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DAILY NEWS

Emerging Catholic Ministries Reach Out to the Divorced

Catholic divorce ministries can offer pastoral solutions, but without the active engagement of parishes, most divorced Catholics remain in the dark about the Church's care for them and their options.

BY PETER JESSERER SMITH

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COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — Almost a third of U.S. Catholics who have been married suffer from the wounds of divorce, and while the Church has resources to heal them, the need is great and the laborers are few in the Church's field hospital.

According to the most recent General Social Survey, 28% of Catholics who have ever married are divorced, a figure that Georgetown's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) explained at CARA's research blog, 1964, "represents more than 11 million individuals."

Pope Francis has said that the Church must "not condemn" the divorced, but instead "accompany those people who have had this failure in their love." The upcoming extraordinary synod of Catholic bishops is expected to lay the groundwork for finding pastoral solutions to address the challenges of the contemporary family, particularly those in situations of divorce or even a second marriage not recognized by the Church.

In the United States, divorce ministries have begun to emerge already. But without the active participation of parishes in this ministry, divorced Catholics remain in the dark about the pastoral resources — and options — the Church wants to offer them.

"We're still a very well-kept secret, and that needs to change," said Gregory Mills, executive director of the Catholic Divorce Ministry, a national group faithful to the Church's magisterium, which seeks to work with dioceses to promote divorce ministry in parishes.

"We know the biggest reason people leave the Church is over divorce, annulment and remarriage," Mills said.

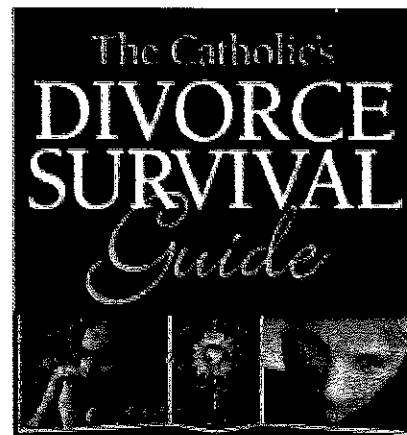
He knows this from personal experience. After his own divorce in the late 1990s, Mills felt angry and isolated from the Church. For the next four years, he traveled down the road of some self-destructive behaviors until he finally decided to return to Sunday Mass. That day, he saw a blurb in the parish bulletin that said a "small community is being formed for the separated and divorced; call this number."

"Even I could read that sign," he said. After two and a half years on his road to healing, people from another parish introduced him to the Catholic Divorce Ministry, where he has been actively involved since 2004.

Accompanying the Divorced

A parish with a welcoming environment plays a key role in accompanying the divorced as they grieve and heal from the loss of their marriages, but also as they rediscover a deeper faith and relationship with God.

Mills said divorce support groups are a peer ministry — such groups need the leadership of other divorced Catholics who have credibility from having walked in their shoes and traveled their own journeys of healing from the pain and loss of divorce into the richness of the Church's love and pastoral care. The Catholic Divorce Ministry, he said, works with family-life ministries in various dioceses to help parishes reach people in the pews with workshops, programs and retreats.



Ann Marie Calistro, who leads the divorced ministry at St. John of the Cross in Western Springs, Ill., said her parish works with the Chicago Archdiocese to help make the parish a welcoming place with trained facilitators and resources to support the divorced.

The parish serves as a conduit to other resources that families need adjust to their "new normal," such as how to survive the holidays. The parish's support group for the divorced meets biweekly — this helps people coordinate child care with their ex-spouses — during the fall until Christmastime for eight sessions in total. She said they're working with the pastor to expand the program to both spring and summer.

Calistro, who divorced five years ago, said having that support group was crucial as she navigated the trauma of her own divorce.

"It was such solace for me," she said. "I remember thinking, 'Just make it to Friday night, Ann Marie; just make it to Friday night.'"

Theology of the Body

Rose Sweet, author of the *Catholic's Divorce Survival Guide*, said she discovered personally with her own divorce 20 years ago that the Church had next to nothing when it came to the divorced. At the time, her own healing came through a Protestant 13-week Christ-centered program called "Divorce Care."

"It was very beautiful," she said, but the program had some problematic non-Catholic theology, which inspired her to create a similar program with a Catholic vision.

Sweet's *Catholic Divorce Survival Guide* is a 12-week DVD program for parish support groups that draws upon the Catechism of the Catholic Church, sacred Scripture, Catholic psychology, spiritual direction from authors like C.S. Lewis and St. Teresa of Avila and theology of the body. Sweet and her team travel the country teaching parishes how to implement the program.

"We are the only Catholic divorce-recovery program that presents the material through the lens of the theology of the body," she said.

"Behind every divorce is someone who desired to be deeply loved, and it didn't happen."

The 12-week program has just taken root in the Diocese of Colorado Springs, Colo. The first group of 35 participants started in January and concluded April 3.

Father Jim Baron, who oversees the diocesan program, said they've had "nothing but good feedback," and are hoping to bring the program into the parishes.

The program served young parents, people with grown children, people with no children and those who have been divorced long term. Participants would break into small groups led by facilitators around these demographics, watch the video, discuss it and share their own stories and experiences.

Love, Listen, Teach

Sweet explained that every parish needs to open its doors to the divorced and "listen to them and love them" first. The divorced are going through all the stages of grief. They need the parish to build trust by meeting them where they're at and helping them slowly to discover prayer and a deeper relationship with God.

"They're angry, and they don't understand. They need to know that they're still part of the family," she said.

"You need to give them the deep theology in little bite sizes."

Divorce ministry not only provides support, but also slowly re-educates Catholics about the true nature of sacramental marriage — and that the Church does provide options.

Mills said a major problem is banishing a lot of myths in the minds of divorced Catholics.

"The biggest myth we encounter is that divorced Catholics are excommunicated," he said. Other myths are that a declaration of nullity means children are "illegitimate" or that annulment is code for Catholic divorce. "That simply isn't true, and we need to get the word out."

Part of the mission of Catholic divorce ministries is to educate those who are divorced about the beauty of the Church's teaching on marriage and sexuality and the love behind these teachings.

Father Baron said that in his parish support group the divorced are reminded they have a "universal call to holiness," so that even though their marriages failed, "they are not a failure."

At the same time, they present the truth of the Church's teaching with compassion — "you can't be compassionate and lie to someone at the same time" — and when the divorced understand, "they're able to receive that."

The Church teaches that a valid sacramental marriage is a lifelong "unique and indissoluble" union of the spouses. Annulment is the process the Church uses to determine whether a valid canonical marriage was present in the spouses who contracted a valid civil marriage. A decree of nullity is a finding by the Church that a sacramental marriage was attempted but was not contracted. Catholics in the state of grace can receive holy Communion, but the Church says that without a finding of nullity, a person who has civilly remarried while his or her canonically lawful spouse is still living cannot receive the Eucharist, because he or she is breaking the original vows with sexual relations outside of the sacramental union.

Sweet explained that part of the challenge is rephrasing the Church's language in terms the divorced can recognize and understand. She said what pastors and lay leaders in the parish need to communicate, when they get around to discussing annulment, is that when a finding of nullity is made, the divorced still had a valid civil marriage, a valid mortgage, valid children, etc. But they attempted a sacramental marriage, which (for whatever reason) did not occur.

But the annulment process is a discussion that takes place only later in the divorce healing process. Father Baron said the first steps of healing need to take place first, and they need to learn the "coherence of the Church's teaching" so they'll have a healthy understanding of what makes a sacramental marriage and what doesn't before they discuss beginning that process. He said they bring it up between weeks eight and 10, and they tell people in the support group to put their healing first and not to get distracted by pursuing other relationships.

Bringing the Divorced Into Communion

The divorce ministry provides a gateway into becoming fully integrated into the life of the parish community — a process that people must meet on their own terms. But Calistro said that many times the divorced who go through this healing process end up becoming some of the most active members of the parish. And her own parish found that one of the most healing things for the divorced was to take on "a project that had nothing to do with themselves," whether it was volunteering at a soup kitchen, cleaning out closets to give things away to those in need or baking cookies for neighborhood families.

"Something really tangible to help people define what their new normal is," she said.

These avenues for participating in the life of the Church are open to all the divorced, even those who have remarried without a declaration of nullity. Father Baron said there is no easy answer for the situation of the divorced and remarried — and holy Communion would not be an option if they are actively living a marital life — but they ought to be embraced with compassion and received "as a person and as a Catholic."

He did say that he has known divorced and civilly remarried people who have returned to the sacraments by heroically abstaining from marital relations, even when choosing to continue their common life.

"They're people living this whole spectrum of brother and sister, and they do it for the good of the kids," he said, who need the presence of their mother and father. "Often times, it means separate beds or separate bedrooms in a single domicile."

Father Baron said each pastor is responsible for his parish making efforts to reach out to the divorced and accompany them, but also that it needs the laity actively involved in this effort and making their parish a welcoming place for their divorced brothers and sisters.

Calistro said that even when a parish has top-notch communications through the bulletin, website, email and social media, nothing can replace the personal encounter that comes with a Catholic reaching out to a divorced Catholic and saying, "This is what's going on next week. Want to come with me?"

"It's going to be a personal invitation that's going to make the difference," she said. "I'm only saying that from evidence in my parish. It is never going to be 'somebody else's' job."

Peter Jesserer Smith is a Register staff writer.