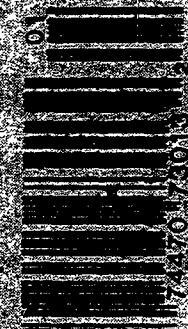


CATHOLIC COURIER

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Peace for peace
Concerned citizens throughout the nation and the Rochester diocese are stepping up their efforts to prevent a war in the Persian Gulf. See stories on pages 3 and 5.



Divorced Catholics breaching barrier of myths

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Five years ago, Angie Gallo was surprised by what she heard from the pulpit of a California church.

"I went to a liturgy one Sunday," recalled Gallo, director since 1982 of diocesan ministry to separated, divorced, bereaved and remarried Catholics, "and the priest got up and called separated and divorced people sinners."

The priest's message was clearly wrong, Gallo noted. But over the years, she said, such an attitude toward divorced Catholics has led to misunderstanding of church teaching, to the perpetuation of myths about those teachings, and to a sense of alienation among divorced Catholics.

Many of those myths continue to flourish, Gallo said, citing among the most popular fallacies the notions that:

Divorced Catholics are excommunicated.

Divorced Catholics may not receive the sacraments.

Divorced Catholics can never remarry in the church.

Divorced Catholics who remarry without first obtaining annulments are excommunicated.

Annulments are expensive.

Children of annulled marriages are illegitimate.

Divorce itself is a sin.

Such myths "develop through many years, and people take them as facts," Gallo observed.

"What happens is that as you are growing up, you pick up certain ideas and phrases, and they become old tapes in your head," she said.

Family members, friends and acquaintances frequently encourage continued belief in these myths, Gallo said. "Aunt Millie or the church gardener would say to somebody who was divorced, 'Why are you here (at church)? Don't you know you

are excommunicated?'" she remarked. "When you are hurting, you accept what they say."

"People have told me that their hairdressers have told them that you can't get remarried (if you are a divorced Catholic)," noted Kathleen Kircher, executive director of the North American Conference of Separated and Divorced Catholics, and from 1976-1981, director of the ministry in the Diocese of Rochester.

"I find that in about 90 percent of the cases that a divorced Catholic is under the impression that that they can not get remarried in the church, they did not hear that from an official representative of the church," Kircher said.

Perpetuating myths about church teaching on divorce only adds to the emotional and psychological burden divorced Catholics feel, Gallo said, consequently affecting their relationships with other people.

Gallo faced some of those problems following her divorce 17 years ago. Although she continued to go to Mass, she cried for hours after doing so because she had come to believe she was not a good person anymore.

One day, Gallo recalled, her sister asked, "What do you go through all that for? You know you're excommunicated."

Connie Hanser, a secretary at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, wasn't confused by the myths about divorce because of her active involvement in the Catholic Church. But when she called her parents in Detroit in 1979 to tell them that she was getting a divorce, "My dad wouldn't even come to the phone to talk to me," she recalled. "That hurt a lot."

Hanser's father continued to snub her for several years, she said, and even used the divorce in arguments with her mother. "When they would fight, he would say to my mother, 'I suppose you want a divorce,

too?'" Like Hanser, Joyce Ferrante understood what annulment meant when she began pursuing hers in 1988. But Ferrante's children were victimized by a myth.

"When my former spouse got the papers from the tribunal," Ferrante reported, "he called the children to make sure that they were upset because the annulment process would make them illegitimate."

Such reactions still take place in the United States, but they are less common than they were just a decade ago, Kircher noted.

"Divorce in the United States and divorce in the Catholic Church carried a stigma," observed Kircher, currently a faculty member at the Divinity School. "This stigma represented a stereotyped set of attitudes about divorced people."

These attitudes faded throughout the 1970s and the early 1980s, Kircher said, "but there are still pockets of people who continue to respond to divorced Catholics that they are somehow less Catholic."

A number of factors are helping to counter these false notions, Kircher said, noting that the Diocese of Rochester has been at the forefront of ministry to divorced Catholics since the mid 1970s. At that time, then-Bishop Joseph L. Hogan declared that the diocese needed to reach out to divorced Catholics. The diocesan administration subsequently created a ministry to serve divorced Catholics.

That ministry — now housed in the Family Ministry Office at the Catholic Family Center and with a branch at the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry — offers a variety of workshops, information sessions and retreats for divorced Catholics. In addition, it sponsors a single-parent family camp; schedules annulment-experience weekends to help individuals and couples through the annulment process; and provides assistance to support

groups in parishes and clusters throughout the diocese.

The need for such a ministry has been growing for years, Kircher noted. Of the approximately 1 million divorces granted in the United States each year, she pointed out, 22-23 percent of the people involved are Catholics. She estimated that 5-6 million Catholics are currently divorced.

The official church has also sought to dispel myths, Kircher said. In 1973, she observed, the canon lawyers' association in the United States declared that tribunals — church courts that deal with annulment cases — are not to pass judgment on the people who come to them, and are not to say that divorced Catholics who have remarried without benefit of an annulment are living in adultery.

"If you don't have an annulment and you remarry, the church says you are in an 'irregular union,'" Kircher noted.

"I think there is a general misconception about what the annulment process really is," remarked Father William Laird, judicial vicar of the Rochester tribunal.

The tribunal does not judge the people in a failed marriage, but seeks to determine whether a valid, sacramental union ever existed between them, Father Laird pointed out. Instead of finding one of the parties "guilty," he said, the tribunal simply declares the marriage null — that is, that no sacramental marriage existed.

The declaration of nullity is based on a variety of factors that prevented the couple from entering a valid union, Father Laird explained. Among such factors are complete unsuitability for marriage to each other; entering marriage with the idea that if it doesn't work the couple can always get a divorce; marrying when one or both of the partners was too young; or the presence of some underlying psychological problems that prevented one or both parties from competently entering marriage.

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