



PASTORAL LETTER

FR CHRISTOPHER SMITH, STD

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Fr Christopher Smith, STD

Prince of Peace Catholic Church & School
frsmith@princeofpeacetaylors.org

CATHOLIC TEACHING ON MARRIAGE

As we continue our journey through the Acts of the Apostles with Paul and Barnabas, we come across the first time in Church history where a question arose, the answer to which had the potential to render asunder the unity of the Church, and which was not immediately obvious from the teaching of Christ Himself. The question was this: did Gentile converts to Christianity also have to follow the Mosaic law in order to follow Jesus? So, whenever you look around at fierce debate in the Church today, just remember: this is nothing new. Paul and Barnabas met with the apostles in Jerusalem, and there, they didn't democratically put up to a vote what they wanted to believe. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, they discerned together what the original content of divine revelation had to say about the question. And they confirmed this:

It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities, namely, to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage. If you keep free of these, you will be doing what is right.

The very first generation of Catholic Christians after Jesus discerned that these two disciplines were part of the content of revelation itself, and they could not change or challenge it. Now, today, I don't think there is much danger of Catholics eating a hamburger from a cow that had been sacrificed to Zeus or Baal. But the danger of Catholics marrying unlawfully is a clear and present danger that I come across all the time. But what does "unlawful" mean in relation to marriage, and who gets to decide? And this is where it gets a bit tricky.

First of all, when we speak of law, there are three different types of law that are relevant here. Divine law, ecclesiastical law and civil law. When many people think about lawful marriage, they only think about what the State has to say about marriage. The Catholic understanding of marriage in 2022 is very different than what the State of South Carolina or the Supreme Court of the United States of America has to say about marriage. But the Catholic understanding of marriage in AD 42 was very different than what the Roman Empire said about marriage as well.



According to civil law, marriage is a contract between two persons that offers certain protections, rights and responsibilities, that can be dissolved by the State under certain circumstances. Interestingly enough, that was also the case for the Law of Moses. But when Jesus comes on the scene, he reminds his hearers that the Law of Moses was an accommodation to human weakness; it wasn't part of the original plan of God. In Mathew 19.8, the Lord said, *Because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but in the beginning it was not so.* The Lord Jesus comes to restore marriage to its original

dignity that had been perverted by the laws of men. He then elevates it from a natural legal contract to a supernatural sacramental covenant, a sign on this earth of the unbreakable bond

between God and His Bride, the Church. The divine law established by Jesus Christ for Christians is this: marriage is an indissoluble bond between one man and one woman for life, open to life, that no power on this earth, not even the Church, can dissolve. When we are baptized into the Lord Jesus, when two baptized Christians give themselves to each other in marriage:

“

what the Lord has joined together, let no man rend asunder.

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I am continually surprised when people get mad at the Church for not allowing divorce and remarriage, but they are asking the Church to do something that not even God can do: if God cannot dissolve his bond with His spouse, the Church, how can His Church dissolve the bond between man and wife, which is the image of that reality in the world? The Church has no power or authority to say that a marriage is not a marriage. Now, here is the interesting thing. The indissolubility of a valid sacramental marriage comes from the fact of baptism. So two baptized Protestants who marry each other are validly baptized, and the Church cannot declare such a marriage invalid either. What is unique about this situation is that in the 16th century, the Reformers began one by one to deny that marriage was one of the seven sacraments instituted by Christ, and reverted to a conception of marriage which was legal and no longer sacramental.

In addition to divine law about marriage, remember that in things that are not commanded by God, the apostles and their successors have the power to bind and loose the Church's children by means of certain disciplines which are meant to safeguard our understanding of the original revelation of Christ. *Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.* In Catholic



teaching, man and wife are the ministers of the sacrament of marriage to each other. It is the vows, not the blessing of the Church, that made it happen. The earliest Christians were acutely aware that their understanding of marriage was different than that of civil law, so they married according to custom and sought a blessing in church right afterwards. Soon, civil law began to reflect both divine and ecclesiastical law. But with the Reformation, civil law began once again to diverge from divine and ecclesiastical law. And so all of a sudden Catholics found themselves in a very different situation than they ever had before. The Church gained



hard and fast experience that when Catholics married non-Catholics, who had a very different understanding of marriage, two different worldviews caused disunity in a marriage and often ended up in Catholics leaving the faith.

And so the sad reality of this very real situation pushed the Church to refine her discipline to prevent the loss of faith. Divine law says that marriage is between one man and one woman for life, and is a sacramental covenant between two baptized Christians that is indissoluble. Ecclesiastical law says that a Catholic marries a Catholic in a Catholic church. The Church binds her children in this way to make sure we don't lose yet another generation to the faith. But the Church can also loose her children under certain circumstances: a Catholic can marry a non-Catholic if the Catholic party agrees to raise the children as Catholic; and a Catholic can marry someone outside of a Catholic church but only in the narrowest of circumstances. Let's say you're stranded on a desert island with your fiancé with no Catholic priest or deacon or church around anywhere, well, the couple are the ministers of the sacrament, so they make a valid sacramental marriage in this case. In less extreme cases, the Bishop can dispense from a sacred space or what is called canonical form, namely the liturgical rite of marriage, for a very serious pastoral need.

But the Church insists her children get married in Church. Why? If two people love each

other, why worry about where and how they exchange their vows if they are the ministers anyway? Well, because when a Catholic gets married outside of the Church, as Catholics they believe one thing about what marriage is, and yet they are marrying a person or by a means which denies, sometimes completely, what God and His Church teach about marriage. That introduces into marriage a fundamental ambiguity about what marriage even is, so how can that be a marriage at all? That is why the Church sees marriages contracted like that as invalid: they do not respect the truth revealed by God about marriage and family life. As such they are unlawful and place a person not only in the state of sin, but of impaired communion with the Church. Up until 1966, a Catholic who married outside of the Church incurred the penalty of excommunication to get across just how seriously the Church takes this. While Catholics no longer incur this penalty, which was meant to wake people up to a spiritual danger, a Catholic who marries in this way may still not receive Holy Communion until such time as the marriage is regularized.

Now the good news is that Catholics who have married outside of the Church can have such a marriage convalidated by going through the preparation of the Church and receiving the blessing of the Church, as long as both parties are free to marry. But when a party has been married before, they can't be married unless it can be proven that there was some pre-existing condition on the day of the marriage that made the marriage invalid. The Church's process of annulment is not a Catholic divorce; it says that, as far as human frailty can know, that people are free to marry because, even if they said, "I do," they actually didn't because there was something that rendered that exchange of vows unlawful.



Unfortunately, we now have generations of Catholics who are growing up with poor catechesis who don't even know what the Church actually teaches about marriage. They get their cues on marriage from pop culture and social media instead of the Gospel. And as civil law con-



tinues to diverge more and more from divine ecclesiastical law on what marriage even is, Catholics are tempted more and more to approach marriage in a way totally inconsistent with Scripture and Tradition. We have now reduced marriage to “a legal contract between two or more persons who are romantically attracted to each other a lot, at least often, until they aren’t, and then decide to not be together anymore.” Nothing could be further from the plan God had for marriage with Adam

and Eve, and restored in Christ. There is perhaps nothing more countercultural today than being a Catholic who lives the Church’s teaching on marriage.

And standing up for that puts faithful Catholics in very awkward situations. As more and more poorly formed Catholics get married outside of the Church, they get very angry when their practicing Catholic loved ones object. Every week I get the question, “My loved one is getting married outside of the Church. Can I go to the wedding?” And then every priest they asks seems to give a different answer. Some priests will say, “well, you’re not supposed to go if it creates scandal, but no one is scandalized by this kind of thing anyway, so, if it’s going to create more problems than it solves, and you’re going to push them away by not going, it’s better to go along with it and hope later to rectify the situation.”

Yet the Catholic Church teaches that the ends do not justify the means. When a Catholic gets married in a way which is invalid, they are not doing something that they think they’re doing, namely, getting married. It’s a simulation of a sacrament, and is an untruth; it is a grave sin that ruptures our communion with God and His Church; it is not an indifferent thing that doesn’t really matter. And when we become an accessory to another’s sin, by silence which indicates consent, by contradicting the truth about marriage, or in any other way, we lose an opportunity to suffer for the sake of the Gospel and demonstrate our belief that actions matter.

The Church can change her discipline, even if she can't change her doctrine. But even if she changed her discipline in this regard, it wouldn't fix the problem the discipline is trying to address in the first place. When Christians marry in a way which is totally contrary to God's plan for marriage, they deceive themselves with a lie about love itself. That sin has consequences that reach far beyond the wedding day. Paul and Barnabas and the apostles gathered in Jerusalem 2000 years ago knew that when they insisted that Christians, whether they be Jew or Gentile, resist unlawful marriage.

The doctrine and discipline of the Catholic Church on marriage is very clear, and also widely ignored. As St Bernadette said, "It is not my job to convince you, but it is my job to inform." As a Catholic priest, it is my duty to remind the faithful of truths that the world, the flesh and the devil don't want you to hear. What you do with that is on you!



PRINCE *of* PEACE
Catholic Church & School
1209 Brushy Creek Road • Taylors, SC 29687
www.princeofpeacetaylors.org