

Fr. James Young:

Divorced, Separated Ministry Has Reached Maturity

In the past year, ministry to divorced and separated Catholics "has become a central part of the Church's mission," Father James Young told the seventh annual convention of the North American Conference of Separated and Divorced Catholics (NACSDC) July 23.

The Paulist priest, who is NACSDC chaplain, noted that a sense of "maturity" has come into the divorced Catholic movement, characterized by a "deeper sense of commitment" confidence in what the divorced Catholic groups are doing around the country. People know what they are doing and how to help each other," he noted, and have a profound sense of concern for those who "will be divorcing today and divorcing tomorrow."

Several dioceses participated in the convention at Notre Dame University. The three days were occupied with workshops designed to benefit the delegates and their ministry to other divorced and separated persons.

Sister Kathleen Kircher, diocesan coordinator of ministry to the divorced, separated and remarried, participated in a panel offering a workshop on revitalizing and sustaining divorced Catholic groups.

In his talk closing the convention, Father Young stated that the end of the excommunication of remarried Catholics was the most significant event for divorced Catholics.

He quoted Bishop Cletus O'Donnell, bishop of Madison Wisconsin, and chairman of the NCCB Committee for Canonical Affairs, as saying at the time of the bishops' vote that "we want this to be interpreted as a gesture of reconciliation and love. We want to welcome back to our community our brothers and sisters who have been alienated and separated by separation, divorce and remarriage."

An example of the harshness of the former discipline, Father Young said, occurred soon after the bishops' vote. A man from Chicago who had married a Catholic woman, after a divorce wrote to him, he said. The couple were married 35 years, and had always attended Mass and had raised their children Catholic. But, the man wrote, "my wife died two years ago... (and) I am continually tormented by the thought that she might be in hell because she married me."

He asked if the revocation of excommunication was retroactive. Father Young reported that he wrote the man, telling him that it was retroactive, and put him in contact with a local priest for further information. "A great thaw has begun to set into the American Church" as a result of the excommunication repeal, Father Young commented. Now, he said, he sees a "new compassion for the people that have experienced the heartbreak of broken marriages."

It is now possible for

divorced Catholics to find support groups in nearly every area of the United States and Canada, he said, noting that he expected convention delegates to return to their areas and "expand the Church's compassionate care of those who suffer."

Citing Vatican II statements on the role of the laity in the Church, Father Young noted that the Church is not buildings or hierarchy, but people, and "all of us have been given a ministry, all of us have been called to serve."

"Who would have thought 15 years ago when the bishops of the world spoke of the Church as God's people," he asked rhetorically, that "the premier group in the American Church, showing the nature of this new kind of service, would be separated and divorced Catholics?"

The ministry to the divorced and separated is "now becoming a part of the very fabric of the life of the Church," he said, adding that he is "so delighted to see the

establishment of official diocesan ministries in many of the local Churches across the country." The diocesan efforts will make it possible to reach even more people, he pointed

out. For the future, Father Young said, demographers indicate that divorce is going to continue to be a serious

problem. Therefore, he explained, it is important for existing divorced, separated groups to remain ready to receive those who will be suffering the pain of divorce.

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John T. Schneider of Irondequoit was elected supreme president of the Knights of St. John at the organization's 61st international convention, held recently in Baltimore. He has been president for 28 years of St. George Commandery 43 at St. Michael's parish, and has held many other offices at various levels in his 40 years of membership in the Knights. He is a commandant of St. Margaret Mary Church. He retired recently from Eastman Kodak.