



A MORE PERFECT UNION

Most people who come to the tribunal seeking an annulment do so because they are seeking to enter a new marriage after a divorce. Since Christ teaches that marriage is for life and between one man and one woman (Matthew 19:3-9), before the new marriage is possible, the first marriage must be determined to be invalid and therefore nonbinding, freeing the person to enter the new marriage with another person.

Often, the people who come to us in this situation have already entered a new civil marriage and are seeking to have that marriage recognized as valid in the Church. A common reason why people want their civil marriage recognized in the Church is that remarriage outside the Church prevents Catholics from being properly disposed to receive Holy Communion because of Jesus' teaching on marriage that anyone who divorces someone and then marries another commits adultery, a grave sin. Until the issue is resolved through the annulment process and the

new marriage is recognized as valid in the Church, Catholics in such marriages remain in an objective state of manifest grave sin, which prevents them from receiving Communion (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1385; canon 915).

It is important to note that divorce does not prevent a person from receiving Communion but that remarriage outside the Church does. The idea that divorce bars a person from receiving Communion is still a common misperception, and pastoral ministers should help divorced persons who have not remarried outside the Church to understand that they are welcome to receive Communion according to the same norms as any other Catholic. It is also important to distinguish between the objective state of manifest grave sin brought about by remarriage outside the Church and excommunication. Persons in these irregular marriages are not excommunicated. While both situations render a person indisposed to receive Communion, excommunication is a formal, canonical penalty imposed by Church authority on someone who has violated a penal law. The inability of persons remarried outside the Church to licitly receive Communion is not a penalty imposed by Church

authority; it is the consequence of their objective moral state, living in manifest adultery.

This is the longstanding teaching of the Church, and no pastoral minister has the authority to change it. Yet, whether out of ignorance, indifference, or a misguided sense of pastoral charity, pastoral ministers today sometimes welcome persons in such marriages to Communion, fully aware of the persons' marital situation. However well-intended such illicit actions may be, they create confusion for the couple about the Church's teaching and cause scandal on the part of others who may be aware of the couple's situation. We need to find a pastoral way forward that recognizes both the need to respect Church teaching and to help persons in such marriages return to full Communion. Pope Francis offers such a way in his post-synodal exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, which we will look at in our next issue. Until then, keep the faith, love God's people, and always honor the code!

