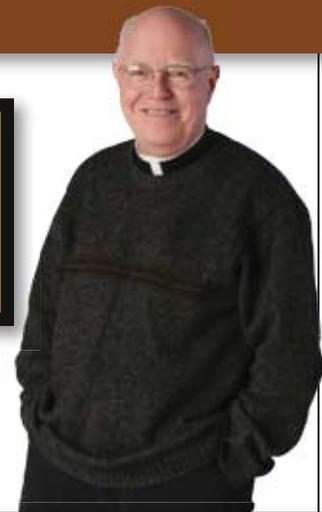


Dear Fr. Kerper

I am divorced. Can I receive Communion?



►► **Dear Father Kerper:** Three years ago my husband and I divorced. Since then, I have worked hard as a single mother to raise my two children as Catholics. I have found a welcoming parish, and enjoy bringing them to Mass. Recently, a prominent woman who goes to that church stopped me after Mass and, in front of my children, told me that I cannot receive Communion because I'm divorced. She said I was sinning by doing so. I was devastated. Is she correct? What should I do?

If you would like to ask Father Kerper a question, please e-mail dearfrkerper@parablemag.com.

You have acted wisely by seeking a clarification about the woman's comment concerning divorce and Communion. At times, some Catholics, even those with much experience and devotion, pass on wrong or incomplete information. Such people usually act sincerely, so I trust you will forgive her insensitivity.

Your question touches on three inter-related matters: the status of divorced Catholics who have not remarried; the connection between Communion and reconciliation; and annulments.

To begin with, divorced, single Catholics like yourself are not banned from Holy Communion. They never have been.

However, three of the four Gospels contain nearly identical and clear statements by Jesus prohibiting divorce. The best known text is Matthew 19:6. Jesus says: "They are no longer two, therefore, but one body. So, then, what God has united man must not divide." Parallels appear in Mark 10:1-12 and Luke 16:18.

While the Lord's opposition to divorce is indisputable, the Church has long recognized that some relationships break down, making common life impossible or even dangerous. In such cases, a sincere Catholic, after prayerful reflection and competent counsel, may seek a legal separation that perhaps culminates in a civil divorce.

Divorce, in itself, does not destroy a person's relationship with God and the Catholic Church. Indeed, over the years I have come to know many exemplary Catholics who have endured the pain of divorce and have generously used their talents – and even their divorce experience – in the service of their fellow Christians.

Now, let's consider reconciliation before Communion. While divorce itself is not automatically a sin, the conflict that caused the divorce may include a variety of sins like unrelenting anger, selfishness, hypercriticism, and adultery. Surely, these require repentance. Moreover, the adamant refusal of reconciliation, not divorce itself, may require a person to abstain from Communion. I hasten to add that this advice applies to everyone, not just divorced people.

The relevant Gospel text is quite clear, at least as unvarnished as the Lord's words about divorce. In St. Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: "If you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering." (Matthew 5:23-24)

Jesus here makes a remarkable demand: reconciliation with one's

neighbor must *always* precede public worship of God. And all of us, not just divorced people, are held to this radical standard.

Reconciliation, of course, does not mean that divorced people must reunite and remarry. Rather, it requires forgiveness, openness, and even love of the other person, not romantic love but sober Christian love, that always wills the good of the adversary, even the most obnoxious and repulsive. This may take years to accomplish.

Because of the Lord's infinite patience and understanding, I trust that he accepts even the smallest sincere impulse toward reconciliation as sufficient fulfillment of his requirement that we reconcile before worshipping. However, someone who deliberately refuses forgiveness and deepens the wounds of a ruptured relationship – marital or otherwise – should think twice before receiving Communion.

Now, let's take a quick look at annulments, a complicated matter susceptible to much misinformation.

If a divorced Catholic remarries without receiving an annulment of the previous marriage, that Catholic is prevented from receiving the sacraments of the Church. If a divorced Catholic hopes to marry within the Church, he or she will need a decree of nullity. Such a decree does *not* dissolve a marriage, nor does it mean that the marriage never existed. Instead, the decree simply states that the marriage was not a *sacramental marriage*, and therefore not an obstacle to a subsequent marriage within the Church.

Out of respect for the Sacrament of Matrimony, Church law presumes that *all marriages*, including those contracted by baptized people beyond the confines of the Catholic Church, are true sacramental marriages until conclusive evidence establishes the contrary.

— Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of Corpus Christi Parish in Portsmouth

►► Though the annulment process is couched in legal language, it's actually designed to foster healing and reconciliation, rather than judgment and controversy. Some people who have no desire to remarry have found the process very helpful. To find out more, please contact our excellent and compassionate Tribunal staff at **603.669.3101**.