

27th Sunday, Ord. Time (B)
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes
October 3, 4, 2015

It is probably only a coincidence, but a very timely and interesting one, that the Synod on the Family begins in Rome today as we hear Scriptures dealing so clearly with both marriage and divorce. You may have found the First Scripture very familiar: you hear it most often at a wedding Mass. The Gospel reading is no doubt also familiar to you, as most everyone knows at least something about the Church's teaching on divorce. Many do not know the Church's teaching on divorce accurately, however.

Very briefly, divorce does not excommunicate a person from the Church
divorce does not prevent a person from coming to Mass and even from
receiving Holy Communion
most importantly, every situation of divorce is unique and should be
spoken of and ministered to in a unique and pastoral way.
As you all know, there is also the element of annulment. But each
annulment is also unique to the individual circumstances, and
annulments in general are currently undergoing some change.
At this time I am not clear on what all that will be.

The gospel highlights questions that people around Jesus, and even some of his apostles, had about divorce. They mention the fact that Moses granted the possibility of divorce in some situations. Jesus does not answer their questions except to say that when Moses did that, he may have felt that his hands were tied by some circumstances, and did not know what else to do. But primarily Jesus sidesteps the question, and He reminds them all of how God had intended it to be. Jesus says, "But from the beginning of creation, *God made them male and female ...* and then pretty much repeats the words of Genesis, which was our First Reading of today.

We live in a time when divorce is very common. We all know people who are divorced. But what I think Jesus was teaching, and also what I think we need to hear is that 'because this is what we know, and because this is our current reality and experience, it does not follow that what we have is what was intended'. We should not accept that divorce is a sad but inevitable reality. While we need to live in reality, we do not need to consign ourselves to everything that reality holds at any given time. To do so denies the possibility of change.

In our country abortion and several other things we do not like are reality; abortion, for example, is legal. That fact does not mean, however, that abortion is the desired choice. Divorce is part of our reality. But there was and still remains a prior plan, namely what God intends. "*that a man shall leave father and mother and be joined to his wife, and*

the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate.” To think and say, “well, that is just the way things are”, or “we need to catch up with the times” is to deny that there is another design, another option: God's design.

For example, as the Synod on the Family opens in Rome today, there are those who think and probably hope that the Church will change its teaching on divorce, which means that it will accept divorce just as civil society does. Those of us who were around during the Vatican Council and the contraception discussion of those days, thought the Church would change its teaching on artificial birth control. It did not. The same will probably be the case with divorce and related issues during the Synod on the Family. But what the Synod will probably do is find different and more pastoral ways to minister to people who are divorcing and who are already divorced. Many who are divorced would rather they were not. It is usually not their first choice. For some there were few other options available to them at the time of their divorce. I am sure that there are couples who wish other options had been available to them when their marriage was hurting. For example, some priest told my brother and fiance that they did not need marriage preparation because my brother had a brother who was a priest. That did not make much sense to my brother 47 years ago. It certainly didn't make any sense to me when I learned about it maybe 10 years ago. My brother is divorced after many, many years of marriage.

Today's Scriptures tell us not to give up on the original design because it hasn't quite worked out that way in real life. Keep the vision; continue to work for and support marriages that are unique, powerful and sacred. And find new ways to support people pastorally when their reality is not exactly according to the original plan. In closing give some thought to these words and ideas of Pope Francis

The Pope called on everyone to pray each day for the upcoming synod of Bishops on the family and for the church so that it could be even more “dedicated and united in the witness of the truth of God's love and mercy for the families of the world, with no one excluded either inside or outside the flock.”

Prayers, “not gossip” are needed for the synod, and “I invite even those who feel distanced or those who aren't used to it to pray”, Pope said.

“The church, as mother, never abandons the family even when it is disheartened, wounded and demeaned in so many ways,” he said, “not even when (the family) stumbles in sin or distances itself from the church.”

The church, he said, “will do everything to try to take care of it and heal it, invite it to conversion and reconcile it with the Lord.” (comments made March 25, 2015)

“No matter how weary, wounded or sinful a family has become, the church will always do everything to try to help family members heal, convert and reconcile with the Lord.”