

Our Journey Together Continues...

July 25, 2010

One of the tragic events among us that I hear about or sometimes learn about firsthand is divorce. In those conversations, one or other are looking for support, a listening ear, direction and sometimes a “miracle”. Often they are looking for information about their relationship with the church. It is frequently a relief to them to hear that if they divorce their relationship with the church doesn’t change. A divorced person is not excommunicated; they may continue to receive the sacraments and they remain full and hopefully active members of our faith family. In those initial conversations, annulment may or may not come up.

As some know better than I, going through divorce is a raw, painful, sad and heartbreaking experience. Feelings of failure, loss, hurt, anger, helplessness, to name a few, are worn like a glove. Just getting through the day is all that one can do. My own helplessness invites me to rely on God and invite and encourage this person to bring to God however they are and whatever they are feeling. Divorce happens all too often and the brokenness in its wake heals only over time and with the help of God. What I can be is a companion, I can pray for the person and I can assure them that they are not alone or abandoned. God is with them and so is the church.

The subject of annulment usually comes up at another time. Annulment is just too complicated to talk about early on when emotions are “high in the water.” In my experience, with some exceptions, annulment is something people hear about from others, are vague about or know pieces that result in misinformation and misunderstanding. Each person seeking an annulment has a unique story and so the grounds for annulment and the process of annulment is unique. When someone asks me about annulments for someone else, I find myself at a loss because I need to know the details of that person’s story.

For us as Catholics, marriage is a sacrament. When we enter marriage we are entering a covenant, not a contract. We sign a “contract” when we sign our credit card receipt. We sign a contract when we buy home or a new car or whatever. A covenant is a biblical word that implies relationship, commitment, faithfulness, love and permanence. The covenant of marriage reflects or mirrors or points to the covenant God has with us, founded in Jesus who gave himself away in love for us. As married partners give themselves away in love for one another in the everydayness of their relationship they witness to what God’s love for us looks like. Married people are a sacrament for one another and for all of us who are church. In and through their loving, faithfulness, commitment and effort, we have hints of who God is and what God’s love for us looks like. Marriage as sacrament is a holy journey, a sacred trust, a blessed relationship with God and the church.

When a divorced person seeks an annulment they are

asking the church to determine whether their failed marriage was a sacrament. A divorced person was legally married for a period of time and the annulment process doesn’t say anything about the existence or legality of the marriage. Nor does annulment deny or in any way impact the legitimacy of the children of that marriage. Annulment is seeking to determine if that marriage that existed for a period of time, with or without children, was sacramental. If the annulment process concludes that the marriage was not sacramental, the divorced person may enter a sacramental marriage or be married again in the church.

The annulment process focuses on the relationship between husband and wife “in the beginning”. To be married sacramentally one must be free, so were both parties free or was there something diminishing or thwarting their ability to freely commit themselves to one another? Maybe there was pressure from an unintended pregnancy, from a parent, from an addiction or maybe they were just too immature and unable to make a choice for life. To be married sacramentally, two persons make a permanent commitment. Are they able to do so? Addictive behavior, for example, could diminish a person’s ability to enter a permanent commitment. To be married sacramentally one makes a choice and one needs to understand what they are doing and the consequences of their choice. Romantic love or being “in love” and wanting to marry someone is not necessarily an informed or understood choice. To be married sacramentally, one is open to having children.

In describing these grounds for annulment, I am offering partial insight into how the process works. Since each person’s story is unique, each person’s story needs individual conversation and pastoral guidance. My own experience companioning people through the process is that, while painful and painstaking, the process can be healing. For many, the process serves as an avenue of closure, leaving the past behind, and moving on. If a first marriage is annulled, a second chance at the sacrament of marriage becomes possible or a second marriage can be blessed and become a sacrament.

I invite and encourage anyone into conversation about annulment. I would welcome you. Our priests would welcome you. Our Pastoral Associates would welcome you. If you choose to pursue an annulment for yourself, we will walk with you. If you want information about annulments for yourself or someone else, we will try to be helpful. If you know someone who is divorced, confused about where they stand, or living in a second marriage outside the church, invite them or encourage them to call me or call someone who can help. More information can be found on our website.

I hope you have a good week.

Fr. John Henneke, OFM