

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 27TH. SUNDAY (B)

Genesis 2: 18-24 Psalm 128 Hebrews 2: 9-11 Mark 10: 2-16

By *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

In the light of what people will be hearing in these readings and the issues and problems they may stir up, the preacher cannot avoid dealing with the subject of marriage, divorce, and annulments. Here's a preaching that those of us who are not married need to approach with care, for even with many years in ministry, we still speak as outsiders. With your pastoral experience, church wisdom and the scriptural background, a homily can be prepared that is sure to get attentive listeners! People are sure to appreciate an honest wrestling with the Word on this occasion. Maybe this week's reflection will help by providing some background and context---you add to the mix your own experience and wisdom.

The First Reading: There are two creation stories in Genesis, this one is the second. In the first (1: 1-2:4), the man and woman are created in one act--they are called Adam. But in this second account, the man is created first. The woman is created from the man's own body. This is not a creation story of subordination by sequence and priority--the man first, then the “lesser” woman. Rather, this is a story of deep intimacy between the two. She is not created from his foot so that he would dominate over her, nor is she created from his head so that she would be over him. She comes from where his heart is.

The animals are already created, and the man has named them and been given dominion over them. However, they are not going to fill his loneliness. God performs a separate act of creation, and the two creatures are in covenant to one another, there is a strong attraction between the two. The two are naked, but since there is not yet sin in the world, there is no shame between them. They do not have to fear the body and there is not sin associated with it. They are "one flesh" which, in the original language, suggests a new personality. In marriage a new personality is being formed. To achieve this unity while still respecting the uniqueness and even the idiosyncrasies of each, is a feat of great love and labor.

The Gospel. It is important to capture the spirit of the times in which Jesus lives to help get an understanding of this reading. In Jesus' world, the families arranged the marriage. Marriage was a way of binding together two families. The couple remained children of the parents and docile to their decisions. Just as children did

not choose their parents, God does,---neither did they choose their spouses. The view was that through the parents, God chose the partners in marriage. In his commentary on Jesus' world, Joseph Pilch shows why divorce would not have been acceptable; it separates two families. In a culture where honor and shame play such important roles, a divorce would bring shame on the bride's family and the men in her family would be shamed. In this world view, a divorce would not shame the wife, but her male family members. They would have to avenge the insult with resulting feuds and bloodshed. To avoid this tragedy, divorce was forbidden.

The discussion with the disciples adds a complication; the divorced couple might remarry. Mark highlights the situation in which the woman (or her family) might initiate the divorce. The shame on the husband's family would be froth with dire consequences. And since a woman could not live alone in this society, a divorce necessarily meant another marriage.

Jesus refers to the Law of Moses in response to the Pharisees who claim that Moses permitted a "man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce his wife." Jesus does not agree. He says Moses "commanded" that such a letter of divorce be written, "because of your hardness of heart." Moses required this procedure at a time when men could send their wives off for the smallest domestic infraction----like a burnt supper, boredom, her old age, or his falling in love with another woman. Remember, Moses was dealing with an almost illiterate society, so a "written decree" would require a lengthy procedure. And that is what he wanted, a lengthy procedure to make divorce more difficult. Moses was actually protecting the rights of women. The Pharisees tell Jesus, Moses "allowed/permitted" a decree of divorce; Jesus disagrees and tells them Moses "commanded it." Jesus is adding his own teaching. A woman cannot be cast aside so easily as if she were a commodity, once used to bear offspring, now no longer useful. He says their relationship is much more sacred, "the two become one flesh" and no one can separate them, because God has joined them.

Marriage is not doing very well these days. Yet, couples are still getting married, talking about "till death do us part"--not "until sickness, or old age or a change of careers call for another arrangement." The marriages I've been at are attempts at permanency, a sincere desire to fulfill promises. However, sometimes you get the impression that some of these couples enter marriage as if entering a new state of being, automatically gaining a new identity just by being married. Maybe the

preacher will want to stress marriage as a vocation. Even a celibate preacher can speak out of "vocation" and the hard work and attention such commitments require.

To be in a vocation is something one does--- one is working at. Getting married does not automatically mean "happily ever after." No one else entering a serious endeavor just presumes being called an "athlete" or "college student" or "pianist" will guarantee success in that endeavor.

But two people enter marriage and then proceed about their lives thinking the work of coming together was settled during their engagement period. It seems when people do decide to work on their marriage relationship it's often because they have neglected it in favor of other issues. It's the people who have made successful marriages who are the ones to ask, and they will tell us how much work was involved.

In the parish where I recently preached, they celebrated a Sunday Mass for "pregnant families." This is a change of language that reveals what becoming "one flesh" might mean; that two begin to think about what it means to retain their individual uniqueness while becoming a new "personality." You hear it in the language of some married people, "We are pregnant".... "our children," "our vacation plans," "let me check with my husband....my wife." A new identity is expressed in their ways of thinking and speaking.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, we have the pastoral practice of annulments. In the circles I find myself there is a lot of passion stirred up when the topic comes up. If you feel you want to allude to the practice because it seems to go against Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel passage, you might refer to a recent article by Thomas Mc Carthy in AMERICA magazine (7/29). A response to this article was written by a Chicago deacon who defends the practice and takes exception to Mc Carthy's article. The article is too long to quote, I suggest you read it in its entirety; but here is a shorter response to the article by deacon Ciesil (AMERICA, 9/16, page 42):

"I wish to protest the remarks in Thomas Mc Carthy's column....Mc Carthy relates that he knows six people who know people who threw up their hands in disgust after 'a chilling, humiliating ordeal.' Even his sister had a terrible experience trying to get a Catholic annulment.

It is possible that there is a diocese somewhere in America that has such a

barbaric process, but as a filed associate of the marriage tribunal of the Archdiocese of Chicago for eight years, I can assure you these things would never happen in Chicago. I am also confident that my Chicago experience is typical of the vast majority of dioceses in the United States.

Normal procedures require the petitioner to submit an application, give written testimony, the names of a few witnesses and meet once with a field associate at a location near their home. The amount of the fee is entirely up to the petitioner. Great care is always taken that the process may be a means of healing, and many petitioners obtain a sense of closure over a wounded part of their lives.

I am alarmed that Mc Carthy's remarks may deter some from taking a crucial step in getting back to the church and renewing their spiritual lives.

### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Karl Rahner, *THE GREAT CHURCH YEAR: THE BEST OF KARL RAHNER'S HOMILIES, SERMONS, AND MEDITATIONS.* (ed) Albert Raffelt. New York: Crossroad, 1993.

Karl Rahner, one of the 20<sup>th</sup>. century's greatest theologians, believed that all theology must give clear witness to the Gospel. He preached almost daily and this is a collection of these preachings. They reveal the faith of a profound theologian as he reflects on the Good News proclaimed through Church year.

### QUOTABLE

During this election season we continue quoting from:  
Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium  
(United States Catholic Conference/ National Conference of Catholic Bishops)

### **The Role of the Church**

Beyond the responsibilities of every Catholic, the Church as an institution also has a role in the political order. This includes educating its members about Catholic social teaching, highlighting the moral dimensions of public policy, participating in debate on matters affecting the common good, and witnessing to the Gospel through the many services and ministries provided by the Catholic community. Our efforts in this area should not be misconstrued. The Church's participation in public affairs does not undermine but enriches the political process and affirms

genuine pluralism. The leaders of the Church have the right and duty to share the Church's teaching and to educate Catholics on the moral dimensions of public life, so that they may form their consciences in light of their faith.

As bishops, we do not seek the formation of a religious voting bloc, nor do we wish to instruct persons on how they should vote by endorsing or opposing candidates. We hope that voters will examine the position of candidates on the full range of issues, as well as on their personal integrity, philosophy, and performance. We are convinced that a consistent ethic of life should be the moral framework from which to address all issues in the political arena. We urge our fellow citizens to see beyond party politics, to analyze campaign rhetoric critically, and to choose their political leaders according to principle, not simply party affiliation or mere self-interest.

The coming elections provide important opportunities to bring together our principles, experience, and community in effective public witness. We hope parishes, dioceses, schools, and other Catholic institutions will encourage active participation through non-partisan voter registration and education efforts. As Catholics we need to share our values, raise our voices, and use our votes to shape a society that protects human life, promotes family life, pursues social justice, and practices solidarity. These efforts will strengthen our nation and renew our Church.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,  
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