

GROWING IN FAITH WHEN A CATHOLIC MARRIAGE FAILS

*For Divorced or Separated Catholics
and Those Who Minister with Them*

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Introduction

*The Special Life and Faith Challenges Faced by
Divorced and Separated Catholics*



THERE'S a day I vividly remember dating back some twenty years ago that I could only label as "a new experience." Coming from a large family, and being the single parent of seven children, all my years until that day had been spent in the midst of people. Now, only one son, a teenager, was still at home. But this was summer, and he had gone to visit his cousins who lived five hours away. For a few days, I was alone when I came home from work. It was a new experience for me to be in an empty, noiseless house.

I wandered from room to room, somewhat disoriented, unable to cope with the quiet or to decide how to spend my time even though I had much to do and there were many choices I could make. Worst of all, I suddenly visualized my coming years as an endless stream of bleak, boring, lonely days.

Being human, my first reaction was to think about the most logical solution in our society for loneliness—marriage. Yet, for me, a divorced Catholic, marriage presented a dilemma, a painful, difficult decision—a choice between a husband, or remaining in communion with the Church. I had never before considered remarriage and so I had not investigated seeking an annulment.

That lonely day I recalled a woman once expressing in pain, "I am one of those divorced Catholics who cannot

get an annulment. And as I look at the years ahead, I do not see how I can make it alone. I want so much to have someone to share my life with, yet apparently God is asking something else of me. Is there solace for me anywhere?"

Her question had particular meaning for me. Like her, I was asking, "How can I face the rest of my life alone?"

The answer, of course, is that I couldn't. No one can. Each of us needs relationships, commitments, interactions, friendships and closeness with others. Without relationships, life is sterile and we put ourselves in danger of pathological loneliness. The need for relationships is universal. And the challenge of finding them is one which must be met not only by divorced persons, but also by the widowed, the young, the old—and yes, even the married.

Divorced Catholics, who cannot get an annulment, find themselves having to face honestly whether relationships, other than one involving marriage and sexual intimacy, will be enough to get them through life happily. That can be painful and difficult to answer.

Certainly it is no good to obey the Church if it is not by absolute personal choice, based upon one's own convictions that the Church's teaching is right. If we obey for any lesser reason, then obedience becomes blind and will probably backfire, turning the conforming Catholic into an angry person, or a helpless, powerless follower of authority. If people feel controlled or manipulated by the Church, and then they "obey," they are in danger of losing contact with themselves and their self-esteem. This condition is personally devastating.

The divorced Catholic who does not qualify for an annulment is in a most unusual position. We are the only Catholics who are being told by the Church that we must stay celibate and single for the rest of our lives or be excluded from the sacraments. Nuns were able to leave their vows and their Order and marry; priests may become laicized and marry. In such cases, Church discipline can be dispensed. Divorced Catholics are tied eternally to our made-for-life vows.

We can see this position as a trap, or as an unusual setting for a new kind of self-growth. On the positive side, we can accept this as an opportunity to make a conscious choice for being individuals capable of standing alone and taking responsibility for our lives, while buttressed by the experiences and support of the Church to help us find greater meaning in our lives.

But we can't make this choice unless we believe the Church is right in its teaching on divorce and remarriage, and unless we can see all our pain and loneliness as a potential source of religious and moral reward. We need our priests and bishops to minister to us with understanding and human concern for our difficult life situation.

I have learned much in my many years of living alone. I have rejoiced for so many good times and mourned for the terminally hard ones I have endured as the mother of three deceased sons. There are times when I still walk from room to room, feeling lonely or lost. But in all honesty, this is not because I am a divorced Catholic who chose to accept the Church's teachings on remarriage. Loneliness hits me—and people in all situations—because we are human.

I have learned the good side of loneliness-- that it is God's way of asking me to grow towards Him. There I have found meaning in my life by being committed to work and causes I believe in, and by accepting my life with its sufferings as a way to a fuller realization of my capacity to be bonded to others, to nature and the very Source of life. Staying single has not been a sterile life, but one which allowed me the freedom to expand my circle of loved ones, staying conscious always of the wonder of living.

I know I could visit any Catholic parish in the country and find hurting people, facing the end of their marriage. They are learning, as I have learned, that life doesn't come with built-in guarantees that all will be well at all times. They expected to live "happily ever after," but were catapulted into a new life situation they were completely unprepared for.

What I learned, and can share with others, is that we can find resources within ourselves that we never knew we possessed, personal powers given to us by God, which can, even though sometimes with difficulty, move us from our darkness to blossom in joy. We must ask our Church to work with us, helping us rebuild our lives in faith.

Antoinette Bosco
Spring 2006

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An Unexpected Interview— and a Crucial Ministry Begins

“I do not have to understand everything, but I do have to be open to all that betrays God’s presence. Faith signals to me that he is there, in that chance event, that meeting, that friend, that word, that coincidence, that loss, that drawback, that perfectly timed joy. He weaves our lives, each strand of our lives, and his hand knows why the threads go off in all directions.”

—Leon-Joseph Cardinal Suenens



MOST of the eighty-two women and twelve men who arrived at the Long Island Cenacle Center for Spiritual Renewal on a cool Sunday in the fall of 1971 were vocally suspicious of what this meeting was all about.

But curiosity—and hope—had dragged them here, some as far a distance as seventy miles. The announcement attracting them, carried in *The Long Island Catholic*, the diocesan paper of the Rockville Centre Diocese, and the local “Pennysaver,” an advertising circular, had read simply:

“The first program of its kind, planned specifically for divorced and separated Catholic men and women, will be held at the Cenacle . . . For reservations, or further information, call or write Sister Thelma Hall . . . ”

As people arrived to register, their motives in coming ranged from disbelief—“I didn’t think the church knew we existed”—to amazement: “Thank God the Church is finally recognizing *this problem*.”

This “problem” was, and still is, the anguishing one faced by everyone who, for whatever reason, has had to confront the tragic fact that their marriage is a shambles, and that separation or divorce is inevitable. For the 94 people who had come that day, the problem was even more severe. They were Catholics, bound by their Church and their faith to remain true to their marriage vows, even if the marriage was no more.

The meeting had come about because of an unexpected conversation I had had with Sister Thelma a few weeks earlier. I was then a reporter for *The Long Island Catholic* and often went to the Cenacle to talk to the Sisters and to pray in the chapel. That day I met with Sister Thelma and she told me the sisters were re-thinking their mission, focusing on whether the programs they were putting on were really offering the spiritual renewal they claimed one could find there. Sister Thelma, who had converted to the Catholic Church when she was 29, told me honestly she felt they needed to “evolve” so as to meet the challenging needs of people who weren’t being reached “by old approaches.”

Then she faced me, with her wonderful smile, and asked me if I knew of any group whose needs were not being met by the Church, and, if so, did I think the

Cenacle could offer a new and tailor-made program to help them. I think it took me exactly one second to respond. "Sister, there are, indeed, some people out there who feel neglected, or even thrown away by the Church. I would be one of them if I didn't work for the Church. I'm talking about divorced and separated Catholics."

I had hardly taken a breath before Sister Thelma responded with a resounding promise that she would do something about this, asking for my help. Before I left that day, she had already made plans for an initial program she would have the Cenacle offer on a Sunday afternoon. I was to be a speaker, and then later she confirmed that the Rev. Joseph Conrad of the Brooklyn Diocese's Marriage Tribunal would also speak, specifically on what would be involved in trying to get an annulment.

When the responses to the publicity about the day devoted to divorced and separated Catholics started coming in, Sister Thelma knew we had come up with something very important. As she told a reporter that day, "We assumed that divorced and separated Catholics often feel they are forgotten by the Church. From the first calls that came in, I'm afraid this assumption is all too true.

"Several divorced Catholics said they had children reaching the stage where they are to make First Communion, and they are confused and uneasy about their own role. All of those who called said they feel very lonely and alienated, and they are anxious to have some contact with others who are carrying the same burden. Hopefully," Sister went on, "out of this program, we may be able to develop some kind of fellowship group to meet monthly for spiritual reinforcement." She added specifi-