

Family Life Commission's Convention for Separated, Divorced, and Widowed:

What does God have to do with me now?

By Leela Ramdeen, Chair, CCSJ

Good morning brothers and sisters in Christ. I would like to thank members of the Family Life Commission for giving me this opportunity to address you on this important subject: *What does God have to do with me now that I am separated, divorced or widowed?*

What does God have to do with you now? Most importantly, He wants you to turn to Him and hold on to him as your rock in the midst of your distress. He wants you to take care of yourself and to go on living and being a witness to Him. "Separated, divorced and widowed people, through their vulnerability, courage and patient endurance, serve as witnesses to Christ and His redeeming grace" (Diocese of Trenton, NJ, USA).

The Responsorial Psalm in today's readings: Psalm 25: 4-5, 6-7, 8-9, is very appropriate for our theme this weekend. We read:

"Lord, make your ways known to me, teach me your paths. Set me in the way of your truth, and teach me, for you are the God who saves me. All day long I hope in you because of your goodness, Lord. Remember your kindness, Lord, your love that you showed long ago. Do not remember the sins of my youth; but rather, with your love remember me..."

I want to ask you: Do you believe that each one of us is willed and loved by God? Do you believe that God is merciful? Do you believe that He has a plan for each one of us? If we truly believe what our Catholic faith teaches us, then the answer to these questions must be "Yes". God has a plan for you. Remember the words in Jeremiah 1:5: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you came to birth I consecrated you; I have appointed you as prophet to the nations."

I agree with the Family Life Commission's Advert for this Convention that "Being divorced, separated or widowed has a shattering effect not only on the individual but on entire families as well" – and I would add, on the wider community e.g. friends, colleagues in the workplace and so on.

It is clear that we need to strengthen our parish ministry to those who have experienced the trauma of separation, divorce or death of a spouse. Parish priests/Parish Administrators and parishioners must ask themselves: "How are separated, divorced, and widowed people treated in this parish? What are our attitudes towards them? What support do we give them during their time of pain and recovery?"

The writer, S. Verbeck, tells us in his encyclical *On the Family* (1981): “Blessed John Paul II characterised the fundamental Christian attitude that ought to permeate a parish response: “let these men and women know that the Church loves them...it is necessary to welcome them with charity and kindness.”

In that encyclical, he also said: “I earnestly call upon pastors and the whole community of the faithful to help the divorced and with solicitous care, to make sure that they do not consider themselves as separated from the Church, for as baptized persons they can and indeed must share in her life.”

Catholics must “seek to create an awareness of the gifts and needs of all who are divorced, separated, and widowed and to give them a sense of belonging within the church community.” (St Louis, USA: archstl.org). And our support for them must not be judgemental.

As Pope Benedict XVI said on Jan 12, 2012: “we need to remember that the destiny of each of us is linked to that of everyone else. For this reason...solidarity...is a fundamental value.” To become who we are, children of God, we must stand in solidarity with each other. I urge you to form active groups of divorced, separated and widowed persons and provide mutual support to each other and peer counselling. Organise prayer sessions and social activities.

As people of faith who believe in God’s mercy and grace; as a Eucharistic people; as a people of hope, we know that God will heal us and help us to move onwards and upwards. No matter how grave our situation may seem, take courage and know that God has given each of us unique gifts which He wants us to use to build His Kingdom. Don’t hide them under a bushell. You do not shed these unique gifts when you are divorced, separated or have lost a spouse. Hold on to Christian hope.

In his article: *The Cleansing Power of Christian Hope*, Rev Sterling Durgy reminds us that: “Hope is a powerful force in the life of any human being. Lack of hope leads to the condition we call depression: flatness of emotion, disorientation, lack of energy, and impaired ability (sometimes the complete inability) to perform tasks. The antidote to depression is hope, which energizes people in the same manner that water makes a wilting plant spring to life. Christian hope promises far more than just an antidote to depression, it re-orientes the entire direction of a person's life.”

Christ’s Resurrection gives us hope. Our reading of the scriptures gives us hope. In my darkest moments, I turn to the psalms and to my favourite quotations from our rich scriptures e.g.

- **Psalm 121: 1-2:** I lift my eyes to the mountains; where is help to come from? Help comes to me from God, who made heaven and earth.
- And in **Psalm 71:5-6:** For you alone are my hope, Lord, I have trusted you since my youth, I have relied on you since I was born, you have been my portion from my mother's womb, and the constant theme of my praise.
- **Psalm 139:13-15:** It was you who created my inmost self, and put me together in my mother's womb; for all these mysteries I thank you; for the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works. You know me through and through, from having watched my bones take shape when I was being formed in secret, knitted together in the limbo of the womb.
 - **Psalm 22: 9-10:** Yet you drew me out of the womb, you entrusted me to my mother's breasts; placed on your lap from my birth, from my mother's womb you have been my God. Do not stand aside: trouble is near, I have no one to help me!
 - **Isaiah 44:2, 24:** Thus says the LORD who made you and formed you from the womb, Who will help you: ... Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, and He who formed you from the womb: "I am the LORD, who makes all things, Who stretches out the heavens all alone, Who spreads abroad the earth by Myself...

Yes, God who made us in His image and likeness, is the one who knew us before we were formed in our mother's womb. He had sent His only son, Jesus Christ, to die for us so that we may have life and have it more abundantly. He wants us to 'live'; to flourish and grow and develop as human beings. Pope Benedict XVI reminds us in his encyclical, *Charity in Truth*, that the kind of development we should be talking about is 'integral human development' – that is, the development of every dimension of a person and of each person. No one should be left behind.

If we are true followers of Jesus, then we are told to take up our cross and follow Him. Being a follower of Jesus means accepting that life will not be smooth sailing. But when the tempest of divorce, separation or widowhood comes and we are being blown and buffeted by gale force winds, if our faith is strong, if we truly pray for God's grace, we will survive. Never underestimate the power of prayer to help us through our difficulties. Pray for God's grace.

In his encyclical, *Charity in Truth*, Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that we can do nothing without the help of God's grace. Grace is a gift from God; it is that internal supernatural help that God gives to us to strengthen us and to keep us on the right path to do His will. Remember the words in John's Gospel (John 15:5-6):

“I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him/her, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing.”

Clearly, God wants each of us who suffer the pain and anguish usually associated with divorce, separation or widowhood, to remain in Him. Hold on to Him – the vine, or else we will wither.

I say “We”, because I also went through the pain of divorce and needed a lot of healing (give my testimony). And while I was struggling with all the publicity and pain of my divorce, my mother died – as a result of hospital negligence. My father, who had been married to my mother for 50 years, was beset with grief – we, their children, were also devastated.

I felt depressed, blaming myself; feeling that God took my mother to punish me for not obeying my parents and marrying someone of whom they did not approve. I felt that there was no one in my family to whom I could speak as everyone was caught up with his/her own grief. I just wanted to curl up and die. I felt I walked in loneliness. I was angry with God and with myself. I ‘vented’ my anger with God by writing to him on my computer each night – ranting and raving for hours at times. Then I would delete it all and start again the following night. This anger, coupled with the blame that I piled upon myself, prevented me from grieving for the loss of my mother – until years later.

When my mother died, I had resigned from my job as Deputy Director of Education in a London Borough and was reading Law. It had been 15 years since I had studied for my Masters degree, so returning to study was not easy. At that time, I was also Co-Chair of the late Cardinal Basil Hume’s Caribbean (C5) Committee. The Cardinal was the Chair. I am here today because of the pastoral support he gave me during that difficult period.

He gave me spiritual direction. Among other things, he reminded me that God never abandons us; that we should rely on Him always; that He will heal our wounds and strengthen us by His grace. I urge you today to believe that God is holding each one of us in the palm of His hand – tenderly, lovingly; nurturing us through our suffering. Your relationship with God and with your family and community can help you through your difficult journey to recovery.

People deal with separation, divorce or widowhood differently. The only blue print I can offer you is my advice to surround yourself with God’s love. Amidst the frustration, anger, bitterness, betrayal, rejection, abandonment, loneliness, sorrow or other emotions that you may experience, make space for the Holy Spirit to fill you with courage, strength and God’s grace so that you will be able to move on with your life.

We never truly forget what we have been through and the loss of our loved ones, but the Lord heals the intensity of the pain. Find ways to channel your grief. I want to read one of the many poems written by my father while he was grieving for the loss of my mother (read the poems – **p 86** of his book). I encourage you to give thanks for the time that you had with your spouse who has died.

My father was fortunate to have his children and grand children nearby. However, there are many who are widowed, separated or divorced who have no one to turn to. Whatever you do, do not isolate yourself. If you feel ‘broken’, know that the whole of humanity is broken. We are broken in so many ways. It is our faith in God that gives us hope that He will heal our brokenness. It is important to know that Catholics who are separated or divorced are still members of our Church and may continue to receive the Eucharist and other sacraments.

However, as Archbishop Harris would have told you in his presentation on Annulment, if you secure a divorce and remarry in a civil ceremony without obtaining a declaration of nullity from our Church, although you will remain a member of the Catholic Church, you will not be able to receive Holy Communion or the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

If you are in this situation, I encourage you to continue to go to Mass, to remain active in your parish. Continue to guide your children in the Catholic faith. Get involved in ministry in your parish e.g. charitable works.

What has God got to do with you now? He has work for you to do. Yes, you continue to have a role to play in the life and mission of our Church and in society – an active, not a passive role e.g. to promote the sanctity of life and the dignity of each person, to build family life, community and the common good. He wants you to continue your journey of faith – not alone, but in community; and to commit yourself to ongoing spiritual formation which is a lifelong process. God wants you to hold on to your faith which will provide you with a moral compass. In a world in which many are moving away from God, I urge you to anchor yourself in His love. Turn to prayer. Lift up your hearts to Him. Trust in Him.

What has God got to do with you now? He wants you to strive to be holy and to discern your specific and personal vocation. As Catholics, as followers of Christ, through our baptism we are all called to be holy. This vocation to be holy is common to all Christians through baptism. In Matthew 5:48, Jesus tells us: “You must...be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Striving to be holy; striving to follow in the footsteps of Christ is a lifelong process. We will fall because of our human frailty and the use we

make of our free will; the choices we make daily. But the sacrament of reconciliation is there to restore our relationship with God and with our neighbour.

As Prof William E. May has said: “In carrying out their common vocation to holiness Christians are called to more specific vocations. These include the states of life to which individual Christians are summoned, some to the priesthood or religious life, others to **marriage** (yes, marriage is a vocation), and still others to the vocation of unmarried men and women in the world. The great majority of Christians are lay people. Their more specific vocation is to seek the holiness to which God calls them in the world in which they live...

“Blessed Josemaria Escrivá, (founder of Opus Dei) emphasized that we fulfill our vocation to be holy by sanctifying our work, sanctifying ourselves in our work, and sanctifying others through our work. Thus a more specific vocation of a Christian incorporates not only the state of life to which he or she is called—the priesthood, the religious life, **marriage**, being an unmarried person in the world—but also the work one freely undertakes to be of service to God and neighbour.

“In addition, God speaks personally to each and every Christian--priest, religious, lay person, doctor, lawyer, construction worker, business man, teacher—calling him or her to a unique personal vocation, inviting him or her to play a unique and indispensable role in carrying out his redemptive work. Vatican Council II insisted that each one of us has a personal vocation to carry out: “by our faith,” the Council Fathers declared, “we are bound all the more to fulfill these responsibilities [our earthly ones as Christians] *according to the vocation of each one*” (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 43). And Pope John Paul II emphasized, in the first encyclical of his pontificate, *Redemptor hominis*, that, “for the whole community of the People of God and for each member of it what is in question is not just a specific ‘social membership’; rather, for each and every one what is essential is a particular vocation.... We must see first and foremost Christ saying in a special way to each member of the community, ‘Follow Me’” (no. 71).

One of our important tasks in answering God’s call to holiness is to discern our personal vocation and fulfill it. If you are to discern what your vocation is, at this stage in your life, you need to pray. There are many resources that you may find useful e.g. Sheila Madigan Hansen has written a booklet: *Stations of the Cross for Divorced Persons*. She says:

“There are many types of suffering on life's path and divorce is one that causes us to lose our way. We feel alone, alienated, even shunned by family, friends, and acquaintances. Through all this, though, Jesus journeys with us. He walks with us and is present to share our burden as he shows us the way. This booklet shows that along our "way of the cross"

we can experience the comfort of Jesus who made the journey before us so that we would not have to take such a treacherous path alone.”

For those of you who have children and grandchildren, God wants you to be strong for them; to do your best to educate them and to pass on our faith to them. While you experience a myriad of emotions, so do your children and others close to you. I urge you not to get so caught up in your own anger, grief, frustration etc. that you ignore the needs of those who depend on you e.g. in those in your family.

Some time ago a friend of mine, I will call her Helen, was devastated when her husband left her for a waitress who was working in their restaurant in London. In today's world marriage is under threat; divorce is a modern-day epidemic. Many of you will be aware of the devastating impact of marital breakdown. In spite of her pain, Helen never prevented her children from seeing their father. It took a long time before she could converse with him in a civil manner, but from the outset, she believed that her children needed their father in their lives. I recognize, of course, that each situation will be different.

Helen struggled to work and care for her children. As a divorced single parent, she tried to provide them with a stable, loving, faith-filled home life. She drew on the strength of her extended family. When necessary, her 2 children took refuge in the bosoms of their grandparents – who themselves were filled with sorrow over the breakdown of their child's marriage. Grandparents and relations can help enormously e.g. they can be positive role models. Today Helen's son is an engineer and her daughter is a pharmacist. God granted her the grace to forgive her husband. Forgiveness is not easy, but unless one forgives, it is difficult to move on.

In 1963, Blessed John XXIII stated in his encyclical: Peace on Earth, that there are 4 pillars of peace: truth, justice, love and freedom. In his Message for World Day of Peace in Jan 2002, Blessed John Paul II added another pillar: forgiveness. He said: “My reasoned conviction, confirmed in turn by biblical revelation, is that the shattered order cannot be fully restored except by a response that combines justice with forgiveness. The pillars of true peace are justice and that form of love which is forgiveness.”

So, what does God want with you now? He wants you to forgive – in situations where forgiveness is required. If we are to rebuild our lives, we have to process our divorce, separation or loss of a spouse and seek healing, guidance and counselling, if necessary.

I have a Trinidadian friend who was so angry when her husband left her with 4 young children in Trinidad that she used to go and throw stones at the house in which he lived with the other woman, and 'cuss' them both while stoning the house.

She was so caught up with anger and frustration that she did not notice that the way in which one of her sons was dealing with the trauma was by gravitating to a gang. The first she knew of his involvement was when she discovered that he had hidden a gun in her house. The gun belonged to a member of the gang who had used it to rob a business place.

God wants you to learn to forgive and also not to ignore your children in such situations. Pray for the strength and the grace to be able to do so. Nourish yourself with the Eucharist.

The Vatican II document, *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 11, tells us, "...the Eucharist is the source and summit of our lives".

(See also paragraph 1324 of our Catechism - which states that the Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life." "The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch.")

What does God have to do with you now? Even if you are divorced, separated, or widowed, God wants you to receive the Eucharist regularly. It will give you strength and help you to grow spiritually - closer to Him. The Eucharist is a place of healing, reconciliation and spiritual nourishment. But remember what His Grace told you about annulment and about remarrying in a civil ceremony without first obtaining a declaration of nullity of your first marriage. We must be faithful to the teachings of our Church. If you are in this position and can no longer receive Holy Communion or the Sacrament of Reconciliation. However, you remain a child(ren) of God and need our love and compassion.

At the heart of our Catholic Culture and Identity is a fraternal feeling for each other. If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that when some of our brothers and sisters who are divorced, separated or widowed go to Mass, they don't feel that people are reaching out to them. In fact, at times parishioners' gossip can further alienate you and add to your pain.

In his encyclical *On the Family (Familiaris Consortio, 1981)*, Blessed John Paul II said – in the section on “Offenses against women's dignity”:

“...many forms of degrading discrimination still persist today in a great part of our society that affect and seriously harm particular categories of women, as for example childless wives, widows, separated or divorced women, and unmarried mothers.

The synod fathers deplored these and other forms of discrimination as strongly as possible. I therefore ask that vigorous and incisive pastoral action be taken by all to overcome them definitively so that the image of God that shines in all human beings without exception may be fully respected.”

We have much work to do to ensure that our parishes are places of compassion, caring and love for all; places where we can turn to our brothers and sisters in Christ to help us through our pain and grief. It is essential that parishes set up appropriate ministries to meet the needs of those who are widowed, separated or divorced – men, women and children. We need to be sensitive to emotional, spiritual and physical needs of children who have divorced or separated parents or those who have lost a parent. Reach out to them; involve them in parish activities; organize special events specifically for each group as their needs may be different. Offer Masses for them.

We must honour our commitment to love our neighbour – and our neighbour is anyone who has need of us e.g. As the apostle James said in his canonical epistle: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before our God and Father is this: care for orphans and widows (and I would add – widowers) in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (1:27).

The writer Emily Stimpson shares a testimony by Deacon Andy Corder, Tucson, Arizona, USA. He says:

“My wife died in 1990 from melanoma cancer. She was 30, I was 33, and we had three small kids. After her death, the physical support we received was fairly constant: We had family close by. Spiritually, however, it was much harder.

I think a Catholic support group would have helped, but the only one in the diocese at the time met during the day, when I was at work. There also was nothing for the kids. She'd been a youth minister, however, so right after her death, a lot of priests and co-workers touched base with me to make sure things were going OK.

Of course, the more time that passed, the longer it went between visits. That was true of almost everyone, though. Right after her death it was easy for people to ask, “How are

you doing?” But after a few weeks, they didn’t want to ask that question anymore. I think they were afraid of setting me back.

There was one man, however, a deacon, who had checked up on my wife and me regularly during her illness. After her death he called or visited every couple of weeks for months. Talking things through with him helped tremendously. When you’ve lost someone, you need to find somebody you can trust to talk to. It doesn’t help to “man up” or pack the memories away.

After about five to six months, I started thinking clearly again, and eventually I remarried. But grief has its own timetable — you can’t rush it or ignore it — and, in some ways, it will always be with you.

If I had any advice to give pastors or friends of those grieving a spouse, I would urge them to listen to what the person is saying. Too often we get stuck on what we think we need to say and that prevents us from hearing where their grief is coming from. Also, give them time. Don’t expect them to be back to normal in two weeks. Finally, invite them to get involved at Church or serve in some way. Treating them like they’re still alive and still human, not some poor thing to be pitied, goes a long way.”

Each of you should let your parish priest/parish administrator and parishioners know what you think they can do to assist you and also other persons who are divorced, separated or widowed.

As part of the Body of Christ, you need to keep abreast of developments in our Archdiocese. I am sure that this will assist with the healing process. Our Archdiocese’s mission statement states: We are the people of God in TT, building the civilization of love – reconciliation with God, neighbour, creation and self – through: the New Evangelization, Revitalizing Catholic Culture and Identity; Regenerating the morals and Values of our society.

Having spent 1 ½ years focusing on the first pastoral priority (PP) – The New Evangelization: Catholic Family Become What You Are, the Archdiocese launched the 2nd PP on Corpus Christi (June 23, 2011) - Revitalising Catholic Culture and Identity.

The first PP was meant to run from December 8, 2009 (Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception) to December 7, 2010. It was extended to May 31, 2011 to allow more time for parishes, schools and Church departments to pursue the initiative. The 2nd PP is expected to run until Dec 2012. As we were reminded in Catholic News on 29 May, 2011, “it is important to note that the new stage should not mean the end of reflection on the first initiative. Each priority is meant to operate in concert with the others and remain

active even though the spotlight shifts from one to the other. In like manner, it is important to recall that reflection on: Called to Be Catholic, the theme of the first post-Synod phase, from January to December 2009, is meant to be ongoing during the present phase that embraces the three pastoral initiatives.”

So, we are in the process of implementing our second pastoral priority – Revitalizing Catholic Culture and Identity. What makes us Catholic? Part of our Catholic Culture and Identity is to demonstrate love of God and love of neighbour. Too often, as Archbishop Gilbert had said, some Catholics are concerned about their own salvation and develop a vertical relationship with God. We are called to have a horizontal relationship with our neighbour; to see Christ in the faces of our neighbour.

We are defined by our core values, our beliefs and how we live our faith; how we behave. Every facet of our lives must be infused by Gospel values and we are called to evangelize the culture in which we live so that it will be transformed and will reflect Gospel values. As Archbishop Edward Gilbert said: “Virtues inform values and values influence behaviour.”

What does God have to do with you now? God wants you to play your part in transforming our communities and our world. Stewardship is a key aspect of our Catholic Culture and Identity - sharing our time, talent and treasure generously to build the common good. So use your time, talent and treasure and play your part in revitalising our Catholic Culture and Identity.

Embedded in our CCI is our belief in the sanctity of life from conception to natural death; and the inherent, inviolable and inalienable dignity of each person and respect for all God’s creation – including SDWs. You do not lose this dignity just because you are separated, divorced or widowed. The task of all Catholics is to promote your dignity and stand with you.

Remember the words in Matthew 25:31-46: (The Last Judgement – separating the sheep from the goats) – “...For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink’ I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me...I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me...”

We Catholics are swimming against the tide of a largely secular culture in which individualism, selfishness, moral relativism, materialism etc., are the defining features. Moral relativism is the view held by many that if something feels good, one can just do it – anything goes. For many, morality has become subjective. We can all decide what is right or wrong for ourselves.

As Catholics, we know that there are objective moral truths that are valid at all times and everywhere and that the lie of moral relativism will not help people to make the right choices. God is the source of all moral truth. The challenge for you and me is to find ways of combating such thinking. Our greatest tools are the teachings of our Church.

It is clear that we face many pastoral challenges in meeting your needs, but we must make an effort to include structures and strategies in parish pastoral plans that will demonstrate that you matter also. Parishes must help you deal with your grief. They must set up structures/groups to offer you healing; to empower you to deal with the practical, emotional and spiritual needs you may have; to help you come to terms with your experiences and prepare you for your life ahead. There are examples of good practice on which we can draw as we develop our own ministries in this area.

In his inspiring Pastoral Letter on Widowed, Separated and Divorced, Bishop Joseph V. Sullivan, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA (www.catholicculture.org), said:

“The ministry of Christ through His Church must be ever more and more efficaciously available to these wounded human beings. They reflect in a real way the image of the crucified Christ, and in ministering to each of them, we minister to Jesus Christ.

“The thrust of such a ministry must have taken into consideration that the widowed, the separated, the "divorced," and the "divorced and remarried" constitute groups of persons in entirely different circumstances. Though persons in each of these groupings have needs in common with the others, in fact in common with all members of the Body of Christ, yet the spiritual status of all of these persons cannot be considered essentially the same. An effective ministry must be adapted to meet the healing needs of persons in each of these groupings, tailoring ministry specifically to the needs of each of these groups ... His (God's) Church must offer healing ministry especially on the parish level to all these groups of persons of whom I speak. None should have just cause for feeling abandoned by God or His Church.

“The Widowed : The parish community has the potential of healing, of relieving in a significant way the loneliness of the widowed within their midst. Though providing cultural and social opportunities of participation for the widowed can be very helpful. It is especially in the realm of the spiritual that meaningful aid can be rendered the widowed. Days of recollection, an annual spiritual retreat especially tailored to uplift and inspire the widowed to a new fullness of life in Christ are readily available means to change the outlook of the widowed where present difficulties will appear as possibilities of greater union with Christ...

“Without the anchor of their Catholic faith and the sure knowledge that they are loved as persons by the living church, in their loneliness, possible frustration and inability in some instances to accept the death of a spouse with perfect resignation to God's Holy Will, they can become easily victims of our secularist society with its neo-pagan ethics...

“Separated And Separated And "Divorced": Both the separated and "divorced" Catholic understandably may experience feelings of embarrassment and partial guilt. Even a spouse who is unwillingly separated may often sense anxiety as to culpable omissions that may have contributed to marital failure and the loss of a Christian home...the separated spouse may be depressed and given to moments of despair. The parish community must never judge pejoratively the separated spouse. The separated spouse must be accepted in a spirit of charity and concern. The parish priest should discreetly ascertain the feasibility of reconciliation and, when possible, encourage the parties to a broken marriage to attempt marital reunion. Professional counseling may be advisable, but most important, spiritual renewal is necessary.

Many separated couples are happily reunited, and the Christian home is restored in its beauty and service to the community. In the interim, the spouse and the children of the separated and "divorced" should be the recipients of pastoral ministry. The spouses and members of "broken families" should be encouraged to frequent the sacraments. Parish support groups under the spiritual direction of a priest can be very valuable in offering effective ministry to the separated and "divorced" Catholic...

“The "Divorced And Remarried" ...The covenant between a man and a woman joined in Christian marriage is as indissoluble and irrevocable as God's love for His people and Christ's love for His Church. Young people and engaged couples must be taught the true meaning of Christian marriage. Married couples must experience the support and encouragement of the parish community in their efforts to honour their commitments. In the face of strong, contrary social pressures, the Church has a serious obligation to help married couples meet the challenge.

In worship, in sacraments, in pastoral care, in education and counselling, the Local Church especially must effectively assist husbands and wives who are striving to realize their obligations to God, to themselves, to their family and to the community.

“It is a tragic fact that with increasing frequency "broken marriages," sacramental, indissoluble unions, *de facto* terminate in a civil divorce court, and Catholic spouses attempt second "marriages" that are invalid before God and His Church. In this sensitive area a pastoral response of the Church is needed but especially difficult to formulate.

“"Divorced" Catholics who have suffered this augmented marital tragedy of living in an invalid second union are in dire need of the salvific ministry of His Church...The United States Bishops' Pastoral on Moral Values, "To Live in Christ Jesus," reminds us, "We

must seek ways by which the Church can mediate Christ's compassion to those who have suffered marital tragedy, but at the same time we may do nothing to undermine His teaching concerning the beauty and meaning of marriage and in particular His prophetic demands concerning the indissolubility of the unions of those who marry in the Lord. The Church must ever be faithful to the command to serve the truth in love."

"Remembering the power of prayer, penance and sacrifice, the parish community should be encouraged to pray for these people, that with God's grace they may ultimately find their way to complete conversion and reconciliation with God and His Church, of which they are still members, although only imperfectly... Parish priests prudently and pastorally must patiently reach out in ministry to these Catholics, assuring them of the suffrages of the Church, reminding them that they are welcome to attend all Church services and that they have the obligation of fulfilling the precepts of the Church.

Though the virtue of prudence must rule the approach, parish priests and all catechists and those counselling in the name of the Church must know and present unequivocally the mind of the Church and the reasons behind her teaching to those sincerely seeking to know. Inquirers can always be referred to a competent priest. Parish support groups may involve such persons of good will in social apostolates and works of charity... we are never justified in judging pejoratively any person. Likewise, such persons are created in the image and likeness of God; Christ died for them also. We must love them and respect them as persons, and evidence this. Charity must prevail. Though support groups should evidence compassion and understanding, they may not witness, explicitly or implicitly, that the living Church condones the "marital" lifestyle of those living in an invalid marriage. To do so would be to betray them."

CONCLUSION:

What has God got to do with you now? He wants you to be strong and to seek to do His will. He has a plan for you. I urge you to go out as stout heralds of our Faith. You and I have work to do. Reflect on the words of St Teresa of Avila:

"Christ has no body now on earth but yours; no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the world; yours are the feet with which he walks to do good; and yours are the hands with which he blesses men and women now." May the Holy Spirit inspire you; may God fill you with wisdom; and may you hear Jesus' gentle voice guiding and sustaining you as you journey on.

PRAYER: I end with a prayer for all of us: Lord, you are the potter, we are the clay. Take us, mold us, use us, and fill us with your Holy Spirit. Take our hands, Lord, walk beside us and guide us. All that we have, all that we are, Lord, we give to you; we place ourselves in your loving hands. Take control of our lives. We have faith and trust in you,

Lord, that you will heal our hurting hearts and help us to move forward with self-confidence and faith in your mercy. Help us to build welcoming parish communities, filled with people who will reach out to all your children, including those who are divorced, separated and widowed. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Amen.

NB: While we focused in this Convention on the needs of those who are Separated, Divorced and Widowed, let us not forget about the need for ministry in our parishes for Single Catholics. The single life is also a vocation. See e.g. Catholic Singles Ministry's (CSM) whose mission/focus is “spiritual growth, fellowship and service to God's Community. This lay ministry provides an opportunity for Catholic singles to encourage, receive, and give support to each other in our Faith Journey.” (<http://www.catholicsinglesministry.org>). Or see: Single Catholics—Making Them Feel at Home by Trudelle Thomas (www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac0684.asp)