



Nurturing Support: Guiding Divorced Catholics with Pastoral Accompaniment

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Article History

Received: 25-01-2023

Accepted: 14-02-2023

Published: 01-03-2023

Keywords:

healing after divorce;
separation;
spiritual support

Abstract: This study focused on the pastoral care and support provided by the Catholic Church for Catholics who had experienced divorce after a court decision. Drawing inspiration from the document *Amoris Laetitia*, the article examined the potential of accompaniment to address the challenges faced by divorced Catholics in contemporary society. With divorce having become increasingly prevalent, the Catholic Church met the responsibility of providing meaningful guidance and support to individuals navigating the aftermath of marital separation. This research adopted a qualitative approach, utilizing a literature review of Catholic marriage and conducting in-depth interviews to gather data. The findings revealed that divorced couples often underwent difficult situations, necessitating careful attention and compassionate understanding. By analyzing the prospects of accompaniment for divorced Catholics through the lens of *Amoris Laetitia*, this article contributed to the ongoing conversation within the Catholic Church regarding pastoral care for individuals who had experienced divorce. The research aimed to provide insights and recommendations that could assist clergy, pastoral workers, and the wider Catholic community in offering meaningful support to post-divorced Catholics. The article sought to nurture a renewed sense of hope and belonging for those affected by divorce within the Catholic Church by promoting emotional healing, fostering spiritual growth, and encouraging reconciliation. Overall, this study highlighted the importance of compassionate pastoral care for divorced Catholics and emphasized the role of accompaniment in addressing their unique challenges and fostering their spiritual well-being. It provided valuable insights and recommendations to guide the Catholic Church in offering meaningful support to individuals who have experienced divorce.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage has always been an interesting theme in the public sphere. Marriage became an exciting theme and a matter of discussion among many people. However, behind it all, marriage raises thorny problems. There are people who, when faced with issues in marriage, do not know how to solve their marital problems. They feel that marital issues are complex.

One of the problems in marriage is the problem of divorce. News about divorce causes the thought that divorce is a common thing. Most couples who want a divorce always reason they are no longer compatible or have different principles. They assume that getting divorced is the best thing they can do, rather than quarrelling constantly, which will hurt their children.

Many Catholic marriages also end in divorce. The Catholic Church does not recognize the concept of divorce in marriage but the annulment of marriage. The idea of “divorce” only occurs in civil law. But it must be admitted that this institution of marriage is a very complex matter for the Church today, both in practical and pastoral terms (Raharso, 2014a).

Civil divorce is often the last resort of some Catholics experiencing marital problems. This option is considered to solve problems in their marriage. However, it turns out that solving marital problems with civil divorce does not solve the problem and instead creates new complicated issues in their lives. According to Canon Law in the Catholic Church, court rulings have no canonical consequences. This ecclesiastical consequence is often a complex problem (Raharso, 2015).

The Code of Canon Law regulates marriage in the Catholic Church. The Code outlines the rules and norms of marriage clearly and thoroughly. Canons 1055-1116 concern with marriage. The first concept is that, according to God’s intention, marriage is a living fellowship between a man and a woman (Meidinata & Raharso, 2022). The second concept is that these marriages occur by consensus or irrevocable personal agreement and must be directed towards the welfare of the spouse and offspring. The third concept is that marriage always requires perfect fidelity and cannot be broken apart by death.

Canon 1055 states the Catholic Church’s understanding of marriage and its continuity. Canon 1055 §1 describes marriage as a marital covenant between baptized persons whom Christ the Lord has elevated to the dignity of a sacrament. Marriage is first understood as a covenant or consensus to establish a whole-life fellowship in this canon. The statement “communion of all life” affirms that marriage encompasses and involves the life of husband and wife in all its circumstances: profit and misfortune, challenging and joyful circumstances. This condition lasts from the moment of the marriage vows’ pronouncement until the death of one of them. “The whole life” refers to the entire time a man and woman are in the legal bonds of marriage, starting from the moment of the vows. In this case, failure to achieve the goals of marriage is not a reason to demand the termination of the marital bond.

The Second Vatican Council affirmed the sacramentality of marriage in its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, by declaring that conjugal love in all its dimensions is overflowing with graces flowing from the source of divine love and built up by Christ according to the example of His union of love with the Church (GS, 48, 49). Thanks to the grace of the sacrament of Matrimony, husbands and wives receive a special grace that enables them to live holy lives and educate children Catholicly (LG, 11).

The Indonesian state asserts that Catholic marriages are recorded at civil registry offices after being confirmed by religious leaders and in the presence of two witnesses. It refers to the Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 1/1974 concerning marriage. The law states that the essence and purpose of marriage is the outward and mental bond between a man and a woman as husband and wife to form a happy and lasting family. However, article 38 of the Act recognizes the existence of divorce; Divorce is the breakup of a marriage. Further, article 39 of the Act contains the imperative provision that divorce can only be done before a court after

the court has tried to reconcile both parties. Although divorce is a private matter involving the will of one or both parties of a married couple, the district court, as a third party, applies statutory provisions to avoid arbitrary actions from one of the parties of the married couple who filed for divorce.

The court ruling carries legal consequences against those who divorce. Under state legislation, they can remarry freely. The legal consequences contemplated by Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 1/1974 do not have the same effect on marital status from the point of view of the Code of Canon Law in the Catholic Church. The Code of Canon Law still recognizes the marriage's existence even though the district court has declared the couple separated.

Two consequences accompany court rulings, namely canonical effects and pastoral matters. Canonically, Canon Law states that marriage still exists as long as there is no statement from the Ecclesiastical court regarding the termination or annulment of marriage (Supit, 2015). Court rulings can be viewed as emergency or temporary (*contingent*) solutions to prevent one of the married couples from dangerous conditions. Therefore, pastorally, the Church still needs to serve those in difficult situations after the court ruling. Although they are not deterred from receiving the sacraments as long as they do not remarry (KWI, 2011), they are in conditions that prevent them from living the values of Catholic marriage. A new problem occurs when one of them remarries. Remarried parties are not permitted to receive the sacraments in the Church. The canonical effect is not from divorce but because of the post-divorce way of life, i.e., remarrying "outside the Church."

The study delves deep into the situation faced by those who have divorced due to rulings rendered by district courts. How did the court ruling affect their involvement in church life? What can pastoral care take against those in difficult situations after the court ruling?

METHOD

This research used a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data collection was conducted with open questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The informants for this study numbered six people. The six informants came from several parishes in Malang City, Indonesia. Data analysis using content analysis.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Divorce is not a problem in modern times. In Moses' day, there was already a divorce. Even the Pharisees believed that the Old Testament allowed men to divorce their wives and remarry (cf. Deut. 24:1-4). Moses did mention the matter of divorce papers. But it must be noted that Moses said it not as a rule or law legalizing divorce! In a sense, Moses was "forced" to speak about it because the stubbornness of his people was such that the situation was not good. Although it did not follow God's will, divorce was still rife in his people. Moses was forced to take the "middle way" to protect women as weak and defeated in Jewish society. It

is they who are the victims of the divorce. The divorce certificate protects them because it forbids husbands to remarry their divorced wives if she is already married to another man.

Jesus showed His view of marriage. God establishes marriage, a union between a man and a woman. This marriage resulted in a unique “one flesh” relationship. The relationship is closer than the parent-child relationship (cf. Gen. 2:24). Marriage is not a contract that is only temporary and not a union that can be dissolved. In this regard, it is wrong for a man to separate a unity that God has united.

Post-divorce Situations are Difficult Situations

Separation or divorce is a difficult situation and is not a typical situation in a family. But these divorces happen often, and this reality cannot be ignored anymore. Divorce is a last resort for couples seeking resolution of marital problems.

One mother with one child from Ratu Rosari Parish Malang revealed that she feels happier and more comfortable living alone. The divorce gave a breath of fresh air to her personal life, “I felt happier and more comfortable living alone” (informant 1). Her divorce positively impacted her life, especially her inner situation. Divorce can indeed solve the problems she faces. It shows that divorce is a means to overcome difficulties. The pressure of their lives is gone. A man from Langsep Parish revealed that his life was calmer and more peaceful, and he felt less depressed (informant 2). Thus, divorce made life quiet and peaceful. His life was not depressed by the problems he faced in the moments before the divorce occurred. Despite its positive value, divorce is disappointing: “I feel sad and disappointed” (informant 6).

Divorce poses new problems in life. One of the informants said,

I felt happy even though I felt sinful. I am glad because I can escape the pressure and difficulties. In addition, I felt sinful because I had broken the sacred promise I had made before God (informant 5).

A man, a parishioner from St. Andreas Tidar Parish, expressed that his divorce haunted his life with guilt and sin. The following is the statement of the person concerned,

I feel like I’ve hurt the people’s hearts supporting our marriage. Mainly our two parents. In addition, I also think that I am not responsible for keeping our marriage together. I am a very sinful man (informant 3).

Although feeling calm after divorce, often couples who have children are afraid and sorry for their children. A woman of St. Andreas Tidar parishioners put it this way:

I feel calm and no longer have a heavy burden. Yes, it can be said to be happier than time together. Living together but depressed and unhappy. Mending to live alone like this. Maybe what I think is my son. If I don’t mind, I feel calm and happy. But it was my son who I was worried about. Afraid that the development is not good. That fear was all I thought after the divorce (informant 4).

Church as *Communio*: Take Part in Church Activities

Divorced couples are members of the Church. They still have to continue to be involved in church life by participating in church duties, “I am still active. Divorce did not hinder my participation in the Church, so I was still entitled to Church service” (informant 1). Not many people have to leave their faith because of divorce. In essence, they remained one member of the Church even though they had divorced. Some say that, at first, they were embarrassed by their life situation. But as time passed, they realized and again wanted to be involved in church life. It was expressed by a mother from the parish of Ratu Rosario, “Yes, because our son is still young and he still needs love from both his father and me. At this time, I was going to church again. At first, I didn’t want to go to church because of shame” (informant 6).

Divorce can make someone who used to be active in church activities but since divorce becomes inactive anymore. Divorce made his church life even more declining. It is as expressed by a woman from Tidar Parish, “Yes, I feel I am less active in Church activities. Sometimes I feel like I’ve sinned, so it’s hard to come to church. But I still go to church even though I am not as diligent as before” (informant 5).

Divorce often distances him from the Church. Although the divorced people were still active in Church, their activity diminished. Those who were originally active must have become less active. Even going to Church is limited to attending the mass. It is not every Sunday to come to Church. An informant said,

After this divorce, I am still active in Church, but it is not as active as it used to be. Especially in ministries, I am not as active as I used to be. I still go to the mass. I was less engaged in that ministry and felt ashamed of my life. I felt that my life was not whole anymore. When I joined the Church, I often felt inferior or embarrassed. Afraid that someone would talk strangely behind my back (informant 4).

Some of them became inferior in parish life. They feel scared. However, most of them still actively attend Church. A mother from Ratu Rosario parish said she was still active in church activities even though she was divorced. An informant argued, “Because spiritual activity should not be confused with personal problems. Despite the moral burden I feel in life together. However, what is certain is that I am still active in spiritual activities” (informant 3).

Its relationship with the basic ecclesial community

Post-retail living situational encountered a difficult situation. In addition to the pressure caused by the problem, it is often also caused by the surrounding environment, “I’m ignorant and still behave fine” (informant 1); “Some sneer, but some are ignorant” (informant 2). In general, those who are divorced need a comfortable situation. Some even feel that people in their environment always give support. It is appropriate to support one another as a family or member of the Church. A woman from St. Andreas Tidar parish put it this way:

I think their attitude to me is casual. Indeed, most of them regretted our divorce. But they excused my divorce because of our bad married life. The Church still invites me when there are activities in the catholic community. They all treated me well. However, I felt that I was not much involved in the liturgical tasks. But they were happiest when I was still active in environmental activities (informant 4).

Pastorally, divorced people need support. Their divorce was one of their life experiences. A form of support is a greeting and an invitation to stay with the community. Some informants said they were still invited to participate in group and parish activities. They are still invited when the catholic community has activities. Indeed, they admit that there is little involved in the ministry. But basically, they are happy because others understand and accept them as part of them. An informant said, "Most of the people in the neighbourhood treat me well. They are the ones who try to approach and support me. But a lot of times, I'm trying to get away from them" (informant 6).

In addition, some divorced people experience unpleasant situations. An informant from St. Vincent A Paul Parish Langsep told his experience of getting an unpleasant attitude from divorce. The unpleasant attitude was received from his environment. He said this:

I feel the effects of the problems I face in life together. I am used as an irresponsible person as a talking point in everyday life. I felt cornered concerning others. I was labelled a striped-nose man who always looked for prey wherever I was (informant 3).

Church Attitude: Good Father

The study subjects generally stated that they felt the parish had not dared to accompany them tangibly. The statements of each informant indicate that they did not receive special pastoral assistance from the parish. It can be seen from the answers from informants who gave "no" when asked whether the Church or through her officers assisted (informants 1, 2, 5, and 6). Informant 5 stated, "I feel that the parish is not with us." Furthermore, another informant said, "I don't think that the Church gave me any special assistance. All this I take care of myself. It may also be because I did not actively consult with the priests" (informant 4)

The Church can't ignore the people and the problems at hand.

The Church has provided companions who have always helped me overcome my problems. However, it all comes back to me. Do I accept the solutions offered to me? Or am I just limited to following their directions?

The opinions of all informants say that they have not received assistance. However, the informant's answers indicated that less active people sought efforts to draw closer to the Church.

Hope: Pastoral Guidance

Almost all subjects stated that they always wished there was pastoral work that touched them. A pastoral Church that can help them, especially in dealing with their problems.

Guidance model to us. We felt that we often experienced a drought of faith, even to the point of despair. What kind of assistance the Church is like a father who always embraces his children. Listening to his son's voice and wisdom helped us solve our problems. We want always to be accompanied so that we who sin remain strong in the faith.

They mainly expect that the Church is near them because most of them feel that the Church is far away. They always hope for pastoral work to assist those who experience difficult situations. The following are the expectations of an informant,

The model of Church accompaniment that I hope for is that the Church continues to offer appropriate solutions to address the problems I face. For example, the Church conducts seminars on sexuality in family life. In addition, a self-management workshop is also needed to manage the future after the divorce case I experienced (informant 3).

They expect companionship from the Church that can offer and provide solutions they cannot solve. They also hope for a formation to help families, such as holding seminars on family themes. On the other hand, the Church has provided the means to help families (Mujianto & Firmanto, 2021).

In general, they hope for pastoral assistance to them. They feel that pastoral guidance or counselling can help them (Firmanto, 2021). As one informant put it, “The assistance from the Church that I hope for is counselling assistance. Because of experience, I have many problems pent up in my heart, and I don’t know who to tell me to, which made us separate” (informant 6). An informant stated, “I hope the parish provides pastoral assistance to us. We urgently need help and assistance from the parish in dealing with our situation or problem” (informant 5).

Pastoral Assistance for Single-Parent Families

The above statement indeed represents the opinions of the subjects of this study. They hope that the Church will always be with them. They hope the Church does not ostracize or abandon them even if they have done wrong. They still believe that the Church is always merciful. The Church always embraces them to invite them to come unto her. The Church is a place of protection and peace.

The Church always expects no rifts and divorces in marital life in the Catholic Church. But there is no denying that marriage has many problems. Nonetheless, divorce should be considered a last effort. After all, reasonable attempts at reconciliation have proven futile (AL, 241). The results showed that a divorce occurred due to a complicated marital problem. Most of those who divorce are already unable to live together in marriage due to stress and suffering, both physical and psychic (mental). So the Holy Father’s appeal through his apostolic letter declares that divorce is the last effort after all other reasonable attempts for reconciling the couple have proved futile. The civil divorce occurred among many people. It is undoubtedly due to a complicated problem. Sometimes, it can be morally imperative, especially when removing more fragile spouses or young children from serious injury from abuse and violence, humiliation and exploitation, and neglect and indifference.

Special consideration should be present for pastoral care for separated, divorced, or abandoned people. Respect must be given, especially towards those who suffer from being unjustly separated, divorced, or left, or those forced to cut off life with them because of ill-treatment from their husband or wife. Forgiveness for this kind of injustice has been inflicted is not easy, but grace makes this journey possible (Raharso, 2016). Thus, reconciliation and mediation services are needed, perhaps even special counselling centers established in the diocese (AL, 242).

Another essential thing to remember is that divorced people entering a new marriage must feel they belong to the Church. “They are not excommunicated” and should not be treated as such because they belong to ecclesiastical communion (AL, 243). Furthermore, in this apostolic exhortation, it is stated that it emphasizes the importance of making the handling of marriage annulment cases easier to obtain, less time-consuming, and, if possible, free of charge. The slow pace of the process causes discomfort and fatigue on both sides (AL, 244). In research, parishioners have shown this attitude toward divorced couples. The community supports and considers those who are divorced as part of them. Further, Pope Francis said that implementing this document becomes a great responsibility for the Diocesan bishops, who are called upon to try some of their cases themselves and, in all respects, ensure easier access for the faithful to justice (AL, 244). It reveals the hope of divorced people.

CONCLUSION

Divorce, an undeniable reality in public life, has not left the Catholic Church untouched. This research sheds light on the prevalence of divorce within the Catholic Church and the Church’s stance towards individuals who have gone through this experience. Divorcing couples are individuals who, in their search for solutions to their problems, take a path that the Church does not anticipate.

As a Church that seeks communion, it needs to foster unity and build bridges between its members. The family, considered the smallest cell within the Church, plays a pivotal role in this process. When families undergo separation and divorce, they find themselves in challenging situations. The pain of divorce experienced within these families inevitably reverberates within the broader communion of God’s people—the Church.

The Church, just like any other entity, faces difficulties when confronted with the consequences of divorce and court rulings regarding such cases. Acknowledging that the Church’s fundamental principles never envisioned or desired separation or divorce within Catholic marriages is crucial. In grappling with divorce, the Church must approach these situations with compassion, understanding, and a willingness to provide support. By recognizing the pain and challenges faced by families affected by divorce, the Church can strive to heal and offer solace to those in need.

Ultimately, through empathy, guidance, and an unwavering commitment to love and understanding, the Church can navigate the complexities of divorce and continue to fulfill its mission of fostering unity and communion among its members.

Acknowledgment: The authors expressed gratitude to all who helped them during data collection such as conducting in-depth interviews, doing observation, gathering information, data analysis, and writing research results.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that the research results that have been carried out are free from conflicts of interest from certain parties who may claim the results of their research.

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