

Twenty years ago, if I'd stood in front of a group like this and asked, "How many of you know a divorced person?" there'd have been very few hands. Today, the question would raise hands all around the church. Divorce is one of the most influential factors in society today, and we're still learning how to deal with it. The Catholic Church strives to make the divorced feel equally welcome among marrieds and singles; but we often fail, and our miscommunication becomes another sorrow in a life already burdened by many more.

Feelings of loss come to all of us. If you've ever grown close to someone and lost the relationship, you know what it's like to feel used, to feel betrayed, to feel like life could never be the same again. Breaking off with someone we love is worse than death; breaking up is making a choice.

Jesus never married, so of course he never knew divorce. But he did know separation. He knew betrayal from one of his closest friends. And he had the gut-wrenching experience related in today's Gospel. Jesus poured out his heart to his friends. He told them he was the bread of life. He told them his flesh was real food which they had to eat if they wanted life in them. Here he is, pouring out his soul, sharing the great mystery of the Eucharist with his followers, and surely expecting a sweep of faith from them, a celebration of joy. Instead, they asked one another, "Is he serious? This doesn't make sense." And they walked away. After he bared his soul to them, they walked away.

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Separation has come to our Church, too. Our history is marred by many moments like divorce: The Eastern Church broke off from the West, the Churches of the Reform became independent, the Old Catholics separated from us earlier in this century, and just this summer, the followers of Archbishop LeFebvre established their own Church. The Catholic Church is like a divorced person. These have been painful moments for us. And we all know people who have left the Church. They left because they couldn't get married here, they left over birth control, they left because we were unjust with women and gays, or because we went too far. We wanted to blame someone, anyone, but as in many human relationships, they break up even when the parties are good people, they mean well, but the relationship goes nowhere.

I'm sure Jesus was sad to see people break away. Maybe he blamed himself. But sometimes our desire for reconciliation still can't bring the parties together. It's not that we pray badly or that we don't deserve this favor. But for reasons we cannot fully understand, God responds to our prayer in a different way. Like Jesus we may have to rely on a few faithful friends to make some sense out of life, to accept a broader vision, bigger than family, bigger than Church--to accept a world where God reconciles in His own way what we are too weak to do.