

27th Sunday (B)

4th October 2015

'Synod on Marriage'

Gen 2: they become one body Ps 127: your wife like a fruitful vine; your
children like shoots of the olive Heb 2: *sanctifier and sanctified are brothers*
Mk 10: 2–16: *what God has united, man must not divide*

The 'Synod on Marriage and Family Life' starts today at the Vatican, and will last for the bulk of this month of October. It's also the month of the Holy Rosary, so we might appropriately dedicate much of our praying of the rosary to ask for guidance and strength for the Synod bishops as they discuss the many tricky issues of the pastoral care of married couples and their families in the Church, in accordance with the mind of Christ.

The Church indeed makes a big deal of marriage. Just as Christ promoted marriage as a very sacred thing in the sight of God, so the Church sees in marriage the source of faithfulness and perseverance, and promotes it as the only decent basis for children, family and society, because commitment in love is what God made us for; and marriage is the natural — and supernatural — expression of that for a man and woman, for life.

Yet mention the Catholic Church and certain things

will come to mind even to those who are not Catholics. One of them is her refusal to permit divorce. Yet when you hear the Gospel, there is almost nothing clearer than Jesus's very own words that marriage is naturally for life, and that divorce and remarriage have never had any part in God's plan. Christ could not have been clearer! We heard His words there in the passage just now. But that doesn't make it an easy teaching ... it wasn't an easy teaching then for Jesus's disciples, any more than it is now. Divorce had been permitted by Moses but this was not something for Christians; Christians were to live their marriages more as God had always intended: more like God's love, which is faithful and permanent, even in the face of mankind's unfaithfulness to God.

Now we all know that it isn't easy to live this out: in a society in which divorce is so common it can be hard to hold firmly to Christ's teaching. The reality of divorce on demand itself makes it harder to live out the marriage vows until death. As friends said to me, it's in the difficult moments of marriage, at the rocky times, that there's such

a need to know in your heart of hearts that the marriage is for life: it's the belief that the commitment is for life that provides the solid foundation from which to lift yourselves up after a difficulty.

You may know that I have done my best many times to help parishioners who are not in regular marital situations to be helped forward towards the Sacrament of Marriage in the Church. Sometimes situations in one's past can be unhappy or rather messy, and one can maybe shy away from trying to unravel the complications, but I am always happy to help you, and my door is always open to discuss the way forward with anyone who wishes. Every year in our church there are couples who are able to have 'convalidations': the celebration of the proper *sacrament* of marriage after for some reason marrying outside the Church. A few clarifications may be helpful regarding those who seem to have fallen short of Christ's ideal. Sometimes there are misunderstandings about these situations, and it's important to be clear about what the Church teaches for our salvation.

1. The separated (& civilly divorced) are not excluded from the sacraments of the Church. If there was any fault, and there probably was, then forgiveness can be sought in the Sacrament of Reconciliation; but separation itself does not exclude the couple at all from the Church, Mass, or Holy Communion.
2. Those who have civilly remarried have consciously taken a decision which goes against the law of God because (unless proved otherwise) their previous bond of marriage remains. While they may not receive Holy Communion, they are *not* excluded from Mass or the Church. The Church looks after *all* her sons and daughters, and helps them in whatever their situation. Often a priest may be able to help them rectify their situation, especially if there are clear grounds for investigating the validity of the earlier marriage. Since coming here I have encouraged quite a number of parishioners to submit cases to the Marriage Tribunal, so that some earlier, failed, relationship can at least have the chance of being annulled if that is the true and right thing before God. I'm not the expert in these matters, but I can at least facilitate the submission of any parishioner in this situation to put their case to the Church's judgment. I want as much as anyone else to help parishioners who currently can't receive Holy Communion to be able to return to the Sacraments as soon as is possible.

3. Sometimes people are reluctant to enter into marriage, and decide just to live together outside marriage in a sexual way as if they were married. This is not in keeping with Jesus's teachings, either, and also would exclude you for the time being from Holy Communion. Maybe the reluctance is the 'cost' of a wedding, and yet that shouldn't be a factor. If you want to get married, then it can be done as simply and quietly as you wish, without any great financial outlay. I would really encourage this. I am so disappointed when people abandon the idea of Christ's Sacrament of Marriage because they say they can't afford it. I'll do a wedding as quietly and simply as you like. Likewise, if someone has chosen to marry civilly, then as long as there aren't any reasons why they can't marry in the Church, then a simple convalidation ceremony, putting right their status in the Church, can easily be arranged.

Our society's thinking on marriage and relationships is often very much against Christian teaching. Every other film and every other TV programme, of course, would promote the very opposite of what the Church says, and sometimes, after a while, one might wonder, well, is it the Church that has got it wrong? But how can we ever understand God's will except in the way Christ has taught us? Jesus affirmed the beauty of faithful married love, and

the Church does the same; Jesus welcomed those who had failed but wanted His help, the Church does the same. Please: if any of you need to come and talk to me about such matters, I'll always make the time. I'm here for you. I'm sure that that's what the Synod would want, above all!