

Our Response to the Roman Catholic Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia
Our Pastoral Approach to the Question of Sexual Sharing Among Divorced and Remarried Couples

To the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ:

July 7, 2016

Grace and peace to you in our Lord Jesus Christ!

We have always been involved in the work of healing, whether that healing work pertains to relationships or to physical illness. The Lord Jesus made no distinction between these two kinds of healing and we follow in His footsteps. Truly, we are called by our Lord Jesus to bring healing and reconciliation to a broken and divided world.

Recent questions of divorce, remarriage, and sexuality have arisen in the Christian community to which I wish to address as the bishop and spokesperson of our beloved community. These questions address the propriety of remarriage and the active sexual life of remarried persons.

The school of marriage teaches valuable lessons which can be applied to all relationships in life. Sometimes that school provides hard lessons in the painful tragedy of divorce. Divorce is a major trauma for all who experience it, whether we speak of the spouses or the children of a family. While we avoid divorce, we are aware of its reality and ask God to heal our hearts when they have been broken by this reality. Saint Paul, the apostle, in his epistle to the church at Rome, asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Too often, however, it is the church itself, which provides the answer. At the precise time when we have been broken and made vulnerable by the experience of divorce, our misery is compounded by a sense of condemnation by our Christian church. It is not the healing voice of Jesus we hear, like the Samaritan woman at the well in John's gospel, but rather it is the voice and weight of law and the judgment of church leaders which confront us and add to our grief. It is apparent that those who have divorced and remarried are still in need of the sacramental life of the Church.

We join our Eastern Christian brothers and sisters in an ancient tradition of supporting those who have remarried by counseling them to now reflect upon all that has passed and to grow in all that will come during their new marriage. Such growth can only be successful in union with the sacramental life of the Church and in the Church's teaching on the life of prayer and the excellent way of love as taught in the Holy Scriptures and practiced by faithful families. To deny the gift of sexual union to those who have remarried is to destroy rather than to support the success of a remarried couple. For sexuality is a source and a celebration of love between husband and wife. It is a special and secret place which allows intimate sharing. It is the measure of a healthy relationship between two individuals who are of the age and health to share in this manner.

While we recognize that many difficulties can cause the suspension or termination of sexual sharing between husband and wife, we recognize that it is they alone who can make the decision to suspend this part of their relationship, and that no official of the Church should make a blanket declaration of the place of sexuality in the life of married or remarried Christian couples. Indeed, we consider it a possible danger for marriages to be denied sexual sharing. Since such frustration could lead to seeking such comfort from others, out of a misguided intention to conform to the teachings of one's church.

Compassionate guidance and loving support are rather the appropriate responses which clergy and laity should offer. For indeed, the strength of the Church depends upon the strength of our families, whether those families are formed by an original marriage or by a subsequent remarriage. As your bishop, I intend to do all that is possible to support and defend the continued success of all families. Those who are remarried will find equal support from this faith community. Our hope and our dream is that of wiping away every tear with the grace of the risen Christ, and celebrating the love of God as it exists between husband and wife, parent and child, our brothers and sisters of the Christian community, and between all of the human family. Every family is valuable and every marriage deserves support for its emotional, sexual, and economic stability.

May Christ bless us and forgive us our sins of the past. With the knowledge that He does, let us allow Him to complete the work of salvation, by not only administering His forgiveness, but also healing us and filling us with grace, that we may walk in love anew, and discover the path from which we may have previously wandered.

In Him who is able to understand our weakness and fill us with grace, Peter, Bishop Saint Matthew Church, An Ecumenical Catholic Community of Orange, California