

Jesus was strict about divorce. Other places in the bible put up with it on occasion, but Jesus had strong words about divorce. He esteemed marriage. He quotes the very first book of the bible to say, “a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” He explains, “they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate.”

The Catholic Church also takes marriage seriously. We rejoice with the engaged; we celebrate their wedding in church; we witness their consent; and we give them a solemn blessing. During the ceremony the couple responds to 3 questions: “Have you come here freely and without reservation to give yourselves to each other in marriage? Will you love and honor each other as man and wife for the rest of your lives? Will you accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?” That middle question implies no divorce: Will you love and honor each other for the rest of your lives? Every couple in the Catholic Church hears that question, and every couple answers yes. Yet, estimates for the divorce rate among American Catholics range from 21 to 40%. Almost every extended Catholic family has experienced divorce somewhere, including mine.

Our catechism tolerates civil divorce in certain circumstances. Nobody likes divorce. It breaks the bond of marriage; it introduces disorder into the family and society. It traumatizes children and emotionally harms one or both partners. Still, it can be the right choice; for example, if staying together causes more harm than living apart.

The Catholic Church does not penalize the divorced. They can still come to communion every Sunday. But if a divorced Catholic wishes to remarry, or if a Catholic wishes to marry a person of any faith who is divorced, then we must obtain an annulment of the previous marriage. People often ask, “If I get an annulment, will my children be illegitimate?” Well, no. A church annulment has nothing to do with the State, just as some State marriages are not recognized by our Church. To us, a true marriage has a spiritual quality. If an investigation shows that the partners did not have a true marriage as we understand one, we say the spiritual nature of that marriage is null. Once an annulment is declared, divorced persons are free to marry in the Catholic Church. Those who marry outside the church are not eligible for communion until the marriage can be recognized by the Church.

Today’s responsorial psalm paints the picture of a happy family life. If you walk in God’s ways you’ll have work in the field and food to eat. You’ll have children as numerous as olive plants sitting around your table. Marriage is not always picture perfect, but when it works it offers many blessings. It takes some people a second try before they get marriage right. Sometimes divorce becomes an unwelcome yet helpful step on the path to blessing. But divorce causes harm, and Jesus warned us about it.