

Divorce and the Catholic Church are strange bedfellows. For years Catholics who divorced felt an icy chill from the Church. Their families and Catholic friends felt embarrassed. No one knew what to say or how to say it. Now annulments have become more commonplace. More and more divorced Catholics are able to remarry in the Church. Many people wonder what's going on: It used to be that being divorced and being Catholic just didn't go together; today people wonder, "Has the Church changed its position about divorce?"

At the center of the storm is Jesus teaching about marriage. "What God has joined together," Jesus says, "let no one separate. Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and the woman who divorces her husband and marries another commits adultery." This is pretty strong stuff. And it frustrates a lot of people who want to be faithful to the Gospel, but find that their marriage, which used to unite, now tears them up inside.

The line the Church focuses on is "What God has joined together." If a marriage ends in divorce, we ask in hindsight, "Was this a marriage joined by God, or not?" We presume that a marriage entered with good intentions but blindly may not be joined by God. If I buy a ring unaware that the merchandise was stolen, God does not hold me responsible for the theft. In the same way if someone enters marriage unaware of its responsibilities, under forceful pressure, unaware that the spouse is incapable of the maturity needed for marriage--to cite a few examples--we believe God does not join that marriage together.

The Church distinguishes divorce from annulment. We do not grant a divorce from a marriage God has joined together, we do recognize the annulment of a marriage God has not joined together. Has the Church changed her position on divorce? Well, technically, no. We do not grant Church divorces, but a civil divorce is one sign that a marriage might be annulled.

Jesus wears two different faces in this Gospel story. First he is the idealist. He lays down a strict law about marriage and divorce. But then he becomes the realist. The apostles are trying to keep children away from him, but Jesus wears the face of compassion: "Let the children come," he says.

To imitate Jesus, we need to know when to wear those faces. The face of idealism will uphold the beauty of marriage. It will reaffirm the choice, the sacrifice, and the joy of Catholic married couples. The face of realism will reach with compassion to the divorced, to those who feel excluded. When we hold one another up in love, we will be faithful to the faces of Christ.