

## Being Divorced

For many years I used to be part of the Diocesan Marriage Tribunal. This brought me into contact with many people who had gone through the breakdown of their married life. But they weren't just "divorced people". The fact that they had come to the Tribunal meant that they were Christian people with a mission to find out why the breakdown had happened, and to find their way back to wholeness of heart, and perhaps a new start for their story. Although the work for me was hard, and sometimes heart-breaking, I knew it was well worth doing, and I encourage anyone who has gone through the awful experience to turn to the Tribunal and see if it can help. I think it always can.

### Making Promises

The first wound which needs help is the rebuilding of people's ability to make, and to receive, promises. You've made the biggest decision of your life, and ventured your whole self in support of it; you then discover that it has turned to dust, sometimes quite quickly: quite apart from the shame and embarrassment of telling everyone who came to the wedding, you have astonished yourself with your ability to make a massive mistake, to get everything so wrong. How will you ever trust yourself again? How will you ask anyone else to trust your judgment? Then: how will you ever trust another person again? The temptation to draw from this mistake a chilling conclusion: *no-one can be trusted, no-one should ever make promises* is entirely real, and some people do draw that conclusion. They allow into their picture of human nature a bitter note of distrust and negation. They can smile, and appear normal to others; but in their heart the wound is still open, and the poison is active.

### How The Family Are

When a relative goes through a marital disaster, the family responds typically by closing ranks. In a parody of the Book of Genesis, *a man leaves his wife and clings to his father and mother* - or equivalent! The point is that there's not an easy way for the lessons to be learnt that make true healing possible, when everyone around you is loyally telling you about the mistake of ever marrying someone who could treat you so badly. This is one reason why the Tribunal is so good; at the end of the process, whatever

the outcome, you should certainly have a clear picture of what went wrong, and how the light went out of the relationship. Without this process, many people go on to repeat the unlearned lesson, serially trying again to make relationships out of straw and building houses on the same stretch of sand. Parents and family can be wonderful; but some gifts need to come from more dispassionate, even-handed sources.

### The Church's Law

Everyone should know the Church's law about marriage: it doesn't believe in divorce. *Once there is a marriage*, no human power can dissolve it, it is a bond whose meaning is established in God's eternity. To my mind, if a union breaks down soon and easily, it is showing massive signs of not being a true marriage. But even when a relationship has gone on for many years, and shows many signs of genuineness, it is quite possible for breakdown to come, because there is some damning fault in its structure. Such a union is not a marriage, and the Tribunal will say so. What's been holding up a faulty marriage, which despite its radical inadequacy has endured for decades? Well, stubborn determination, the need of care for children, the support of the *status quo* - and many other things. But if the sustained consent which founds a true marriage is wanting, and the conditions for living it out are not there, it will eventually start to decay, and usually it will fail. The law tells us then to return to the original time when the consent was made - the day of the wedding, in fact - to see if the couple were fit to make those promises, and did so with the full force of their personality. If we can show the shifting sand that eventually brought it down, in at the moment when the promises were made, we can call it null, and untie the false bond.

### The Truth Makes You Free

But the healing of the wounds still takes time and infinite sensitivity. The vital condition is to build on the truth - whatever it may be. It is a place where the love of God really does come first, guiding us to love one another in truth. The Church wants to help everyone to find their way there, and to learn to trust, and to give themselves without fear, in the spirit of Jesus Christ. The grace of God can do this for all of us: trust Him!  
*Fr Philip*