New Blackfriars

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# Comment: *Oikonomia*

Pope Francis has given the Synod of Bishops that will take place in October 'The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization' as their theme. Created by Pope Paul VI in 1965 the Synod was designed as a way for the pope to hear the voice of local churches. The question of communion for divorced and civilly remarried Catholics is bound to arise. The idea of an unbreakable covenant has long been eroded. People who remember how irrevocable monastic vows and priestly celibacy were regarded in the 1950s have silently wondered throughout decades of dispensations and laicizations why it remains so hard to allow for marriage breakdown. With the 'silent schism' since the contraception controversies, Catholics have also become radically divided over the very idea of marriage itself. In one diocese in the United States couples may not proceed to marriage unless they undertake to practise natural family planning. At the other extreme, many Catholics, like their secular contemporaries, regard marriage as exclusively to do with the relationship between the partners, with children as an optional extra.

On the pastoral challenge of the divorced-remarried, we might hope to learn something from the age-old practice in the Holy Orthodox Church. Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople attended Pope Francis' installation, the first time in history that a Bishop of Constantinople has attended the installation of a Bishop of Rome. This was a vastly more significant event than the Christian media in the UK appreciated, let alone others. Whether his fraternal presence advances the reconciliation that has been desired on the Catholic side since Pope John XXIII onwards we shall have to wait and see.

However, communion for remarried divorcees is never justifiable, so the Prefect of the Congregation for the Defence of the Faith, Archbishop Gerard Ludwig Müller, reiterated recently in the German Catholic paper *Die Tagespost* (15/6/2013), adding, somewhat aggressively, that the Orthodox practice of *oikonomia* by which second and third marriages may be blessed goes against God's will. The article develops a deeply impressive account of the indissolubility of marriage. It includes practical advice for the pastoral care of the remarried divorced. There are many ways of being united with Christ beside receiving holy communion (a regrettably somewhat forgotten truth). Indeed, going to Mass regularly while never receiving communion might itself bear witness to the indissolubility of marriage.

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As regards the Orthodox, Archbishop Müller claims that, as church and state intertwined, there appeared more and more compromises: leading in the East, especially after the separation from the see of Peter, to increasingly liberal practice. Today in the Orthodox churches a multitude of grounds for separation, mostly justified with appeal to *oikonomia*, open the way to second and third marriages, of course with a penitential character. With the will of God expressed in the words of Jesus about the indissolubility of marriage this practice is not to be accepted, the Archbishop concludes — which 'sets a not to be underestimated ecumenical problem'.

*Oikonomia* is the healing 'law' (nomos) of the 'household' (oikos) of the redeemed. It is a matter of fidelity to the Redeemer who did not come for the just and strong, but to heal the sick and the weak. The basic symbol of mercy is Jesus Christ who, to the great scandal of the Pharisees, celebrates the messianic meal with tax collectors and sinners: on what grounds can divorced-remarried people be excluded from the sacraments if they are sincerely trying to do what, in their situation, is best for their own healing and integrity and that of others involved?

The Archbishop writes as if this practice is a sign of modern liberalizing. In the preliminary declaration before the Council of Florence (1439), however, the Catholic Church assured the Eastern churches that, in the case of reunion, it would not oppose their practice of *oikonomia*. During the Council of Trent, the bishops of the Republic of Venice, who came from territories where the union still existed, succeeded in preventing a revocation of this assurance. Thus the practice has been officially considered reconcilable with Catholic doctrine.

The Catholic Church has defended the indissolubility of marriage at the cost of great sacrifice and suffering, Müller insists. Somewhat bizarrely, he takes his example from the Church of England, which separated from the successor of Peter 'because the Pope could not give in to the pressure of the bloody King Henry VIII out of obedience to the word of Jesus'. Perhaps; but when Henry sought the annulment of his twenty years of marriage to Catherine of Aragon on the grounds that the papal dispensation granted for him to marry his brother's widow in the first place was invalid, Pope Clement VII, could not go against the will of Charles V, Catherine's nephew, the Holy Roman Emperor. The schism was brought about by dynastic politics rather than papal obedience to a high doctrine of marriage.

But the Prefect of the CDF, as it turns out, has placed a highly contentious matter on the Synod's agenda.

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