

# ***“Until death do us part”***

Most adult Christians are married Christians. Most of these married Christians have stood before a minister or a priest and solemnly promised fidelity and lifelong marriage “until death do us part.”

Still, some Christians ask whether they can put aside these vows, divorce and remarry, and still call themselves faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus. Therefore it is necessary to review the teaching of Jesus about marriage, for it is He who came to teach us God’s truth about human love.

## I: The Permanence of Marriage

### Q. What did Jesus teach about marriage?

R. What Jesus taught about marriage has to be seen in the light of his total teaching about love and discipleship; our focus in this leaflet is on his specific teaching about the permanence of marriage. This teaching occurs in four passages in the gospels and once in a letter of St. Paul.<sup>1</sup> The most concise passage comes from the gospel of Luke.

Every one who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery (Lk 16:18).

### Q. Did the Jews at the time of Jesus allow divorce and remarriage?

R. Divorce and remarriage were taken for granted among the Jews at the time of Jesus. However, there was a debate. The more conservative school of thought—the followers of Rabbi Shammai—believed that only a very serious reason could justify divorce; in practice that meant adultery or some other very serious moral misbehavior. The more liberal school—the followers of Rabbi Hillel—held that a man could divorce his wife for all sorts of reasons, even trivial ones. According to some, the liberal practice was the prevailing one.<sup>2</sup>

### Q. What did Jesus say about the Jewish divorce practices of his day?

R. Here is Matthew's account.

Some Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" He answered, "Have you not read that the Creator who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder." They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a written notice of separation and to put her away?" He said to them, "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity [in Greek, *porneia*, "indecency"], and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry" (Mt 19:3-10).

Matthew tells us that this wasn't just a simple, honest question; it was a test. The question was loaded: Could a man divorce his wife "for any cause"—as the liberal followers of Hillel taught? If Jesus said yes, then he could be criticized for laxity; if he said no, he could be accused of rigorism; at the least he would

be accused of taking sides with one school or the other.

His answer caught everyone by surprise; he told them that they were both wrong; divorce was not possible for trivial reasons and divorce was not possible even for serious reasons.

Jesus gave the most fundamental possible reason: quoting what the Jews recognized was the Word of God—the book of Genesis, He based his answer first upon the very nature of man and woman created in the image of God (Gn 1:27) and secondly upon the very nature of marriage—that the two become one flesh (Gn 2:24).

The response of the Jewish lawyers was immediate; like many lawyers, they looked for a precedent to justify their position, so they quoted Moses. Why did Moses command giving your wife a written certificate of divorce in order to put her away, they asked. Jesus told them plainly: "For your hardness of hearts. . . ." And then He taught them about the fundamental law of God and the nature of marriage once again: "But from the beginning it was not so."

Actually, what Moses had done was to give at least some recognition of the rights of a woman not to be treated as a piece of property as was common in the Near Eastern world of his time. Prior to the dictate of Moses, a man could divorce his wife and then claim her back. With the written certificate of separation, he gave up all future claim to her; at least she was no longer his yo-yo.

### Q. What about that phrase "except for unchastity"?

Does that provide a reason for divorce with freedom to remarry in cases of infidelity, desertion, etc.?

R. No. If Jesus had meant that adultery and desertion were grounds for real divorce with the consequent freedom to remarry, he would have been siding with the conservative school of Shammai. But he did not do that. He went back to Genesis, to the very order of creation. Look again at the last verse of Matthew's account. The teaching of Jesus was such a shocking surprise that the immediate reaction of his disciples was that if a man was really that "stuck" with his first wife, it would be better not to get married at all! His disciples clearly understood that he was not siding with the school of Shammai.

Second, making an exception for adultery and desertion would contradict the basic teaching of Jesus; it would have undermined his whole purpose in going back to the very order of creation. If adultery were grounds for divorce, all a man would have to do would be to have sex with someone he'd like for a new wife, and he would have broken free from the first marriage. Instead, Jesus spelled out very clearly that remarriage constitutes living in adultery. The gospel of Mark makes this very clear:

And in the house, his disciples again asked him about this. He taught them: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, he commits adultery against her; and if the wife divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" (Mk 10:10-12).

Third, the most likely meaning of "except for unchastity" is that it refers to marriages of close relatives which were condemned by Jewish law as indecent.<sup>3</sup> As indicated above, the Greek word translated as "unchastity" is *porneia* (pronounced por-nay-uh) from which we derive our word "pornography." So the phrase reads, "except for *porneia*—unions judged indecent because they had every appearance of incest."

Marriages judged to be incestuous, e.g., between a man and his stepmother (1 Cor 5:1) and between other close relatives, were acceptable in some societies long known to the Jews, but Jewish law condemned them as *porneia*. The early Christian Council of Jerusalem continued this condemnation (Acts 15:29). Therefore the clause "except for *porneia*" was no exception; it was a warning that no one, Jew or Greek, could enter into an incestuous union and expect the Church to recognize it. Such evil unions were not marriages; they both could and should be dissolved.

This interpretation has a special force because the "except for *porneia*" clause is found only in the gospel of Matthew which was written for the churches close to Jerusalem.

### Q. What if abuse makes it impossible for two spouses to live together safely?

R. Under such circumstances, there can be a permanent separation from "bed and board" or even civil divorce. However, this does not dissolve the spiritual bond of marriage; it does not free the spouses to marry someone else. As St. Paul taught:

"To the married, not I but the Lord commands that a wife is not to leave her husband, but if she does separate, she is to stay unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife" (1 Cor 7:10-11).

### Q. What's the conclusion?

R. In marriage, two spouses become one flesh. Husband and wife create a relationship of oneness that is just as real and permanent as any other. A father may have disagreements with his son, even disown him, but he cannot cease to be his father. So also with husband and wife.

Therefore Jesus taught that Christian marriage is for keeps. No exceptions. It is permanent. There is no out. If horrible circumstances occur, it may be necessary for one spouse to leave the other for the safety of herself (or himself) and the children. But the original bond created by their marriage vows before God still remains before God regardless of any civil laws, and neither party is free to remarry. Any attempt at such "remarriage" falls under the words of Jesus himself—it is adultery.

### Q. What are the benefits of this permanence?

R. The great blessings of indissoluble marriage were well described by Pope Pius XI.<sup>4</sup>

1. "Both husband and wife possess a positive guarantee of the endurance of this stability which that generous yielding of their persons and the intimate

fellowship of their hearts by their nature strongly require, since true love never falls away."

2. "A strong bulwark is set up in defense of a loyal chastity against incitements to infidelity, should any be encountered either from within or from without."

3. "Any anxious fear lest in adversity or old age the other spouse would prove unfaithful is precluded and in its place there reigns a calm sense of security."

4. Indissolubility is a great blessing "in the training and education of children, which must extend over a period of many years. . . since the grave and long enduring burdens of this office are best borne by the united efforts of the parents."

5. Lastly there are real benefits to society.

"Experience has taught that unassailable stability in matrimony is a fruitful source of virtuous life and of habits of integrity. Where this order of things obtains, the happiness and well-being of the nation is safely guarded; what the families and individuals are, so also is the State."

In summary, indissolubility is not a "rule of the Church." It is part of a loving Creator's plan. It is faithful to our true human nature, and its goodness should be clear: "the good of a stable home or haven: of knowing that this 'belongingness'—shared with others—is for keeps. People want that, are made for that, expect that it will require sacrifices and sense that the sacrifices are worth it. . . It is a strange head and heart that rejects the permanence of the marriage relationship."<sup>5</sup>

## II: What Is Christian Marriage?

Christian marriage can be described in several ways. It's a personal relationship of permanently committed love. It's a covenant. It's a sacrament. It's a symbol of the unbreakable union between Christ and his Church.

### Q. What does Vatican Council II teach about marriage?

R. "The intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws. It is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. Hence, by that human act whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other, a relationship arises which by divine will and in the eyes of society too is a lasting one. For the good of the spouses and their offspring as well as of society, the existence of this sacred bond no longer depends on human decisions alone."<sup>6</sup>

With that statement, the Church teaches that

- 1) Marriage is a covenant.
- 2) The covenant of marriage is created by God and it is entered into by the couple when they exchange their marriage vows.
- 3) The consent to marriage is irrevocable; it cannot be broken by changing your mind, changes in feelings, or even by subsequent sin.

**Q. What is meant by calling marriage a covenant?**

R. It means that the commitment of marriage is a family commitment: open-ended and unlimited. Compare it to a contract. In a contract, you spell out all the details about what each party to the contract is obliged to do. If something isn't covered, it simply isn't covered and there is no contractual obligation. Furthermore, a contract will spell out the duration of the contract and how it can be ended.

The open-ended character of the marriage covenant is expressed in the traditional vows or promises of marriage: "for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, for better and for worse, until death do us part." It does not establish a "deal" but a family.

**Q. Can we hedge our bets and marry for better but not for worse?**

R. No. Marriage is a **God**-created relationship; as noted above, it "has been established by the **Creator** and qualified by **His** laws."

**Q. What if a couple agree, before they marry, to end their marriage if "it's just not working out"?**

R. If a couple enter into such an arrangement, it is not a marriage, because marriage comes about not from the ceremony but from "irrevocable personal consent." In other words, a couple "commit marriage" by the act of their wills and by consummating that act of will by the act of marital intercourse which symbolizes their oneness in the Lord. To enter an arrangement of living together without the true commitment of marriage is to fornicate—even if it has been preceded by a ceremony which would, of course, be fraudulent on their part.

**Q. What is an annulment?**

R. The proper term is "declaration of nullity," and it is a judgment by a Church process that an "apparent marriage" was no marriage at all.

**Q. Why is a declaration of nullity given?**

R. It is granted because sometimes a couple enter an apparent marriage without "committing marriage." One example was given just above—the mutual lack of commitment, and there are others. For example, one party might be serious about marriage, but the other person might, from the beginning, view the relationship simply as a social steppingstone to be ended when someone more useful turns up.

**Q. Then "annulments" aren't just a Catholic form of divorce with freedom to remarry?**

R. Definitely not. There is the possibility that the application of certain grounds of nullity, especially psychological ones, can be abused, but the point remains: there are some unions that utterly fail to meet the requirements of true marriage from the very beginning, and they can and should be dissolved.

**Q. Why did God create the relationship of marriage?**

R. The Second Vatican Council clearly teaches that

God created matrimony for the raising of a family and the perfection of the spouses. "By their very nature, the institution of matrimony itself and conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children, and find in them their ultimate crown."<sup>7</sup>

Spouses are called "to render mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and of their actions."<sup>8</sup>

This intimate union of their persons goes far beyond their genital unions. Indeed, married love has to be worked at, for it requires unselfishness. "Such love, merging the human with divine, leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of themselves, a gift proving itself by gentle affection and by deed. . . It far excels mere erotic inclination, which selfishly pursued, soon enough fades wretchedly away."<sup>9</sup>

**Q. So, how important are children to Christian marriage?**

R. Vatican II teaches that while "marriage is not instituted solely for procreation," still, "marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and education of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents."<sup>10</sup>

**Q. How do children "contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents"?**

R. The teaching of Sacred Scripture is still true; "A woman will be saved through bearing children if she continues in faith and love and holiness with modesty" (1 Tim 2: 15). In addition, the raising of children helps parents to grow in the ways of love so prophetically described by St. Paul: "Love is patient and kind. . . is not jealous or boastful. . . is not irritable or resentful. . . hopes all things. . . endures all things" (1 Cor 13:4-7). Indeed, as parents both exercise their roles of caring love toward their children, each spouse grows in admiration and appreciation for the other, and their mutual love increases.

Lastly, "children strengthen the goodness of the bond of marriage, so that it does not give way under the strains that follow on the inevitable wane or disappearance of effortless romantic love."<sup>11</sup>

In short, you marry to be friends in the deepest sense—to help each other on the path to heaven and to have children whom you will educate in the ways of the Lord. In turn, your children will help you as parents grow closer together and to God. Married love is for family, and family life with its combination of joys and sorrows is the ordinary way of working out your salvation.

**A personal note**

This pamphlet didn't just happen. I wrote it in response to tragedy. Some acquaintances of my children in their early twenties were already starting to break up their marriages. I knew one of those kids, not well, but I've seen her off and on. My kids tell me of others—no names—who went to Catholic high school with them and are now already divorced. What else can you call that except sheer tragedy?

This tragedy isn't new. I can still recall all too well a young couple who walked into my office one day in the mid-Sixties. One of them was a divorced Christian. I showed them the passages in the Bible where Jesus teaches about the permanence of marriage. Tears came to their eyes as it became clear to them that this was no mere rule of the Church but was from the Lord. Their only question was, "Why didn't anyone ever tell us this before?"

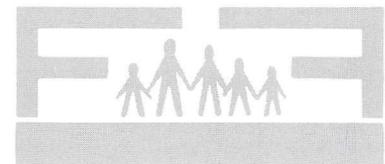
To help avert such heartbreaks, to help prevent the breakdown of marriages, and to help prepare couples for the happiness that God intends for them to have in marriage—that's why I wrote this pamphlet.

— John F. Kippley

*References*

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10. "The Church Today," n. 50.
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**Foundation for the Family**  
P.O. Box 111184  
Cincinnati, Ohio 45211-1184  
(513) 471-2000

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