



## What Does the Catholic Church Teach About Divorce and Remarriage?

By Patrick Madrid

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE is a widespread problem these days. Many Christians know the pain of divorce, and some have remarried. Not surprisingly, many of them wonder about the spiritual ramifications of their situation.

Divorced Christians who've never attempted remarriage, or who have received from the Church what is known as an "annulment," are not the focus here. Rather, it's Christians who divorce and remarry without going through the annulment process who should heed the danger of their spiritual situation.

The Catholic Church's teaching on divorce and remarriage is anchored squarely on Christ's teaching: "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery" (Luke 16:18).

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (Matthew 5:31-32).

The *Catechism* says, "Divorce is a grave offense against the natural law. It claims to break the contract, to which the spouses freely consented, to live with each other till death. Divorce does injury to the covenant of salvation, of which sacramental marriage is the sign. Contracting a new union, even if it is recognized by civil law, adds to the gravity of the rupture: the remarried spouse is then in a situation of public and permanent adultery" (CCC 2384).

"Divorce is immoral also because it introduces disorder into the family and into society. This disorder brings grave harm to the deserted spouse, to children traumatized by the separation of their parents and often torn between them, and because of its contagious effect which makes it truly a plague on society" (CCC 2385).

“It can happen that one of the spouses is the innocent victim of a divorce decreed by civil law; this spouse therefore has not contravened the moral law. There is a considerable difference between a spouse who has sincerely tried to be faithful to the sacrament of marriage and is unjustly abandoned, and one who through his own grave fault destroys a canonically valid marriage (CCC 2386).

This is why God said, “I hate divorce . . . so take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless” (Malachi 2:16).

When the Rich Young Man asked Christ what he must do to go to heaven, He responded, “If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” Among those he listed was “You shall not commit adultery” (Matt. 19:16-19).

In Matthew 19: 3-10, “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 he 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 not man put asunder.’ They said to him, ‘Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, 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, and marries another, commits adultery.’”

Some argue that the phrase, “except on the ground of unchastity,” constitutes an “exception clause” that allows for divorce and remarriage in cases where one or both spouses commits adultery. But this is a misreading of the text. The Greek word here for unchastity, “*porneia*,” refers to sexual unlawfulness in which two “spouses” are not validly married (cf. John 4:17-18), though they live as if they were. In such cases, to separate and then marry someone else would not constitute adultery, since the two parties were not really married to begin with.

A valid marriage, however, cannot be dissolved. Christ said, “They are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.”

St. Paul added, “[A] married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress” (Romans 7:2-3).

Anyone who imagines that divorce and remarriage is not serious in God’s eyes should ponder this warning: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

That passage might trouble someone who is divorced and remarried but who never went through the annulment process and received from the Church a declaration of nullity (i.e. “an annulment”). If so, he or she should feel troubled. His conscience is warning that something is spiritually very wrong.

If you are in this situation, contact a priest for sacramental confession and to get advice on how to correct things.

Additional Verses to Study:

- Exodus 20:14
- Leviticus 20:10
- Deuteronomy 5:18
- Proverbs 6:32
- Malachi 3:5
- Matthew 5:27-28
- Mark 10:11-12, 17-19
- Luke 18:19-20
- Romans 2:22, 13:8-10
- 1 Corinthians 7:10-11
- Hebrews 13:4

Related *Catechism* Sections: CCC 1629-1651, 2384-2386

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