

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 4, 2015

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When Christ came with the New Covenant this did not mean business as usual! Something decisive was offered every man and woman when “the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” The Incarnation was not just a divine social call! Christ became our Redeemer by dying for us. The result was *intimacy with God*. The New Testament is full of language indicative of this new condition. Scripture talks about our becoming members of God’s *household*, members of Christ’s *body*. And the Lord Jesus Himself instructs us to call God *Father*. This reunion of God and man was accomplished by Christ’s death on the Cross, where, at His provision, the sacraments became the agency of grace whereby this personal relationship begins in each of us and is then nurtured and developed.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church calls Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist *sacraments of initiation*. That is because these sacraments establish and continue to promote the growth of faith. Then there are *sacraments of healing*: Penance and Holy Unction serve as remedies for post-baptismal sin and sickness (which can sidetrack growth in faith). Finally, there are two other sacraments which are *not* required for full participation in the life of Christ. Holy Orders and Holy Matrimony are optional. They are called *sacraments in service of communion* because the focus is shifted from the recipient as the only beneficiary to equipping the recipient for the benefit of the whole Church. The persons receiving these sacraments are graced no longer for themselves alone but for the community. In Holy Matrimony it is the *spouse* and *family* who benefit from the grace conferred. Through Holy Orders a life is strengthened for service to *all the faithful*.

In today’s gospel the focus is on marriage. Our Lord was asked a question. “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” And the answer given by the Son of God is *no*. To fully understand the answer we must remember that the coming of Jesus Christ with the New Covenant does not mean business as usual. Something decisive happened. And it is not based upon any “take it or leave it” attitude on our part. His coming means reunion of mankind with Almighty God.

In the book of *Genesis* we are told marriage was given in the very moment when God created male and female in His Own image and likeness. Jesus says, “From the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man

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shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife.” Made in the image of God means the man and woman image something of God Himself. What they image is the loving interpersonal relationship and the fruitfulness of the relationship of the Holy Trinity. The love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost is reflected in the man and woman joined in one flesh. And the fact this happened at creation means it is part of the natural ordering of things and is not just true for pious Catholics who happen to believe it.

Like everything else human, marriage is distorted by the sinful condition. As with everything else in human life, marriage has as its Redeemer Jesus Christ. **Redemption** means *giving something back its worth*. When I was a boy trading stamps were a part of the incentive to purchase goods. You bought gas, you got *Green Stamps*, and put them in a book. And when the book was full it had no value unless you took it to the redemption store where you could convert it into a pack of playing cards. In His Blood Christ gave us back our worth, sin and alienation were replaced by the reunion of things of Heaven and earth. In Jesus Christ men and women once again regained the capacity to image as perfectly as God allows in this life the life of the Holy Trinity.

Christ did not say *no* to divorce to be mean and nasty to souls for whom marriage fails. The Lord also provides the grace of chastity and celibacy for all men and women, including those separated from spouses and/or living Christian lives after a civil divorce decree. Remember that marriage is not a requirement for the Kingdom of Heaven. Saint Paul even counsels *against* marriage if it will distract a soul from the pursuit of holiness. But indissolubility is an integral aspect of marriage because the union between Christ and humanity cannot be broken. Because Christ cannot separate from His Church divorce is not so much a sin as a lie. As with everything else Our Lord asks us to do, marriage is not impossible for us. It is Jesus Christ Himself Who confirms the goodness of marriage, and promises the necessary grace for fidelity and permanence to the Christian couple as they follow Him in His Paschal Mystery. As Catholic Christians you and I are pledged to the fullness of the revelation, and we have the duty to bring this revelation to the whole world, always preaching the truth in love.

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