

*The Chelseas of the world cry themselves to sleep
at night knowing that Dad loves his new wife
more than the little girl who is growing up without him.*

Catholics and divorce

By Sheryl Temaat

■ The following essay titled “Seeing Dad” was presented in all the English classes in a public middle school in February 2006 by a seventh grader named Chelsea. The assignment was a personal narrative. The English teacher had told her students to write on something that they feel passionate about. After reading this essay, the teacher found this child’s testimony so powerful that she wanted all her classes to hear it. I asked for a copy because it is also a powerful testimony to all those priests who have been silent for three decades while these children suffer.

Seeing Dad

“Hey, Mom! Who’s that?” I said as I walked into the room. “Not now. I’m on the phone,” was the response I got as I was told to go in my room. Ten minutes later I walked in my Mom saying, “Hey, guess what. Your Dad’s in town and we’re gonna go meet him for pizza.”

I couldn’t wait! I ran to my closet and picked out my party dress. Then to the bath-

room to start to do my hair. Well, actually my Mom walked in.

“Chelsea, what are you doing?” She said.

“I wanna look pretty,” I replied.

“Go get in regular clothes, and I will do your hair,” she said.

“FINE!” I shouted and ran back to my room.

After I was ready we jumped in the car and off we went with me bouncing up and down in my seat. As my Mom yelled at me, “Calm down!”

As we pulled into the parking lot of the shopping center, I was so nervous. I was afraid of being let down again. I had tried so many times to get in touch with my Dad when I was a kid. When I was about three, my Mom left my Dad. We moved into an apartment in another part of town. I can remember sending my Dad a letter that told him how sorry I was for being a bad girl, and that I would be good forever and ever if I could see him again. For the next three months, I got up early with my Mom every day to check the mail. I would skip to the mailbox thinking, “Today is the

day! He wrote me back; I just know it! He'll say that he's sorry too and then Mom will take me to see him, and it will be just like before."

I hated Sunday for those three months. I hated it! Sunday meant no mail. Also to me it meant that that week was over and every Sunday hope slid further and further from my heart. Every Sunday that came and went I knew that he wasn't going to write back, and I wasn't going to see him. Nonetheless, for three months straight I got up and checked the mail, but I never got a reply from my Dad.

Without my Dad there, there was no money, so my Mom couldn't afford much. So I moved to my grandparents' so my Mom could get back on her feet money-wise. Of course, my grandmother hated my Dad since he hurt my Mom and me. So I didn't see him then either (not that I think or thought then that he wanted to see me). I wanted to see him so bad. I felt like it was my fault that I couldn't see him. My grandmother would hear me crying, and I guess she didn't know what to do because she just left me there to lie awake sobbing into the covers.

I would hug stuffed animals and wish so bad that they could be him. I guess I really wished that she would have come up and held me and made me feel a little more wanted by someone. When my Dad stopped calling I felt like he didn't love me. I know it's not true, and that she did it because she loved me, but when my Mom dropped me with my grandparents, I felt that she didn't love me either. So when my grandmother left me in my room crying, I felt even more unloved. Four years later my Mom was ready to take me back and we moved to (state).

And about another year or two later puts us back in the parking lot. Right then my Mom found a parking space. We sat in the space for a few minutes. I was glued to the car window, my eyes scanned the parking lot looking for him in his car. I don't think my

In that very moment I was ready to forgive him for everything he'd ever done. But to do that I think that he has to forgive himself. Which he still hasn't done.

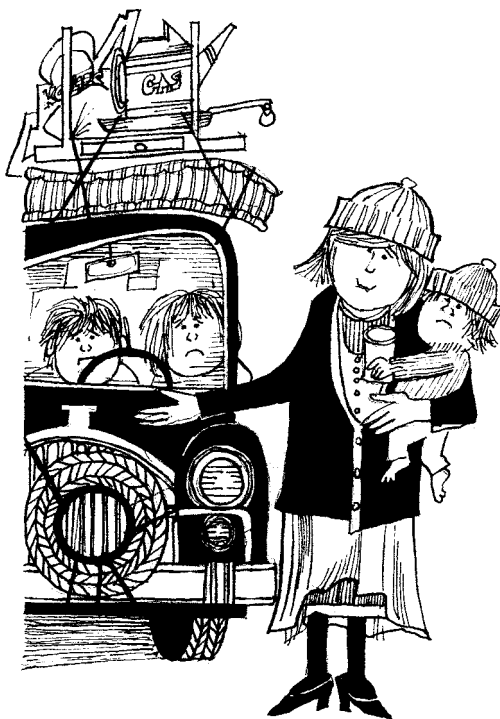
eyes had ever worked so hard to see something. All of a sudden there he was. I freaked out. "Look, Mom, there he is! He's really here!" I think she was relieved to see him. She didn't want to let me down again.

When I was a kid, we would go to his house to see him, and he was never there. I remember we would leave a note in the door. I would cover it in hearts and smiley faces. I would say to my Mom as we walked back to the car, "think he'll get the note? I really want to see him. I didn't mean to be bad." She would smile and say, "I dunno."

So when I saw him, I screamed, jumped, opened the car door, and ran to him. He gave me this hug that lifted me off my feet and around in circles. I felt like I could fly away with him and never come back. I couldn't remember the last time I saw him, but it was the best feeling in the world to see him again.

In that very moment I was ready to forgive him for everything he'd ever done. But to do that I think that he has to forgive himself. Which he still hasn't done. I don't know if he ever will, but I want him to know that he can because I have already done so.

As we walked into the pizza place, I held his hand in mine with the biggest smile on my face. I never wanted it to end. I looked at the cashier and told her proudly, "This is my Dad. We're gonna get some pizza." She looked a little confused but said, "Okay," and asked us what we wanted. We got the pizza and as we ate, my Dad and I caught up on what we had missed. I told him about school and my friends. When we were done eating, my Dad



told me that he needed to talk to my Mom.

He gave me about three dollars in quarters and told me I could go play the games. As I walked back to the table with a gumball and three bouncy balls in my hands, plus a sucker in my mouth, I saw tears in my Mom's eyes. I got to the table and my Mom and Dad noticed that I was there. My Mom quickly wiped her eyes.

"Hey, kid-o. How'd you do?" my Dad asked.

"Look. Bouncy balls. They bounce real high! See."

I threw the ball to the ground and watched it speed back up toward me and caught it in my hand. I held out my prize for my parents to see. "Cool," said my Mom. "Well, Chelsea, I have to go, but I'm gonna try and see you soon." I wasn't sure if I could believe him, but I could feel the tears well up behind my eyes and all I know was that I wasn't going to let him see me cry. I didn't want to cry. I wanted

to show him how brave and tough I was, so I turned without a word and walked out of the building. My Dad put me in the car, and I couldn't take it anymore. I burst into tears. I was so scared that it would start all over again. I wouldn't get to see him again. I wouldn't get to talk to him again. He promised that we would write and we could call each other sometimes. I knew I didn't believe him, but I didn't dare say anything.

He told me that his new wife would be mad if she knew that he had seen my Mom and me. It made me mad in a way. She had had him for the past six years. Couldn't I see him more that once every six years? I mean he is my Dad for heaven's sake! It just wasn't fair. Aside from it all, I said okay.

He told me that he loved me. I wanted to believe him. I wanted it to be true, but it didn't seem like it. He kept saying that he meant it, that he loved me more than I would ever know, and I thought, "**Not more than your new wife,**" (emphasis added) but I didn't say that. I was too scared that he would get mad at me and he would change his mind.

So just like I always do, I told him that I loved him too. Then he left. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep that night. I knew I would stay up crying again, and I didn't want to have to, but I knew that I was going to. I hate crying.

Like he promised, we wrote, and I've been getting to see him more and more. I'm still so scared to mess up. I'm afraid if I get bad grades or leave a candy wrapper on the table at his house or not clean up enough that he won't want to see me anymore.

I hate being so scared of love. Whenever I get close to someone, I'm afraid to be me because they won't like the real me. I guess I can't give up on love. So now I'm even going to see him once a month every month. The visits never seem to be enough to take back all that he and I missed. It never will be enough to take back all the times he couldn't protect me from things that shouldn't have happened

to me when I was little.

There never will be anything to take back all the tears I shed. All I know to do now is to spend my time as well as possible, not to give up, and learn from everything that has, is, and will ever happen to me.

Comments

In the opening to this narrative, I said that priests have been silent while children suffer. Silent about what? Divorce. I cannot remember hearing a sermon on divorce the past forty years. Many of my friends and relatives have taken their marriage troubles to a priest and gotten the advice to file for divorce—“You don’t have a marriage,” they have been told in similar terms—and to petition for an annulment. That is the message that has been promoted for Catholic families for the past four decades.

Today Catholics divorce in the same percentages as non-churchgoing people and they go on to date or keep steady company with a member of the opposite sex as if they have a right to remarry.

What is the effect of this pattern of behavior? Chelsea articulates it well. Crying oneself to sleep many nights because parents do not stay together. Parents separate because they are not happy, there is too much stress living together, they are not getting along, there are angry words, hateful behaviors.

Who told them that they don’t have a marriage if they don’t have a storybook life? There is a misconception going around in Catholic circles that the interpersonal relationship between husband and wife is a good of marriage which is to be considered first.

In the 1970s canonists began to write about a new discovery that they found in *Gaudium et Spes* which they interpret to change the object of the matrimonial contract from a right to the conjugal act to a right to the community of conjugal life.¹

The now Cardinal of New York, Edward

Parents separate because they are not happy, there is too much stress living together, they are not getting along, there are angry words, hateful behaviors.

Egan wrote an article in the 1984 Journal of Canon Law for the Sacred Roman Rota that such an interpretation of *Gaudium et Spes* is incorrect. The article is titled “The Nullity of Marriage for Reason of Incapacity to Fulfill the Essential Obligations of Marriage.”²

Egan is not impressed with the thinking of canonists who came up with what are essentially new reasons to declare marriages null. He writes the following in the article just mentioned:

Every year tens of thousands of marriages are declared invalid by tribunals of Roman Catholic dioceses, especially in the English-speaking world, because of an alleged incapacity, distinct from impotence, in one or both of the partners to fulfill the essential obligations of marriage. . . .

[Canonists announce] with evident pleasure that a wondrous, new discovery has recently been made regarding the nature of marriage. . . . [that] the merely physical, carnal, even animal view of marriage which so long stalked the unhappy path of Catholic theological and canonical thinking has at last been abandoned. In its place we are now to admit a more spiritual, human, and personal understanding of marriage in which the central issue is the relationship between the partners, their mutual fulfillment, completion, integration, and enrichment.

Hence we are finally in a position to acknowledge that a marriage in which such a relationship has not been achieved or at least could not have been achieved in appropriate measure is invalid and susceptible of being declared such by tribunals of the Roman Catholic Church.

Egan says that such a premise is false and he refers to authorities from Thomas Aquinas to Peter Cardinal Gasparri to prove his position that the new discovery is neither new nor

***The priest is moved by sympathy
and often gives advice that leaves
children hating the church.***

a discovery. MARRIAGE IS TODAY WHAT IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN: THE GIVING TO AND RECEIVING FROM ANOTHER OF THE OPPOSITE SEX THE EXCLUSIVE RIGHT TO CONJUGAL ACTS AS LONG AS BOTH PARTIES ARE ALIVE.

Today's thinking says that there is not a marriage if all is not peace and love. But what human endeavors can outlast 30-40 years of living together and avoid the pitfalls that virtually every couple faces? There is no such thing, or if there is, it is very rare.

In the meantime, the Chelseas of the world cry themselves to sleep at night knowing that Dad loves his new wife more than the little girl who is growing up without him. Catholic teaching does not allow divorce/dating/remarrying. That lifestyle not only creates misery on earth but it leads to eternal punishment, not to eternal life.

The priest in the parish where I live hired a widow, who is free to date, to head his religious education program. But when I found out quite by accident that she is dating a divorced man, I asked them all how that can be. The widow politely told me that it is a personal matter. The divorced man yelled in my face that it is none of my business, and the priest told me that the divorced man is "properly disposed."

I had asked the priest if the man had a decree of nullity of his marriage, and the priest told me, "I won't tell you," which means that he doesn't. The term "properly disposed" is the priest's solution for personal sin without calling it that, and, after making sure that I understood him, I discerned that, if that is the case, pederast priests are "properly disposed" to do what they do. Which he did not appreci-

ate, but he didn't offer an argument against my conclusion either.

Divorce/dating/remarrying in or out of the Church is going on among Catholics all across America, and if anyone brings up the subject of the sinfulness of such lifestyles, that person is persecuted. St. Paul had the answer to the children who cry themselves to sleep over loss of their family life a long time ago when he told the Corinthians, who lived in a decadent society like ours, that a woman is not to leave her husband, and if she does, that she is to live the rest of her life alone. (1 Corinthians 7:10-11)

The problem today is two-fold as I see it. One, no one preaches on sin. God hates divorce (Malachia 2:16); divorce is a grave offense against the natural law (Catechism of the Catholic Church, # 2384); the Catechism calls it a plague and says that divorce traumatizes children # 2385; and study after study has shown the evil effects of divorce upon children.

Two, priests often counsel unhappy married people, usually women, who sit in their offices crying that they have been abused by their husbands (aren't we all abused in one way or another?), and that they have found a man who treats them well (for the time being at least). The priest is moved by sympathy and often gives advice that leaves children hating the church.

But the children are not there in his office telling him their side because often they don't know how to present their case. But 12-year-old Chelsea, in the account above, in her seventh-grade English class in a public school, unwittingly figured out how to do it. And I just happened to be there to hear her presentation and to see the effect it had on her classmates who were silent for a while after she finished.

But did any of them see the real evil that Chelsea has lived with for so many years of her childhood? Probably not because they

have counselors who “help” them through the divorce of their parents. A divorce that should never have happened.

Pope John Paul II gave a yearly address to the Sacred Roman Rota, and often his remarks addressed the scandal of annulments in the English-speaking world, which has fueled the divorce rate among Catholics I would argue, while many canonists argue the other way around, that new grounds for nullity have been offered in order to deal with the rising rate of divorce among Catholics. Either way, the solution of granting many ordinary process decrees of nullity for divorced people is not a solution.

In his address to the Rota in January 2003, Pope John Paul II said that marriage is a participation in the Cross that includes the bearing of suffering. He said that the rosary has shown itself particularly effective in bringing families together. Marriage involves suffering and before Vatican II, we were taught that.

If Chelsea’s mom had been told that leaving her husband would crucify her daughter, would she have done it? If she had been told that it wasn’t Chelsea’s idea to form a family, it was hers, would she have put such a burden of suffering on her little girl? If she had been told that it is not about her, it is about her little

girl’s need for her father, would she have left her husband?

I don’t think a lot of people would put their children through the awful trauma that Chelsea’s mom put her through if we had a few good priests who would preach like St. Paul in our modern American Corinth.

Please, Father, begin now to prepare some powerful sermons to preach to your people this Sunday and for weeks to come on the evil of the breakup of the family. May I suggest that you begin the first Sunday by reading Chelsea’s essay and see if it has the same effect on your parishioners as it had on her class? Millions of Chelseas who have been crying themselves to sleep through much of their childhoods, will appreciate you. ■

End notes

¹ *Documentation II on Marriage Nullity Cases* compiled by J. Edward Hudson, Ottawa, St. Paul University Faculty of Canon Law, 1979.

² “The Nullity of Marriage for Reason of Incapacity to Fulfill the Essential Obligations of Marriage,” *Ephemerides Iuris Canonici*, Rome, 1984, available at defendingmarriage@yahoo.com.



Mrs. Bill (Sheryl) Temaat lives in Monument, Colorado. She earned a Masters degree in education at Regis University in Denver. She is a substitute teacher in the public schools and a freelance writer. Her most recent article for HPR appeared in the March 2006 issue.