Divorce is a human reality. All major civilizations and religions deal with it. In the Roman Empire a husband or a wife could initiate divorce action. In the Mesopotamian world, which includes Hebrew society, only the husband could initiate divorce. In today’s gospel Jesus presented a revolutionary doctrine. He says this, “Because of the hardness of your hearts {Moses} permitted that a husband could divorce his wife, but from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. … Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate.”

This reading comes from Mark’s gospel. Luke’s gospel allows for one exception, “no divorce except for unlawful sexual intercourse.” Matthew’s gospel allows for a different exception, in the Greek, “porneia,” which translation Scripture scholars give a wide range of activities. St. Paul allows for divorce only in the case when an unbelieving spouse departs from the believing spouse.

Current Church teaching is this. Marriage is a sacrament between a man and a woman. The sacrament provides God’s grace to live well this vocation. In the weddings which I celebrate, I emphasize this point by preaching, “two people walked into church, viz., a bride and a groom. Three people leave the church: a husband, wife and the Holy Spirit.”

The human reality is that not all marriages last. Lower than the national divorce rate is Catholic divorce rate, namely, 28%. In my family and maybe in some of your families, divorce occurs. Almost every couple expects and wishes the marriage to last, and that divorce is the last resort. For countless factors, however, divorce not only happens but even should happen. Some situations are truly unbearable.

As a parish priest, I worked with a dozen divorced and remarried couples to help them obtain annulments in the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church teaches that every sacramental marriage ideally consists of four factors: marriage is for two people, not three; it is to be forever, not to give it your best shot for five years; it is for the possibility of having children although one of out six couples is unable to conceive; and it is for mature adults. Virtually every newly married couple meets the first three requirements: they desire to be faithful forever and to be blessed with children. I estimate, however, of the failed marriages 99% do not last because of the fourth factor: marriage is for mature adults. Many factors fall into this category: inability to communicate honestly, inability to keep a budget, inability to keep a job, abuses and addictions of all kinds. No one knows what goes on behind closed doors unless they happen to live there.

A quick story about divorce from the 5th century. St. Jerome was the greatest Scripture scholar of the Church until Vatican II. At Rome, he led a prayer group of wealthy women. After he departed from Rome for Bethlehem, one of the Roman ladies wrote to alert him that one woman in the prayer group
had just divorced her husband and remarried another. Jerome wrote back a scathing letter about that woman and her pursuing a divorce. The prayer group delighted in Jerome’s condemnation of the situation. Then the next year, the divorced woman came to Bethlehem, and shared with Jerome her situation. After some few months, she returned to Rome, and continued her life of prayer and good works.

At the eventual funeral of this woman, long recognized in the Church as Saint Fabiola, Jerome spoke the following words: “So terrible were the faults imputed to her former husband that not even a prostitute or a common slave could have put up with them. If I were to recount them, I would undo the heroism of the wife who chose to bear the blame of a separation rather than to blacken the character of and expose the stains of him who was one body with her.”

Many people don’t pursue annulments because writing the request just re-opens the terrible wounds of the past. Annulments not only free one canonically to marry but also to learn more about oneself.

Pope Francis has asked dioceses to expedite requests for annulments. He has eliminated the automatic second review of court decisions, has cut the time and costs of the process.

A final thought, Jesus presents the Church and married couples a wonderful ideal. The reality in everyone’s life, married and unmarried, falls far short of the ideal. We try our best. Some marriages are unbearable. Some marriages demand that the marriage end. Jesus provides many instructions, another one of which is, “Judge not lest you be judged.” No one knows what goes on behind closed doors. That is why the whole world loves Pope Francis for his memorable statement, “Who am I to judge?” We pray for all married couples that they might continue to receive and share the graces which God gives them, that, if possible, they might live “until death do them part.”