

Archbishop Sheehan: How to lose Catholics and alienate people

Jamie Manson | Apr. 11, 2011 Grace on the Margins

One of my earliest memories of church is watching my mother being forced to abstain from the Eucharist during my First Holy Communion. The scene is still vivid for me.

I sat in the third pew, squirming in the frilly, miniature bridal gown and veil that we were required to wear. When I returned from my first taste of the host and sacramental wine, I turned around to watch my family receive communion.

I saw my mother kneeling alone in a pew, looking at turns sad and embarrassed. The pews around her had been vacated by Catholics worthy of receiving communion. My mother kneeled in that empty pew. She was the only parent of a new communicant who didn't receive Eucharist that day.

I wasn't surprised to see my mother there. Five years earlier, she divorced my father. Two years after that she remarried. Not having the several thousand dollars she was told the annulment process would cost, her second marriage took place with a justice of the peace. When I was in sacramental preparation, my mother met with the pastor of our Long Island parish to ask if she could receive communion at my ceremony.

"Absolutely not," he immediately replied, "you are excommunicated."

My formal introduction to Holy Communion was defined by this image of my mother's excommunication. Sometimes I wonder whether this moment didn't give birth to my vocation as an outspoken, progressive Catholic.

Reading Archbishop Michael Sheehan's recent letter of admonishment to divorcees and cohabitating couples immediately brought me back to that pew. Sheehan, who is the archbishop of Santa Fe, offers a lamentation on "three groups of people who are living contrary to the Gospel teaching on marriage: those who cohabit; those who have a merely civil union with no previous marriage; and those who have a civil union who were married before."

If you belong to any of these groups, Sheehan would like to remind you that you are in "great spiritual danger." And, as a result, you "are objectively living in a state of mortal sin and may not receive Holy Communion." You should also abstain from being a Eucharistic minister and from taking on the role of godparent. When it comes to your participating in other parish activities or organizations, the pastor should be consulted for a final judgment.

But, Sheehan counsels, "Prudence is needed, avoiding all occasions of scandal."

Throughout Sheehan's letter, the archbishop appeals to the "teachings of the gospels" to support his enforcement of the church's teachings on marriage and divorce. In fact, there is only one passage in one of the gospels on marriage, in Matthew 19: 1-12. Sadly, the rest of Jesus' teachings in the four gospels seem lost on Sheehan.

If Jesus believed that anyone he met was in "great spiritual danger," the first thing he would do would be to invite that person to his table. Jesus would want to learn the individual's story. Jesus would invite that person into community and remind her that she is God's beloved. Jesus also might have called the religious authorities hypocrites, as he does in Matthew 23:13, 28, for "locking people out of the kingdom of heaven" and for being like "white washed tombs . . . full of hypocrisy and lawlessness inside."

For five years after my communion, my mother continued to abstain from the Eucharist. Around the time that I was preparing for Confirmation, a group of Franciscans came to our parish to offer a mission week. By this time, she had divorced her second husband (on grounds that would have quickly earned her an annulment, if she had applied for one).

Something about the Franciscans' message resonated with my mother, so she made her confession to one of their priests. She explained to the priest the reasons why she didn't take communion, but expressed her desire to be able to receive at my confirmation Mass. The priest listened to her story. And he strongly encouraged her to start receiving the Eucharist again.

This priest understood that the table of the Eucharist was established by Jesus and, ultimately, belongs to God alone, not to any human being or institution.

Years later my mother and I moved to a new parish. They put out a call for Eucharistic ministers. My mother was eager to serve, but feared that the pastor would ban once he learned of her divorces. To my mother's joy, the pastor welcomed her.

The years that she has served as a Eucharistic minister have been the most meaningful time that she ever spent in church. She is honored to be able to offer Jesus to others, and always tears up whenever she looks into the eyes of those who came to her to receive communion.

There are few people more able to offer the broken body of Jesus to a hungry people than those who themselves who have been broken by loss, abusive relationships, or shattered love. It's hard to imagine a better image of the resurrected Jesus than a wounded human being offering the bread of life to another vulnerable human being.

Sheehan's letter leaves no place for God's grace to work in this way within the institutional church. The sacraments are meant to work in people's lives to deepen our communion with God and others, to heal wounds, and to offer meaning and consolation. They are not a prize awarded only to those who follow doctrine and church law to the letter.

Few cohabitating Catholics will endure processes like annulment or change their living arrangements in order to be welcomed back into church and its sacraments. The institutional Church simply does not hold this kind of power over the lives of Catholics anymore.

Words like Sheehan's only create feelings of judgment and shame and, therefore, only further sever a Catholic's ties to the institution. Once again, the hierarchy fails to understand that it has a far better chance of communicating the teachings of Jesus and the meaning and power of the sacraments by welcoming Catholics into the church as ministers or godparents, regardless of their married state and living situation.

There is little doubt that Sheehan's reassertion of the church's doctrine of marriage is one small prelude to the Catholic institution's forthcoming symphony of anti-gay marriage movements, composed, no doubt, to coincide with the 2012 elections. The hierarchy's deepening involvement in politics is symptomatic of religious leadership scrambling for power in reaction to a loss of influence and moral authority over its flock.

How tragic that the church is willing to cut off so many of its faithful from the sacraments in order achieve the conformity it needs to achieve its political goals. How many more eight-year-olds will not have their parents join them the first time they approach Jesus' table?

Though Sheehan delivered this letter in the middle of Lent, he signs it, "Sincerely yours in the Risen Lord." For reasons far deeper than the liturgical calendar, it might have been more apt to have signed it "yours in the crucified Lord." For in his words and actions, he has only further fractured the body of Christ.

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