

SECOND MARRIAGE

An Opportunity for Spiritual Growth?

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Introduction

MY BRIEF IS TO FOCUS ON THE *significant other* in a second marriage who, as a result of current church teaching, is not recognized as a marriage partner, although it is conceded that the union itself may witness vividly to the presence and activity of God. Such a marriage, or in strictly canonical terms attempted marriage, presents the teaching Church with a paradox: how can the partners give witness to the presence of God in their lives, when at the same time they are regarded as permanent sources of sin to each other?

In the past few years I have researched this question in some depth, interviewing hundreds of people about their pastoral experiences and examining the theology which gives rise to the conflict. In another article in this issue I explore the theological and canonical complications which surround the Church's efforts to bring pastoral relief to such people. Here I will concentrate on how they themselves perceive their situations and how they cope spiritually with the radical adjustments which they have to make.

My starting-point is the point at which my other article concludes: 'It is to peace that God has called you' (1 Cor 7:15). There is a fundamental gospel imperative that Christ's saving presence can reach into every situation. Paradoxically experience often demonstrates that in the midst of the greatest pain and sadness we discover new depths of love and compassion, perceive new and broader spiritual horizons. My research bears out the truth of this among the separated and divorced. Often the dreadful pain that accompanies the breakdown of marriage can prove to be the catalyst for new spiritual growth: for some it is achieved in simply coming to terms with what has happened, for others it is only discovered in the warmth of a new relationship which reveals God's love to them. To get in touch with the spiritual challenge of a new partner we cannot ignore the spiritual demands of coming to terms with

the marriage breakdown which precedes it. And it is worth remembering that the *significant other* for some separated and divorced people may not be a new partner, but an individual or group of people who help them adjust to their new circumstances.

Setting the scene – some valuable insights

Rosemary Haughton, in an article entitled 'The meaning of marriage in women's new consciousness', wrote:

For many women, the moment of conversion, the true metanoia, has come when they reach the decision to seek a divorce. This is not necessarily because the husband is abusive, but often because he has been cast, willy-nilly, in a role which he cannot break out of, and which makes it impossible for the relationship to be honest – and therefore impossible for the woman to live with integrity . . . To compare the decision to seek a divorce to the choice of discipleship may seem shocking – but that can be what it really is: the choice of life over death, spiritual freedom over bondage.¹

While Rosemary Haughton's article concentrates exclusively on women's experience, my research suggests that the kind of spiritual development she envisages is open equally to both women and men, albeit that fewer men are likely to seek counselling or outside support.² Below is part of the moving account of Andrew, someone who attended one of my many group interviews. He began by explaining that he had spent several years in a monastery, but, troubled by doubts, had decided not to proceed to final vows. In the course of time he married, but after seventeen faithful years he was confronted with the terrible dilemma of his wife's affair. He went on to say:

For one thing I was determined not to pick up the first stone and throw it. I didn't see myself as the innocent party. My problem was I wanted to do the right thing . . .

As a child . . . I somehow felt that God would love me if I kept the rules and that if I broke them he would punish me. And that was at variance with what I felt at gut level with a loving God . . . There is a disparity between what the Church is saying . . ., and this idea of a loving God who wants me to grow as a person.

The loving thing in this situation was to let Margaret go, which was the first thing I did . . . But then I went through a period when I thought: 'The Church disapproves of me: God somehow must disapprove of what I have done' . . .

In the interval I had joined *Beginning Experience*,³ and I realized that I had gone through my grief and I had to let go of it . . . In the end the only way I could work my way through it was to start to say I would take responsibility for my own actions . . .

I will always believe in God. And to me the way through it was to concentrate on my perception of God . . . So I clutched to a God point of view rather than a Church point of view. I felt somehow the Church, by its insistence on rules and regulations in the early stage, had placed an insupportable burden, which I couldn't carry and which I didn't want to carry. So I eventually divorced Margaret because I thought it was the loving thing to do . . .

I know that I feel a whole person now. I am quite happy to tackle the next stage when it comes along. And if I did get involved in a relationship I would have to look at this question of whether I want an annulment or whether I would just disregard the annulment . . . I honestly feel I had a valid marriage and that somehow for somebody to turn round and say to me, years later on, 'your marriage was null and void', would almost devastate me . . . I would find it easier to live with the fact that I have come to terms with what happened about my marriage.

I have come to terms with my relationship with God. I am accepting responsibility for my life as it is now, and if I thought I could grow in a loving relationship, then I would have no qualms about entering into one. In fact I have made it almost a criterion for judging whether I trust God enough.⁴

I have quoted from this testimony at some length because it eloquently identifies many of the conflicts which disturb committed Catholics.

Catholic perceptions of divorce and remarriage

I often hear it said that the Catholic Church has never had a problem with divorce as such: the problems arise over remarriage. Because of pastoral developments over the past thirty years it is understandable that this should now be widely perceived to be the case, but that is not the full story. Throughout its history the Church has had a huge problem with divorce. The abhorrence of divorce is so deeply rooted in the Catholic psyche that I would suggest it explains why committed Catholics whose marriages break down are likely to suffer an added trauma of the kind described in Andrew's testimony. In other words not

only do they have to struggle with all the psychological repercussions of their perceived failure, but also with a deep sense of guilt that they have betrayed God and the Church.

During my research I met someone whose divorce in the 1960s had been formally sanctioned by her bishop with the proviso that she was not to marry again. It is worth remembering that such had been standard practice; only since Vatican II has it effectively ceased to be implemented.⁵ It should not surprise us therefore that many Catholics still have an inherent dread of divorce and regard it with great suspicion. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* it is still described as 'a grave offence against the natural law' and 'a plague on society' (2384). I was interested in how often people admitted that prior to their own separations or divorces they had stood in harsh judgement of fellow Catholics who had experienced marriage difficulties.

Undoubtedly one of the important contributory factors to what many discern to be a changing climate in the Church as a whole is the fact that the enormous increase in the number of divorces means that few families are left unscathed. When your own son or daughter, nephew or niece share with you the pain of their separation or divorce you are bound to get a different perspective. But it was the support groups, who emerged in the early 1980s, who first showed the way, ministering to one another in a way which I believe was prophetic.

The support groups

Three main groups became established. The Association of Separated and Divorced Catholics (ASDC) was a response to an anguished letter in the Catholic press in 1981. From a pioneer group in Manchester it now numbers hundreds of members in centres all over the country. A lay initiative, it has forged excellent relations with the hierarchy and wider Church by bringing the plight of its members to their attention while studiously avoiding the temptation to become a lobby for change.⁶ The following year the Archdiocese of Liverpool took its own initiative and formed the Rainbow Groups. In practice they and ASDC perform the same role: mutual support within the family of the Church in the face of the crises which accompany separation and divorce. They are complemented by the Beginning Experience (BE). As the name suggests, this is more than a support group: rather it is a programme of readjustment based on bereavement therapy, and open to those who are grieving the loss of a partner either through death or separation/divorce. Its origins can be traced to the USA in the 1970s. It was introduced to Britain in 1983 when a team

came by invitation to direct the initial weekend of the programme at Minsteracres in County Durham. Now a number of teams are established in different parts of the country.

It is significant that Andrew attributed much of his spiritual growth to his association with BE. The intensity of the programme is such that in terms of the anticipated spiritual results BE might be compared to a directed retreat in preparation for a life commitment. The other support groups would be more akin to ongoing spiritual direction with a soul-friend. All comparisons have their limits, and in writing this I do not intend to decry the work of ASDC or Rainbow; quite the contrary: I think they are fulfilling a vital function in their own right as well as sometimes preparing the way for people to attend the BE programme and/or supporting them after the event.

Furthermore, I would advocate some caution with regard to BE in that I think great care needs to be taken to ensure that people are psychologically ready for the kind of therapy it offers. For some it will never be a wise option. Nevertheless, as in all Christian spirituality, there is no better guide than the gospel criterion: 'You will know them by their fruits' (Mt 7:20). BE has proved that it can not only restore people but enable them to move on and make fresh starts, liberating them from the kind of burdens which ultimately stifle spiritual progress. I thought that Andrew made a very telling point in his testimony when he spoke of what he judged to be the 'insupportable burden' placed on him by the Church's 'rules and regulations in the early stage': a burden which he said he 'couldn't carry' and 'didn't want to carry'. This is not the place to investigate the validity of his challenge: I deal with that in my other article. What I would draw attention to is the fact that when a marriage breaks down it is likely that we will be confronted with broken human beings. As one ASDC member so astutely observed: 'I think sometimes the Catholic Church doesn't realize we are human as well as Catholic'. The first ministry such people require is the comfort of an understanding community, reflecting the compassion, hope and forgiveness of Christ, not a reminder of the rules and regulations surrounding divorce and remarriage.

This ministry all the support groups have managed to provide. I believe that in so doing they are providing a prophetic voice to the rest of the church community. It was a ministry that was lacking in the past because of those perceptions of divorce which meant that it was regarded as a state incompatible with Catholicism. A key discussion took place prior to the establishment of ASDC because the wisdom of

having the words 'divorce' and 'Catholic' in the title was questioned. To this day there are priests who remain uneasy about such an association and who would hesitate about encouraging its establishment in their parishes or balk at having a poster in the porch.

For the majority of Catholics the responses of the clergy are still vitally important in determining their potential to make spiritual progress. Therefore to the responses and the spirituality of the clergy we must turn our attention.

The clergy

I was often fascinated by my encounters with my brother priests during the research. Labels can be dangerous, but in general they fell into two categories: those with an instinctively *legalist* outlook and those with a *personalist* one. Those with a personalist outlook would begin by seeing the suffering person before them; those with the legalist outlook would begin by seeing the canonical complications. It was not that the latter necessarily lacked compassion; it was just that their training had so conditioned them that this was their instinctive response. In fairness most of the clergy cannot be fitted neatly into categories, for in these situations, as in so many others, they struggle with the tension. This was eloquently illustrated by one priest in a group meeting. My policy was to focus their attention on the complex problems under review with the hypothetical case history of Julie. It is not necessary to know the details of her story to understand the tenor of his response.

My first reaction to the case is that, at the beginning, Julie is somebody who wants to do the right things and seems to love God, and at the end of it she is a problem. And she has been made a problem not because she has changed – she is still exactly the same – but she has been made a problem in my mind-set because there are all sorts of laws that I am not all that happy about. So you end up just wishing Julie would go away and talk to somebody else, which is terribly unfair because you have contradicted the basic gospel principle: you have condemned her. You are almost in danger of writing her off as a hopeless case for no good reason other than that it is going to be an awful bother to get this sorted out.

More than most lay people, the clergy have the opportunity for spiritual renewal and many are becoming sensitive to the inadequacy of

their training and the need to become better equipped to meet the new demands of their ministry. They are becoming conscious that the need to respond to the humanity of one another is the beginning of all good spirituality. Modern spiritual writers are stressing again the humanity of Christ and reminding us of the teaching of Irenaeus that 'the glory of God is the human person fully alive'.⁷ The task for all of us is to find the gospel solution in every situation.

The spirituality of those recovering from the trauma of divorce is linked with the spirituality of the clergy: we are all part of the one Church, seeking union with one another and with Christ. Just like Andrew, many priests are weighed down by the rules and regulations as they understand them. They want to reach out to the human person in pain but are fearful that by not administering the law they will be unfaithful to God. Again I can illustrate this by quoting from one of the clergy. That very morning he had officiated at a funeral in the parish. The woman's son had come to him in the sacristy, asking if it would be possible on this one occasion to receive holy communion in spite of his irregular marriage situation. The priest felt unable to give his blessing to this and told him to come forward for a blessing, but he realized the son left the sacristy 'broken-hearted'. This led the priest to ponder on the injustice of it all. He reflected that most of the young children who had come from the school to sing at the mass were not regular churchgoers and that a few years ago he would have been unhappy about them going to holy communion *en masse*. He went on to say:

The same rules and regulations that are binding me I was able to ignore regarding children – and I think ninety-nine per cent of people would ignore them. But on the other hand, I could not bring myself to ignore the one about the divorcee. And I just felt it is all a sham . . . I really felt I had let that man down when he needed me most, when he needed Our Lord most of all. And in the same Mass I just could see there has to be a better balance, there has to be a fairness in applying Our Lord's sacraments to people . . . There is a tremendous conflict within myself. It is going to become more and more, and I think a lot of good priests will go under with the pressure of it all.

I draw your attention to two points. Firstly, the priest's dilemma is the same as Andrew's: how do I cope with rules and regulations which conflict with what I believe is the just and loving gospel response? Secondly, the question surrounds the reception of the eucharist.

Although for some the fact that they cannot have a church ceremony to celebrate their new union is a cause of sadness, the great distress for most people results from their being banned from holy communion. The fact is that for all that the teaching Church insists that people in these irregular situations should 'not consider themselves as separated from the Church, for as baptized persons they can, and indeed must, share in her life',⁸ to be deprived of the eucharist is for them tantamount to being excommunicated.⁹ It is probable that contemporary Catholics feel this deprivation even more than their ancestors in view of the enormous stress that is now placed on frequent reception of the eucharist – not as a reward for being good but the means by which we grow spiritually.

In my other article I examine the Church's pastoral response in terms of the increase in the granting of annulments, and touch on the delicate area of the internal forum – that ministry which seeks to find a way forward privately when the public (external) forum of the annulment process is unable to provide the solution. Much has been written on this subject in the past twenty-five years and I cannot hope to do it justice by trying to summarize the debate here. I simply draw your attention to the discussions in Kevin Kelly's new edition of *Divorce and second marriage: facing the challenge*,¹⁰ and also in my own recently published book, *What binds marriage? Roman Catholic theology in practice*.¹¹

What we do need to note is that the internal forum solution became the focus of much attention precisely because canonists and theologians were looking for pastoral solutions in the field of marriage breakdown, seemingly with the blessing of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.¹² It is all the more ironic therefore that the Roman magisterium should be seeking to outlaw its use even in the so-called *conflict cases*, where it is privately acknowledged that a former marriage was invalid, but for some reason this cannot be established in the external forum. The *hardship cases*, where the validity of the former marriage is not in question, call for a broader interpretation of what is legitimate pastoral care in that primacy of conscience becomes the sole criterion. And it is in this sphere that Catholics often have insoluble spiritual problems because they look to authority for definitive decisions. The priest who agonized over the son at the funeral pleaded with me to make clear in my report to the bishops the desperate struggle priests were experiencing. He was looking for someone else to make the decision and free him in conscience. Andrew struggled for years but was finally coming to a kind of freedom which few Catholics

enjoy: he was actually able to say that a decision not in conformity with official Church policy – i.e. that he would have no qualms about entering a loving relationship in which he could grow – was the criterion whereby he would judge whether he trusted God enough.

I submit that this one single statement amply demonstrates the potential for spiritual growth in these situations. It is not that Andrew did not care or was kicking over the traces or believed that divorce should be readily accepted in every situation by the Church. Throughout his painful struggle he sought the loving solution, which is surely the gospel solution. That kind of maturity can only be reached by individuals opening themselves to the mercy of God and ‘trusting enough’ to love.

Before drawing to a close there is one other factor which we cannot ignore. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) has become established as a normal process for welcoming new members into the Catholic community and with it has come a new dimension to the problem of pastoral practice with regard to the separated and divorced.

RCIA and the pastoral problem of separation and divorce

A key element in RCIA is that people learn to interpret their stories and see them as part of God’s story. Not surprisingly for a good number of candidates the stories include broken relationships, divorces and remarriages, which conflict with Catholic teaching and make these people’s reception into the Church problematical. I studied this particular aspect of the question as a separate issue during my research and found almost all the concerned parties – candidates, catechists, clergy and fellow parishioners – were bewildered that there was no simple solution to the problem. For in many of these situations we have a perfect illustration of the kind of spiritual dilemma we are addressing in this essay: people, witnessing to the love of God in their homes and families, and prompted by the Spirit to grow spiritually and seek full communion with the Church, yet confronted with the obstacle of a past failure, which may well have been resolved at every other level, but which could still be the cause of stifling that spiritual growth. In many respects such situations are comparable to those which St Paul sought to resolve among the Corinthians *in favour of the faith*. The essential difference is that even today a large percentage of people are still baptized, making them at least technically Christians already.¹³

I can only say that I was intrigued by the solutions found to move matters forward in this arena. When approached it seems that the tribunals generally took a sympathetic view and tried to respond as

efficiently and speedily as possible. When that option did not appear to be feasible it seemed that some bishops, vicar generals and tribunal personnel were not beyond telling their priests 'to deal with it' or to remember that 'rules must never get in the way'. One bishop suggested to a worried priest that his messages on the tribunal answerphone may not have been answered 'for a reason'.

We must hope that the increasing incidence of cases among those seeking reception into the Church will further prompt the church authorities to attend urgently to the anomalies and injustices of the present discipline. Meanwhile there is no reason why any of us should be prevented from growing in peace and freedom.

Conclusion

I am happy to report that the research has been a growth experience in my own spiritual journey. It has been a liberating experience, enabling me to understand better not only the gospel paradox in so many other people's lives but also in my own.

Nowadays I am always careful to avoid any suggestion that I can resolve the problems of those in these tangled situations. I am happy to rehearse the arguments, discuss the theological history and allow people to share their stories. But they must learn to trust enough and to love enough, and then they can live in peace.

NOTES

¹ Article in William P. Roberts (ed), *Commitment to partnership: explorations of the theology of marriage* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp 141–157, esp pp 149–150.

² See John Abulafia, *Men and divorce: coping, learning, starting afresh* (London: Fontana, 1990).

³ The Beginning Experience (BE) is a group therapy programme for people who have lost their married partners either through death or divorce. It will be discussed along with the other support groups later in the article.

⁴ This is a transcript from a tape-recording of his spontaneous statement at the meeting and is published with his permission. Andrew and his wife's name, Margaret, are pseudonyms.

⁵ Canon 1153 of the *Code of Canon Law* still suggests that the norm for a spouse leaving the marriage should be 'by a decree of the local Ordinary', although it is possible to use one's own authority if 'there is danger in delay'.

⁶ This is not to say that they have not contributed greatly to changing attitudes in the Catholic Church. In my estimation they and the other support groups have played the major role in helping to re-educate the wider community.

⁷ *Against the heresies*, Bk 4.20.7.

⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio* (84) (London: CTS, 1981), p 159.

⁹ It is worth noting that while no formal excommunication has ever been imposed here in Britain, in the last century the bishops of the United States of America did impose this censure on those who married 'outside the Church', albeit that they subsequently modified it with the clause 'out of defiance'. Interestingly, it was formally rescinded only in 1977. See Barry Brunsman, *New hope for divorced Catholics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), pp 3–4.

¹⁰ London: Chapman, 1996.

¹¹ London: Chapman, 1997.

¹² Cf *What binds marriage?*, p 127.

¹³ For a further discussion of this Pauline privilege *in favour of the faith*, please consult the other article.