

ASSOCIATION WITH DIVORCED PERSONS

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Q.What should be the practice of Catholics in the matter of association with persons who have been divorced and have attempted another marriage? Nowadays, it is not unusual for Catholics, especially those who are well-to-do and move in more "exclusive" circles, to associate as freely with such persons as with those who are properly married. Some Catholics do not hesitate to attend the remarriage of a divorced friend in the presence of a civil magistrate or a non-Catholic clergyman. Catholic parents are sometimes faced with the problem as to whether they may or should attend the marriage of their daughter to a divorced man outside the Church. What norms can be proposed to Catholics to guide them in situations of this kind?

A.The questioner has brought up one of the most difficult problems in modern American life.

Persons who have been divorced and "remarried" are now numbered by the hundreds of thousands in our country. They are found in all classes of society: they represent all religious denominations, including even some who call themselves Catholics. Association with such persons cannot be entirely avoided. They live in the same apartment houses as Catholics, they are found among the tradespeople and professional men and public officials with whom the faithful transact business, they are their fellow workers in shop and office, they are their employers or their employees. To avoid all contact with such unfortunate persons nowadays we should have to bury ourselves in a desert.

The chief moral problem centered about association with those who have attempted remarriage after divorce (whom we shall call simply "divorced persons" hereafter) is the scandal which such association may cause. The scandal consists principally in the fact that by freely associating with such persons, Catholics are likely to give the impression that they regard the conjugal life of the couples in question as perfectly lawful, or as only slightly culpable. Other persons who are contemplating divorce may in consequence be more inclined toward severing their marriage tie. The couple themselves may be encouraged in their efforts to persuade themselves their union is a genuine marriage. Those who are not well instructed in Catholic doctrine may be led to believe that the Catholic Church is mitigating its teaching on divorce, and that it will be only a matter of time before the Church will fully conform to the standard of the modern world.

It would be impossible to lay down rules for the guidance of Catholics that would adequately cover every possible case. But the following norms, we believe, will be helpful:

(1) Purely business relations with divorced persons are ordinarily permissible. To trade in a store whose owner is a divorced man, to consult a lawyer or a doctor enmeshed in a similar marital entanglement, to attend a ball game when several of the players are divorced men—such activities would be allowed to Catholics, even though only their own personal utility or convenience or pleasure is thereby promoted.. Under this heading would come those meetings which appear to be of a social nature, though actually business is involved, such as the visit of the junior member of a firm, aspiring to advancement, to the home of the senior member who happens to be divorced. Similarly, to attend a motion picture whose star actor has been divorced and remarried three times would not be forbidden, provided the picture is not itself objectionable. In saying that these things are permissible we do not intend to deny that it would be more commendable in some instances for Catholics to abstain even from such associations with those whose marital status is opposed to God's law. For example, it might be a healthy move if Catholics banded together to boycott motion pictures which feature actors and actresses who flaunt even the fundamental canons of decency in their private lives.

(2) Purely social relations with a couple, one (or each) of whom is known to have a previous spouse still living should be avoided by Catholics or at least reduced to a minimum. When Catholics are as friendly with such couples as they are with decent people, properly married, they manifest little regard for the attitude of their church towards those who so gravely violate the divine law. For the Church declares such persons *ipso facto* infamous (Can. 2356). And it is difficult to excuse Catholics from the grave sin of scandal if they frequently attend parties and dinners at the home of such persons, or perhaps even spend a few days with them from time to time, and reciprocate by an invitation to their own home. The strange fact is that these same Catholics would

emphatically decline an invitation to a social function in a household of which the master is openly living in concubinage, without having any marriage ceremony. Yet, according to Catholic belief, the man who has divorced his lawful wife and attempted remarriage is actually in the same situation. The mere fact that he and his partner went through the marriage service before a minister or a justice of the peace does not alter the fact that, as the Catholic Church views the matter, they are living openly in adulterous union. Why then, should not Catholics realize the incongruity of giving the couple the same respect and courtesy that are given to a man and woman living in honorable wedlock? At most, a very rare exchange of visits might be permitted, when some special occasion calls for it. But when Catholics associate frequently and regularly with divorced persons for merely social reasons, I would consider them guilty objectively of grave sin; if they do so only occasionally without any justifying reason, it would seem to be a venial sin. The case is not changed substantially by the fact that the couple are non-Catholics and are apparently convinced that their marriage is valid; though, of course, when they are Catholics the danger of giving scandal by association with them is greater.

More leniency could be exercised when the association involved only one of the parties—for example, when a group of men invite a divorced fellow-worker to accompany them on a fishing party. Again, Catholics would not be guilty of scandal if they attend a social function in the home of a friend to which a divorced person and his present partner were also invited. But this should not happen very frequently. In other words, Catholics should not become regular members of a social group in which divorced persons are fully acceptable.

(3) Apart from most unusual circumstances, a Catholic would not be permitted to be present at the attempted remarriage of a divorced person (nor, *a fortiori* to act as bridesmaid, best man, etc.), knowing full well that such a union is invalid in the sight of God. Such attendance would ordinarily be gravely scandalous. Speaking of an analogous case, the attempted marriage of a Catholic before a non-Catholic minister, Davis says: "Assistance at a mixed marriage in a Protestant church would not be tolerated, since this would be co-operation in violating a serious church law that forbids mixed marriages without dispensation, and such a marriage would now be invalid" (Moral and Pastoral Theology [New York, 1938], I, 286).

Parents or near relatives of a Catholic involved in such an unfortunate union might argue that by attending the "marriage" they can retain the good will of the erring one and thus have a better chance of later inducing him to turn away from the sinful cohabitation. But, even if there is such a probability, it would not seem a sufficient reason to outweigh the grave scandal that would almost certainly ensue. Moreover, there would usually be just as much probability that a severe attitude on the part of the parents or relatives will open the eyes of the misguided Catholic.

After a marriage of this kind has occurred the parents may —and even should show the sinner that their love and sympathy bestowed on him in full measure, but that they are unchanged in their condemnation of his evil conduct. It would be permissible to invite him to visit them; but visits from the couple together should be definitely disapproved, or at the most allowed only rarely. On the occasion of a large gathering — for example, when parents are celebrating their golden wedding anniversary or when the son of the family is offering his first Mass — a difficult problem is presented, but I believe that Catholic principles require in such an event that the couple should not be invited. At most the one who is the member of the family could be asked to come alone.

Perhaps to some Catholics these norms may appear too strict. It must be admitted that they are not in accord with the customs of the day, which regard the marriage bond so lightly. But, in view of the scandal that is undoubtedly caused by the apparent recognition of a union that is a grave violation of God's law, it seems that priests should guide the faithful according to the principles that have here been set down. There are times when pastoral prudence will suggest that individuals be left in good faith; but that does not justify priests in failing to give general instructions concerning a problem which occurs so frequently and which so vitally affects the sacredness of the sacrament of Matrimony.