

HOMILY 27th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2021
MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE AND NULLITY AND REMARRIAGE AND CHILDREN
Mk 10.2-16 Gen 2.18-24 Heb 2.9-11

Welcome again to Mass on-line, now the 27th weekend of Ordinary Time, as we now head along the hopeful *road map*, as a way forward. Still, case numbers have escalated this week, seemingly a result of selfish behaviour on the part of individuals refusing to observe restrictions on social gatherings and following norms to protect the community. We will be following government directives, for the good of all.

I fail to understand the attitude of those who don't accept that vaccination is a personal moral responsibility for the common good of all, as well as for the individual. It is not a private matter, and, as I see it, a conscientious requirement in order to get back to some sort of normality in family, school, work and social life. Once again, I quote Pope Francis on vaccination as *a gift of love!!* Besides, if we wish to engage with each other normally, there are certainly going to be severe restrictions on those who refuse vaccination in terms of travel and access to public facilities in general, including church attendance.

Meanwhile, we conclude the Seasons of Creation with the Feast of Francis of Assisi this coming Monday 4th October, and following our Parish Feast Day of Therese of Lisieux last Friday 1st October. The Australian Plenary Council First Session also commences this Monday, and is accessible on livestream, with the link in this weekend's parish bulletin, and below, so we hope and pray for open and inclusive deliberations and decisions, and don't forget that daylight saving, or Eastern Summer Time, begins this weekend *Down Under*.

And I send special greetings and congratulations to my great friends Ruth and Ted Vanderlaan in Toronto, tuning in, happily celebrating their 38th wedding anniversary, this weekend, with their son Joe and partner Laree, in Edmonton, Alberta, and daughter Anna and partner Luke, in Hamilton Ontario, with me as celebrant in Oshawa on this date back in 1983! Happy memories and enduring friendship indeed!!

What would I know about marriage, as a Catholic priest of 43 years? Well, I'll start with saying again that divorce is a necessary good, not evil, having been involved over the last 35 years in assisting literally thousands of individuals deal with the trauma of a marriage which has ended, for whatever reason, and who wish to be free to remarry in the Catholic Church, or at least have the Church acknowledge officially that a person is not bound to a prior marriage which has ended.

No-one is bound to the impossible or to enduring unhappiness in a relationship which is abusive, destructive or dysfunctional, such that there can be no resolution of the deep-seated difficulties. This can hardly be described as sacred, and everyone has a right to freedom and happiness, within the broader picture of the common good of all.

Then there is the issue of children, where research and common sense demonstrate that their emotional stability and development can be seriously impaired within a dysfunctional home environment. Sometimes, for the benefit of all, separation may be a good thing for peace and harmony for all parties involved. Most people enter marriage with the best of intentions, in love and committed to making it work, but sometimes the human factor makes this impossible, especially in the longer term.

Yes, Jesus sets the ideal for the permanence of marriage, acknowledging the Mosaic law which allowed for divorce because of human weakness. The fact remains that human weakness has not gone away, and is still very much a part of our condition. Don't we all know it, from personal experience, starting at home?

It is great, and to be celebrated well, when a couple grow in love and partnership throughout their lives together, once the commitment has been made, but, at the same time, it doesn't always happen that way. In fact, approximately 33% of marriages entered in Australia, end in divorce. This is not to say that effort, energy and time must go into making a relationship work in the long term. Sacrifices need to be made, and a concern for the other partner must be a priority. Then again, sometimes, there are psychological and personal factors which can disable a relationship, through no fault of one or other party to the union.

Being *in love* in the first place, is a wonderful thing, but it's not a matter of *automatic pilot* from there, but a mature awareness of the need for adjustment, compromise, acceptance of each other, *warts and all*,

understanding and forgiveness at times, mutual encouragement, and a willingness to work together to achieve the goal of lifelong sharing of life in loving partnership. It's not just a contract, but a sacred bond to be developed and deepened from the start. If there's not that awareness, maturity and capacity to do so, for whatever reason, then there are often enough grounds for annulment. This doesn't mean there was no marriage nor good intentions, but an appreciation and capacity to follow through with responsibilities on both sides is a crucial part of the deal.

Over the years, I have happily been involved as an ecclesiastical judge in annulling marriages, thereby enabling individuals to get on with their lives within the Catholic Church, often in a new relationship, which is loving and life-giving for both parties. Yet, sometimes, that can fall short as well. We have to acknowledge our limitations, and work on them, and seek help where we need it. And let's remember that Eucharist is ***Bread for the Broken***, deprived as we are at present, but still present in spirit here and now!

It's all very well to be critical and judgmental of those whose marriages have ended, with the dirty word *divorce* almost unthinkable, even unmentionable in the Catholic world of my somewhat sheltered and happy childhood. The notion was that once married, for Catholics there was no way out, even where a terrible mistake had been made. In 1969, my final year of secondary school (and the year of the Apollo XI and XII moon landings, the launch of the Jumbo jet and the Concorde, both now dinosaurs!), there was one annulment in the Victoria/Tasmania Tribunal. By 1992, there were over 300 annulments that year, and now I continue to judge cases, such that I guess I've been involved in over 3,000 cases over the years here and in New South Wales, in my 18 years up there.

That same year, the first decision was given by the Roman Rota (Vatican Tribunal) on the basis of psychological grounds for nullity, based on the Vatican II understanding of marriage as an equal and mutual partnership of life and love.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is defining the ideal, where marriage is a sacred and permanent union, providing a stable and secure environment for a couple to share life together, also to raise and nurture children where possible, and to find fulfilment and grow in love. The fact remains, however, that we can aim for the ideal, but for some, it is not attainable, and there needs to be a mechanism for acknowledging this, through divorce and nullity, in Catholic practice.

The last thing needed is condemnation of those who've been through the disappointment, suffering and emotional trauma, where the best of intentions have not been sufficient to sustain a lifetime commitment to a partner in marriage. The good thing is that a second chance is possible and permissible, through the channels of the Church, where there is a will and a way forward.

Finally, in a passage which I nearly always use at baptisms, Jesus welcomes and calls forward the children, against the wishes of his inner circle, as, to their minds, his words were for the adults. Yet, he countermands them, indicating that children, who, as the Jerome Biblical Commentary states, were considered to be on the outer: "*In writings of the time, children are presented as either examples of unreasonable behaviour or objects to be trained. In this passage, they are to be taken seriously as persons and enjoy a relationship with Jesus and the kingdom*" of justice, love and peace, which he proclaims!

Jesus welcomes all, no matter who, how great the sin, whatever the past or one's background. Once again, inclusion of all is to the fore. All are welcome to believe and so live the Good News in God's kingdom.

john hannon

3rd October 2021