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Close canon law books and open doors of love

Michael Leach | Jun. 19, 2012 Soul Seeing

Aunt Mary and I were the same height when I was 12. She was as wise as Yoda and her charity reached the stars. She helped raise me.

God looked at Aunt Mary and beheld devotion and generosity. The church looked at her and saw a divorced and remarried woman who was unworthy to receive the Eucharist.

Aunt Mary?s first husband used to beat her bloody. When she was pregnant he tricked her into going to an abortionist. She took one look around and fled. He found her and pounded her so she would lose the baby. My cousin Genevieve was born healthy and Aunt Mary protected her until one day her husband got so mad he beat Aunt Mary to a pulp and ground a ring into the crying baby?s leg so hard it almost had to be amputated. Today Genevieve, in her 80s, still has a hole in her thigh you can put your fist through.

Aunt Mary, to protect her child, tried to get an annulment but she didn?t qualify.

So my grandfather took her to a divorce attorney as a last resort. Aunt Mary qualified for the divorce.

Years later Aunt Mary married my Uncle Louie. ?I could not have had a better father,? says Genevieve. ?He was my real father. He wanted to adopt me but my birth father wouldn?t allow it. Everyone knows my mother and father were the most loving people in the world.?

Uncle Louie and I were the same height when I got to be 21. Uncle Louie was always a man. He helped raise me, as well as Genevieve and my cousin Ronald, who was born two years before me. Oh, I didn?t tell you? I was child of divorce too.

When I was in the seminary the rector told me that I couldn?t be a priest in my hometown of Chicago because my mother was divorced and it would be ?a scandal to the faithful.? Fortunately my pastor was Bishop Bernard Sheil and when I told him, sick of heart, what the rector had said, he rushed to the phone and yelled at the rector never to talk about my mother like that again. I became a priest in Chicago.

As a seminarian I tried to persuade Aunt Mary that God wanted her to receive Jesus in the sacrament but, unlike my mom, she wouldn?t. She and Uncle Louie went to Mass every Sunday but never received because the

church said so. When I became a priest, I thought she?d pay more attention to me, but she just couldn?t. It was the rule.

When I was a priest at a home for dependent children I often called on Aunt Mary?s kindness. On visiting Sundays I?d always have about 20 kids who had no visitors. I?d pack them all on the school bus and take them to the lake or to a museum or to their favorite place of all, Aunt Mary?s house in nearby Skokie. She?d bake cookies or cook pasta and the kids would help her and clean up when they were done. Her house, need I say, was equivalent to her size but as welcoming as heaven. Some of the kids always asked to see her shrine to the Sacred Heart on the bedroom dresser. Surrounding it like Star Wars figures were a dozen little plaster saints. ?This is St. Anthony,? she told them. ?He helps you find things. This is St. Therese; she was called the Little Flower. Here is St. Joseph: He was Jesus? father on Earth.? I thought of Genevieve and Uncle Louie.

Uncle Louie died in 1986, Aunt Mary in 1990. She received Communion in her last days, thanks to a priest who wasn?t her nephew and who understood what Eucharist is. He knew that none of us receive the life of Jesus because we are perfect. We receive it because all of us need to be made whole.

Recently, a priest in Austria announced at a first-Communion Mass that anyone divorced and remarried was forbidden to come to the altar and receive Communion. Only Catholics who are in a state of grace, he said, are worthy to receive the body and blood of Christ. When Communion time came, in solidarity not a single adult left the pew. They knew: We are all Aunt Mary and Uncle Louie.

Divorced and remarried Catholics remind us of something the church doesn?t understand about Eucharist. It is Christ?s gift to all of us, especially to those whom life has hurt and whom the church punishes for being hurt. If there is not food at the great feast for ?the crippled, the blind, and the lame? (Luke 14:15-24), the church is not a family but a country club.

The rule that cheats divorced Catholics from receiving the sacrament is, amazingly, one of those nondefinitive church laws, like those against artificial contraception, general absolution, and intercommunion, that can change at the drop of a crozier. In a speech to the Roman Rota on Jan. 28, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI himself confessed that Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics is an open question.*

It?s time to close the canon law books and open the doors of love. Let Aunt Mary and Uncle Louie in! In truth, it?s where they and others like them have always been.

**An earlier version of this blog post incorrectly marked this phrase as a quote from Pope Benedict XVI.*

[Michael Leach, who edits Soul Seeing for *NCR*, is the award-winning author of Why Stay Catholic? Unexpected Answers to a Life-Changing Question.]

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