

The Official Catholic Directory, published by P.J. Kennedy and Sons, contains important statistics for the Catholic Church in America. The 2011 Directory presents some startling numbers with regard to Catholic marriages in the dioceses of the United States.

Since 1948, there has been a steady decline — with the exception of small increases in the early 1950s and the mid-1960s — in the number of Catholics who have their marriages witnessed by a priest. In the last 10 years the rate of Catholics married in the church has declined by almost 50 percent. And all this time the Catholic population has been increasing.

In my last column, I cited the sad number of 30 percent — the average percentage of American Catholics who participate in Mass each Sunday. That being the case, perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised that fewer and fewer Catholics are observing the law of the church when it comes to marriage.

The fact that many Catholics neglect to approach the church for marriage may be due, in part, to ignorance. Oftentimes Catholics simply do not know or appreciate the full meaning of marriage. For this reason I would like to devote this space, to a catechesis on marriage.

Marriage is a lifelong partnership of the whole of life, of mutual and exclusive fidelity, established by mutual consent between a man and a woman, and ordered towards the good of the spouses and the procreation of offspring. In this brief definition we can find all the elements of the church's teaching on marriage as a human institution and — for the baptized — a sacrament of Christ.

Marriage is a lifelong partnership. The bond of marriage is a permanent bond that cannot be broken. It was Jesus himself who proclaimed that "they [the married couple] are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate" (Mt 19:6). The profound unity of a man and woman that is established by marriage means that that bond, of its very nature, cannot be dissolved.

Those who are baptized into Christ, i.e., all Christians, also marry in Christ. For the baptized, marriage has been raised to the dignity of a sacrament, a sacred sign of Christ's love for his church. This further emphasizes the permanence of

marriage because Christ's love for his church has no end.

Among the offenses to the dignity of marriage is divorce. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) teaches that "divorce is a grave offense against the natural law. It claims to break the contract [of marriage], to which the spouses freely consented, to live with each other till death . . . Divorce is immoral also because it introduces disorder into the family and into society. This disorder brings grave harm to the deserted spouse, to children traumatized by the separation of their parents and often torn between them, and because of its contagious effect which makes it truly a plague on society" (CCC, 2384-85). When one of the spouses is an innocent victim of divorce granted by law, that spouse has not gone against the moral law (cf. CCC, 2386).

Divorce is a civil procedure which can bring about the physical and legal separation of the spouses, but divorce cannot dissolve the bond of marriage. For this reason, one who is divorced is not free to marry again — unless it can be demonstrated that the first marriage was invalid.

Every pastor suffers with those who are victims of divorce. It is heartbreaking to see the pain of one who has sincerely tried to be faithful to marriage, only to be abandoned by his or her spouse. As tragic as this situation can be, however, it cannot bring about the dissolution of the marriage bond. Even though divorced (but not having attempted a subsequent marriage), a Catholic remains a member of the church, and has the right and obligation to participate fully in the sacramental life of the church.

Marriage, like any vocation from God, can be difficult and demanding — even painful at times. But every vocation is sustained and strengthened by the grace of God. The Catechism speaks beautifully of the permanency of marriage. "This unequivocal insistence on the indissolubility of the marriage bond may have left some perplexed and could seem to be a demand impossible to realize. However, Jesus has not placed on spouses a burden impossible to bear, or too heavy — heavier than

the Law of Moses. By coming to restore the original order of creation disturbed by sin, he himself gives the strength and grace to live marriage in the new dimension of the Reign of God. It is by following Christ, renouncing themselves, and taking up their



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MOST REV. MICHAEL J. SHERIDAN, S.T.D.
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crosses that spouses will be able to 'receive' the original meaning of marriage and live it with the help of Christ. This grace of Christian marriage is a fruit of Christ's cross,

the source of all Christian life" (CCC, 1615).

Bishop Sheridan's catechesis on marriage will continue in the next issue of the Herald.

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