

“The Word on Fire”, 25 giugno

Cardinal Thomas Collins, arcivescovo di Toronto

As we approach the upcoming Synod on the Family, which will be held at the Vatican this October, discussion has swirled about the Church's teachings on marriage. Many people are seeking clarity about these teachings while others wonder which, if any, are open to change. Today, Brandon Vogt interviews Cardinal Thomas Collins, the Archbishop of Toronto, who sheds light on many of these pressing questions.

Brandon Vogt: Much of the current discussion about divorce, remarriage, and communion is clouded by confusion. What does the Church actually teach on these issues and why?

Cardinal Thomas Collins: The Catholic Church simply teaches what Jesus teaches: marriage is an unbreakable covenant between a man and a woman, faithful in love and open to the gift of life. Divorce and remarriage is not allowed when it is a matter of a valid, sacramental, and consummated marriage. When Jesus was preaching in Galilee, divorce and remarriage was accepted in society. The law of Moses allowed for it (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). The teaching of Jesus that divorce and remarriage is not allowed was revolutionary. It was even an indication of his claim to divinity, for only God has the authority to over-rule the law of Moses. Jesus went back to creation itself for the foundation of the unbreakable bond of marriage between a man and a woman: "Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate" (Matthew 19: 1-12). In light of current controversies, it is also helpful to note that Jesus also asserts plainly something that until recently was obvious to everyone: marriage is between a man and a woman.

It is always assumed by the Church that couples are truly, or "validly" married. The burden of proof is on anyone who says that they are not. When requested, however, the Church will examine a marriage to discover whether it was a truly binding commitment of the type that Jesus is talking about, i.e, a valid marriage, which cannot be dissolved. If, after very careful study, the Church discovers that at the time when they exchanged consent at their wedding the couple for some reason did not truly make a binding commitment to marriage, then it will issue a statement, or "declaration of nullity," officially confirming that the marriage was not "valid" from the start. This is very

different from a divorce, in which the government official grants that there was a valid marriage, and then uses the power of the state to end it.

Brandon Vogt: Some Catholics hope the Church will soon change her position regarding communion for those who are divorced and remarried, perhaps at the upcoming Synod. Others worry such a change would undercut Jesus' clear teachings on marriage. On this issue, which teachings and practices are immutable and which are open to change?

Cardinal Thomas Collins: The Synod on the Family will surely deal with the whole range of issues facing the family today, not only this one issue of communion for those who are divorced and remarried. For example, one of the key problems we face now is that couples are more often living together without getting married. And there are many societal trends, especially in the western world, that undermine the family. The question of communion after divorce and remarriage is one among many issues, and I would imagine that the Synod will spend most of its time on the broader issues affecting marriage and the family.

The command of Jesus that marriage is unbreakable is central to the Christian understanding of marriage, and cannot be changed by the Church. But we can change the way we help couples prepare for marriage, and help them live their marriage, and help them practically if their marriage breaks down.

Even apart from Our Lord's command, divorce is a great human tragedy that can have devastating effects upon the spouses, and especially upon their children. That is why we need to do all that we can as a Catholic community to help couples prepare for marriage, and to assist them during marriage. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. There are many groups, such as "Marriage Encounter", and other such groups, that offer great assistance to spouses. When there are problems in a marriage, groups such as "Retrouvaille" seek to help the couple once more have a healthy marriage.

One thing we need to do is celebrate wedding anniversaries. Recently, in my diocese, we had a great celebration of the 25th, 50th, 60th and higher anniversaries of married couples. In the context of Mass, they renewed their vows. It was inspiring, and encouraging to them and to other married couples. We need to encourage all married couples with such living examples of fidelity in the midst of the struggles of life, especially in our society that is so allergic to lifelong commitments. I hope that the Synod will show the way towards better marriage preparation, encourage groups that seek to strengthen marriage, and help those whose marriage is in difficulty.

In a society in which permanent commitments are not valued - and that applies to the priesthood and religious life as well as to marriage - it can take great spiritual strength, and is certainly counter-cultural, to renew each day a sacred lifelong commitment, trusting in the grace of God. That must be our path as Christians, and anything that tends (even unintentionally) to re-inforce a culture that undermines fidelity to sacred permanent commitments must be resisted, as also any action that suggests that the Church does not take seriously the permanence of such covenants.

Our Lord's teaching on marriage, like his whole teaching on discipleship, can at times be very difficult. Especially in the world in which we live, but really in all periods of history, a certain heroism is required in the Christian life. We are all called to holiness; that is not just the vocation of the few who are canonized, but of all of us.

So what cannot be changed is the fact that what God has joined together, no one can put asunder. But the Synod may well deepen our understanding of Christian marriage, building on the treasure of teaching in Scripture and Tradition, such as the beautiful document of St. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*. We need above all to help couples faithfully and fruitfully live the sacrament of marriage.

Sadly, marriages sometimes fail, and the Synod may try to find more effective ways of caring for people in those painful situations. If a couple separates, despite every effort to heal the marriage, and are legally divorced, each is called to continue in a faithful life of Christian discipleship. They cannot marry again, as they are married already. Many divorced Christians lead a life of exemplary holiness, recognizing this reality. They are an inspiration to us all. I hope the Synod offers encouragement to those who are divorced and faithfully living the Christian life.

Perhaps, when someone has been civilly divorced, if the marriage is examined by a Marriage Tribunal of the Church, it will be found not to have been valid, and the person will be free to marry. But that may not happen, or a person for various reasons will decide not to seek to discover their status in the Church concerning their marriage (that is, whether they are in reality single or married). Although the dedicated staff of marriage tribunals offers great pastoral care to those whose marriage has failed, the Synod might be able to find ways of improving the processes tribunals use for making a judgement concerning the validity of marriages, and so that is one possible area of change. Any human process can always be improved.

Many people who are divorced, and who are not free to marry, do enter into a second marriage. There are various reasons that can lead to this, and their fellow parishioners should not occupy themselves speculating about them. Catholics in that tragic situation can be involved in many ways in the life of the community, but they may not receive the sacraments, such as Holy Communion, since whatever their personal disposition is or the reasons for their situation, known perhaps only to

God, they are continuing in a way of life which is objectively against the clear command of Jesus. That is the point. The point is not that they have committed a sin; the mercy of God is abundantly granted to all sinners. Murder, adultery, and any other sins, no matter how serious, are forgiven by Jesus, especially through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and the forgiven sinner receives communion. The issue in the matter of divorce and remarriage is one's conscious decision (for whatever reason) to persist in a continuing situation of disconnection from the command of Jesus. Although it would not be right for them to receive the sacraments, we need to find better ways to reach out to people in this situation, to offer them loving assistance.

One thing that would help would be if all of us realized that receiving communion is not obligatory at Mass. There are many reasons why a Christian might choose not to receive communion. If there were less pressure for everyone to receive communion, it would be some help to those who are not in a position to do so.

Often, people in this situation decide no longer to continue as members of the Catholic community, as they are not able to receive sacramental communion at Mass, even though they can experience a kind of spiritual communion through prayerful adoration, although abstaining for good reason from receiving communion; that, for a Catholic can be a truly penitential act. It is a great tragedy if they leave the Church. It is likely that they, and their children, and their descendants, will become disconnected from the source of life in Christ that is found in the Church. We need to think of what we can do to reach out to people in this situation, in a loving and effective way. But as we do so, we also need to be attentive to the command of Christ, and the necessity of not undermining the sanctity of marriage, with even more dire consequences for all, especially in a world in which the stability of marriage is already tragically compromised. If we proclaim in actions, even though not in words, that the marriage covenant is not really what Jesus says it is, then that offers short term comfort at the cost of long term suffering. As the sanctity of the marriage covenant is progressively weakened, it will ultimately be the children who will suffer most.

So although fidelity to the teaching of Christ on the indissolubility of marriage is not open to change, there may be things that we can change to assist our brothers and sisters in Christ who are in this difficult and painful situation. Real assistance can be given through improvements in the way the Church examines the validity of marriages, and through efforts to give spiritual support to Catholics who are divorced and remarried, encouraging them to be engaged in their parish as much as they can, and offering them ways of prayer appropriate to their situation. We need to consider what the Church community can do to assist the couple with their children, often living in combined family situations. But over-riding the explicit teaching of Jesus on the unbreakable nature of marriage is not an option. Nobody has the authority to do that.

Brandon Vogt: Outside the Church, the secular media overwhelmingly expects the Synod to substantially revise Catholic teaching on marriage and divorce. How does this compare to the expectations swirling before Pope Paul VI's release of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968?

Cardinal Thomas Collins: In the years before the letter of Pope Paul re-affirming the constant Christian teaching that contraception is not in accord with the will of God, there was widespread speculation that the Church was going to change this teaching. This kind of speculation is based to some degree on the idea that Christian doctrine is like government policy: when the circumstances change, or when more people support this alternative rather than that, then policy changes.

But Christian teaching is based upon the natural law that is written in our very natures by God, and especially upon the revealed word of God. We discover God's will, and the scriptures and the living faith of the Church help us to do so. We do not shape God's will according to what currently seems best to us.

So when Pope Paul did not change what he could not change, but re-affirmed Christian faith, many, many people were upset, and simply decided to ignore the teaching. That is our present situation. I certainly hope that we do not suffer a repeat of that, as unfounded speculation swirls concerning a change by the Church of the explicit teaching of Jesus on marriage.

Brandon Vogt: You've previously mentioned how Our Lady, Undoer of Knots—one of Pope Francis' favorite devotions—is specially connected to the healing of broken marriages, and how we should therefore turn to her as a key intercessor and guide on this issue. Why this connection?

Cardinal Thomas Collins: I had not heard of this devotion until recently, when I read a booklet about it. Apparently its origin is found in something very close to the issues now being discussed: in the 17th century, a young couple experienced immense difficulty in their marriage. They prayed to Our Lady, and she untied the knots in their relationship. A descendant of the couple commissioned a painting of Our Lady untying knots, and that has become a great focus of devotion, which Pope Francis has done much to popularize. It is a devotion that can be connected to many situations in life, but apparently it arose out of prayer to Our Lady to bring healing to a troubled marriage. We should ask Our Lady to help us address these difficult issues of marriage in a way that is loving and faithful.

Brandon Vogt: Some theologians have looked to the Church's tradition for examples of divorced-and-remarried Catholics licitly receiving communion, sometimes pointing to the Council of Nicaea's rulings. What did that Council have to say on the question?

Cardinal Thomas Collins: There is a rule that comes from that most important Council that refers incidentally to people who are in a second marriage. It has mistakenly been taken to justify a second marriage, after divorce, but it actually refers to those whose spouse has died, and who then marry a second time, which is certainly in accord with our faith.

Brandon Vogt: The annulment process seems to be a common-ground target for renewal. Many Catholics believe it could be more efficient and dignifying. What are some ways to renew the annulment process without compromising its integrity?

Cardinal Thomas Collins: I am not an expert on the law of the Church, and I know that those engaged in the ministry of marriage tribunals at every level seek diligently to serve the Church, and especially those who ask them to examine the validity of a marriage. But it would be good for those who are more expert than I to see if there are ways of improving this process.

Brandon Vogt: At the heart of this discussion are millions of divorced Catholics experiencing real pain and difficulty. How can the Church welcome and serve these people while still promoting the deposit of faith?

Cardinal Thomas Collins: It is vital that we do all that we can to reach out in loving support for all of our brothers and sisters who are experiencing the terrible pain of divorce. There are movements in the Church that seek to do that, but each parish and diocese also needs to care for people who are suffering this pain. Their children may be suffering most of all. This should be a focus of our prayer, and in individual situations, pastors and parishioners need to do all that they can to help.