

Divorce Ministry in the Age of 'Amoris Laetitia'

Catholics in divorce ministry see movement on the ground, but say more diocesan and parish leadership is needed to accomplish the pastoral care advocated by Pope Francis or St. John Paul II.

ST. CHARLES, Mo. — “I do” meant forever on Donna O’Donnell’s wedding day. Then the unthinkable happened after 28 years of marriage and four beautiful children — divorce. So O’Donnell turned to her church for help.

But in 2011, O’Donnell could not find any truly Catholic divorce ministry to help her. The Archdiocese of St. Louis had just one program at a Catholic parish listed on its website, but it lacked the Catholic content that she, a person looking for healing from the trauma of divorce, sought from the Church. She needed to hear about redemptive suffering, sacraments and grace.

O’Donnell, however, felt God call her to act on — and not accept — this lack of pastoral care for her pain: She called the archdiocese and said she wanted to help establish a divorce ministry.

“I told them, ‘We’re really bad at this, and we need to be better,’” O’Donnell said. Fortunately, the archdiocese’s staff had been thinking along similar lines.

Six years later, nine new divorce ministries are now underway in the archdiocese, including at O’Donnell’s parish, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. O’Donnell said the archdiocese is working to have one in every deanery. The archdiocese also just completed its first healing prayer service for separated and divorced Catholics, led by Father Aaron Nord from the tribunal office, who reminded them about “keeping our eyes on Jesus” in the midst of pain and grief.

This is the kind of pastoral accompaniment that Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation [Amoris Laetitia](#) (The Joy of Love) calls for.

“Awareness has risen fairly sharply,” said Greg Mills, executive director of the Catholic Divorce Ministry, regarding an uptick in queries since the synods on the family and the Pope’s exhortation. The national ministry serves to help dioceses and parishes supplement their staff with qualified volunteers, and establish groups on the local level that minister to divorced Catholics.

But the awareness of the need for divorce ministry coming from the pews “does not appear as widespread or supported by the formal Church ministry.”

“Ministry to the divorced and separated will become established once the bishops endorse it as a recognized ministry,” Mills said.

Divorce ministry is often led by Catholics who have gone through divorce. Mills said the approach provides “the accompaniment aspect that Pope Francis advocates for.”

Mills explained that deacons in the Church could also provide an excellent leadership resource in getting their parishes to develop a divorce ministry. But bishops and priests must state from the pulpit they need this kind of ministry in their parish or diocese and ask volunteers to step forward.

A Welcoming Message

Some parishes have been establishing divorce ministry in response to Catholics who are coming back to the Church because they feel Pope Francis has welcomed them back.

“They are hearing the message clearly, whether they know it is from that document or not,” said Christine Shafer, director of pastoral care and faith formation at Holy Family parish in Caledonia, Michigan. She told the Register that after *Amoris’* publication, the parish received a definite “uptick in calls” from people who kept citing “the mercy of Pope Francis” and said they wanted to go through the tribunal process to know whether their marriage was valid or null in the eyes of the Church.

Shafer said the Pope has broken through some formidable barriers. Many divorced Catholics do not approach the Church because of persistent myths, such as divorce excommunicates a person (it does not); that divorce by itself bars a person from holy Communion (it does not; only un-absolved mortal sin would, such as if a person does not repent of the evils that destroyed his or her marriage or refuses to stop hating the spouse that destroyed the marriage, or lives in a civil remarriage with no intention to exercise perpetual sexual continence); or that a declaration of nullity (often known as “annulment”) from the Church would make their children illegitimate (it does not).

The parish offered a two-part session on [divorce, annulment and remarriage](#), and Shafer soon after realized it needed to offer a permanent divorce ministry that people could find easily on the internet. But she stressed “the impetus for people in ministry to go do something” was coming from the faithful, who now felt empowered by Pope Francis to set aside the myths, go back to the Church, and ask for healing from divorce.

Substantial Need

The overall absence of momentum for divorce ministry is puzzling, given that divorce affects a large number of the flock: 25% of Catholic adults in the U.S. have gone through divorce, according to a 2015 Pew Research study.

Before the synods on the family that contributed to *Amoris Laetitia*, Rose Sweet, author of [Surviving Divorce: Hope and Healing for the Catholic Family](#), estimated no more than 10% of nearly 17,600 U.S. Catholic parishes had a divorce ministry. Sweet teaches workshops to train facilitators using her 12-week parish-based program. But Sweet has not seen any general trend from the Church’s leadership since *Amoris* to really boost the number of parish-based divorce ministries.

“I don’t see any major change, which is disappointing,” she said.

As for divorce ministry itself, *Amoris* “doesn’t seem to have made a practical difference one way or another” at the local parish level, she said. *Amoris* remains a “discussion point” in the Catholic media, but Rose said hardly anyone in divorce-ministry groups knows there is an apostolic exhortation because their pastors have not mentioned it.

The ongoing [debate](#) over controversial elements of *Amoris Laetitia* could be a factor as to why some pastors may be reticent to talk about *Amoris* and the need for divorce ministry. Sweet noted some footnotes are “vague” regarding what to do in terms of holy Communion for the civilly remarried without a declaration from the Church that they did not successfully contract a valid sacrament with their first union.

But general failure to implement pastoral care for the divorced by the U.S. Church’s pastors, from the bishops on down, Sweet said, goes all the way back to the first family synod in 1980. St. John Paul II’s follow-up document, [Familiaris Consortio](#) (The Christian Family in the Modern World), in 1981 stated the “ecclesial community must support [divorced] people more than ever.”

And, although his apostolic exhortation did not provoke controversy in the same way as *Amoris*, the Church’s pastors in many ways did not act on St. John Paul II’s plain instructions for the pastoral care of the divorced.

Neither did the Church’s leaders eagerly adopt St. John Paul II’s call in *Familiaris* to embrace a [catechumenate model](#) for marriage formation — a drumbeat that Pope Francis has taken up 36 years later as a way to effectively accompany and form couples for lifelong marriage. The Pope has stated St. John Paul II’s method is essential to prevent divorce and null unions that now claim 1 out of 4 adult Catholics in the pews and devastate their families.

“There should be a call for people to get [divorce ministry] off the ground,” Sweet said. “Bishops and priests need to open the doors and provide the support, but it is laypeople who have to get this done.”

Archdiocese of Portland

Two years ago, 500 [surveys](#) from Catholics in Portland, Oregon, related to the synods on the family were placed on Jason Kidd’s desk — on his first week on the job as the director of the Archdiocese of Portland’s Marriage and Family Life Office, newly restored by Archbishop Alexander Sample.

A number of people brought forward the need for divorce ministry via the surveys. Kidd read how Catholics abandoned by spouses, along with their children, especially needed support.

Within a couple of months, he had three phone calls from Catholics desperate for the Church's help.

"They couldn't find any divorce ministry for Catholics in the metro Portland area," he said.

Kidd got to work, and now the archdiocese has divorce ministries at two parishes on the east and west sides of Portland. One parish conducts 12-week sessions throughout the year using [Ascension Press's Surviving Divorce program](#).

The other parish offers *Beginning Experience*, which offers a retreat experience, with theological and psychological components similar to other Catholic Movements like Marriage Encounter and Retrouvaille. Kidd and the parish worked together to launch a six-week class called "Coping With Life Alone" that would prepare people for the retreat and then support classes following the retreat.

Because Pope Francis has the "heart of a pastor," Kidd said, the archdiocese is trying to respond to his call in *Amoris* to make the Church a place where people can feel safe enough to share the "messiness" of their lives with the Church, whether that's addictions to pornography or failing marriages.

"We've got room to grow here as a Church," he said.

The principles of ministry to divorced Catholics, Kidd explained, are not "rocket science" and need to be "plug and play" for the pastoral leader who implements the ministry. But he needs collaborators with a passion to "take this to other parts of the archdiocese and the vicariates."

Kidd said the archdiocese is taking seriously Pope Francis' message that the Church must not only take care of divorced Catholics, but also prevent tenuous unions that end up in divorce by forming couples for joyful, faithful marriage through a catechumenal process.

He explained the archdiocese's developing catechumenal model for marriage formation has six key elements, including mentor couples and a theology of the body focus, which covers the engaged period as well as the newlywed period — a sort of mystagogy (interpretation of mystery) for couples in their first years of married life.

These ministries, whether they are healing the divorced or forming the engaged, Kidd said, require that a parish extend "radical hospitality" to people in order to be successful, because people need to feel like they belong before they open themselves to the Church's message.

"Belonging leads to believing, and believing leads to changed behavior and parish membership."

[Peter Jesserer Smith](#) is a Register staff reporter.