

Let us pray for a new attitude to Catholics who divorce

For those who fail to attain the ideal, this Church of sinners should offer forgiveness and the promise of hope.



Pope Francis married 20 couples Sunday, including some who already live together and those with children, technically a sin in the eyes of the church.

It is rumoured that Pope Francis is ready to present his revolutionary take on divorce sooner than expected Photo: AP

What's the big deal, non-Catholics must be asking? Cardinal Vincent Nichols, leader of Britain's 4.5 million Catholics, is making noises about how his Church of "sinners" should show "mercy" to divorcees. He says there may have to be a "radical rethink" on the issue.

Outsiders must be scratching their heads: the rest of the world resolved divorce ages ago. It has been legal in this country since 1857, and marital break-up is now routine, apart from in the Philippines and Vatican City, where it is still banned. Women who have divorced are no longer caricatured as desperate cougars; nor is being a child of divorce an automatic reason to see a shrink. In short, divorce has become normal.

And yet, for some Catholics, the Cardinal's words are nothing short of hand grenades that may explode next month – when the Synod of bishops meets at the Vatican – and shatter the stained-glass windows of the Church as they know it.

Catholicism teaches compassion. Jesus was kind to prostitutes and the poverty-stricken, and preached that what we did to the least important among us, we did to Him. But there is one area where, to date, Catholics have been cruel, not kind: divorce.

If you are a Catholic who is divorced, or married to a divorcee, you are banned from taking

communion. Step into a church at the moment when the priest offers the body and blood of Christ to the faithful, and you'll see men and women, heads bowed, cupping their face in their hands as if the vision of the lucky ones receiving bread and wine is too painful. I know how they feel. I am a Catholic who married a divorced man. It doesn't matter that Edward didn't initiate the break-up; we still couldn't marry in church, and I still can't take communion.

I have accepted the rules I was raised with. When friends asked why I stayed in a club that didn't want me as a member, I explained that the Church was not my club, but my home: I could no more walk away from it than from the cosy house I set up with Edward and our children. This is where I belong.

I have felt no outrage on my part: I walked into this painful limbo – where I am a Catholic, but kept away from the most important part of our liturgy – with eyes wide open. I knew the rules, and decided unilaterally that I would ignore them and marry Edward anyway.

But although I feel a passive acceptance of my lot as a “sinner”, I do know many whose situation is so unfair, I want to lob those hand grenades myself. How can my Church bar Suzanne, a friend whose husband spent the nights at his laptop, gambling away the family's income? If she had not divorced him, after his broken promises to reform added up to nought, she risked her children's future. Surely no priest can say she's guilty of breaking God's law? Nor is Suzanne's case the worst: one priest, who offered to give me communion despite Church rulings, knew battered wives who'd finally found the courage to divorce their abusers – only to realise they would be divorcing their Church as well.

Such tales anger me. As did the practice of annulment, where you could effectively buy the Church's collusion in untying the marital knot.

Marriage is sacred, and not a temporary contract. I believe that, wholly. But this wonderful institution, where a couple love one another through sickness, poverty and even betrayal, is an ideal. For those who fail to attain it, the Church of sinners should offer forgiveness and the promise of hope. Rumour has it that Cardinal Nichols is a warm-up act – and that Pope Francis is ready to present his revolutionary take on divorce sooner than expected.

Excluded and humiliated, too many of us have knelt forlornly, waiting for our Church to embrace us fully. Francis may be the Pope we've been waiting for.

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