

Diocese of Colorado Springs
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In light of the confusion that seems to be surrounding the question of the reception of Holy Communion by divorced and remarried (without benefit of a decree of nullity [from any previous marriage(s)]—also known as an “irregular marriage”) Catholics, I believe it incumbent on me as your bishop to once again clarify the perennial teaching and discipline of the Church in this matter.

Matrimony. “The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; This covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament” (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], 1601). When a couple marry validly and sacramentally there arises a bond between them that is, by its very nature, perpetual [never ending or changing] and exclusive [restricted to each other]. This bond may not be broken by any human power.

The union between a husband and a wife is the beginning of every human relation. The words “relation” and “relationship” are often confused. “Relationship” indicates *how* one relates to another. “Relation” is a bond between persons. For example, the bond between a father and a son is a filial bond – or a relation. How the father and son relate to each other is called a relationship. Human relationships can be broken – even destroyed, but a relation endures. A father might have a broken relationship with his son, but he continues to be related as a father.

We know that the bond of marriage – the relation – is unbreakable because Christ himself has told us so. “Some Pharisees came up to him [Jesus] and said, to test him, ‘May a man divorce his wife for any reason whatever?’ He replied, ‘Have you not read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female and declared, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, and the two shall become as one”? Thus they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, let no man separate what God has joined.’ They said to him, ‘Then why did Moses command divorce and the promulgation of a divorce decree?’ ‘Because of your stubbornness Moses let you divorce your wives,’ he replied; ‘but at the beginning it was not that way. I now say to you, whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery’” (Matthew 19:3-9).

These divinely revealed words of the Lord have been handed down by the Catholic Church from the beginning. The Fathers and Doctors of the Church, as well as popes and ecumenical councils give testimony to the indissolubility of marriage, as well as the prohibition of a divorced person from entering into a new union.

Reconciliation. “Among the penitent’s acts, contrition occupies the first place. Contrition is ‘sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again’” (CCC, 1451). One who is validly married and enters into a second,

conjugal union is living in a state that is objectively sinful. Only if the couple sincerely promises to abstain from sexual activity can they receive a valid sacramental absolution of their sins.

No priest may pronounce the words of absolution knowing that the penitent intends to continue to commit sin. If the priest does so, the absolution is invalid. Sins are not forgiven. This is also a serious misuse of the priestly faculties. A priest has the duty to forgive, enlighten and strengthen the spiritual life of every penitent. Absolving a penitent who intends to continue to commit sin does not conform to this vocation [nor is it the intent and/or purpose of the sacrament].

Holy Communion. “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily sins against the body and blood of the Lord. ... He who eats and drinks without recognizing the body eats and drinks a judgment on himself” (1 Corinthians 11:27,29). If a person is in an irregular union, **he or she may not receive Holy Communion**, unless the previous marriage has been declared null by the Church’s tribunal, or the couple agrees to live as brother and sister.

Being unable to receive Holy Communion, however, does not render the Mass meaningless. The Mass is the highest form of worship and adoration that can be offered to God. It is the re-presentation of the Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary – whether or not one receives Holy Communion. Reception of Holy Communion is not required to fulfill our Sunday obligation. Every Catholic, even if unable to receive Holy Communion, has the right and the obligation of worshipping with the community [of faithful] every Sunday.

Reception of Holy Communion is the greatest union that one can have with God. This is precisely why one who is in the state of mortal sin may not receive Communion. No one may receive the Body and Blood of the Lord knowing that he or she is in the state of sin, which is always some form of rejection of God.

I ask our priests always to communicate authentic Catholic teaching, both in the confessional and as well in public venues. To teach the truth and help people to form their consciences according to the truth is a real work of mercy. As Pope Francis instructs us in *Amoris Laetitia*: Priests should “accompany [the divorced and remarried] in helping them to understand their situation according to the teaching of the Church and the guidelines of the bishop” (#300).