

BEARING WITNESS TO CHRIST'S SPOUSAL LOVE

In the Western world, the mentality of individualism pervades sexual behavior more than it permeates the liberal economy. People run after pleasure without restraint. Sexual relations between consenting adults are always considered legitimate, even if love is lacking. Marriage is reduced to cohabitation, based on mutual gratification and a temporary convergence of interests. The Church's teaching is judged as detached from reality, as madness, worthy of scorn and derision.

Christians, who want to follow Jesus as true disciples, are called to go against the current with determination. "As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (Jn 13:34). Eros reaches its accomplishment in agape; joy comes from self-giving to the point of sacrifice; the exercise of sex has value only as an expression of conjugal love; Christian marriage has the grace of participating in and expressing Christ's spousal love for the Church; the Christian family has the mission of evangelizing, by radiating Christ's presence with the beauty of a united, faithful, fruitful and indissoluble love (cf. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 48).

Jesus' demanding teaching on marriage is summarized in the following text: "they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder... Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" (Mk 10:8–9.11–12). God has given the husband to his wife and the wife to her husband. The gift is irrevocable; it can be rejected, but not annulled; it creates an unbreakable bond of mutual belonging between the spouses. Freely accepted with faith and generous commitment, it makes a genuine and lasting conjugal love between them possible and effective. Divorce is contrary to God's will, and even more opposed to it is a second union, which Jesus explicitly qualified as adultery. While it can sometimes be a lesser evil, or even necessary, to stop living together, remarriage is never licit (cf. St. Paul, 1 Cor 7:10–11; Council of Trent, Canon 7, DH 1807). With a second union, people completely reject God's irrevocable gift and find themselves in absolute contradiction with the indissolubility of marriage.

The Church has never given Herself the power to change Jesus' teaching, to make exceptions and grant dispensations. Only wanting to listen and interpret it obediently, She has progressively come to indicate the absolute indissolubility of ratified and consummated sacramental marriage (cf. Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, DH 3712; St. John Paul II, Speech, 31 January 2000). This marriage can be dissolved only by the death of one of the two spouses. Human will cannot divide what God has

joined together: not only should it not do so, but even if it wanted to, it could not, because unity is principally an irrevocable gift from God.

Being gravely contrary to God's will and qualified as adultery by Jesus himself, the new union, as long as it lasts, is incompatible with the Eucharistic Communion that expresses and embodies Christ's spousal love for the Church. It is necessary to recognize one's sinfulness, to repent of previous marital failure, repairing any damage, and to abandon the consecutive adulterous union, thus truly changing one's life. Forgiveness—the mercy that God untiringly offers us—can be received and the disposition necessary for access to the Eucharistic table acquired only if there is a sincere commitment to conversion.

According to the teaching of St. John Paul II, it is desirable that conversion lead the remarried divorcees to stop living together; but, if this is not possible for serious reasons, their abstinence from sexual relations would be enough, because these acts are exclusively proper to true marriage (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 84). The practice of continence puts an end to the adulterous union, and familiarity between the two is limited to a life together based on friendship and mutual help. Only those with a spiritualist vision and little sensitivity for the physical dimension of the human person can consider what the Second Vatican Council calls the “exercise the acts proper to marriage” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 49) irrelevant or secondary for the quality of interpersonal communion.

When the two partners stop living conjugally, they are no longer in contradiction with Christ's spousal love, and they are inwardly prepared to receive the Eucharist. However, their objective situation, which in public still appears as conjugality, does not yet correspond with their subjective disposition. Therefore, the Church, careful to avoid undermining the objective meaning of the sacraments of the Eucharist and of Marriage, admits them to the Eucharistic table, provided that there is no danger of scandal to other believers and that the objective meaning of the sacrament of marriage and the Eucharist is not compromised. Admission to the Eucharist should usually be conceded in a place where these faithful are not known, because it cannot be granted to the detriment of others. It is a visible and communitarian fact, and not merely interior and individual; indeed, it is the highest expression and embodiment of the Church as the “universal sacrament of salvation” (*Lumen Gentium*, 48), and it must be kept free from ambiguity and objective counter-witness. We must not underestimate the essential social dimension of man and of the Church's sacraments. Since the Church is the universal sacrament of salvation, i.e., the visibility of Christ's love, desirous to convert and save everyone, Her constituent elements, firstly the preaching of the Gospel and the celebration of the sacraments, require being true, consistent and transparent.

A certain restriction is required in the case of remarried divorcees, who practice continence, and even greater restriction is called for in the situation of those who are living together conjugally without committing themselves to practice continence. Some Catholic theologians, taking their inspiration from the Eastern Orthodox Churches, propose considering their union, if it is faithful, stable and fruitful, a marriage by analogy, a licit and positive marriage, although not sacramental since it cannot objectively express Christ's unique and indissoluble spousal love for the Church. In my view, this proposal is unacceptable, because Jesus himself described a second union of the conjugal type as adultery. Behavior, which in itself is disordered, does not become good by the mere fact that it has some inherent merits. Stealing with others is bad, even if there is friendship and solidarity among the accomplices.

If the Church were to grant remarried divorcees the Eucharistic communion without requiring continence, She would recognize the second marriage as morally licit and implicitly deny the indissolubility of the first marriage. Any generalized concession, although it may be supported by relevant reasons (e.g., the inability to recover their previous marriage, duties to children born in the second union), would imply that, at least in some cases, the ratified and consummated sacramental marriage may be dissolved. Pastoral practice would be affirming what the doctrine denies. The Church would add her counter-witness to that of the person living conjugally with another who is not his/her spouse.

Conversely, the Church, by not admitting remarried divorcees to the Eucharist, and likewise the remarried divorcees themselves who refrain from the Eucharist, witness in another way to Christ's unconditional and irrevocable spousal love that the sacraments of marriage and the Eucharist express and the unlawful second union objectively contradicts. We grasp the importance of this objective contradiction, only if we consider the physical and communitarian dimension of the relationship with the Lord and the mission, entrusted to the Church and to the Christian family within it, to evangelize by making Christ's love present and in some way visible.

In this perspective, we can understand why, with respect to the problem of admitting remarried divorcees to the Eucharist, it is necessary to take into account the objectively disordered situation and not only the quality of the subjective dispositions. It is moreover understandable that the general rule should be that of not admitting the divorced and remarried couples who live together conjugally. No concession can be general, let alone public.

Yet, divorcees who are not continent should be welcomed in the Christian community, in fraternal friendship, with respect for the persons and for the consciences.

Bearing in mind that the conscience is the proximate norm of action and that it is upright if it seeks the true good and tries to correspond to the supreme norm, which is the will of God; remembering the law of gradualness according to which man “knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by stages of growth” (St. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 34); and, finally, considering that subjective responsibility can be reduced and sometimes even annulled by internal and external conditions, we can conclude that forms of grossly disordered behavior are not always mortal sins and that even people who objectively behave badly can sometimes be in God’s grace. Among the remarried divorcees living together conjugally, there are those who, in good faith, are invincibly persuaded that they are righteous before God. God alone sees their hearts. Pastors must avoid confirming them in their error, while respecting their conscience. They will not admit them to Holy Communion; they will rather always invite them to trust in the Lord’s mercy, to do the good they can, to regularly attend Mass and participate in the life of the Church, through spiritual communion, which is a subjective, internal and individual relationship with the Lord and not an objective physical, communitarian and directly ecclesial relationship.

The Church offers everyone the opportunity to encounter God’s mercy, but in divers ways, with prudent discernment in the different situations.