

Breakdown of Marriage Women's Retreat Topic

By PAT PETRASKE

The 17 women obtained legal insights, discussed common causes and reflected on the future. But primarily they drew emotional and spiritual support from one another as they gathered at the Cenacle Retreat House on East Avenue for the first retreat for divorced and separated women.

The backgrounds of the women varied. Many were older divorcees who had built new lives. Others were recently divorced or separated and still struggling to pick up the pieces.

Father Robert Collins, director of the offices of Family Life, believes the root of marital discord lies in attitudes towards marriage itself. He believes many couples do not understand the teachings of the church on marriage as "a permanence, a bond and a sacrament."

Patterns develop inside a marriage that eventually serve as danger signs. Common causes of difficulty include the selfish demands made on one another, unrealistic expectations of romantic love, conflicting value systems, and lack of communications. Father Collins also believes many couples act as "parents first and partners second."

One woman who was divorced after 27 years of marriage praised his insights but added that attempts to help remedy the situation are no good if only one person is involved. She said that any attempt to hold the marriage together was "like waving a red flag in front of a bull."

The problem of alcohol led to the breakdown of several

marriages within the group. One woman said she was at peace for the first time since her divorce eight months ago. "My priest told me I'd better come back to the Lord very quickly," she said, and she accepted the Lord "as husband and father." She thought many divorced people used their spouses as "scapegoats" and refused to accept any part of the blame for marital difficulties.

"When my husband came to visit the children last week, I asked him for forgiveness. I now feel at peace," she said.

Many of the women have found new strength and have built new relations with their children since their divorce. One retreatant said it was her daughter who forced her to go away for the weekend retreat. "A new life style must be established after the divorce; the women must learn to live more for themselves, and to give more responsibility to their children," she said.

Father Robert O'Neill, chief judge of the diocesan marriage tribunal, attended the morning session and spoke on Church law and annulments. He reported that changes in procedures and new grounds for annulments had greatly increased the case load at the tribunal. Last year, for example, 36 cases were tried, in contrast to only nine cases two years ago.

In 1970, a privilege called the American Procedural Norm was granted to tribunals in the United States. It is no longer required that cases for annulment have to be tried by three judges of the tribunal. Many dioceses, including Rochester, now use only one judge. Another change allows cases to be appealed in a higher court in New York City rather than to Rome.

In 1969, new grounds were established for annulments. The marriage bond can be dissolved on "psychological grounds, including sanity at the time of marriage." Father O'Neill believes psychological grounds account for 80 per cent of the annulments today.

To dissolve or annul a marriage, the tribunal or the legal arm of the Church must decide "if there was ever a marriage from the beginning," Father O'Neill explained. Formerly canon law defined marriage as a contract giving the "perpetual and exclusive rights to the acts for the generation of children."

"Since Vatican II, however, marriage has come to mean a community of the whole life. It's a beautiful term, showing deep concern and love," the priest said.

This new definition of marriage allows the Church judges to dissolve a marriage on the basis of psychological incapacity to live up to this definition. Careful investigation of witnesses and events is conducted before any decision is made.

Grounds for annulment include no baptism on the part of one party, non-consummation, coercion of one kind or another, proper number of witnesses, age and relationship of the spouses, and their intentions. Father O'Neill cited one couple who

totally simulated a marriage only for the purpose of obtaining a bank loan. A marriage may also be declared invalid if it is only partially "simulated." This can occur when the couple does not agree on the terms of the marriage regarding children, fidelity and permanence.

Father O'Neill added that a Church annulment has no civil effect but only gives a person freedom to marry again within the Church. A final decision on an annulment is not granted until the civil divorce has been obtained.

In response to one woman's question on the purpose of annulment, Father O'Neill said that an annulment is required only if the spouse wishes to remarry.

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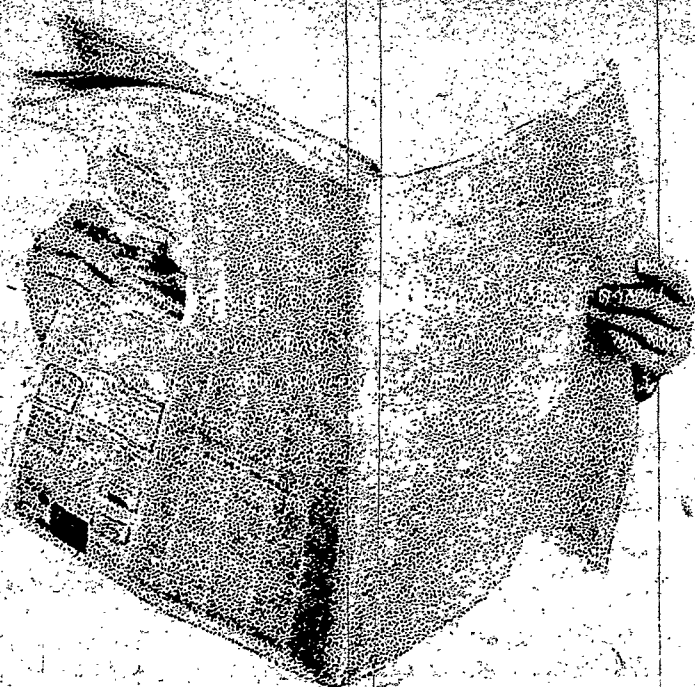
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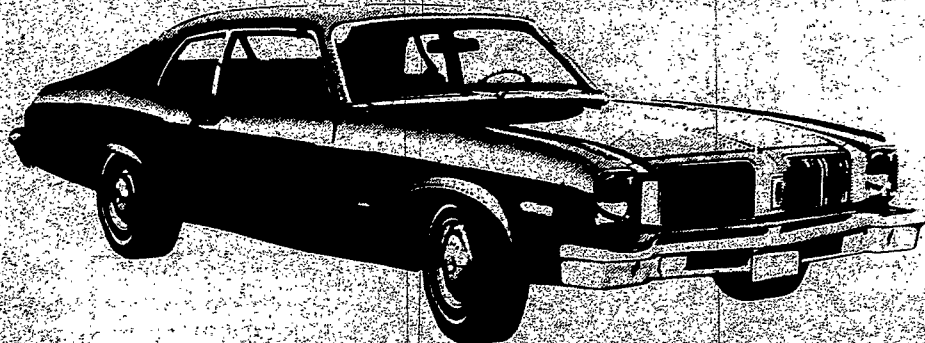
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