



Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time B October 7, 2018

- **Marriage, Divorce, Annulment**
- **Respect Life Sunday - Three Life Issues**

Comments on today's Gospel, Mark 10:2-16.

In Jesus' time, divorce was rampant, just as it is today. But one major difference is that in Jesus' time, men called all the shots. Women had no legal rights. The result was that a man could divorce his wife for almost any reason, while there were very few, if any, grounds on which a woman could divorce her husband. At best, she could only ask her husband to divorce her. A woman could be divorced with or without her consent, but a man only with his consent.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees' question about divorce in today's Gospel would have left the women in the audience cheering and the men feeling very challenged, to put it mildly.

Jesus is basically saying that in the new Kingdom which he is inaugurating, disciples who marry should stay married. In proclaiming this new ideal, Jesus was restoring marriage to God's original plan—as we saw in today's first reading. God's plan is that couples shall remain married as long as both shall live. In today's Gospel, we find the words: *"What God has joined together, no human being must separate."*

When *two* people (and I stress *two*) are *true* disciples of Christ—i.e., committed to a personal relationship with him, committed to prayer, committed to forgiving, committed to doing whatever it takes to make the marriage work, committed to a faith community—there will, most likely, be no divorce. There may be some terribly difficult times, there may be great struggles but, in the end, due to a deep commitment to Christ and to the relationship, the marriage will prevail.

Reflection questions

- **What are your thoughts on the above?**
- **Do you believe that *two committed disciples of Jesus* would never seek a divorce?**

Some reasons why many marriages fail today

Some couples who may have married in Church and attend Mass on a regular basis may not necessarily be true disciples of Christ. Too often, couples get married in Church to please their parents or because the Church is a nice place to get married. Too often, at the time of marriage, there is little or no real commitment to Christ. Their focus is elsewhere. Also sometimes, couples who may go to Church on a regular basis are not really committed to Christ and his ways. Career, material gain, children and other things may be the real focus of their lives and not Christ, prayer, church and their marital relationship. Sometimes very good people can get sidetracked from what should be their primary focus. If this happens for a long period of time, the marriage will fall apart or "go on the rocks." A lack of commitment to Christ and the marriage is shown by the absence of a real prayer life, a hard-heartedness that is unwilling to let go of hurts, a need to be overly controlling, and unwillingness to seek outside help when the marriage is obviously in difficulty.

"A Divorce Mentality"

When I was growing up in Ireland in the 50s, no one got a divorce. When couples got married, divorce was never considered an option when difficulties arose. It was pretty much the same in this country until the "sexual revolution" exploded in the sixties. The vast majority of Catholic couples had no one in their family or circle of friends who were divorced. Today, it is very different. A "divorce mentality" is very prevalent which, consciously or unconsciously, sends the message that "I can walk out of this marriage at any time." Another reason why marriages fail is that couples do not want or are unable to deal with their conflicts. Most divorces happen three years into the marriage. If only couples were willing to seek help and work through their first few struggles, then they could say, "We got through the bad times, we'll also weather this latest storm." What's more, some very good individuals carry deep wounds from childhood which makes it very hard for them to sustain a long-term, intimate relationship. Some spouses just quit on the marriage when the going gets tough.

Understandably, some spouses file for divorce after huge efforts to work through their marital problems prove fruitless. Others walk out of their marriage without making much of an effort to resolve their difficulties. Some people will tell you that if they had worked as hard at their first marriage as they are working on their second marriage, they would still be married to their first spouse.

Marriages fail for all kinds of reasons. Some Catholics remarry in the Church after obtaining an annulment. Some remarry outside the Church. Catholics who have justifiable reasons to end their marriage should obtain an annulment. If this is not possible, they should do the best they can, trusting that God knows their heart and the efforts they are making to be a good and faithful couple in their present marriage. A Catholic who cannot obtain an annulment is encouraged to talk to a priest about a ‘pastoral solution’ to their situation.

Annulments

Deacon Sergio and I will be happy to answer questions about annulments and the process needed to have your marriage blessed in the Church.

Three Life Issues

Across our nation, this is *Respect Life Sunday*. Three of the many life issues we could talk about are: unborn life, environment, and immigration. I am grateful to Ascension parishioner and diaconate candidate Phil Warwick for writing on these three topics.

Protecting the life of the unborn child

Many years ago, I was visiting an elderly lady, Margaret, in a nursing home. Margaret was fading quickly, struggled with lucidity, and could no longer see well. She whispered,

“Alfred, is that you?”

“No, it’s Phillip.”

“Alfred, I need to tell you something. When I was pregnant with you, it was the middle of the depression, and your father was without work. We were so poor and had three other children to feed. The day I learned I was pregnant, the nurse told me I could do something about it. I knew what she meant.” She paused and sobbed for a while. “I am so sorry, Alfred. I am so sorry that I ever thought of taking your life. I am so proud of you and your four little boys.”

I was stunned into silence. “Alfred, please forgive me,” she cried.

“I forgive you ... thank you,” I whispered.

Margaret was my grandmother; Alfred is my father. I am one of those “four little boys.”

That day my heart became pro-life. To be in love with God, *the Lover of all souls*, is to be in love with His creation, especially the pinnacle of creation: humanity. To be in love with humanity means to recognize how fragile we are and how life from “womb to tomb” must be cherished and protected with the utmost urgency.

St. Pope John Paul II wrote, “*The inviolability of the person which is a reflection of the absolute inviolability of God, finds its primary and fundamental expression in the inviolability of human life. Above all, the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights—for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture—is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination.*”

(Section 38, paragraph 2, [CHRISTIFIDELES LAICI](#), Dec 30, 1988)

Pro-life today must challenge a growing culture of death through many issues:

- In February 2017, two Planned Parenthood (PPI) former employees reported that “Each clinic has abortion quotas.” PPI performs ~30% of all U.S. abortions.
- Studies correlate abortion with domestic violence; ~70% of post-abortive women feel that they did not have a “choice.”
- Assisted suicide is legal in Washington, Oregon, Montana, Vermont, California, Colorado and Washington, D.C.
- China, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan *and the United States* carried out the most executions in 2016.

The Pro-life movement does applaud some recent political changes, motivated primarily by the Trump administration:

- No federal funding may be used to support any international organization supporting abortion in any form.
- States may deny federal funding to any abortion provider. 20 states have done so.
- Religious organizations do not have to provide coverage for elective abortive procedures or any form of “preventive services” that violate conscience.

That said, according to data collected by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), abortions in the United States have been declining since 1984—regardless of the political party affiliation of the U.S. President.

Environment

Pope John Paul II clearly and rightly sets a priority for the focus of respect life on life issues. Many people feel Pope Francis has watered down life issues with his focus, such as care for creation (*LAUDATO SI'*). I believe, however, he is trying to broaden our view of life issues from a third world perspective. From my personal experience, environmental issues are life issues:

In 1993, I was volunteering in a hospital ward in the Dominican Republic when a small child died of severe dehydration from polluted water. That child would today be the same age as my adult daughter, Sarah. What if that were *my child*?

The #1 killer of children in most western hemisphere countries is not abortion. (U.S. and Canada are notable exceptions.) It is the environment. As another example, mass deforestation in Haiti has destabilized the country's traditional tropical rainfall season and decimated crop production. Haiti can no longer feed itself. Children starve to death just 750 miles from Melbourne. I still have a couple "mud cookies": a mixture of a little flour and clay used to fill a child's stomach and keep it from hurting.

It may be true that no one person uses an instrument of violence to bring about starvation or death from water pollution. However, we have the means and the basic technologies to correct such life and death issues. Isn't this a matter of how we chose to share our wealth and resources (i.e., a sin of omission)?

Even in the United States, environmental problems exist and threaten life. Roughly 40% of members the Navajo Nation do not have running water. Many members of the tribe fear running water due to uranium ore contamination. More than 500 uranium mines—abandoned as the Cold War came to an end—existed within the territories of the Navajo Nation. Cancer rates have doubled since 1970, and a recent study on Navajo infants demonstrated that 27% of participants had dangerous levels of uranium in their urine—five times the national average! Navajo children today continue to carry the burden of the cold war. What would we do if these were our children?

Jesus, *the Lover of all souls*, wants us to love all souls!

Immigration

People most often do not want to leave their homeland. *They leave to live*—whether it be for lack of food, or lack of work to provide for food, or profound violence surrounding them. To understand the plight of a refugee is to understand that this is a life issue.

Most of us are descendants of immigrants who reluctantly left their homelands to live. My immigrant ancestors are Irish, Scandinavian, English, Welsh, German, and Polish. Not every immigrant ancestor of mine was a "knight in shining armor," and very few would get through the immigration process today. More than one left their homeland because they were in some sort of trouble. (I suppose that explains a lot.)

My own experience of Haitians is that people in Haiti survive because of the financial support from relatives in the U.S.A. and Canada. Many are "illegal." Not every immigrant is "perfect," but the vast majority work very hard. In fact, studies show that many American manufacturers prefer immigrant employees. Why? They have a better work ethic.

By one estimate, border-based drug cartels control ~90% of undocumented immigrants from Mexico. Human trafficking therefore closely links to immigration. Victims who can't pay the cartel crossing fees have to "earn it," mainly through prostitution, drug smuggling, or slave labor. This affects an estimated 800,000 women and girls every year. Florida is the third largest hub of human trafficking, and three of the largest human trafficking busts in the past four years resulted in arrests in Brevard County!

Jesus, *the Lover of all souls*, makes "welcoming the stranger" paramount to our understanding of love. What can we do?

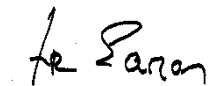
- Simplify the immigration process. Every country has the right to protect itself from terrorists and criminals. However, a typical application can be very long, go through multiple technical rejections, and take years to process. How can we expect an illiterate mother with hungry children to apply?
- Allow "Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals" (DACA). Removing teens and children would be a humanitarian crisis.
- Educate oneself on signs of human trafficking.

Closing thoughts: I fully understand that we most often are divided on Respect Life issues based on political party. We should, however, ask ourselves: Are we first, Catholic—or first, Republican? Are we first, Catholic—or first, Democrat?

We are not called to the same ministry, and wouldn't it be foolish if we were? If we are first, Catholic, and second, Republican, maybe our call is to work pro-life issues, while sensitizing other Republicans to why the Church teaches what it does on the environment, immigration, and human trafficking. If we are first, Catholic, and second, Democrat, maybe our call is to work environmental and immigration issues, while sensitizing other Democrats to why the Church teaches what it does on abortion and euthanasia.

One thing Jesus, the Lover of all souls, does call us to, as Catholics, is unity. No matter what, let us respect what we are: the Body of Christ. (End of Phil's reflection)

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Sean". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.