



The **Catholic Bishops**
of **Alberta** and the
Northwest Territories

Les évêques catholiques
de l'**Alberta** et des
Territoires du Nord-Ouest

GUIDELINES
FOR THE PASTORAL
ACCOMPANIMENT OF
CHRIST'S FAITHFUL
WHO ARE DIVORCED AND
REMARRIED WITHOUT A
DECREE OF NULLITY

The Purpose of this Guide



During the Jubilee of Mercy, the Universal Church received from Pope Francis his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. It conveys the beautiful invitation to encounter Jesus Christ, who pours out the Spirit of Love and Truth in the vast diversity of family life situations. We encourage everyone to read it prayerfully and reflectively.

One concern raised by Pope Francis as needing particularly careful and sensitive attention is the situation of those men and women who are divorced and have civilly remarried without having received a decree of nullity. The Holy Father insists that, “Priests have the duty to ‘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” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 300). This *Guide* responds to the summons of the Holy Father by providing just such guidelines. The document is thus limited in scope as it pertains only to this one issue. It should be understood that it is informed by the entire Apostolic Exhortation, which itself reflects and upholds the Tradition of the Church. These guidelines are to be situated within the respective pastoral plans for outreach to families in each of the Latin-rite Dioceses of Alberta and the Northwest Territories.

Our Catholic parish communities should welcome with generosity and love men and women who are divorced and remarried. Pastors in particular will take great care to ensure that these couples know they have not placed themselves beyond the embrace of the Church. As baptized persons they are strongly encouraged to share in the life of the Church to the greatest degree possible, such as through family prayer, attendance at Mass, sharing where possible in the Church’s liturgical life, or participation in her charitable activities, particularly outreach to the poor. Their children are vitally important members of the Church, which wishes to help the parents raise them in the faith.

Authentic pastoral care of these men and women, our brothers and sisters in the faith, will be shaped and directed by the Word of God, under which the entire Church community stands in faith and obedience.

THE WITNESS OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

The Teaching of Christ

The Christian receives with gratitude and hands on in fidelity the teaching of the Lord Jesus himself. From the very beginning of the life of the Church, the clear commands of Christ regarding marriage posed challenges as they overturned the prevailing social and religious understanding of divorce. We read in St. Mark's Gospel:



Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate." Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." (Mark 10:2-12; cf. Matthew 19:2-9)

For many, this was very difficult to receive and accept. However, as Pope Francis continually emphasizes, Jesus is the merciful face of the Father. The Lord's commandments, therefore, come from the heart of God, "the Father of mercies" (2Cor 1:3), and can confidently be accepted with trust in God's wisdom and love.

Marriage a Mystery

St. Paul offers profound insight into the Lord's teaching on the nature of marriage by relating it to Christ's Body, the Church. Marriage, he teaches, is a great mystery which manifests the loving communion between Christ and the Church (cf. *Ephesians* 5: 31-32). It is thus a sacrament, a public institution with a mission to give witness to the faithful love of Christ. Therefore, for baptized Christians, adultery is not only violation of one of the Ten Commandments; it is also a public counter-witness to the very nature of the Church: the spousal union between Christ and the baptized.

Eucharist and the Reception of Holy Communion



It is precisely this union between Christ and his Church that is celebrated and deepened in every celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist. By the reception of Holy Communion, Catholics give visible and public expression to their participation in the “new covenant” established in the blood of Christ and offered to his disciples (cf. *Luke* 22:20); they make manifest their unity with the self-offering of Christ to the Father and with the other members of the Church. Therefore, any serious rupture of this union, such as adultery, must be healed prior to the reception of Holy Communion. Sacred Scripture, in fact, summons us clearly to undertake serious self-examination before approaching the Table of the Lord: “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the [Lord’s] body, eat and drink judgment against themselves” (*1Cor* 11: 27-30). This divine commandment is the foundation for the teaching of the Church that every Catholic, prior to the reception of Holy Communion, must sacramentally confess all serious sins of which he or she is aware. Such confession must be motivated by true contrition, which necessarily involves sincere repentance and renunciation of sin and a firm resolution to amend one’s life (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn.1450-1460; *Code of Canon Law*, c. 959).

THE PRACTICE OF PASTORAL ACCOMPANIMENT

In Chapter Eight of *Amoris Laetitia*, the Holy Father makes clear that the pastors of the Church are to accompany divorced and remarried persons with “a pastoral discernment filled with merciful love, which is ever ready to understand, forgive, accompany, hope, and above all integrate” (n. 312). This attitude prepares the way for “the faithful who find themselves in complicated situations to speak confidently with their pastors ... They may not always encounter in them a confirmation of their own ideas or desires, but they will surely receive some light to help them better understand their situation and discover a path to personal growth” (n. 312).

The pastor shall always be especially sensitive to the presence in the community of those who are divorced and remarried without a decree of nullity. Particularly in moments of sacramental celebrations – Baptism, Confirmation, First Eucharist, weddings, and funerals – one can be assured that present in the midst of the community will be divorced and remarried persons. The pastor and parish must bear in mind that “they belong to the Church as the Body of Christ ... they are baptized; they are brothers and sisters” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 299), and reflect this in any pastoral response. Priests, catechists and parishioners should be particularly alert to situations of those who, because of divorce and remarriage, have absented themselves from the Church. An invitation to a conversation with the pastor is an appropriate and important gesture. Discovery of such a situation should not be met with awkward silence but with a warm communication of openness and readiness to accompany them in the journey of faith.

Clearly, pastors must reflect deeply on their engagement with divorced and remarried couples. They and their parish communities should be prepared to undertake the necessary mission of reaching out in welcome to these brothers and sisters of ours. We encourage recourse to the resources of our respective diocesan offices for life and family as well as to the Interdiocesan Marriage Tribunal so as to have complete familiarity with the local Church’s engagement of divorced and remarried persons. We pray that, through the welcoming care of a pastor and community, these people will be open to understanding their situation in the light of the teaching of the Lord Jesus and his Church. The expression of welcome and concern conveys belonging, the experience of which can in turn awaken a desire for even deeper integration.

It may happen that, through media, friends, or family, couples have been led to understand that there has been a change in practice by the Church, such that now the reception of Holy

Communion at Mass by persons who are divorced and civilly remarried is possible if they simply have a conversation with a priest. This view is erroneous. Couples who express it should be welcomed to meet with a priest so that they hear proposed anew “God’s plan [pertaining to marriage] in all its grandeur” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 307) and thus be helped to understand the correct path to follow toward full reconciliation with the Church.

In order to enable such a journey of healing and reconciliation in a manner that remains obedient to the strong command of Christ that “what God has united man must not divide,” the Church has established its marriage tribunals. These are charged with examining in mercy and truth the circumstances of the first marriage in view of making an official declaration as regards its validity or nullity. Therefore, we remind our pastors that divorced and civilly remarried couples seeking reconciliation with the Church are always to be directed to our Interdiocesan Marriage Tribunal for an investigation into their case. In fact, in order that couples have efficient access to the Church’s marriage tribunals and have their situation examined without undue delay, Pope Francis recently reformed the relevant canons of the Code of Canon Law (cf. *Mitis Iudex Dominus Iesus*, December 8, 2015). At the same time, the pastor supports the couple by helping them examine their conscience.

Formation of Conscience



Conscience is the capacity to judge what is to be done in a given circumstance in obedience to objective truth. It needs to be carefully and patiently formed (cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, 54-64).

The truth revealed in Christ, who is the Truth (*John* 14:6), is handed on in the Church. “For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. Her charge is to announce and teach authentically that truth which is Christ, and at the same time with her authority to declare and confirm the principles of the moral order which derive from human nature itself” (*Veritatis Splendor*, 64; cf. *Dignitatis Humanae*, 14).

Therefore, the pastor will seek under grace to awaken in the couple the disposition of “humility, discretion and love for the Church and her teaching, in a sincere search for God’s will and a desire to make a more perfect response to it” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 300). This will likely require considerable time, and the pastor should be prepared to meet with the couple on a number of occasions in order gently and progressively to lead them by stages to an understanding of their situation.

The initial stage will have the pastor listen carefully to the history of the first relationship as well as to the experience of Christ Jesus and the Church in their lives. This will prepare the way for the couple to hear, in a second stage, the Lord's teaching on marriage. In the third, the priest will summarize his understanding of the situation and the Church teaching relevant to the case, taking time as needed to clarify any points as yet unclear to the couple. In an atmosphere of unhurried consideration and prayer, they would then discuss how the couple can move forward in faithful and trusting obedience to the teachings of Christ in the company of his Church.

As the Holy Father states: "What we are speaking of is a process of accompaniment and discernment which 'guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God. . . . [T]his discernment can never prescind from the Gospel demands of truth and charity as proposed by the Church'" (cf. *Amoris Laetitia*, 300). In our day such guidance can present a significant challenge to the pastor. Many couples are formed in a culture where individual rights are exalted and are no longer moderated by an adequate notion of the common good. This may result in an adversarial stance vis-a-vis the legitimate exercise of ecclesiastical authority. Moreover, in the Church rights and obligations are always set within the context of ecclesial communion. This can be very hard for persons formed in our culture to grasp, and the most common situations where they encounter this divergence between their cultural formation and ecclesiastical doctrine are in the area of marriage. Here faith asks something of them based on the commands of Christ, and they may have difficulty responding. Such a struggle calls forth from the pastor much patience and great pastoral sensitivity, as Pope Francis states often throughout *Amoris Laetitia*.

Assistance for Pastoral Accompaniment

Pastors may find helpful some of the following questions as they "exercise careful discernment of situations" (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 84).

- Is the couple's faith one informed more by principles, culture, or theories than by meeting Christ in the Gospels?
- Do they understand who it is that is waiting with the living waters of mercy?
- Do the people have the profound sense of community with God and with the Church such that they experience their own adulterous behaviour or their divorces as having consequences in the lives of others for which they bear responsibility?
- Do they have a clear understanding of what "scandal" is?

- How has this couple dealt with the community that surrounded and emerged from their former marriage?
- What is the difference between the experience of Christ in the former marriage and their current union?
- What has been the experience of the Church through the process of their divorce and remarriage?
- Is there a voice of a family member or friend who has shaped this experience? What kind of a voice has this been – one dismissive of the Church; one dismissive of the couple?
- Have they ever considered applying for a decree of nullity? Do they understand what a decree of nullity means and entails?

The gentle and clear guidance of the pastor as he helps the couple to form a right conscience will assist them greatly to live in accordance with their objective situation. Should the tribunal process result in a declaration of nullity, they will understand the need to proceed toward the celebration of the Sacrament of Matrimony. In the case where the tribunal upholds the validity of the first union, obedience in faith to the indissolubility of marriage as revealed by Christ will make clear to them the actions that must follow. They are bound to live with the consequences of that truth as part of their witness to Christ and his teaching on marriage. This may be difficult. If, for example, they are unable to separate for the sake of the care of children, they will need to refrain from sexual intimacy and live in chastity “as brother and sister” (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 84). Such a firm resolution to live in accordance with the teaching of Christ, relying always on the help of his grace, opens to them the possibility of celebrating the sacrament of Penance, which in turn may lead to the reception of Holy Communion at Mass.

The situation may arise where a tribunal is unable fully to examine the circumstances of a prior union. This may be due to the absence of any witnesses to the first marriage, or to the impossibility of obtaining documentary evidence. Such cases are to be referred to the Diocesan Bishop.

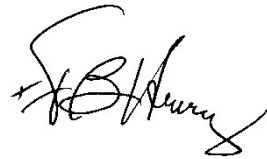
Conclusion

In *Amoris Laetitia*, the Holy Father lifts up the beauty and dignity of marriage and family life. He calls upon all members of the Church to embrace with mercy, love and inclusion any families that are encountering difficulty. These guidelines are issued to direct the authentic and effective pastoral accompaniment of men and women who are divorced and have remarried without a formal declaration of nullity as regards their first union. We pray that these brothers and sisters of ours will open their hearts to the Father's merciful love, revealed in Christ, and find healing and reconciliation within the Church.

These guidelines take effect September 14, 2016, Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.



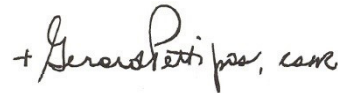
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