

SPEAKING FRANKLY ABOUT DIVORCE

During these last few months, I've given talk after talk concerning divorce, visiting parishes and prayer groups, trying as best I can to explain the Church's position on this subject. And we must admit: it is a delicate one. These are the lives of real people that we are talking about, not mere hypothetical situations. Whenever the Church explains her position, she risks appearing callous and insensitive; furthermore, those who disagree with the Church on this issue (as on any other) will be quick to accuse her of fundamentalism. Some of us – including Church leaders – have tried to steer away from these two pitfalls (insensitivity and fundamentalism) and have consequently been accused of a third: that of not taking a clear position, of not giving the guidance which people need and deserve. It has truly been a textbook case of “damned if you do, damned if you don't”!

Here, therefore, are my thoughts on this matter. But first things first: please do not ever think that I am insensitive to the plight of those persons whose marriage has irremediably broken down. The Lord knows how many of them I deal with on a daily basis, how my heart goes out to them, and how I wish I had some magic solution for their situation. But magic solutions do not exist: we live in a real world where relationships are often messy and painful, and where the decisions we take today can (and inevitably will) influence future generations.

So if you want the straight answer on why the Church opposes divorce, here it is: **the Church is against divorce, quite simply, because God is against Divorce.** We read, in Malachi 2,16: *“I hate divorce,” says the LORD, the God of Israel, “because the man who divorces his wife covers his garment with violence.”* Jesus too, in his own time, repeated this sentiment when he overturned the accommodations which had crept into the Law of Moses, saying: *“Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.”* (Mt 19,8) Now I'm sure that an answer like this will not satisfy most people. Non-religious people won't care what God is supposed to have said, whereas many Christians will need more information (if only to answer their

interlocutors). Perhaps in other times, people might have been content with an answer like that, and it's easy for us to accuse them of being uneducated and naive, expecting the Church to do their thinking for them; I, however, suspect that they had a well-defined sense of the primacy of God's will in their lives, and therefore God's will (as expressed in His revealed Word) was enough for them.

But since we live in complicated times and are a little more cynical about those who claim to speak in God's name, I'll explain: **God (and Jesus, and consequently the Church) are not against divorce just for the fun of it.** When God said "I hate divorce" he wasn't saying this capriciously. It wasn't a question of taste, in the same way that – because of taste – I don't like mushrooms and snails. It is a question of principle: it is because when God created humanity He intended that the spousal bond between husband and wife – an image of His own love for us – should be permanent. The same applies to Jesus. When he said "what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Mt 19,6) he had good reason. He didn't oppose divorce simply to differentiate his followers from others. He didn't say "Ok, let me see: what am I going to forbid my followers, divorce or pork?"

The issue is sometimes confused by certain people (even well-meaning Christians opposed to divorce) when they say that divorce is bad because Jesus prohibited it. Actually I believe it's the other way round. Jesus prohibited divorce BECAUSE it is bad. It wasn't good, OK, or at least neutral before he prohibited it: **it was bad to begin with!** It's not even like alcohol which is OK if consumed in moderation but bad when taken in excess. Divorce is bad, fullstop, and that is why Jesus opposes it.

And this is where objections start cropping up. Proponents of divorce say things like: *"no one is forcing Catholics to accept divorce. But Malta isn't the Vatican. What about non-Catholics? Therefore even Catholics should vote in favour of divorce, because they shouldn't deprive others of this right."* Many Catholics also give a variation on this theme when they say *"I'm happily married, myself, and I would never consider divorcing. However I know people who would benefit from divorce."*

First of all, a reminder: if we're saying that already at Creation God wanted marriage to be permanent, then it follows that he wanted **all marriages** to be permanent: those of Christians certainly, but also those of everyone else. After all in the beginning there weren't Christians, Catholics or Jews: there were just human beings! Marriage is meant to be permanent in itself, already in its natural form, not only when it becomes a Sacrament (as happens when it is celebrated by two Christians). As Pope Benedict told us on the 17th April 2010 upon his arrival in Malta: **"Your Nation should continue to stand up for the indissolubility of marriage as a natural institution as well as a sacramental one, and for the true nature of the family."** This argument isn't only valid on a religious level. There is a natural law which shows that marriage makes sense only if it is permanent and stable. Remember that even civil marriages are contracted "until death."

Yet if people are comfortable putting such considerations aside (I know I'm not), then there are also other extremely significant points backed up by solid statistics. If divorce is allowed into Malta, it will affect everyone, in the same way that pollution doesn't affect only the polluters. Christians will not be walking around with a sort of shield around them protecting them from the harmful effects of divorce. When young parents choose a school for their children, they cannot specify in the application form: "Please shelter my child from pro-divorce schoolmates, teachers and ideas." No parent is going to sit down with prospective girlfriends or boyfriends for his teenage son/daughter and grill them about their views on divorce.

You may object (and you'll be right) that already now our children are mixing with people having different opinions. The difference is that currently we view marital breakdown as a tragic possibility; but if a divorce law is enacted, marital breakdown will go from 'tragic possibility' to 'acceptable option'. The State will indirectly be facilitating marital breakdown because anything that is legal inevitably becomes socially acceptable. And the effects of this are not irrelevant: eventually, the possibility of obtaining divorce works its pernicious way into the consciousness of people and causes them to stop thinking of

marriage along the lines of “Until death do us part” but rather “until _____ do us part” (and in that space feel free to include any problem you can imagine). That is why even secular writers write about the ‘Divorce mentality’. When divorce is available, generation after generation sees a gradual but steady weakening in the sense of commitment which people associate with marriage. As our Archbishop pointed out in an article last year, instead of being a springboard to growth and greater understanding, every argument and difficulty will become a moment in which the couple chooses whether to renew their matrimonial commitment or not.

That is also why practically all countries which have divorce laws have seen an increase (gradual for some, sudden for others) in the rates of cohabitation and of children born outside of marriage (those same societal ills which the proponents of divorce in Malta are offering as reasons for introducing divorce in the first place): if marriage is viewed not ‘until death’ but ‘until problems crop up’, then many people will simply conclude that it is not worth the financial and emotional hassle of getting married in the first place. They will simply go for the equivalent and cheaper option: cohabitation.

These and several other considerations are the ‘natural’ reason why the Church is opposed to divorce (as opposed to the merely ‘religious’ reason we have seen above).

I have not gone into the psychological damage inflicted upon the children of divorcees (studies indicate that children suffer more from the reorganization of their family unit – new ‘mum’ and new ‘dad’ – than from the actual tension of living with bickering parents); I have not mentioned the fact that very often the weaker (and often innocent) party in a difficult marriage is further penalised by the divorce proceedings and at times rendered destitute (on top of the initial desertion); I have not gone into the financial consequences which the multiple divorces, increase in cohabiting couples and children born out of wedlock will inevitably wreak on the taxpayer. I have limited myself to a consideration of how divorce impacts the very idea of marriage.

Christians are obviously free to make up their own mind (having ensured beforehand that their conscience is enlightened by God's Word). In making their decision they can't ignore those persons in Malta today whose marriages have failed. However they will also want to bear in mind those present and future generations for whom the very concept of marriage will be forever tarnished, weakened and endangered by divorce. When I hear people describing divorce as a sort of cure or solution for the social problems we have today, I'm reminded of the old moral principle enshrined in par. 1756 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "One may not do evil so that good may result from it."

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