

## Ministries to divorced, remarried strive to echo pope's call for mercy



Divorce is never easy.

From the realization that love has failed to feelings of shame and a tendency to assess blame, divorce poses an untidy conundrum for families even when a couple settles on an amicable legal separation.

In the eyes of the church, a divorced couple remains married until a decree of nullity is issued, if a couple chooses to go that route.

There's even more of a challenge for faithful divorced Catholics, who often misunderstand church teaching on marriage. Divorced people may separate themselves from the church, believing they have been automatically excommunicated or banned from church activities even though they have not remarried.

People who are civilly divorced and do not marry someone else are not prohibited from receiving Communion under canon law.

However, church practice prohibits people in irregular marriages -- those civilly remarried without receiving an annulment -- from receiving Communion, serving as lector or extraordinary minister of holy Communion, teaching in a Catholic institution and holding certain parish or diocesan offices. There is no prohibition on being involved in most other church ministries.

About 20 percent of U.S. Catholics have experienced divorce, according to the General Social Survey at the University of Chicago. The Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate at Georgetown University places the number of divorced Catholics at about 11 million.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, through its National Pastoral Initiative on Marriage, has worked to explain church teaching on divorce in the hope of correcting misunderstandings and keeping people connected with the church.

Bethany J. Meola, assistant director in the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth, described the work of the church with divorced, separated and remarried Catholics as accompaniment, a term often cited by Pope Francis.

"It's that sense of making sure that they don't consider themselves separated from the church, that they realize they are baptized Catholics, they are members of the church, they are called to participate with the church, attend Mass, pray, be present with the church," Meola explained.

"(It's) helping people in all of these situations to carry their cross and know that they don't carry it alone," she said.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, former president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, addressed several concerns surrounding divorced and remarried Catholics in the Sept. 15 issue of America magazine.

Acknowledging that the indissolubility of marriage is specified in canon law, Cardinal Kasper cited Pope Francis' repeated calls for a more merciful church in making a carefully constructed argument that mercy must be at the heart of the church's outreach efforts, including those to divorced and remarried Catholics. He wrote that the Gospel "is against a legalistic understanding of canon law."

He posed the question: If a Catholic who is divorced and civilly remarried without the first marriage being annulled, "but then repents of his failure to fulfill what he promised before God, his partner and the church in the first marriage, and carries out as well as possible his new duties and does what he can for the Christian education of his children and has a serious desire for the sacraments, which he needs for strength in his difficult situation, can we after a time of new orientation and stabilization deny absolution and forgiveness?"

Such questions are being weighed by church leaders in advance of the upcoming extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the family Oct 5-19.

Healing and acceptance are at the heart of ministries to divorced and remarried Catholics.

There's no better place to heal from the trauma of divorce than in the church, believes Gregory Mills, executive director of Catholic Divorce Ministry, the Ministry of the North American Conference of Separated and Divorced Catholics.

"People have walked back into the church, willing to admit they made a grievous mistake and want to get right with themselves, their local community and with God," he told Catholic News Service. "The ultimate salve for the wound is God and his healing mercy."

Dioceses across the country have ministries to divorced, separated and remarried couples in place. But unlike marriage ministries, programs for this significant part of the church family are not a requirement; among existing programs their offerings varies.

During a time of divorce, couples are dealing with the realization that love has failed and mercy, understanding and acceptance is vital, said Carol Petro, marriage and family specialist in the Cleveland Diocese.

"This is where mercy comes in. Mercy comes in, but also the virtue of hope because (couples) come with despair, they come with shame, they come with blame, they come with hearts that have been

broken and disconnected from the church and there are a lot of myths that are out there," Petro said.

"We need to learn how to evangelize the divorced because we're seeing a lot of them not having a basic knowledge of the Catholic faith. We also need to understand where they are with the shamefulness and the fact they are now single in the pews," explained Petro, who was divorced in 1997 and remarried in the church after her first marriage was annulled.

Cleveland's Sacred Steps to Peace ministry is closely tied to the diocesan tribunal, which is charged with handling marriage annulments.

The tribunal offers a program it calls First Step. It convenes several times a year to provide basic information about the annulment process to divorced couples.

Lynette Tait, a tribunal judge in Cleveland, told CNS her office began the program in 2009 in an effort to help people understand the requirements of the annulment process. More than 1,500 people have attended the sessions, she said.

"A lot of people come because they need to submit cases. But people also come just for the right understanding of what the church is doing. So many people don't understand what we do, why we do it and how we do it," Tait explained.

She admitted the annulment process is not easy, but that it is also not meant to be intimidating.

"The hardest thing in doing this is that first step, is getting it started," she said.

"We're looking to reach out to people, make them aware that the church is concerned for them."

To encourage more people to consider the annulment process, Cleveland Bishop Richard G. Lennon in June waived all fees.

Father Gary Yanus, judicial vicar, said the move was meant to encourage people to renew their relationship with the church. So far, there has been no significant change in the number of people seeking an annulment, he said.

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***Editor's Note: More information about the church's ministries for divorced, separated and remarried Catholics is available online at [www.foryourmarriage.org/catholic-marriage/church-teachings/divorce](http://www.foryourmarriage.org/catholic-marriage/church-teachings/divorce).***

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