

CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

**LETTER TO THE BISHOPS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
CONCERNING THE RECEPTION OF HOLY COMMUNION
BY THE DIVORCED AND REMARRIED MEMBERS OF THE
FAITHFUL**

Your Excellency

1. The International Year of the Family is a particularly important occasion to discover anew the many signs of the Church's love and concern for the family(1) and, at the same time, to present once more the priceless riches of Christian marriage, which is the basis of the family.

2. In this context the difficulties and sufferings of those faithful in irregular marriage situations merit special attention(2). Pastors are called to help them experience the charity of Christ and the maternal closeness of the Church, receiving them with love, exhorting them to trust in God's mercy and suggesting, with prudence and respect, concrete ways of conversion and sharing in the life of the community of the Church(3).

3. Aware however that authentic understanding and genuine mercy are never separated from the truth(4), pastors have the duty to remind these faithful of the Church's doctrine concerning the celebration of the sacraments, in particular, the reception of the Holy Communion. In recent years, in various regions, different pastoral solutions in this area have been suggested according to which, to be sure, a general admission of divorced and remarried to Eucharistic communion would not be possible, but the divorced and remarried members of the faithful could approach Holy Communion in specific cases when they consider themselves authorised according to a judgement of conscience to do so. This would be the case, for example, when they had been abandoned completely unjustly, although they sincerely tried to save the previous marriage, or when they are convinced of the nullity of their previous marriage, although unable to demonstrate it in the external forum or when they have gone through a long period of reflexion and penance, or also when for morally valid reasons they cannot satisfy the obligation to separate.

In some places, it has also been proposed that in order objectively to examine their actual situation, the divorced and remarried would have to consult a prudent and expert priest. This priest, however, would have to respect their eventual decision to approach Holy Communion, without this implying an official authorisation.

In these and similar cases it would be a matter of a tolerant and benevolent pastoral solution in order to do justice to the different situations of the divorced and remarried.

4. Even if analogous pastoral solutions have been proposed by a few Fathers of the Church and in some measure were practiced, nevertheless these never attained the consensus of the Fathers and in no way came to constitute the common doctrine of the Church nor to determine her discipline. It falls to the universal Magisterium, in fidelity to Sacred Scripture and Tradition, to teach and to interpret authentically the depositum fidei.

With respect to the aforementioned new pastoral proposals, this Congregation deems itself obliged therefore to recall the doctrine and discipline of the Church in this matter. In fidelity to the words of Jesus Christ(5), the Church affirms that a new union cannot be recognised as valid if the preceding marriage was valid. If the divorced are remarried civilly, they find themselves in a situation that objectively contravenes God's law. Consequently, they cannot receive Holy Communion as long as this situation persists(6).

This norm is not at all a punishment or a discrimination against the divorced and remarried, but rather expresses an objective situation that of itself renders impossible the reception of Holy Communion: "They are unable to be admitted thereto from the fact that their state and condition of life objectively contradict that union of love between Christ and his Church which is signified and effected by the Eucharist. Besides this, there is another special pastoral reason: if these people were admitted to the Eucharist, the faithful would be led into error and confusion regarding the Church's teaching about the indissolubility of marriage"(7).

The faithful who persist in such a situation may receive Holy Communion only after obtaining sacramental absolution, which may be given only "to those who, repenting of having broken the sign of the Covenant and of fidelity to Christ, are sincerely ready to undertake a way of life that is no longer in contradiction to the indissolubility of marriage. This means, in practice, that when for serious reasons, for example, for the children's upbringing, a man and a woman cannot satisfy the obligation to separate, they 'take on themselves the duty to live in complete continence, that is, by abstinence from the acts proper to married couples'"(8). In such a case they may receive Holy Communion as long as they respect the obligation to avoid giving scandal.

5. The doctrine and discipline of the Church in this matter, are amply presented in the post-conciliar period in the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*. The Exhortation, among other things, reminds

pastors that out of love for the truth they are obliged to discern carefully the different situations and exhorts them to encourage the participation of the divorced and remarried in the various events in the life of the Church. At the same time it confirms and indicates the reasons for the constant and universal practice, "founded on Sacred Scripture, of not admitting the divorced and remarried to Holy Communion"(9). The structure of the Exhortation and the tenor of its words give clearly to understand that this practice, which is presented as binding, cannot be modified because of different situations.

6. Members of the faithful who live together as husband and wife with persons other than their legitimate spouses may not receive Holy Communion. Should they judge it possible to do so, pastors and confessors, given the gravity of the matter and the spiritual good of these persons(10) as well as the common good of the Church, have the serious duty to admonish them that such a judgment of conscience openly contradicts the Church's teaching(11). Pastors in their teaching must also remind the faithful entrusted to their care of this doctrine.

This does not mean that the Church does not take to heart the situation of these faithful, who moreover are not excluded from ecclesial communion. She is concerned to accompany them pastorally and invite them to share in the life of the Church in the measure that is compatible with the dispositions of divine law, from which the Church has no power to dispense(12). On the other hand, it is necessary to instruct these faithful so that they do not think their participation in the life of the Church is reduced exclusively to the question of the reception of the Eucharist. The faithful are to be helped to deepen their understanding of the value of sharing in the sacrifice of Christ in the Mass, of spiritual communion(13), of prayer, of meditation on the Word of God, and of works of charity and justice(14).

7. The mistaken conviction of a divorced and remarried person that he may receive Holy Communion normally presupposes that personal conscience is considered in the final analysis to be able, on the basis of one's own convictions(15), to come to a decision about the existence or absence of a previous marriage and the value of the new union. However, such a position is inadmissible(16). Marriage, in fact, because it is both the image of the spousal relationship between Christ and his Church as well as the fundamental core and an important factor in the life of civil society, is essentially a public reality.

8. It is certainly true that a judgment about one's own dispositions for the reception of Holy Communion must be made by a properly

formed moral conscience. But it is equally true that the consent that is the foundation of marriage is not simply a private decision since it creates a specifically ecclesial and social situation for the spouses, both individually and as a couple. Thus the judgment of conscience of one's own marital situation does not regard only the immediate relationship between man and God, as if one could prescind from the Church's mediation, that also includes canonical laws binding in conscience. Not to recognise this essential aspect would mean in fact to deny that marriage is a reality of the Church, that is to say, a sacrament.

9. In inviting pastors to distinguish carefully the various situations of the divorced and remarried, the Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* recalls the case of those who are subjectively certain in conscience that their previous marriage, irreparably broken, had never been valid⁽¹⁷⁾. It must be discerned with certainty by means of the external forum established by the Church whether there is objectively such a nullity of marriage. The discipline of the Church, while it confirms the exclusive competence of ecclesiastical tribunals with respect to the examination of the validity of the marriage of Catholics, also offers new ways to demonstrate the nullity of a previous marriage, in order to exclude as far as possible every divergence between the truth verifiable in the judicial process and the objective truth known by a correct conscience⁽¹⁸⁾.

Adherence to the Church's judgment and observance of the existing discipline concerning the obligation of canonical form necessary for the validity of the marriage of Catholics are what truly contribute to the spiritual welfare of the faithful concerned. The Church is in fact the Body of Christ and to live in ecclesial communion is to live in the Body of Christ and to nourish oneself with the Body of Christ. With the reception of the sacrament of the Eucharist, communion with Christ the Head can never be separated from communion with his members, that is, with his Church. For this reason, the sacrament of our union with Christ is also the sacrament of the unity of the Church. Receiving Eucharistic Communion contrary to ecclesial communion is therefore in itself a contradiction. Sacramental communion with Christ includes and presupposes the observance, even if at times difficult, of the order of ecclesial communion, and it cannot be right and fruitful if a member of the faithful, wishing to approach Christ directly, does not respect this order.

10. In keeping with what has been said above, the desire expressed by the Synod of Bishops, adopted by the Holy Father John Paul II as his own and put into practice with dedication and with praiseworthy initiatives by bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful is yet to be fully realized, namely, with solicitous charity to do everything that can be done to strengthen in the love of Christ and the Church those

faithful in irregular marriage situations. Only thus will it be possible for them fully to receive the message of Christian marriage and endure in faith the distress of their situation. In pastoral action one must do everything possible to ensure that this is understood not to be a matter of discrimination but only of absolute fidelity to the will of Christ who has restored and entrusted to us anew the indissolubility of marriage as a gift of the Creator. It will be necessary for pastors and the community of the faithful to suffer and to love in solidarity with the persons concerned so that they may recognise in their burden the sweet yoke and the light burden of Jesus(19). Their burden is not sweet and light in the sense of being small or insignificant, but becomes light because the Lord - and with him the whole Church - shares it. It is the task of pastoral action, which has to be carried out with total dedication, to offer this help, founded in truth and in love together.

United with you in dedication to the collegial task of making the truth of Jesus Christ shine in the life and activity of the Church, I remain
Yours devotedly in the Lord

Joseph Card. Ratzinger
Prefect

+ Alberto Bovone
Titular Archbishop of Caesarea in Numidia
Secretary

During an audience granted to the Cardinal Prefect, the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II gave his approval to this letter, drawn up in the ordinary session of this Congregation, and ordered its publication.

Given at Rome, from the offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 14 September 1994, Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

(1) Cf. John Paul II, Letter to Families (2 February 1994), n. 3.

(2) Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio (22 November 1981) nn. 79-84: AAS 74 (1982) 180-186.

(3) Cf. *ibid.*, n. 84: AAS 74 (1982) 185; Letter to Families, n. 5; Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1651.

(4) Cf. Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanæ Vitæ*, n. 29: AAS 60 (1968) 501; John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Pœnitentia*,

n. 34: AAS 77 (1985) 272, Encyclical Letter Veritatis Splendor, n. 95: AAS 85 (1993) 1208.

(5) Mk 10:11-12: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

(6) Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1650; cf. also n. 1640 and the Council of Trent, sess. XXIV: DS 1797-1812.

(7) Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio, n. 84: AAS 74 (1982) 185-186.

(8) Ibid., n. 84: AAS 74 (1982) 186; cf. John Paul II, Homily on the Occasion of the Closure of the Sixth Synod of Bishops, n. 7: AAS 72 (1980) 1082.

(9) Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio, n. 84: AAS 74 (1982) 185.

(10) Cf. 1 Cor 11:27-29.

(11) Cf. Code of Canon Law, 978 §2.

(12) Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1640.

(13) Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Certain Questions concerning the Minister of the Eucharist, III/4: AAS 75 (1983) 1007; St Teresa of Avila, The Way of Perfection 35,1; St Alphonsus de' Liguori, Visite al SS. Sacramento e a Maria Santissima.

(14) Cf. Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio, n. 84: AAS 74 (1982) 185.

(15) Cf. Encyclical Letter Veritatis Splendor, n. 55: AAS 85 (1993) 1178.

(16) Cf. Code of Canon Law, 1085 § 2.

(17) Cf. Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio, n. 84: AAS 74 (1982) 185.

(18) Cf. Code of Canon Law 1536 § 2 and 1679 and Code of the Canons of the Eastern Churches 1217 § 2 and 1365 concerning the probative force of the depositions of the parties in such processes.

(19) Cf. Matt 11:30.