

How To Act Towards Invalidly Married Catholics

Booklet 2. Part 1.

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Some guiding principles for those who face the too common problem of an invalid marriage in the circle of their family or friends.

ONE of the most common and difficult moral problems that must be faced by Catholics today is that concerning the right attitude to be taken toward Catholics who have publicly renounced the grace of God by entering an invalid marriage. Sometimes parents have to face the problem when a son or daughter takes this fateful step. Other relatives, friends, neighbours, business associates, fellow parishioners, not infrequently run into the same thing. All want an answer to questions like these: "How should we act toward a relative or friend who has chosen to live publicly in a state of sin? Must we avoid them? May we keep up some contact with them? May we or should we help them in any way?"

The problem is so common in this divorce-ridden world of ours, that it needs to be thrashed out as thoroughly as possible. When that is done, it will be seen that some rules can be set down that are very definite and seriously binding in conscience, while other principles must be asserted that leave much to the honest judgment of the individual Catholic in a set of particular circumstances.

This important study will deal, therefore, first, with the difficulties surrounding this touchy problem; second, with certain principles that can be set down; third, with a few practical recommendations.

Let it be noted carefully that we are speaking, not of divorced and remarried persons in general, but of informed Catholics who attempt marriage after a divorce, or with a divorced but validly married person. The principles set down will apply in some measure to Catholics who marry outside the Church, but who could be rightly married before a priest. In this case, however, it is far easier for the sinner to return to the grace of God by having the marriage rectified in the Church, and Catholic friends and relatives will ordinarily concentrate on achieving that end. The difficult cases are those in which a Catholic insists on living as if married to a person with whom there can be no valid marriage in the eyes of God and of His Church. What attitude is to be taken toward such Catholics?

Part 1. THE DIFFICULTIES.

ALL the difficulties connected with deciding on a right mode of conduct toward such as these arise from the fact that two different kinds of obligation must be weighed carefully against each other.

A. On the one hand, there is the obligation of not giving scandal by any manifestation or appearance of approval of the invalid marriage.

Scandal is defined as any wrong words, actions, even omissions, that may incite or assist or facilitate or contribute to the sins of others. Note two things in this definition: 1) that it is a wrong or evil word, action or omission contributing to the sin of another, that carries the stigma of scandal; good or virtuous actions, which someone might twist into their own purposes of evil, are not sins of scandal; 2) that practically any sort of help or encouragement given to another in his sins would involve scandal if it resulted from the bad actions, words or omissions.

In the case of those who commit the great public sin of entering an invalid marriage, and who continue to live in the habitual sins of an invalid marriage, it is entirely sinful to give, before, at, or after the so-called marriage, any sign of approval of the sins. That would be like saying: "I think you are doing the right thing, despite Christ's clear statement that he who puts away his wife and marries another is guilty of adultery. I accept your marriage, even though I know God cannot accept it, and Christ cannot accept, and the Church cannot accept it." It is easy to see how such words from a relative or friend, or actions easily interpreted as meaning the same thing, will contribute to and make easier the continuation of the sins of one invalidly married.

There is another reason for the fact that any approval of a Catholic's bad marriage constitutes scandal. It makes it easier for person not yet married to yield to the temptation, if it arises, of entering a similar sinful and invalid marriage. No one can possibly doubt that the frequency with which this moral tragedy overtakes Catholics today is due in large measure to the fact that many Catholics do in some way give their blessing and approval to such invalid marriages. One can realistically imagine many a Catholic who has fallen in love with a divorced person saying to himself (or herself): "So-and-so is a Catholic and he married after a divorce, or married a divorced person. He's getting along fine. All his friends and relatives have accepted his marriage as if it were as good as any other. It won't be so bad if I do the same thing."

The danger of such scandal prompted the apostles, in the inspired words of the New Testament, and even Our Lord Himself, to make some stern statements in regard to the treatment of those who publicly renounced Christ and His doctrine. Thus, Saint Paul, in 2 Thessalonians 3:6: "We charge you, brethren, in the name of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, to withdraw yourselves from every brother who lives irregularly, and not according to the teaching received from us." Again, in 3:13 of the same letter, "If anyone does not obey our word by this letter, note that man and do not associate with him, that he may be put to shame. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." And Saint John, in his second epistle, filled as it is with repetitions of his familiar theme of the necessity of fraternal charity, still has this to say: "Anyone who advances and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ, has not God... If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house, or say to him welcome. For he who says to him welcome, is a sharer in his evil works." (2 John verse 10.)

Our Lord Himself has equally severe words, to be understood always in the light of His great hatred of scandal. Of the offender who, after repeated correction, will not hear the Church, he says, "Let him be to you as the heathen and the publican." (Matthew 18:17.)

Thus the case for not giving scandal by any sort of approval of the sins of an invalidly married Catholic, must be made very strong. Of course, the greatest scandal, and the first scandal, is given by the Catholic who enters the invalid marriage, and thereby sets an evil example that others may follow. It must be the desire and the duty of other Catholics not to increase that scandal by taking sides with the sinner through any show of approval for his sins.

B. On the other hand, this urgent and clear obligation must be weighed against the duty of charity toward sinners. It is an essential part of Catholic teaching that God wants no sinner, not even the greatest, to be lost; that there is hope for every sinner until death has actually sealed his fate forever; that it is the duty of every Catholic to desire, to pray for, and, in so far as he has the power, to work for the conversion of sinners, especially of those to whom he is bound in some way.

The difficulty is to exercise this charity in such a way as to eliminate any real scandal. When it is remembered that scandal is given only when some kind of approval is expressed or manifested for the sin of entering an invalid marriage, certain guiding principles can be set down. But there are always two extremes to be avoided.

THE first is that of erroneously making the danger of scandal a reason for cutting off every form of charity to the sinner and thus practically slamming the door against his return to the grace of God. This is sometimes motivated more by selfishness and resentment than by any real spiritual desire to avoid scandal. Thus, a Catholic family, naturally feeling that it has been deeply disgraced by the defection of one of its members who has entered an invalid marriage, might be merely expressing its personal resentment in withholding all signs of charity toward that person. Thus, they may so embitter the one fallen, and the illicit partner who may be more or less ignorant of the evil of the marriage, that even if both became free to marry validly, or able in some other way to escape their sinful state, they would not do so.

THE other extreme is to make charity a cloak for so complete and warm-hearted an acceptance of the invalidly married couple that it amounts to approval of the evil itself, encourages them to be content in their sins, and encourages others to commit the same grave sins. All charity toward public sinners of any kind must be inspired and marked by the desire to help them escape from their sins. It is no longer charity, but rather the most terrible form of unkindness, to encourage a person to be satisfied with his sins.

It is obvious, then, from this interplay of various considerations and obligations toward the invalidly married, that the solution of individual cases is not always easily decided upon. To help toward such solutions the following principles are laid down.

Part 2. PRINCIPLES.

1. Before a Catholic enters an invalid marriage toward which he seems to be tending, every reasonable effort should be made by relatives and friends to dissuade him (or her) from taking this step.

The obligation mentioned here begins as soon as a Catholic with whom a relative or friend has some influence is seen to be going steady with a person who cannot be married before God. Right here is where many Catholics are guilty of grave sin. Not only do they not warn a close relative or friend against the rising danger of an invalid marriage, but they even promote and encourage regular dates between a couple that cannot validly marry. It is the same kind of grave scandal as to approve or encourage the invalid marriage in which it can so easily result. Few divorced Catholics have not at times been victims of diabolic advice from friends that they should find “a pal (of the opposite sex) and go out and have a good time.” Catholics should not even invite to their homes or their parties other Catholics who they know will be accompanied by a steady date whom they cannot validly marry.

Besides avoiding such scandal, good Catholics – parents, brothers and sisters, good friends – of one who has started company-keeping with a person who cannot be validly married, will marshal every argument and every bit of influence they possess to save the one whom they love from the great danger in which he has placed himself.

2. It is a mortal sin of scandal for any Catholic to express or show approval of an attempted but invalid marriage of a Catholic.

Certainly, this is true of direct words of approval. For one Catholic to say to another who is about to marry a divorced person, or after a divorce, “Even if the Church refuses to accept your marriage, I do,” or, “It’s too bad the Church doesn’t get up to date and recognize marriages like yours,” or, “I don’t blame you for this marriage; you’re in love and that’s all that matters,” is direct approval, direct scandal, clearly mortal sin.

But one can show approval of an invalid marriage without putting it into direct words. Here many Catholics infected with secularism or the world’s un-Christian outlook on things, often fail seriously. The truth is that to take any part in the preparations for and the ceremony and celebration of the invalid marriage of a Catholic is a show of approval and therefore serious scandal. This holds for parents and all members of the immediate family of the one attempting the marriage, as well as for friends.

Thus, it would be seriously wrong for Catholics to attend “showers,” engagement parties, pre-wedding dinners for Catholics about to attempt an invalid marriage.

It would be seriously wrong to send wedding presents or congratulatory cards to such persons.

It would be seriously wrong to attend the wedding ceremony, either as a member of the wedding party or as a mere guest, or to go to the breakfast or banquet served after the wedding.

It would be seriously wrong to help the invalidly marrying Catholic to find, rent, buy or furnish living quarters to be used after the wedding.

It would be seriously wrong to offer hospitality, assistance or facilities for the honeymoon of the invalidly married Catholic.

All these actions can be readily recognized as the equivalent of saying to the Catholic who is, according to the words of Christ, entering publicly into a life of sin, “I don’t see anything wrong with what you are doing. May you be most happy in your sins.”

3. After a Catholic has entered and settled down in an invalid marriage, loyal Catholics may not give direct or indirect approval of the situation, but they should be guided by true and sincere charity in the attitude they take toward the person.

The first and most necessary object of all fraternal charity is to help one’s neighbours reach heaven. Scandal is the greatest sin against charity precisely because it means turning a person away from heaven. When the scandal of showing approval of the public sins of another has been diligently avoided, there still remains the duty of doing anything within one’s power to win the person away from his sins and back to the road to heaven.

Thus, it must not be thought that in all cases of invalidly married relatives or friends, Catholics should completely ostracize and avoid them. Saint Paul, in one of the admonitions quoted above, commands Christians not to look upon sinners as enemies, but rather to admonish them as brothers.

There must be a desire for the conversion and salvation of the one gone astray; and prudent means must be used to express and fulfill the desire.

However, circumstances differ so widely in this matter that it is difficult to lay down universal rules. The individual Catholic must himself weigh his obligation not to give scandal against his obligation of charity toward the sinner and make the best decision he can with the help of God's grace. At the same time, a few sample solutions of the problem may be given.

- a. Sometimes charity itself will suggest that a most effective way of "admonishing the sinner" (to use Saint Paul's phrase) is to sever all social relations with him (or her). This is true especially in cases where family ties have been strong; where the one entering the invalid marriage had obviously expected family and friends to be just as kind and affectionate after the invalid marriage as before; where it is prudently judged by the family and friends that the rupture of social relations will bring home to the outcast the evil of his state and the desire to escape it.
- b. Sometimes charity to others than the invalidly married person requires an almost complete break with that person. In a family of many children, in which the oldest married outside the Church (or even in the case of a cousin or uncle or aunt doing the same thing), the mother and father might prudently decide that the surest, and possibly only adequate, way of impressing on the growing and teen-aged children the evil of a bad marriage is to sever relations with the one who chose such a "marriage." In these cases, too, there is usually a good effect on the latter, in that the sadness of his (or her) spiritual state will be more clearly recognized.
- c. Sometimes, and here we may say most often, the right program to adopt is that of keeping up a limited contact with the one who has severed himself from the sacraments of the Church, with at least the hope that in due time the person will be willing to accept solid spiritual advice.

We say limited contact, because there always remains the obligation of avoiding any manifest approval of the bad marriage. Thus, the family or friends of an invalidly married couple may not invite the latter to occupy a guest room in their house just as any truly married couple might be invited to do. They should not spend vacations with them, thus publicly supporting their pretence of being validly married in the eyes of God.

But apart from such things, a certain amount of social contact may be kept up so long as there is a flicker of hope of being able to help the person spiritually in the end. In such contacts, the friend or relative will use opportunities to urge the invalidly married Catholic to pray daily, to attend Mass, at least on Sundays, to read spiritual books that may eventually provide the motives for a break with sin. It should be remembered that nagging, that is, using every opportunity to berate, condemn and scold the person, will never accomplish much, except perhaps to stiffen him in the rejection of grace.

Part 3. PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS.

Catholics should be aware that this problem is one on which they are bound to be misunderstood and misinterpreted by many non-Catholics. They will be accused, even when they do what their consciences dictate, of adopting a "holier-than-thou" attitude, of being intolerant and bigoted and hypocritical, of proudly sitting in judgment on sinners.

None of these charges will be justified, and none should be worried about, if they keep clearly in mind their own spiritual objectives. They want to prevent sin, and that is why they must not give the scandal of showing any approval of what Christ (not they) called a sinful and invalid marriage.

They want to save sinners, and that is why they do what they think best to bring about the conversion of anyone who has publicly renounced Christ's teaching about marriage.

Three recommendations are offered to Catholics who face the problem of dealing with invalidly married Catholics.

1. Be humble. Remember your own sins, which Christ has forgiven. Be mindful that you, too, might have severed yourself publicly from Christ's Church, except for His grace. Suppress personal resentment and anger based on a feeling that you have been disgraced by the action of one dear to you. Think often of this: If you had been a truer and a better loved one or friend, you might have prevented the tragedy that occurred.
2. Explain your position simply and clearly to the invalidly married relative or friend, and to others who have a right and a need to know. When you have charted your course according to the principles set down in this article, let it be known, and with it, your sole desire to help the wanderer back into the fold of Christ.
3. In doubt, lean to the side of kindness. Let there be no room in your heart for personal bitterness, the least tinge of contempt for any sinner, the slightest pretext of making a final judgment. Give no scandal of approval of a bad marriage, but in all other things let kindness reveal your desire for the salvation of one who has turned away from Christ and His sacraments for the love of a human being. Never stop praying for that soul, never stop hoping for its salvation; never stop looking for an opportunity to help it back to the fold of Christ.
