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A new theology of divorce

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Nov. 12, 2009

Tom Roberts, NCR editor at large, recently wrote about an upcoming document from the US Conference of Catholic Bishops on marriage, **and the threats to marriage** [1]. The threats ranged from cohabitation to same-sex partnerships, to birth control pills, condoms and other forms of artificial contraception. There is a lot to question here given what sociology, biology and 21st century experience contribute to the dialogue. The threat to marriage that I would like to think more about is divorce.

Here is what Roberts reports about what the bishops have to say about divorce:

Divorce is a reflection of original sin, "which disrupted the original communion of man and woman," the document states. Acknowledging that the stresses of modern life and ordinary disagreements and quarrels that occur can jeopardize marriage, the bishops urge "couples in crisis to turn to the Lord," as well as to programs and ministries offered by the church, for help in solving problems.

This all sounds well and good on paper. But what happens when a couple turns to the Lord and is led to getting a divorce in order to live a happier life?

My parents were married in the Catholic church in 1976, about a year out of college. They had me three years later and my sister two years after that. In the mid-1980s, my parents separated for six months and then moved back in together. We all went to church every week, and my parents both taught CCD classes. They participated in church programs and ministries, including hosting a woman from Nicaragua who needed medical attention in the United States. By the late 1990s, even after countless sessions of counseling as a couple and a family, they just weren't very happy together. Looking back, none of us were going to be able to reach our potential for happiness in life on this earth. They got divorced near the end of my junior year in high school.

My dad got remarried about a year later, and my mom took her time and got remarried last year. Neither of them got married in the church for the second time. That doesn't mean that the people present, including the Protestant minister, couldn't see that love existed here. A wonderful addition to my life in the past decade a stepbrother to cheer on at tennis and a stepsister to bond with. We didn't exactly have the same childhood and I am a bit older, but I've embraced having them as part of my family life. It's not what the church imagined for family vacations but it seems to work fine for all of us.

The pastor at my childhood church was not very supportive of their situation. I haven't talked to them too much about it, but I imagine it would be about as easy for them to hear how they should have remained married from a celibate man as much as it would be for a priest to take advice on the particularities from his job from someone who has never done it. For me, as a child of divorced parents, there has always been a real disconnect between the documents that the bishops' conference produces on divorce and who writes them. I wouldn't recommend that anyone writes policy initiatives for a country they have never visited, and I wouldn't recommend anyone comment on marriage and divorce without the experience of living it.

I know that the stat that floats around is that 50 percent of marriages in the United States ends in divorce. I have

no official confirmation, but various studies on the Internet point to it being similar for Catholic marriages as the rest of the population. What this shows me is that it doesn't matter if you are married in the Roman Catholic church or if you are married on the courthouse steps downtown -- there is a chance that your life and the life of your spouse will change so much in the coming years and you will decide it is better to go your own ways. In my mind, it doesn't matter how much preparation you have, how many people you date before you land the person you think is just right -- life will continue to happen after the wedding day and unravel in ways that we as humans cannot ever fully predict nor comprehend.

The bishops' approach to dealing with divorced couples is disheartening. I have a friend whose mom was married in the church, endured years of domestic violence, and got divorced. She is now remarried and happy. Would God have wanted her to stay in that first marriage, continue to endure abuse, and not find happiness in another unitive, procreative relationship where she and others involved could more fully feel God's love? She attempted to file for annulment of the first marriage, but it meant having to recount all the times she was abused in order to complete the paperwork. It wasn't worth it. It's not that she's not committed to the church -- she still attends daily Mass and doesn't participate in the Eucharist. She's continued to play by the rules. I'm sure she'll approach the pearly gates, and God will forgive her for not filling out some paperwork -- and I imagine if God doesn't forgive her, it will be because she never sinned in the first place for getting out of this marriage and finding one where she could live God's call.

In another case, a friend of mine got married in his 20s, and after about five years, his wife became unfaithful. It was a devastating blow to their marriage, and they both agreed that they were better off going their separate ways. She wanted to be with another man, and he never wanted this experience in marriage. Over a decade later, while earning his Masters of Divinity degree with hopes of working at a Catholic church doing youth ministry, he met a new love of his life. He attempted to get the first marriage annulled. His first wife was happy to participate in the process of filling out a lot of paperwork (and writing checks for filing fees of several hundred dollars). He respected the church's process at the time, and it helped him to more deeply analyze his first marriage. The local tribunal rejected the filing, saying that he didn't fully prove that love never existed in the marriage (anyone who gets married to someone they love can tell you that you can't disprove that at a later date -- you have to go with what you know at that time). The tribunal told him that he could always appeal the process -- and pay hundreds of dollars more -- but he figured out what he needed to from this process. He is now happily remarried outside the church, raising a kid, and working at a Catholic church as a youth minister. However, he will probably never fully participate in Church life again -- until, I imagine, when he passes on, and God deals with him appropriately (or doesn't deal with him at all since it's possible he made no mistakes in God's eyes).

There needs to be a new inclusion in the theology of divorce that more fully allows divorced Catholics to articulate their faith. I imagine that the bishops do solicit opinions and support for their documents on marriage and other moral issues. However, I don't think that they solicit the opinions of my friend's mom and my friend, who want nothing more than to fully participate in the church but decided they found more fulfillment through love in their lives elsewhere.

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