

What Divorce Has Done To America



Session 4

THE IMPACT OF DIVORCE
ON SPIRITUALITY

Reading 1: Prodigal Parents

Jennifer Roback Morse

Notes

Please write any comments or questions for discussion here.

Dear Concerned Citizen,

Christianity teaches that God is our loving father. Catholics often envision the Church as a loving mother. For most people throughout history these have been comforting images – a vast improvement over jealous or angry gods. But what happens to people whose experiences of their fathers and mothers are not so positive? Children of divorce often experience their fathers as absent or their mothers as preoccupied. Elizabeth Marquardt's book, *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce*, tells the heart-rending story of the spiritual struggles of the children of divorced parents.

Marquardt conducted intensive in-person interviews with 71 young adult college graduates, half of whom experienced the divorce of their parents before the age of 14, while the other half grew up in intact families. On the basis of her interviews she developed a set of survey questions that she addressed to 1500 randomly chosen young men and women from around the country between the ages of 18 and 35. Because all her subjects maintained some contact with both parents, they were spared the most devastating experience of divorce: the complete loss of contact with one parent. In other words, Marquardt made an effort to choose people who were functioning well, whose lives had not been completely ruined by divorce. She wanted to see the impact of divorce, even on those young people who had weathered it well.

Less than 20% of adult children of divorce consider themselves "very religious," compared with almost 30% of children from intact families. The children of divorce were four times more likely to agree "My father has done things I find hard to forgive," compared with those from intact families. Similarly, 20% of the adult children of divorce said that "my mother has done things I find hard to forgive."

Another woman described her disappointment with prayer:

"When stuff was happening that I didn't understand, I'd be like, 'Maybe I should pray.' I'd sit down and go, 'Okay, now how do I pray?' You'd start it as a letter. 'Dear God, how are you? I'm fine. Today was warm. I was hoping you could help me.' But then you kind of wonder about it because they never answer. So that made me wonder, 'Well, I wrote to him. I didn't get a letter back. That sounds like Dad.'"

Among the most poignant tales Elizabeth Marquardt tells about adult children of divorce is their response to the Biblical parable of the Prodigal Son. In their lives, people who left home never came back. They identified more with the forgiving father than with the sinful child. They saw themselves as willing to forgive, waiting for the prodigal to return home. But for them, it was a Prodigal Parent, rather than a Prodigal Son.

Some of Marquardt's subjects interpreted the story differently. "They say that even if they had rebelled and left home, there would not have been a stable home for them to return to." One woman went so far as to say, "I thought it was a nice idea if it would ever really work... to actually believe that you could just leave and the fact that love would always be constant. For me, it was like, if they love me, then why do they live so far away? Or why are they always going out with boyfriends....I figured if I left and went away, when I came back my house would be gone."

One of the most troubling findings of Marquardt's study was that of those who attended places of worship at the time their parents divorced, two-thirds say that no one, neither from the clergy or the congregation, reached out to help them. Many churches now have ministries for divorced members. Do those same churches have specific outreaches to their children? Perhaps some do. But all churches should.

Jennifer Roback Morse

Notes

The divorce culture poses a unique challenge to Christianity. Many of the central metaphors of Christianity are based on the family. God is the loving Father. Jesus is the bridegroom, and the Church is the Bride. Jerusalem and Zion are depicted as daughters of Yahweh. If the family breaks down, or becomes a source of pain rather than solace, the Christian message loses much of its appeal. In fact, the Christian message can become almost incomprehensible. For all these reasons, pastors need to attend seriously to the needs of the children of divorce. Reading Elizabeth Marquardt's honest book will be an essential aid to everyone who cares about healing their wounds.

Reading 2: Familiaris Consortio

Pope John Paul II

Notes

83. Various reasons can unfortunately lead to the often irreparable breakdown of valid marriages. These include mutual lack of understanding and the inability to enter into interpersonal relationships. Obviously, separation must be considered as a last resort, after all other reasonable attempts at reconciliation have proved vain.

Loneliness and other difficulties are often the lot of separated spouses, especially when they are the innocent parties. The ecclesial community must support such people more than ever. It must give them much respect, solidarity, understanding and practical help, so that they can preserve their fidelity even in their difficult situation; and it must help them to cultivate the need to forgive which is inherent in Christian love, and to be ready perhaps to return to their former married life.

The situation is similar for people who have undergone divorce, but, being well aware that the valid marriage bond is indissoluble, refrain from becoming involved in a new union and devote themselves solely to carrying out their family duties and the responsibilities of Christian life. In such cases their example of fidelity and Christian consistency takes on particular value as a witness before the world and the Church. Here it is even more necessary for the Church to offer continual love and assistance, without there being any obstacle to admission to the sacraments.

84. Daily experience unfortunately shows that people who have obtained a divorce usually intend to enter into a new union, obviously not with a Catholic religious ceremony. Since this is an evil that, like the others, is affecting more and more Catholics as well, the problem must be faced with resolution and without delay. The Synod Fathers studied it expressly.

The Church, which was set up to lead to salvation all people and especially the baptized, cannot abandon to their own devices those who have been previously bound by sacramental marriage and who have attempted a second marriage. The Church will therefore make untiring efforts to put at their disposal her means of salvation.

Pastors must know that, for the sake of truth, they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations. There is in fact a difference between those who have sincerely tried to save their first marriage and have been unjustly abandoned, and those who through their own grave fault have destroyed a canonically valid marriage. Finally, there are those who have entered into a second union for the sake of the children's upbringing, and who are sometimes subjectively certain in conscience that their previous and irreparably destroyed marriage had never been valid.

Together with the Synod, I earnestly call upon pastors and the whole community of the faithful to help the divorced, and with solicitous care to make sure that they do not consider themselves as separated from the Church, for as baptized persons they can, and indeed must, share in her life. They should be encouraged to listen to the word of God, to attend the Sacrifice of the Mass, to persevere in prayer, to contribute to works of charity and to community efforts in favor of justice, to bring up their children in the Christian faith, to cultivate the spirit and practice of penance and thus implore, day by day, God's grace. Let the Church pray for them, encourage them and show herself a merciful mother, and thus sustain them in faith and hope.

However, the Church reaffirms her practice, which is based upon Sacred Scripture, of not admitting to Eucharistic Communion divorced persons who have remarried. They are unable to be admitted thereto from the fact that their state and condition of life objectively contradict that union of love between Christ and the Church which is signified and effected by the Eucharist.

Besides this, there is another special pastoral reason: if these people were admitted to the Eucharist, the faithful would be led into error and confusion regarding the Church's teaching about the indissolubility of marriage.

Reconciliation in the sacrament of Penance which would open the way to the Eucharist, can only be granted to those who, repenting of having broken the sign of the Covenant and of fidelity to Christ, are sincerely ready to undertake a way of life that is no longer in contradiction to the indissolubility of marriage. This means, in practice, that when, for serious reasons, such as for example the children's upbringing, a man and a woman cannot satisfy the obligation to separate, they "take on themselves the duty to live in complete continence, that is, by abstinence from the acts proper to married couples." [180]

Similarly, the respect due to the sacrament of Matrimony, to the couples themselves and their families, and also to the community of the faithful, forbids any pastor, for whatever reason or pretext even of a pastoral nature, to perform ceremonies of any kind for divorced people who remarry. Such ceremonies would give the impression of the celebration of a new sacramentally valid marriage, and would thus lead people into error concerning the indissolubility of a validly contracted marriage.

By acting in this way, the Church professes her own fidelity to Christ and to His truth. At the same time she shows motherly concern for these children of hers, especially those who, through no fault of their own, have been abandoned by their legitimate partner.

With firm confidence she believes that those who have rejected the Lord's command and are still living in this state will be able to obtain from God the grace of conversion and salvation, provided that they have persevered in prayer, penance and charity.

Suggested Questions About the Readings:

1. Based on these readings, what is the impact of divorce on the spiritual lives of children?
2. Based on this passage from Pope St. John Paul, what does the Catholic Church teach about divorce?
3. What does your church teach about divorce? What is your church doing to help those affected by divorce, especially children of all ages?
4. How can the members of the group support you this week?
5. Whom would you like to invite next week?

Activity: Think of all the activities in which you are involved at your place of worship. Invite the leaders of these groups to participate in the next Reading Group.