

Finding beauty amid pain: divorce in the Church

By Jessica Trygstad
The Catholic Spirit

In a Church that upholds the sacrament of marriage, it's no secret some Catholics who are separated or divorced have felt judged and alienated.

But Pope Francis has said it in no uncertain terms, and many Catholics already know it to be true: Divorce doesn't have to be a dirty word in the Church.

In homilies ahead of the World Meeting of Families taking place now in Philadelphia, and October's world Synod on the Family, the pontiff has focused on a slew of family issues, including ministry to separated and divorced Catholics.

During his 100th general audience Aug. 5, Pope Francis said Catholic pastors must "openly and coherently demonstrate the willingness of the community to welcome and encourage" divorced and remarried couples and their families to participate in Church life, Catholic News Service reported. For those same couples, he said prayer, listening to the word of God, attending Mass, educating their children in the faith, serving the poor and working for justice and peace should be part of their lives.

Two local Catholics who have actively sought spiritual guidance during separation and divorce say the Church has inspired them to do just that.

Finding new meaning

Michelle Nabors faced a series of complicated questions when her husband of three years decided to separate from her last year. At first, the 26-year-old mother of two was angry — she thought if her marriage ends in divorce, why would her Church insist she's still married? And how would she live that out?

It took Nabors examining what her faith says about marriage to bring a "radical shift" to how she sees the Church's teaching. She says it's one of the most beautiful teachings she has ever learned because it has prompted her to explore what it really means to love.

"When I look at Jesus on the cross, I see that he knew in that moment every time I would reject him, deny him [and] abandon him. And yet in that moment, he still chose to give all of himself in love for me," said Nabors, a parishioner of St. Peter Claver in St. Paul. "He calls all of us to love everybody in that way, but I think our families and our spouse, in a particular way, to really model that love. And that image has been very helpful in asking Christ to take me up on the cross with him [and] let me see my spouse through his eyes with his mercy, his forgiveness and his love."

Since her separation, Nabors has sought support from family, friends, parish priests and a new group sponsored by the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis' Office of Marriage, Family and Life called Faithful Spouses.

Nabors appreciates that the group promotes love and respect for everyone involved — spouses, children and extended family. Previously, she was part of a different Christian support group, but stopped attending because the focus was about moving on, and conversations usually ended in bitterness and anger.

"Faithful Spouses has been helpful in fellowship, support and prayer. [It's] a community of people who are asking the same questions that are honestly questions most people in society don't understand why you're asking in the first place, much less how to answer," Nabors said.

Among those questions: how to love someone who doesn't reciprocate that love, what it means to be married when society has a different view of the relationship, and how to explain the situation to children in a way that's respectful of their other parent, yet upholds the Church's teaching.

After the separation, a priest reminded Nabors that nowhere in her vows did she say she'd physically live with her spouse.

"You can live out vows no matter what your spouse chooses to do," she said, adding that love as an active choice is a concept that needs to be better addressed when couples prepare for marriage. "No one wants to talk about worst-case scenarios, but it is something that should be . . . clearly understood."

Although she feels supported in the Church, Nabors said in trying to articulate to non-Catholics what her marriage means, she has felt ridiculed.

"I think a lot of it comes from our society's view on what love is," Nabors said. "I heard Pope Francis once say that our culture, our society is setting people in the mindset of divorce, that we throw things away; if it's broken, you throw it away, if it's not what you envisioned, if it's not making you happy, that you would throw it away and pursue something different. But that's not what love is."

The experiences she's had and lessons she's learned have inspired her to document her thoughts and feelings at a blog she created, www.mysoulfullove.com.

Dedicated ministry

At one parish, it took the anguish of a widowed deacon to minister to people who shared that feeling, if for a different reason.

For the past 10 years, Deacon Greg Steele has hosted a support group for people who are separated or divorced. In 2004, at a time when Deacon Steele said few support groups existed in the west metro, Father Michael Becker, then-pastor of St. Michael in St. Michael, asked him to start one at the parish.

"There were times I'd come to the meeting, and there was no one," said Deacon Steele, a deacon of the Diocese of St. Cloud but "on loan" to the archdiocese. Now, some 10-15 people attend any given session, and the group doesn't take breaks. "They're hurting every week. That's why we meet all the time," he said, describing how many people are spiritually and financially broken. He stressed that for those who are separated from their spouses, preserving the marriage is the ultimate goal. Meeting at the parish from 6:30 to 8:30 each Thursday night, the group begins and ends with prayer. In between, members view part of a film series and discuss it, then talk about their week. But they have to abide by a few rules: no cell phones, and they must maintain confidentiality. The meetings often continue unofficially at a local restaurant.

The group took time to evolve, but Deacon Steele has found success in two different film series that address the practical and the spiritual — in particular, Rose Sweet's "Catholic's Divorce Survival Guide." From the 13-week program, Deacon Steele has seen "significant changes" in the group members, many of whom lacked shared spirituality in their marriages.

"We've had people who weren't even going to church who are now on the finance council; they're eucharistic ministers, they're readers," he said. "We often say the No. 1 goal of marriage is to get each other to heaven, but that [often] gets low on the priority list." Leo Gagnon agrees.

For Gagnon, who attends St. Michael, divorce meant turmoil. The proceedings began in 2005 and ended in 2010. He said it wasn't until he sought God that he started to feel better, taking inspiration from his mother, whom he described as a woman with strong Catholic faith.



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Around that time, he went to lunch with Deacon Steele, who told him not to let the divorce destroy him. He took the words to heart.

"We beat ourselves up," Gagnon said. "We're probably our own worst enemies . . . running through the 'what-if' scenarios."

One part of the video series likens divorce to a tornado: The film shows a well-constructed city, a tornado knocks everything flat, people's lives are in disarray, then the clean-up and rebuilding starts.

"That's probably one of the most outstanding examples of a divorce, because that's what it does," Gagnon said. "You don't know what's going on, [and] you don't know if you're up or you're down. It's just crazy. I wish I would've had that to start with when I went through my divorce, because I would've understood a lot more things about it and not have felt so alone."

Gagnon said most people who hesitate to join a group don't understand the benefit of having people understand how they feel and what's going on.

"And yet," he said, "people shouldn't be embarrassed, either. This happens."

Now a group facilitator, Gagnon asks people if they went to church when they were married, and even if they did, whether they were spiritually in sync.

Deacon Steele acknowledges the difficulty in praying for people who've hurt others, but "God's asking us to go beyond ourselves." He said it's not necessarily about praying for change, but to have God work with the person.

"Those exes can be awful people, but how are you going to have change unless someone is praying?" he asked. "That's hard, because there's so much anger," but praying is especially important if children are involved. "You need to have God entering this relationship somewhere."

Forgiveness has brought Gagnon resolution. "A lot of people don't understand that forgiving somebody doesn't mean that what they did was right," he said. "It means

that you're forgiving them, you're letting that go. They did what they did, it's over and done with. But if you hold the bitterness inside, it will literally eat you up. And that's what destroys a lot of lives, and that's where the prayer comes in."

Marriage annulment

Gagnon says putting God first in his life makes him happy; he doesn't date. He also hasn't pursued an annulment, a declaration from the Church that one of the essential elements of marriage was not present when the couple exchanged vows, rendering the marriage invalid. Since he wasn't going to date, he didn't think an annulment was necessary.

But after a staff member of the archdiocese's Office of Marriage, Family and Life spoke to their support group about what the sacrament of marriage means, Gagnon said he took it more seriously and is considering starting the process. He believes a lot of people don't understand the Church's teaching on marriage.

In early September, Pope Francis announced a streamlined annulment process in order to eliminate unnecessary and sometimes burdensome barriers toward obtaining a just and expeditious judgment. The changes are set to take effect Dec. 8, the opening day the pope's Year of Mercy.

The Diocese of Madison, Wisconsin, posted on its website a comprehensive list of frequently asked questions about the new changes. Read them at www.madisondiocese.org.

The challenge for the Church

When a parish survey omitted a check box for separated or divorced status, Deacon Steele saw to its inclusion.

"People have a difficult time even going to their local separated and divorced meetings because of the stigma and [wondering] who's going to be at that meeting,"

Deacon Steele said. What complicates it even more is that in small, close, heavily Catholic communities like St. Michael, "when you divorce someone in St. Michael, you divorce the community," he explained.

To help erase the stigma many people feel, Deacon Steele said it's important for clergy to be present at support group meetings.

"We're not necessarily there for all their answers because we don't understand what they've gone through. But at least we're there to listen," he said.

In ministering to people who are separated or divorced, Deacon Steele said he finds beauty in each of them and often observes them experiencing a sudden call to serve. For instance, many of the men in the group now volunteer with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. What's more, members of the support group have helped one another move; Gagnon has fixed lawn mowers and done yard work for group members.

"It's amazing. In my mind, it's somewhat miraculous," Deacon Steele said. "It's fun to watch it unravel and evolve, and to see them grow spiritually. They're doing something with it. They're active. It's not just sit back and take it all in. You see results and fruit from all they've been through."

"People happen to make a bad choice in their life," he continued. "They have so much guilt, and they feel abandoned by the Church. It's hard to find people who are willing to minister to them. Especially clergy are uncomfortable."

Deacon Steele said regardless of the percentage of separated or divorced Catholics, they all need to be helped, adding there should be a separated and divorced group in every parish.

"I'm not going to abandon these people, I'm not going to give up on them," he said. "They need [the] Church so bad. I couldn't walk away from it. They come in truly broken."

Out from behind closed doors

Although Nabors knew she wasn't the only Catholic separated from her spouse, she didn't know where to find others in similar situations. And she wasn't hearing it talked about in church.

"We hear homilies on marriage frequently throughout the year . . . the traditional view or image of marriage," she said. "But there's a whole other group of people who are married but living apart from their spouse, and it's something that I think isn't really talked about — in many ways feels isn't recognized — as something that people are doing actively in our parishes."

Nabors pointed out that unless a Catholic has received an annulment, the Church continues to recognize a couple's union as a marriage.

"In standing for our marriage, we're choosing to stand for the same things as every other married Catholic, and to have that talked about a little more would be good," she said.

For Nabors, being separated or divorced "doesn't have to be something that's a secret or behind closed doors," she said. "Living out your married life when you're separated and divorced is something that is nice to have affirmation from not only groups like Faithful Spouses, but also from the people you know in your parish, and to have them walk with you, even if it's something they feel they can't relate to."

Nabors pointed out that while many aspects of marriage are private, "you publicly stood up in front of your family and your friends at the church when you got married."

Nabors has yet to find a Catholic support group for children.

"Catholic children in this situation are put in a unique spot," she said. "There are a lot of divorce support groups for children . . . but they focus on mommy and daddy moving on to new people; they [the groups] aren't in a place of understanding the Catholic Church's teaching on marriage."

Nabors has become more comfortable talking about the separation from her husband. Encounters with others have made it clear to her that Catholics who are separated or divorced need to talk more about how the Church is

Divorce FAQs

From Father Timothy Cloutier, JCL, judicial vicar of the Metropolitan Tribunal of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis

Q. I've been divorced for a long time. Why would I seek an annulment?

A. The marriage of baptized Christians is a sacrament, and is therefore an image of God's unbreakable, faithful and fruitful bond with his people, as his bride, the Church. Following the teaching of Christ and of his apostles, therefore, the Church regards a valid marriage bond as also unbreakable, taking the parties at their word, "until death do us part." To attempt another marriage bond while the prior bond still exists constitutes the sin of adultery.

Q. Does divorce automatically put me outside the communion of the Church?

A. A civil divorce of itself affects only the civil legal aspects of marriage: inheritance, custody of children, tax status, etc. A divorced Catholic who has not entered another marital relationship and remains chaste can receive the sacraments. In fact, it would be necessary to receive the sacraments in order to maintain one's faithfulness and Christian life.

Q. What does annulment mean for my kids?

A. A declaration of nullity has absolutely no effect whatsoever on the legitimacy or other considerations of children born of a given marriage.

Q. Isn't an annulment just a 'Catholic divorce'?

A. No. A civil divorce breaks the civil effects of a civilly-recognized marriage, while a declaration of nullity — annulment — merely states that a marriage never existed because some essential element that is constitutive of marriage was absent or falsified at the moment of consent by one or both parties.

For more information about marriage and annulments in the archdiocese, visit www.archspm.org/departments/metropolitan-tribunal

guiding them through their marriage, even if only one of the spouses is honoring his or her vows.

"The people who can talk about it are the people who are experiencing it," she said. "And if we're not willing to step out of our comfort zone and talk about what might be a painful experience, who else is going to share this way of marriage that is so rarely talked about anywhere? . . . I think it's something that the world needs to hear — not just Catholics: What is the love that God calls us to share with each other? And it's so vastly different from what we see portrayed everywhere around us."

Never-ending love

Nabors approaches her sacrifice with love and fortitude.

"I think when you're separated or divorced, there can be a feeling like unconditional love doesn't exist," she said. "Your marriage isn't the way that you envisioned it would be, but our faith gives us a third person in the marriage in Christ. His love for us never ends, and his love for us is all we ever need. . . . Christ can fill that spot in a way that your spouse couldn't even fill."

Nabors said she still receives the graces of the sacrament of marriage; in fact, she couldn't continue without them, especially forgiveness, mercy and peace, she said. To see how others in Faithful Spouses are living their marriages helps her to know it's possible for her, too, and she can do it joyfully.