

Pastoral Concern for Divorced Seen Growing

By Religious News Service

As divorce rates in the U.S. and in many other nations continue to rise, religious leaders are being exhorted to confront the problem of pastoral care of church or synagogue members alienated from the marriage state.

In addition, there are increasing calls for new and concerted efforts to shore up what has been described as a deterioration of family life and reaffirm the family as the basic unit in the religious framework. These efforts would include better and more professional guidance and counseling for the pre-married as well as for those in "troubled" marriages.

Father John L. Thomas, SJ, a sociologist at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., told the general meeting of the U.S. Catholic bishops in November that the family life situation in the Catholic Church is "extremely critical." He said the growing divorce rate among Catholics was the major problem.

Warning the bishops that "soon over half your parishes will be (made up of) divorced persons," the Jesuit said there is great confusion among Catholics on the theological aspects of Christian marriage, on family life and divorce. He said these questions must be faced immediately "if the Church is to survive."

Generally speaking, divorce is much more acceptable to the religious communities of the

1970s than previously, although most religious leaders are unwilling to categorically condone divorce. While many hold that divorce is due to moral laxity or lack of commitment to the challenges and responsibilities of marriage, they accept it as a fact of life today.

Rabbi Harold Lerner, spiritual leader of Toronto's Pride of Israel Temple, noted in a speech before divorced and separated Jews that divorce, in many cases, represents "unnecessary... butchery" of a marriage that could be saved through effort or professional counseling.

"Generally marriages don't die," he said. "They're killed through bumbling and neglect." The rabbi added that there is a great deal of truth to the statement that people would not divorce for trivial reasons if they did not marry for trivial reasons.

A Paulist priest who specializes in a ministry to divorced and remarried Catholics in Boston told an ecumenical dialogue on divorce last June that a major problem in his Church is the "hunger" of remarried Catholics to remain in the Church.

An advocate of Catholic marriage law changes that would permit divorced Catholics to remarry with the Church's blessing, Father James Young, CSP, declared that there is now little room for divorced Catholics in the Catholic parish structure. He said that is why other divorced people who have been through "the spiritual and

emotional turmoil" are often the best healers.

During that same dialogue, held at the Graymoor Ecumenical Institute, Garrison, N.Y., where members of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement sponsor retreats for divorced persons, Father Robert Stephanopoulos of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America said the approach adopted by the Orthodox Church to the divorced is "one of support and guidance for errant children.

Noting that the Eastern Churches do not "give" divorces and that divorce is a "grave sin which requires a corrective and new direction," he said the Church "in her concern and solicitude offers the possibility for repentance and a fresh start."

The Church of England, only recently, voted to restudy the entire question of marriage and marriage discipline, reopening the whole question of remarriage of divorced persons in the Church. A similar proposal was rejected by the Anglican General Synod in 1973.

At that time, Bishop Robin Woods of Worcester called on the Synod to liberalize the canons of remarriage, declaring that the Church must practice "Christian forgiveness and compassion for divorced people." He said that "forgiveness implies not a life-long hardening of the situation but the possibility of a new life and, therefore, sometimes a new marriage."

Also in 1973, the Episcopal bishops of the U.S. voted to allow divorced persons to be remarried anywhere, providing a bishop gives consent. The new regulations were seen as being "pastoral in nature," providing assistance to persons who have been "victimized" by a bad previous marriage or one which has been annulled because of impediments.

In the Catholic Church, where divorce and remarriage without an annulment is officially forbidden, the pastoral concern for the divorced has spilled over into areas of Church discipline. There is a rising chorus of appeals for changes or relaxation of Church law regarding remarriage as a means of expressing pastoral outreach.

In a strong plea to the Catholic Church for a change in discipline and new directions in its pastoral approach to the divorced and remarried, a Jesuit scholar proposed that such persons "be officially readmitted to full communion in the Church" on the basis of certain conditions. The proposal, made by Father Charles Whelan, SJ, of Fordham University Law School, appeared in the Jesuit weekly review, America, and was heartily endorsed editorially by the publication.

Citing the fact that 3 million Catholics in the U.S. are divorced and remarried and that most second marriages have not received Church approval, the Jesuit said the Church is a long way from a "full and official solution to one of (its) most pressing pastoral problems."

He called for changes in discipline with regard to Catholics when first marriages are "irretrievably lost," annulment is impossible, partners in a second marriage seek to "participate fully" in Church life and there are "solid grounds" for hope that a second marriage is a Christian one.

"The basic justification for this change in discipline with respect to these Catholics," he said, "is that marriage and family life are fundamental human rights which may not be denied except for the most compelling reasons."

Urging the Church to leave questions of validity and indissolubility of marriage to God's judgement, Father Whelan said the Church should take a "middle ground between denunciation and blessing." He said "there are



no unforgivable sins; and repentance... always opens the door to a new chance and full life in the Christian community."

Father Charles Curran of the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., told a Canon Law Society of America meeting last October that a consensus is developing in the Catholic Church to change the pastoral practice and allow divorced and remarried Catholics to take part in the sacraments under certain circumstances.

A native Rochesterian, Father Curran said he supported a change in pastoral practice and advocated a change in the Church teaching on indissolubility. He held that the teaching should be offered as an ideal with the understanding that some may fail to live up to it in practice.

Msr. Stephen Kelleher, former chief judge of the New York archdiocesan marriage tribunal, told a national conference of divorced Catholics that changes in Church discipline would have the pastoral effect of enhancing the dignity of persons "anguishing from the near mortal wounds of dead marriages" and bolster "the dignity of children of these marriages as well as the dignity of the Christian community and the community at large."

In an example of pastoral response, the Bridgeport, Conn. diocese established an office in January 1974 to assist divorced, separated and remarried Catholics. While helping the clergy assist Catholics in problem marriages, the agency also seeks to help priests "become aware" of the needs of those alienated by divorce and remarriage.

Father Thomas Driscoll, diocesan chancellor, said Bishop Walter Curtis of Bridgeport established the program because of the increase in Catholics who require special pastoral care. "We simply want to reach out to those in need," he said.

While most Protestant denominations, the Orthodox churches and Conservative and Reform Jews are not as stringent as the Catholic Church about rejecting divorce and remarriage on doctrinal grounds, they are increasingly concerned with the growing breakdown of marriage and family life.

Agreeing that there is a need for pastoral concern for the divorced and remarried, as well as other alienated groups, religious leaders face the twofold problem of reaching back to minister to the alienated and reaching forward to build programs of preparation for marriage that will forestall an increase in separations and divorces.

'Breakthrough' Seen For Prison Laws: JPD

By BONITA BALDWIN

1975 promises to be the year for a breakthrough in correctional legislation in New York State, according to the Genesee Ecumenical Ministries' prison reform thrust, the Judicial Process Commission. At a pilot workshop in the 53rd Senate district last Wednesday, changes in the state administration and the formation of the New York State Coalition for Criminal Justice and the Rapid Communications Network were cited as reasons for optimism.

The New York State Coalition for Criminal Justice, a group of prison action groups from across the state, has formed a policy committee which is drafting and revising bills considered important to prison improvements. These priority bills would give inmates greater mail and visiting privileges. And during disciplinary proceedings against them, prisoners could bring witnesses and be represented by a lawyer.

Hospital Group Plans Drive

Mrs. Richard Bagby and Mrs. Andrew P. Donovan, co-chairmen of the Monroe Community Hospital Auxiliary (MCHAUX), announce the 10th Anniversary membership drive will begin Monday, Jan. 27, with luncheon for board members at the hospital cafeteria. Theme for this year is "People Who Need People."

Auxiliary president, Mrs. John Bronson, reports the 300 members of MCHAUX provide the "extras" for some 700 patients and residents of Monroe Community Hospital, a facility for long-term care and rehabilitation.

Officers of the auxiliary are Mrs. Bronson, Mrs. William S. Raithel, first vice president; Mrs. O. K. Carhart, second vice president; Mr. Clarence Mueller, recording secretary; Miss Mildred Cramer, corresponding secretary; and Mrs. Peggy A. Look, treasurer.

Medical and psychiatric needs would be served by the Department of Health and Department of Mental Hygiene, respectively, instead of the Department of Correctional Services, and inmates serving life sentences could no longer be deemed civilly dead if the proposed legislation were to become law.

Another group of bills being drafted by the Coalition's policy committee would affect parole decisions. Written reason would be required for parole denial. Parolees threatened with revocation of parole would be granted a preliminary hearing in the locality where the alleged violation occurred and allowed release on bail. Currently hearings are held in the person's former prison, hindering defense preparation and the presence of witnesses.

Potential employers would be prohibited from denying employment to a person solely on the basis of an arrest which had not been followed by a conviction, in another bill. Yet another is designed to eliminate licensing and bonding restrictions on ex-convicts. Some of the 60 occupations currently restricted, according to Lynn Zeller, a VISTA volunteer working with Prison Action Group, include boxing, operating a bingo game, embalming, and junk dealing.

The Rapid Communications Network was established by the New York State Council of Churches to work with the Coalition for Criminal Justice. Irene Jackson, a volunteer working in Albany, will research, evaluate, and summarize bills in each stage of the legislative process and disseminate information weekly to nine satellite offices throughout the state. David Leven will be the Rochester contact person working through JPC. Telephone trees will communicate the information to as many interested persons and groups as possible so that key people in the government process can be contacted at the appropriate time.

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