

Unhappy couples should not be 'held hostage' to their past



As it stands, the current annulment process is the equivalent of 'marital archeology'

A major dispute at the recently concluded Extraordinary Synod on the Family, described by Tokyo Archbishop Takeo Okada as "white hot", concerned the Church's practice of denying the Eucharist to those who have remarried following a divorce.

In a commentary sent to the Katorikku Shimbun, Japan's national Catholic weekly, the archbishop said that "the participating bishops demonstrated one of two orientations. One was the desire to be pastoral, providing comfort, encouragement, help and hope to families worn down by pain.... On the other hand, some stressed the necessity of deepening the commitment to and conveying the teaching of Christ."

Those who opposed relaxing the rule cited the command of Jesus (Mark 10:10-12, modified and softened in Matthew) saying that remarriage following divorce is adultery.

Among those hierarchs who most vehemently insist upon literal observance of Jesus's words (though Jesus is never recorded to have spoken at all of either allowing or denying people access to the Eucharist) are some cardinals whose photos can be found on the Internet showing them wearing the cappa magna, a red cape with a hood lined with ermine or silk that was shortened from 15 meters to seven (49 feet to 25 feet) in 1952 and generally disappeared from ecclesiastical haberdashery after Vatican II. Originally, the great length was intended to cover the rear end of the horse as a bishop or cardinal rode. Reportedly, such a cape costs several thousand dollars — a far cry from swaddling clothes.

Clearly, those cardinals have found a way to reconcile their fashion sense with Jesus' stern warning against ostentatious garb for religious leaders who impose burdens on others (Matthew 23:2-7).

Apparently, they think that while some verses of Scripture must be taken literally, others may be pursued as optional ideals for the heroically holy, some can be entertained as mere suggestions and some should be ignored. They presumably reserve to themselves the authority to decide to which category a particular Scriptural injunction belongs.

Some who seek to allow people whose marriages have failed to once again share fully the life of the Catholic community point to the practice of the Orthodox Church, where a period of penitence may be followed by a second or even third marriage.

However, this ignores the fact that sometimes marriages fail without anyone being at fault. Rather than repentance, what might be needed is a period or even a ceremony of mourning for the hopes that have evaporated, for the shared life that has for whatever reason come to an end.

Men and women grow and change throughout their lives, and the couple that spoke vows in the past can — and do — become different people from those who were joined together in matrimony.

Any real relationship is constantly reaffirmed. A marriage is no different. Each day and in myriad ways, spouses renew their vows. But, sometimes that renewal becomes impossible, or even ill-advised, as when domestic violence in one form or other becomes part of their shared existence.

In spite of their best efforts, their union might no longer be a sacrament of love, but instead an ongoing experience of frustration, anger, pain and hopelessness. Sometimes, their life together has become an arena of spiritual, psychological, social and even physical torture. Can God have joined them and kept them joined for this?

Without so intending, the Church can present marriage as shackles that chain people together whether it be to their benefit or not, to others' benefit (for example, their children) or not.

This weakens the proclamation of marriage as a sacrament of Christ's relationship with the Church, casting a shadow over those marriages that continue to mature and grow. Such marriages can be better signs when there is no doubt about the freedom in which the sign, the relationship, is lived.

The current practice in declaring an annulment is to engage in marital archeology, looking back to the time when a marriage began in order to excavate evidence that one or both of the parties was unable or unwilling to contract a marriage once upon a time. It depends upon the not-always-given and not-always-possible cooperation of various people — the couple themselves, family, old friends, etc.

Instead of simply searching the past, why not look at the present to see if the people that they have become are able to live the marriage covenant? Must they be held hostage to their past, to people (their younger selves) who no longer exist?

In other words, as it is now possible to declare a marriage annulled because it never really took place, it should be possible to make a declaration of nullity based upon the fact that a relationship that may have been a marriage at one point in the past has ceased to be so.

Just as the physical death of a spouse may be followed by remarriage without affecting one's ability to share in the sacramental life of the Church, such should be the case when the spousal relationship, the marriage, has died.

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