

The Paulus Institute

for the Propagation of Sacred Liturgy

The Most Reverend Athanasius Schneider, O.R.C.

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Berkeley Springs, WV

Questions & Answers

Q.1. My question is about the state of divorce in the Church today.

H.E.: This is not the teaching of the Church in the first place, but this is the teaching of Christ, of the Eternal and Divine wisdom, that divorce is never allowed, in no circumstances. This is the divine law. When a marriage is valid, no one can separate and dissolve it. Every act that violates the sacramental bond of marriage is a sin against God, against His holy will. This is sin, it hurts you in your soul, damages you, because when someone is disobeying God, he is always hurting and damaging himself. No good purpose can justify, to be opposing God. It's terrible to be opposing God's will. But we know the will of God, and the Church is only repeating the will of God, transmitting it to us. So this is not the Church's own teaching, but divine revelation, divine truth.

Therefore in practice, there can be cases of separation, for which the name "divorce" is not correct, because a sacramental marriage is indissoluble. You cannot divorce a valid marriage. An invalid marriage can be declared null. In the case of a valid marriage we must speak of separation, and of course the Church permits separation in some cases of the spouses for serious reasons, but they have to keep fidelity and not engage in a new union. So this is the truth of God. But, when someone is really sincere in seeking the will of God, in such a situation of separation or so-called divorce, there could be of course very deep sufferings. But God always gives His help and His graces, always, when you are asking in Him. So you must have patience, faith and trust. Ask help, and God will give it to you, and you will save your soul and the souls of the others of your family. This is the highest power of someone who accepts the will of

God, even in suffering. He is already preparing for his own eternity, the eternal salvation of his soul and of the soul of the spouse from whom he is separated. Such a person has to pray for the spouse's eternal salvation, and for the salvation of their children. Salvation is always through Christ and the Cross. Without the Cross, there is no salvation, but only an illusion. This earthly life is very short, and after comes eternity. We have to prepare ourselves for eternity.

Q.2. Why is marriage indissoluble?

H.E.: Because the marriage was already established in paradise. Marriage was established and created before Adam and Eve sinned, before original sin. And so, this is the only sacrament that was given to us direct from paradise, in paradise, where there was no sin. God joined Adam and Eve as a couple before they sinned. What God joins, man cannot separate. Therefore, the marriage bond is a sign, a reflection of the holiness of God and of the fidelity of God Himself. God is faithful to us, always, even to the extent that when a baptized person rejects God and ultimately will be condemned to hell, he will carry with him to hell the indissoluble mark of his baptism. In baptism, we receive an indelible character, an indelible seal on our soul. Even a condemned soul will carry it into hell as a sign that God is faithful. God remains faithful. Therefore, the marriage bond is a sign of the love of God for His creation. Especially the marriage bond is a sign of the love of Christ for His Church, His bride. The marriage bond is a sign, an external sign, a sacrament of the indissoluble bond and fidelity of Christ to His bride, the Church. Therefore, marriage itself possesses this indissolubility. It is a work of God. It is not a work of man. What man has joined, they can separate. But here, not. This is a work of God.

Q.3. Can you please explain clearly the difference between a civil divorce and the church's declaration of nullity of a marriage that did not exist. And in light of that, an annulment, which is valid, why parties are free then to marry?

H.E.: As I said, we cannot speak of divorce when a marriage is valid. Therefore, people go to the registry office of the state, and make a divorce, a civil divorce. It has no effect on the valid marriage, first. Second, there is a church tribunal that examines the question if a sacramental marriage was valid or not. To be a valid marriage, to be a sacrament, you have to have the will. You have two persons with a free agreement. A marriage is a contract between two persons. They have to express their serious will, with freedom, to accept each other as husband and wife. This is essential. When it happens, and it will be demonstrated by the tribunal that during the celebration of the marriage in the church there was violated some essential element of the sacrament, then marriage never existed. It was null and void because of some defect in the celebration of the sacrament of marriage. For example, when one of the parties were with intention deceived by the other, did not want to marry him, but concluded only an exterior ceremony. There have been such cases, and this is not a marriage. Or when one of the parties was forced by violence, by moral violence, to marry, and there have been such cases. So there are reasons, very heavy reasons, and therefore the Church examines this in a process, and declares then that this union had never been a marriage. This is the so-called declaration of nullity, that there had never been a marriage. Then such persons are free, even when there are common children. They have never been married, and they are not husband and wife, so they are completely free in the eyes of the Church to separate, or to marry another person validly. They can also heal their bond of marriage in expressing validly the mutual consent maybe in a private manner, but in the presence of a priest and testimonies.

Q.4. Your Excellency, what is the position of an abandoned spouse? One spouse leaves for his or her own intentions, leaving a person who desires that the relationship be continued.

H.E.: The abandoned spouse has to keep fidelity, notwithstanding the infidelity of the other party. The abandoned innocent party has to keep the fidelity, and this is the challenge of our Christian life. We have to be faithful, even when we are innocent, and pray, and God will bless this

suffering very much. And to pray for the conversion of the party, and to pray for the children. Ask the Lord that the soul and the heart may be free from all feelings of hatred or other bad feelings. This is very important in this situation. We are Christians, not pagans. We have to live as Christians, with the grace of God, to receive the sacraments frequently, to engage in works of mercy, of prayer, to educate the children, to help them. This abandoned partner also has possibilities to do something good in his or her life. His life is not meaningless. He can use this bad situation in the spirit of faith, to do even good works, to pray, and God will give His help, surely.

Q.5. How can we support you in your mission to bear faithful witness to Christ and His saving truth? And how can we without diminishing our witness to proclaiming the truth of those around us come alongside them and be compassionate and not be misunderstood as being the hard, cold, but the loving and merciful while also proclaiming the truth?

H.E.: First, I would be very grateful if you can support me with your prayers in my mission. I would very much appreciate your prayers. This is the greatest power in our lives. The world of prayer is the greatest power.

Second, we all in our lives, we need such persons in such situations. We are living in a valley of tears. But we have to have compassion with these people in these situations of separation and so on. Help them with charity, but also with clarity, because when you are not clear to them, when you are hiding the truth, you are not loving the person. This is not love. Of course, you have to be prudent and pedagogically to say the truth to them. You can say the truth with love, also. As with a doctor, sometimes a doctor has to say the truth. This is not always pleasant for other people, but I have to say this, and I will help them. When you are innocently suffering you can become really happy in the eyes of God and in your conscience and for your eternal salvation. Even for your temporal being here on earth to live according to the will of God, you can come to a peace of your conscience and your soul. You can say to these persons who suffer: I am ready to help you with my prayers and with concrete actions. You can invite them for pilgrimage, works of mercy, for prayer groups, for formation, for good deeds, you can be very helpful to these people, every one of you.

Q.6. Your Excellency, I work in this parish with the Nazareth House. We provide things to women who have small children and provide tangible items. Most of them are not married. Most of them have more than one father if they have a number of children. Very few have any religious affiliation. Is there something concrete, other than saying “God bless you,” at least putting them in a situation where we’re caring for them and they know that we believe in God, that myself and the other volunteers could do to help influence them toward a marriage, obviously a valid marriage, when they’re pretty much pagan children? I’m not sure what we can do at our level, but to do nothing seems inappropriate.

H.E.: Women, who are single and with children: you have to help them, to educate them. This is the first task of this movement. Maybe the community can help them to get a good education, human, but also a religious, a moral education. Also, to invite these women for some formation, for some retreat, some prayer, invite them. They are free, but you can invite them. You can give them some good books, good literature about family, about Christ, about the saints, examples of the saints. So you can do some good work, and pray for them. The rest is through God. We cannot do all the work. Sometimes we can only throw a seed. A good work, a prayer, an invitation. And the rest is God’s. The grace will produce fruit later. We don’t know. We have to recognize sometimes we cannot do much and achieve visible results.

Q.7. How can Catholics who have divorced and remarried, and then later repent of the sin, return to the Church and the sacraments?

H.E.: The only way, as the Church has always taught, in her unchanging discipline, is that they have to live in continence, not to violate their sacramental bond, not to sin against the sixth commandment, because their cohabitation is adultery. With the grace of God, with prayer, with penance, they can live in continence. There are associations of those who are divorced and remarried, or simply who are alone, abandoned, who agree to live in continence. This is possible. Then in the case of the so called divorced and remarried when they go to the sacraments, they have not to do this in the same church where they are known, because of the possible scandal. They cannot say to all people publicly that they are living in continence; because this touches their privacy. Therefore, they have to receive Communion in another church, where they are not known. But under

the condition that they have the firm, serious proposition to live in continence as if they are brother and sister, and to avoid the occasions of sin. This is Christian life. Christian life is the imitation of Christ, always. Jesus said, when someone will follow me, he has to take his cross and follow me. And this is part of the cross.

Q.8. Your Excellency, you said something earlier that was powerful, but beautiful, that whenever a baptized person enters hell, they have to take with them that seal of baptism. Going in the other direction, when we enter heaven, God willing, our seal of baptism and our sacrament of marriage, are we entering heaven in a state of marriage?

H.E.: In the catechism, as for example in the Baltimore Catechism it is taught that three sacraments impress on our soul an indelible sign, or seal: baptism, confirmation, and priestly ordination. Only these three. This is an expression of the fidelity of God in the baptism, and the configuration to Christ, the Priest. In baptism and confirmation, this seal confirms in all people the common priesthood. In the ordination of priesthood, this is the configuration to Christ the Priest as the Head of the Church. The other sacraments do not impress the indelible seal on our souls. The divine words say, this bond of marriage is until death only, and then it is finished. Our Lord said that when there shall be the resurrection on the last day, the universal resurrection, there will no longer be marriage. Our Lord says this. To the question of the woman with seven husbands, and to whom will she be a wife in eternity, Our Lord says to no one, because there will no longer be marriage, marriage is only on earth. The first mission of marriage is to give birth to children; this is the first mission. To give not only birth to children, but something more. What does it mean? It means to give new inhabitants for heaven. You my dear brothers and sisters who are fathers and mothers who have children, this is the most beautiful mission of yours. This is not egoism; matrimony it is the contrary of egoism. You are giving new citizens for heaven. This is the first mission of matrimony. You are giving new citizens, not only for earth, but for heaven. Then the second meaning, which is inseparably connected, is the mutual love and support of the spouses. And so, you have a very beautiful mission. I will add that marriage is the house church, the domestic church, and the first seminary for priestly vocations. So you have a very beautiful task, the family, and it is at the same time a difficult task. Therefore, you have to pray, and God will give you the graces.

You know the beautiful story, when holy Pope Pius X became bishop, he was young, and his mother was still living, she was very old. He received a beautiful episcopal ring for his ordination. When he came to his village where his mother lived, he showed her the ring, saying: Mother, look at this beautiful ring they gave me. And his mother said to him, you would not be wearing this ring if I had not been wearing my marriage ring. So they are connected: the priesthood and the family, this is so beautiful in the Church.