

THE JOURNEY THROUGH DIVORCE

By PAULA RIPPLE

Yahweh is an everlasting God, he created the boundaries of the earth. He does not grow tired or weary, his understanding is beyond fathoming. He gives strength to the wearied, he strengthens the powerless. Young men grow tired and weary, youths stumble, but those who hope in Yahweh renew their strength, they put out wings like eagles. They run and do not grow weary, walk and never tire (Isaiah 40,28-31).

TIMES OF human tragedy offer to us at once the greatest possibility for new life and the greatest danger of personal destruction. They are times when we grow weary. Seldom are we able to look beyond the torment at the moment of suffering to see the gift of new life that can be ours. It is in retrospect that we come to terms with the meaning of the words of Kierkegaard when he says that 'we live our lives forward but we understand them backwards'. In no human tragedy is this more true than in divorce, a process of loss followed by a time of grieving.

As a society we have come to understand the nature of grief as it relates to dying. We are only now discovering that human beings grieve in many different ways and for greatly diversified reasons. Few divorcing people initially realize that they are grieving. It is only within the past ten years that we have extended our understanding of grief to include the loss of a marriage through divorce. It is only within the past ten years that we have been able to help divorcing people discover new life.

Divorce as a process

Until recently divorce was looked upon as an event that began and ended in a courtroom. The shared experiences of thousands of divorcing persons, coming together in various kinds of groups and other support systems, have taught us that divorce is a process that begins long before two people ever separate or see a lawyer. Moreover, it is a process that continues long after the divorce decree is final.

The divorce process may begin when two people start to avoid

conflict or when one or both people stop sharing significant areas of life. It may begin when someone makes the judgment that continual investment in a relationship central to two lives is no longer important or simply not worth the effort. Sometimes people drift into the process without an awareness of the destructive elements present in their relationship.

Tragically, the divorce process sometimes begins almost at the time of the wedding because people may unknowingly carry into a marriage the seeds of its destructiveness. Poor self image, hidden and often unrealistic expectations of another, inability to share feelings, fear of human intimacy and poor marriage models are but a few of the culprits that can prevent a marriage from ever developing into the community of life and love of which the Church speaks in its teachings on marriage. Even the best marriages face turning points when the possibility of divorce could be there. But experience also tells us that some marriages begin with so little potential for happiness and life that almost no objective observer expects the partners to grow and find new life together.

Whatever the circumstances of the marriage or the divorce, we do know that the journey through the divorce process is a long and personally costly one. Even when it is fairly clear to at least one of the two people that a relationship is more destructive than life-giving, divorce remains an unsatisfactory solution. It is a decision to replace one set of problems and questions with another set. I have heard large numbers of divorcing people say, with a sense of regret, 'I had no idea that divorce was so difficult and personally painful. Now I want to grow through this pain to make a new beginning'.

The pain of the journey is not restricted to the two people involved. It touches the life of every person who was a part of their network or relationships: their children, parents, brothers and sisters, neighbours, those with whom they work and all whose lives touch theirs in any significant way. It is not unusual that, at one time or another, all of these persons will need the support of a good listener or an understanding friend.

If those whose lives are touched by the divorce process are to *grow* through it and not just *go* through it, there is a need for all to acquire information and to reshape past attitudes. We have rapidly gone from a 'no divorce ever' mentality to a 'divorce is the solution to all' stance. We are left to deal with the tension that necessarily exists between calling Christians to the faithful fulfilment of the ideal of permanence in marriage and continuing to value the virtue of

compassion. Reconciling these two seemingly irreconcilable values was an art in which Jesus was skilled. Even though it is an art we can hope to emulate only imperfectly, we are not freed of our responsibility to care for divorcing persons. Rather, we are called to be mediators of the new life that can emerge from this singularly painful form of suffering.

When Isaiah reminds us that 'Yahweh gives strength to the wearied, he strengthens the powerless', it is important for each of us to recognize that we are the channels through which strength and love will reach those who have lost a once chosen relationship.

The response of the Church

Ten years ago when I began working with divorcing people, the response often given by pastoral people was, 'Why should we help people who have not been faithful to their promises? Why offer pastoral care to people who should not get divorced?' These statements reflect the attitude that we carried, that 'good Catholics never get divorced'.

The Church, like society in general, is only gradually coming to understand the process of divorce and all that follows in its wake. It is only in recent years that enough divorcing people have come together to share their experience in such a way that it could be sufficiently objectified to be understood by Church communities and by the secular counselling world.

When I began my work with divorcing people in Minneapolis, Minnesota, there were only a handful of support groups for divorcing Catholics throughout the United States and Canada. As I write this, we have grown to a complex network of groups on this continent numbering well over a thousand. In a survey taken of the dioceses throughout the United States two years ago (with 68% of the dioceses responding), 65% of those which responded stated that their diocese has some visible form of support for the victims of the divorce process. It is clear that the stance of the Catholic Church has changed. It is clear that the state of the question has changed from, 'Why should we give pastoral care to divorcing people?' to 'How shall this support and care be offered?'

A grass roots organization was begun in Boston in 1975 at the request of a small group of divorced women and with the help of Father James Young, C.S.P. Out of these beginnings has grown the North American Conference of Separated and Divorced Catholics. The board members are all divorced Catholics, whose primary

responsibility is the development of like-to-like ministry. The goals of the organization are simple and direct. Formulated by the board in 1975, they have never changed essentially. They are: (1) Support and healing for the separated and divorced through a network of support groups established throughout the United States and Canada. (2) Service to one another and to the total Church. (3) Education with a threefold thrust: (a) the separated and divorced, (b) the total church community, and (c) persons in ministry including religious educators, pastoral assistants, CCD teachers, teachers in schools, and priests. (4) Contacts with the media to help spread information about existing groups to help with the educational thrust. (5) Service to the local and/or diocesan offices of ministry to the separated and divorced.

It is not the purpose of these groups to make professional divorced Catholics out of people. Rather, it is important that the Church be present in such a way that people can move through the process of grieving and come to a place of new life. When they do this, their energy and their newly confirmed faith strengthen the total community. Divorcing people often say that God and the Church became important to them at the time of their divorce in a way they had not recognized at the time of their marriage.

When the pastoral care offered is challenging and loving, a gradual transformation is visible. For, in the words of Isaiah, 'Those who hope in Yahweh renew their strength, they put out wings like eagles'. Good pastoral care is essential in helping divorcing people discover their own roadblocks to life.

The roadblocks to life for a divorcing person

Among the obstacles to renewed life following separation and divorce one might include the following: the refusal or inability to deal with grief, the stereotypes divorcing people carry of themselves, guilt, inability to accept failure and misconceptions of who God is. While each of these is significant, there is one obstacle that seems to present greater problems than any other. It takes a threefold form. It is the inability to deal with anger in constructive ways. It usually manifests itself initially in relationship to the other person. It is often related to God, but the most important aspect with which one must deal is the anger and disappointment with self.

One of the first places of pain in the divorce process is the bitterness and disappointment, the anger and hostility often felt in relationship to the other person, the former spouse. It is a place of

pain which, unless dealt with and healed can grow until it destroys the person who carries it. It can even be a way of refusing to let go of someone who is no longer a part of one's life. It is as if a person clings in anger and bitterness toward another with the same intensity with which one once loved. All the creative energy once apparent in loving is sometimes channelled into bitterness and hostility when a relationship ends. Divorce counsellors and lawyers often witness to the intensity of these feelings.

I believe that this anger toward another is best dealt with indirectly. By that I mean that when divorcing people have the support system they need — friends who care and listen but who avoid giving advice — they will gradually discover that they are becoming more preoccupied with getting their own lives together again and less concerned with the person to whom they were once married.

When people begin to catch hold of their lives again, when the battered self-image is healing, when they see a possible beginning and not just an end in the divorce, then they also begin to see their own part in the former relationship. Two people set the patterns in a marriage and two people carry responsibility. Ownership of one's part is the key to dealing with one's anger towards another. When divorcing people grow to a place where they can forgive themselves, there is a moment of realization that the anger they thought was anger with another was, in fact, anger and disappointment with self.

Another aspect of anger that is difficult for many people is anger with God. The difficulty stems not so much from the divorce as from the fact that few of us have learned to accept and deal with feelings of anger in any form. Sometimes angry feelings have been labelled for us as 'naughty' or 'unacceptable'. We have gradually come to believe that anger and love are incompatible. I remember a very moving statement made by a woman at the end of a day for divorced Catholics. With a great deal of emotion she said, 'I am so frightened because I leave here realizing that I am so angry with God. I am afraid that I will be punished for my anger'.

Such expressions of anger with God or the Church are not uncommon among divorcing people. They look back and believe that they did everything the Church asked them to do. They wonder where God was while their marriage was coming apart. Such people need to be reminded of the lives of the prophets who, like Jacob, wrestled with God. They need to be told the story of Jonah who resisted God's call to go to the people of Nineveh, and to be

reminded of the fiery lives of those who had it out with God and loved and followed him still. One might wonder if Jesus was not angry when he called out from the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Sometimes people express their anger with God by saying, 'I know that God broke up my marriage because he was not pleased with me. I suppose I did not pray enough or go to Church enough'. We need to help people understand that God does not 'break up' marriages. Two human beings enter into a relationship, choose one another with all of the gifts and limitations that each has. When marriages end, it is not God but the humanness of the two people involved that has failed to give direction to the relationship. Two people choose or fail to choose those things that build solid and lasting human friendship.

Many good people do not really believe that God loves us, and understands us in ways we do not understand ourselves. God accepts us just as we are — happy, sad, encouraged, discouraged, and even angry. The final form that anger takes, though often the last to be dealt with, is the key to the other two.

When Robert Frost in his poem 'The Oven Bird' presents us with the question of what to do with a 'diminished thing', he opens for our consideration failed expectations and broken dreams:

There is a singer everyone has heard
Loud, a mid-summer and amid-wood bird . . .
The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

There is perhaps no area of human life that is more painful to us than that of broken relationships. In the excitement and hope of new relationships we seldom give thought to the possibility of diminishment or loss. When it happens we struggle to find some inner direction. Searching for ways to bring new life to a friendship that is caught in some sort of doldrum is never easy. It requires of us effort and the use of our best creative energies. It asks of us a commitment to walking through days that may seem like the season of winter.

Having the courage to refashion dreams and to let go of broken dreams is as costly for us as it was for Jesus. It asks faithfulness to our own lives while we listen to the ever-present call of a pursuing God whose promise is that in every ending are the threads of a new beginning. When dreams lose their vitality or are totally lost, we ask

ourselves why we did not notice what was happening. We ask ourselves why we did not listen to or read more clearly the signs that were there along the way.

The painful question at the heart of the divorce process is asking what I do now with this 'diminished thing' which was once my marriage? How can my life continue? All too often valuable energy is spent reviewing what someone else, the other person in the marriage, did or did not do. This information is the most apparent and easily obtainable for both persons. But it is not the information in which the keys to new life are to be found.

Experience tells us that one cause of divorce is the lack of self-knowledge that people carry into marriages. It is important that a person who must accept the end of marriage and the reality of a divorce invest personal energies in those places where the dividends are certain to bring new life. One such costly investment with rich rewards is the journey in self-discovery.

Every marriage is two people's marriage. The patterns in every marriage are related to both of the partners — never just one. Coming to understand one's own part is simply an opportunity to discover and reflect upon one's way of being a friend. It offers a challenge to get in touch with inner dynamisms, and to notice how we offer friendship to another. Looking with courage and hope at diminished and broken dreams may help us see, for the first time, that a desire to manipulate may have been our reason for giving and that our hidden expectations did not respect the person of someone we said we loved.

Those who have made this journey say of themselves, 'My divorce was the greatest hurt I have suffered. But through all of this I came to know myself for the first time. I also realize that the bitterness and resentment I carried, thinking I was angry with the person to whom I was once married, was really anger and disappointment with myself'.

Those making the difficult journey through divorce are aware of the pain that has come into the lives of those they love: their children.

The children of divorce

The question, 'Who is most hurt in the divorce process?' is a difficult one with which to deal because every person whose life is touched by this process is somehow 'hurt'. Perhaps it is too strong a statement to say that the children are most hurt. A sixteen year old

boy told me recently that he was relieved when his parents separated because he found it so difficult to live torn between two parents whose lives had grown apart. Divorcing people sometimes admit that their own divorce transition was so personally costly that they had neither the emotional energy nor the ability to reach beyond their feelings to be sufficiently sensitive to the feelings of their children.

To speak of the children of divorce with sensitivity to those who choose divorce is to remind ourselves that, once a marriage has reached a certain place of destruction, the only choice left may be to ask, 'How will the least harm be done?' To speak of divorce with sensitivity is to remind ourselves as Christians that God's call to life does not demand that people remain in clearly destructive situations. Making a bad situation better in marriage necessarily involves the energy and commitment of both people. For a variety of reasons, this is often not a viable option.

A recent issue of *Marriage and divorce today*, a weekly professional newsletter stated: 'The divorce rate has doubled in the last decade and over 50% of divorced couples have children under the age of 18'. When I read that I was reminded of a little girl I met recently on a plane as I was flying from the west coast to Minneapolis. When I boarded the plane, she was sitting in the front row aisle seat, crying quietly. Kneeling next to her, clearly not planning to fly with her, was a young man. When the cabin attendant announced that all visitors had to leave, the young man gave her a final hug and went away. I was sitting directly behind her and I reached over the seat, put my hand on her shoulder and said, 'Do you want to sit with me?' She nodded her head and pointed to her seat belt: she did not know how to unfasten it. After she had tucked into the window seat next to me, she sat looking towards the airport. Barely moving the fingers on the other hand she was waving goodbye to her father. In the next two and a half hours, I was to have reviewed for me many of the ways in which divorce affects children.

After Rhonda had dried her tears we talked quietly. She never used the expression, 'When my parents got divorced', she always said, 'When I got divorced . . .'. Not only does divorce disrupt all relationships that are a part of the life of two people, it affects the relationships of all whose lives touch theirs in any significant way.

The quiet dignified tears were of great concern to me. Rhonda, like many other children, was afraid of making her father hurt more. Very young children have strong protective instincts with regard to

their parents; a fact which means that often the children of divorce have no strong place in which to put their own pain, no place to share it on a day to day basis.

She told me that she was afraid that the divorce was her fault. She said she remembered one day when she had been naughty, and she associated that with the conflict that followed. What she did not realize and perhaps could not have understood was that whatever she did was simply the occasion for the surfacing of the conflict and not its cause.

Like other children, Rhonda wondered if her parents still loved her even though they did not love each other any more. She needed reassurance from both parents that they had divorced one another but not her. She was afraid that one day she would be all alone. Because many children live far from grandparents, aunts and uncles, they do not have the many blessings of an extended family.

We know that the children of divorce grow through the process more easily when their parents are getting the help and support they need. The support of the Church is vital.

The call to renewed life

Because of the all-encompassing nature of the tragedy of divorce, it is a process through which people can grow to new life only if they feel the support and care of others. Because divorce is a human process, it touches deeply the lives of people of all faiths and cultures. Though divorced catholic groups include people of all religious orientations, there are some questions and some areas of pastoral sensitivity that are unique to Roman Catholics. It is not likely that a Roman Catholic will grow through the grieving and pain of divorce without good pastoral care that relates directly to the 'catholic questions' and to the deep-seated sense of failure and guilt.

Isaiah reminds us that 'Yahweh is an everlasting God', and that 'his understanding is beyond fathoming'. Since the Church is the place where God's love is best mediated and God's strength is made present to all, but especially to the tired and the weary, each of us has a responsibility to create an environment in our Church that calls people to new life. It is in and through the Church that we live the promise of Jesus who acted with compassion and not judgment toward the hurting. The Church is called by God to be that place which 'puts out wings like eagles' so that the hurting and the broken-hearted can accept the promise of life: 'They run and do not grow weary, walk and never tire'.