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# It is time for the Church to face up to the crisis of spousal abandonment

By Hilary Towers, Ph.D. \*

Imagine your brother Jim discovers that his wife of 17 years, mother to their four children, is leaving him for another man. He pleads with her to stay. He asks that they get counseling to heal their marriage. He calls every priest he knows, along with family and friends, to try to get the help he needs to keep his family together. But your brother's efforts are in vain.

Jim learns that his wife has retained a lawyer, and is suing him for a divorce. His mind races back to the day he made his vows before God and the community of believers.

"I don't want a divorce," he cries out in despair. "And I will never sign a paper stating that my marriage is over."

Over the next few weeks, Jim's wife keeps asserting that she has left because their marriage has been "hell." She says he is the only thing standing in the way of her happiness.

She signs a lease on an apartment where she begins to bring the children for visits. The children, who are devastated and confused, report that there is usually a strange man at the apartment during these visits. "Sometimes he kisses

mommy,” they confide with tears in their eyes.

Outraged at the rate at which his world is spinning out of control, Jim hires his own lawyer. It doesn't take long for him to learn that there is nothing to be done. His divorce is imminent, and his ability to act as the primary protector of his children is effectively over.

In fact, Jim's right to parent his children according to Church teachings will be undermined at every turn by a “family law” system that worships at the altar of sexual freedom. As your brother will learn over the next year or two, this system serves one purpose alone: to facilitate the destruction of marriages (and by extension families) quickly and with the least resistance possible.

There is abundant research to affirm the dire consequences of divorce for children: much higher likelihoods of poverty, teen motherhood, school expulsion, conduct disorders, physical abuse, incarceration, cohabitation, divorce, and even suicide.

This is not surprising. As Catholics who believe in the sanctity and permanence of the marriage vow, we can understand why things go drastically wrong when that vow is breached. As rational human beings we recognize that when marriage – the foundation of civilized, lawful society – is undervalued on a wide scale, the long-term repercussions will be catastrophic.

What we may not know is that most divorces are situations in which one person wants to end the marriage while the other

is fighting to save it.

The National Survey of Children indicates that about 80 percent of divorce cases in the U.S. are forced, or unilateral, divorces. Women initiate two-thirds of all divorces. Research also shows that the vast majority occur in marriages described by the spouses as happy only five years earlier. According to a 2002 study using data from the National Survey of Families and Households, the number is close to 75 percent. Nonetheless, under “no fault” divorce, any husband or wife, at any time and for any reason, can walk into a lawyer’s office and begin the process of divorcing his or her spouse.

Unlike in any other area of the law, the defendant in a divorce case is dead on arrival because the court never considers a defense of the marriage. The spouse who is being abandoned is presumed guilty. Judicial discretion is illusory because the plaintiff (usually the abandoning spouse who is seeking the divorce) always wins.

Even a child rapist has a right to a trial by a jury of peers. Our Constitution guarantees it: “no person shall be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law.” Not so for the spouse who has been abandoned.

In our system of family law, the legal presumption is that the marriage is over the moment one spouse decides it is. It does not matter who has engaged in adultery. It does not matter how long the couple has been married, whether they have minor children, or whether they were married in the Catholic Church, which doesn’t acknowledge divorce.

Our divorce courts violate the civil rights of countless men and women every day. Most victims do not have the ability to fight the injustice. Most suffer in silence and their stories remain untold.

In the face of this crisis, which is causing untold suffering and injustice, what is our obligation as Catholics who uphold the sanctity of lifelong marriage?

We must fight our tendency to look the other way in the name of discretion or a false sense of charity. This instinct is rooted in a cultural ethos that values privacy and personal (meaning, sexual) autonomy above all other rights.

As Catholics, we have moral obligations when we know someone who has abandoned his or her family in order to seek a divorce. We have a duty to stand in solidarity with the spouse who has been left behind, and with any children who might be involved.

We should not assume that the marriage must have been deeply troubled to have reached this point. And we should not accept the assertion that the one left behind was “just too difficult to live with.” Such claims are usually made to deflect attention from the real issue —spousal abandonment and the immoral conduct that almost always accompanies it.

Sometimes, when we are friends with the couple involved, we might be tempted to conclude, “There must be something we don’t know. This must be more complicated than we think.” All too often, the complicating factor is in fact quite simple —

an adulterous affair.

It might be useful when we consider “logical explanations” for abandonment for us to contemplate our own marital struggles. How would we fare should the survival of our own marriages hinge on our spouse’s view of us at a particular moment in time?

The Church teaches that marriages are comprised of two flawed individuals whose job is to love one another unconditionally: “Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (I Cor. 13: 5-7).

What does it mean to stand in solidarity with an abandoned family?

It means not being afraid to use the term “abandonment” instead of divorce when speaking about these situations.

For pastors and priests it means being willing to address the issue directly with their congregations.

For family members, clergy, and close friends of the couple, it means speaking to the abandoning spouse in charity, but with clarity.

The message to the abandoner must be this: “What you have done is contrary to God’s plan for you and your family. We are praying you will return home and seek the counseling needed to heal your marriage. Once you decide to return to

your family, you will have our full support. Until then, please do not expect us to condone your action by pretending it hasn't happened.”

These encounters serve two purposes.

First, they assure abandoned spouses that they are not alone. They tell the spouses that the Church community supports their desire to save their marriage and uphold the marriage vow.

Second, by summoning the moral courage to speak candidly about the devastation that spousal abandonment causes, we remind the world that eternal Truth remains.

Sadly, men and women who abandon their spouses will often have family and friends around who support their decision to “start over.” It may benefit one who has left home more than we will ever know to hear the truth from us, who have their eternal souls in mind.

We need a renewed effort on the part of bishops and priests to recognize that spousal abandonment is a crisis in our Church. Church leaders need to acknowledge this — and they need to encourage new, more effective responses in our parishes and chanceries.

In every case of spousal abandonment, much is at stake — not only the lives of the men, women and children involved, but also the belief of all Catholics in the integrity of marriage as a sacrament.

In a world that would have us believe that divorce is just an opportunity for a new start, the Church's message must be loud and clear: We will hold fast to our ancient teachings on marriage – for the sake of our souls, our families, and our civilization.

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