the first spouse has died will have particular grief issues. Sometimes there is lingering guilt about moving ahead in a new relationship. Sometimes there remains fear of losing another spouse, especially if the first spouse died young or after a long and agonizing illness. Doubts about one's ability to handle the pain may remain. These will obviously need to be addressed and you may want to explore additional resources from your parish's bereavement ministry.

Finally

In whatever situations and manner you use the material presented here, keep in mind that the pain, anger, and profound disappointment that divorce brings will leave many people quite reluctant to talk. Even years after a marriage fails and a couple divorces, emotions can run high and egos remain fragile. As with many beginning a first marriage, it is hard to underestimate the vulnerability of couples giving marriage a second try. This is true whether only one or both of the partners have been married before. Yet this vulnerability is remarkably mixed with hope, courage and profound gratitude for the new life that has come with falling in love again.

Keep in mind that as someone helping couples prepare for a second marriage, your role is really one of a trailblazer. The church is just beginning to understand and publicly acknowledge the unique challenges that many married couples face. You are part of the growing wisdom on this matter. Your own experience is crucial in helping the church address more adequately this developing and greatly needed area of pastoral ministry.

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