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Divorce and Remarriage of the Divorced as a Step toward Engaging in a Life with Christ and the Church?

Abstract: Divorce is one of the most difficult trials in the life of an individual and is considered a defeat by at least one of the spouses. Does it also cut a divorced couple's ties to Christ and the Church? The results of a survey conducted among the divorced couples in Slovenia from May to July 2015 are introduced in the first part of the article; they show that divorce stimulated most of the divorced persons to grow spiritually. In the second part, three approaches to the pastoral care of the divorced are suggested: improvements in the process of respectful acceptance; improvements in the marriage annulment process; creation of a path of repentance and forgiveness by considering the "defeat" in terms of spiritual growth.

Key words: divorced couples, civilly remarried divorced spouses, defeat in spiritual life, pastoral care of the divorced, survey

Povzetek: **Razveza in poroka razvezanih kot vstopanje v zavzeto življenje s Kristusom in Cerkvijo?**

Razveza je ena od najtežjih življenjskih preizkušenj in pomeni vsaj za enega od zakoncev poraz. Se zato za razvezane in za ponovno poročene razvezane zakonce življenje s Kristusom in Cerkvijo prekine? Avtor v prvem delu razprave predstavi rezultate ankete, izvedene med razvezanimi zakonci od maja do julija 2015. Rezultati pokažejo, da je zakonska razveza večino spodbudila k duhovni rasti. V drugem delu razprave avtor z uporabo ankete in teologije duhovnosti ponudi tri predloge za pastoralo razvezanih: izboljšati spoštljivo sprejemanje; izboljšati ugotavljanje ničnosti zakonske vezi; omogočiti pot pokore in odpuščanja, ki upošteva »poraz« v duhovni rasti.

Ključne besede: razvezani zakonci, civilno poročeni razvezani zakonci, poraz v duhovnem življenju, pastoralo razvezanih, anketa

Divorce is one of the most difficult trials in the life of a married couple. Helena Reščič Granda (2013, 7) claims that the divorce »is considered a defeat in life by at least one of the spouses«. Does it bring an end to the life with Christ and the Church for the divorced couple in terms of their spiritual experience? Or does it enhance it? The answer to this question poses a great challenge for the pastoral

care of the divorced. The mission of the Church is to help every person, especially the one in need. This includes helping the divorced – among which some would like to remarry or they already have – who cannot find such support within the current pastoral care framework.

The theological discussions and pastoral care practice to date reveal that the Catholic Church fails to address the needs and longings of the divorced adequately (Cereti 2009; Cumunità di Caresto 2001; 2003; Hearing 2000; Kasper 2014; Leonard 2013; Schönborn 2009; Slatinek 2005; 2015; Ratzinger 2014). It is not enough that Church only applies some specific passages of God's word (Lk 16,18; Mr 10,11; Mt 19,9), Church documents, and tradition. The Church must lend its ear to the divorced. As encouraged by Pope Francis, the Church is committed to listen to all of them with respect and loving attention as given by God (Pope Francis 2014, 171). This is the guidance followed by the Synod on the Family. In the first Synod questionnaire, a special focus was placed on listening to the experiences of all families, especially those where failure, defeat, and wounds are present (Bahovec 2014, 457–459).

What should the Church theology and practice look like in order to reinforce a practical attitude of sensibility, respect, and love in light of the dead letter of the law?

In the first part of the discussion related to the answer of the above question, the results of a web survey about the divorced and the Church conducted among the divorced couples in Slovenia from May to July 2015 are introduced (Survey 2015).¹ 252 individuals participated in the survey. Some of them only provided answers on a few questions, thus only 184 respondents who answered most of the questions were included in the analysis. There were 42 males and 127 females among the respondents (15 respondents provided no answer to this question).

Only 21 participants were civilly remarried after the divorce. On this level, the survey could not reach a larger number of civilly remarried participants.

In the second part of the research, a theology of spiritual growth is employed to develop three suggestions for the pastoral care of the divorced: to improve the process of respectful acceptance; to improve the marriage annulment process; to create a path of repentance and forgiveness by considering the »defeat« in terms of spiritual growth.

1. Survey Results

1.1 Spiritual Life

Most participants considered spirituality important. For a large majority of participants (139 of 179 who answered this question), the answer to the question

¹ The web survey included 27 questions and 88 variables. Because the discussion scope is limited, only 9 questions were analyzed.

»How important is spirituality to you?« was »Very important«. 116 respondents provided the same answer to question of how important was spirituality in terms of their relationships and coexistence with other people (Chart 1).

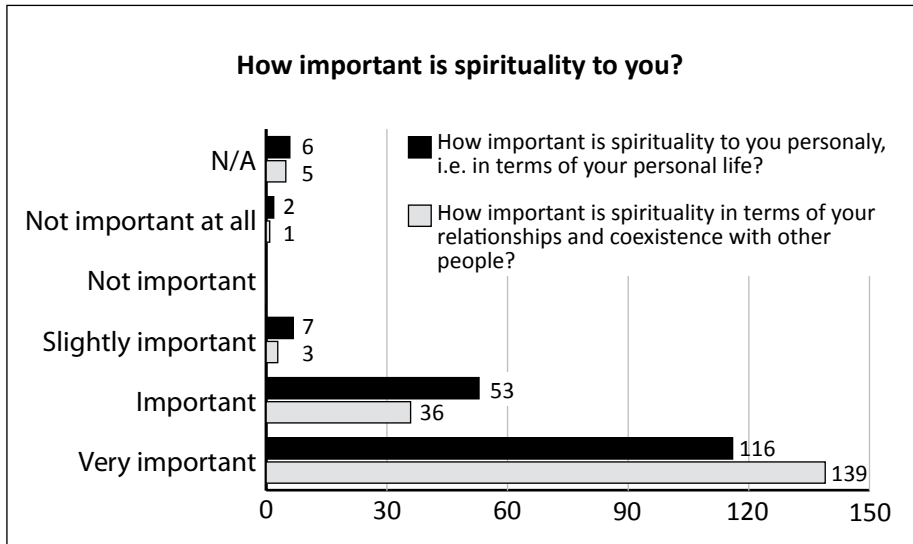


Chart 1: *How important is spirituality to you?*

Most respondents consider themselves believers (Chart 2), including some strong believers as well. These answers reflect the spiritual experiences and considerations of those willing to invest an effort into their spiritual life and personal growth.

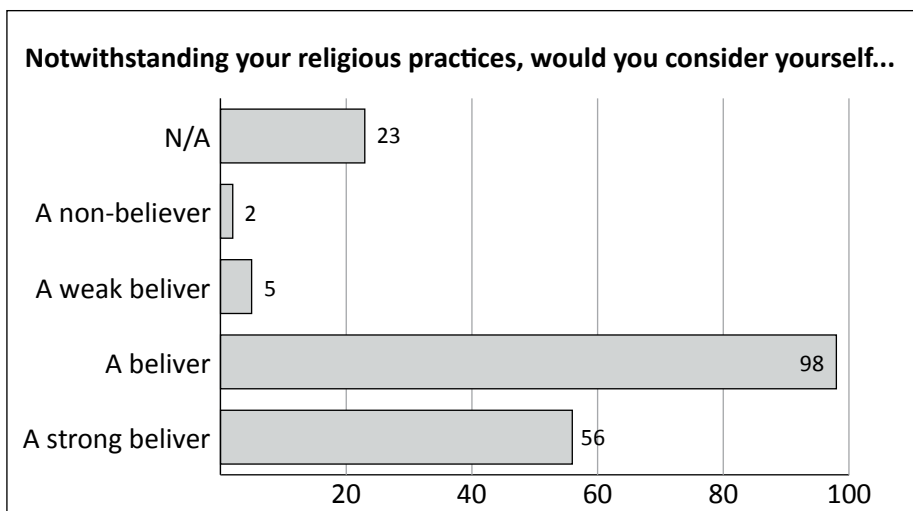


Chart 2: *Notwithstanding your religious practices, would you consider yourself ...*

1.2 Influence of Divorce on Spiritual Life

The question: »How did divorce influence your opinion on spiritual life?« encouraged the participants to briefly express themselves in this regard. This question was answered by 160 participants who wrote a few words or several sentences. The answers were classified into ten viewpoints.

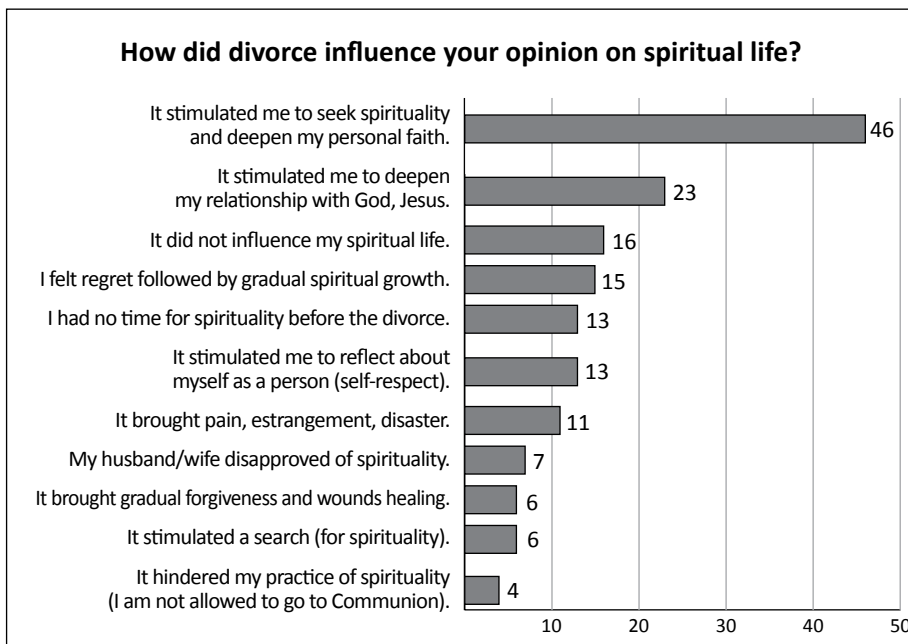


Chart 3: *How did divorce influence your opinion on spiritual life?*

46 participants emphasized that (Chart 3) the divorce had a large or considerable impact on their search for spirituality, because it strengthened it. 23 participants stated that the divorce enabled them to deepen their relationship with God and Jesus. A deeper and more engaged relationship with Jesus Christ was gradually attained by 15 respondents. Some participants (13) had no time for spirituality or did not consider it important before the divorce. Other participants (7) were prevented from freely practicing their spirituality by their spouse. Some respondents found time for spirituality after the divorce or experienced an inner need that forced them to search for new »sources« in order to continue threading their path. This was also confirmed by 6 participants who wrote that their divorce stimulated them to build new foundations in their new life. 6 respondents pointed out that, after the divorce, they started to discover the healing power of forgiveness and healing of wounds caused by the divorce.

Only 16 participants replied that the divorce had no impact on their spirituality – neither positive nor negative. Two of them were prevented from receiving the communion by the divorce, whereas ten of these participants suffered unimaginable pain, estrangement, defeat, disaster, and spiritual death because of the divorce.

The answers to the question »How important was personal spirituality to you before your divorce?« reveal that (Chart 4) spirituality was considered important for nearly a half of participants already at that time (76 of 176 respondents), but markedly less than after the divorce. The same applies to the importance of spirituality in terms of coexistence with other people and their relationships in marriage and family (Chart 4).

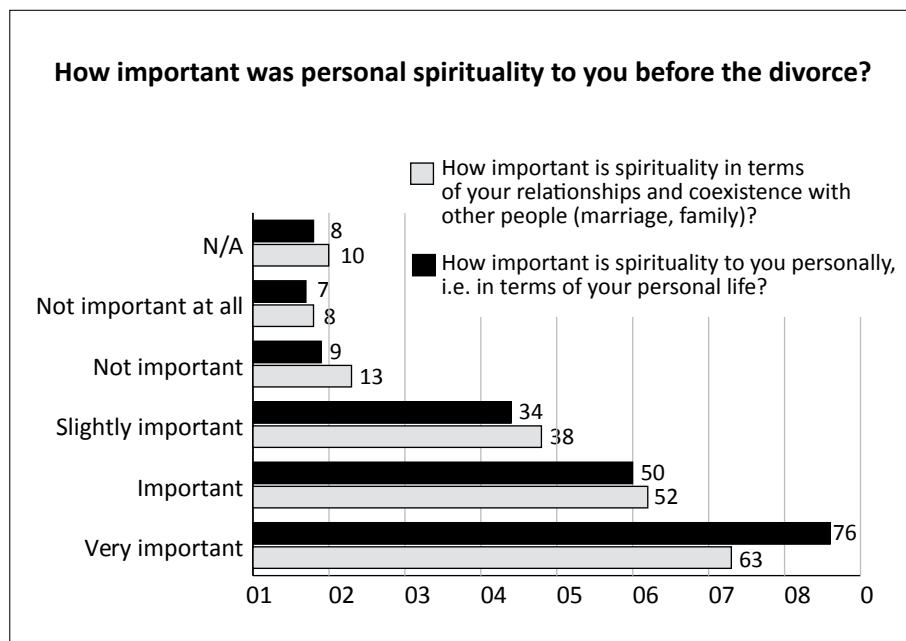


Chart 4: *How important was personal spirituality to you before your divorce?*

The positive impact on the spiritual growth of participants was substantiated by the answers to the question »How did your divorce influence your religious life (prayer, holy mass, sacrament taking etc., including your participation in the parish) in the first few months after the divorce?«. The number of all answers was considerably high (273), because the participants were allowed to choose two answers. Most (101 of 184) respondents stated that the divorce stimulated them to deepen their relationship with God and discover the true meaning of living a religious life in practice. 58 participants replied that they continued to live their religious life in the same manner as before the divorce. The most divorced (Chart 5) did not only continue to live their religious life, but have improved it as well.

Many divorced (especially civilly remarried divorced couples) experienced that other Christians started avoiding them (26) or they were dismissed from their parish life (22). In this way, many divorced strengthened or, at least, maintained their relationship with Jesus, but failed to find their place in the Church.

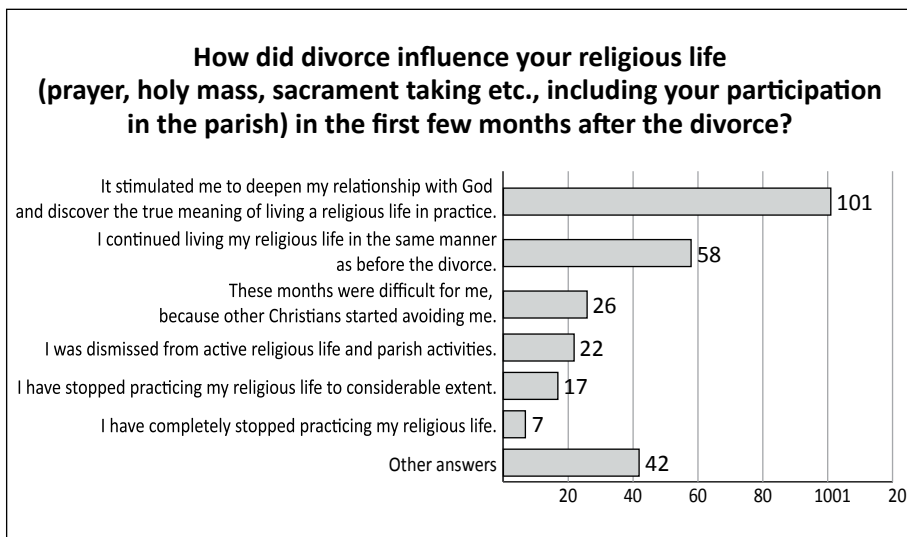


Chart 5: *How did your divorce influence your religious life (prayer, holy mass, sacrament taking etc., including your participation in the parish) in the first few months after the divorce?*

1.3 Longings

The participants indirectly expressed their longings with regard to their personal life, the Church, and changes while answering the question »What did you miss the most in your spiritual life in the Church after your divorce (and remarriage, if applicable), what were you most delighted about?« Most participants missed the acceptance by the priests and other members of the community. They also expressed a longing for priests to talk more (or simply to talk) about the status of the divorced. In their opinion, the priests almost never raise the awareness of their parish community for the evangelical relationship to those divorced and civilly remarried whose first marriage could not be annulled. What hurts them most is priests talking about ideal families, but nothing about marriage and family hardships and defeats. The same applies to religious newspapers and magazines. Many divorced and civilly remarried miss support groups, where they could meet and be listened to (similar to the support group SRCE in Ljubljana, Slovenia). A lot of civilly remarried greatly miss the opportunity to receive the confession and communion.

The longings of the divorced are especially reflected in the responses to the question of what do the divorced suggest that should change in the attitude of Church to the divorced couples and divorced and remarried couples. Every participant wrote their suggestions that were classified into sixteen most common suggestions (Chart 6).

78 respondents emphasized that they long to be respected and accepted as well as to receive compassion, attention, and understanding. They long for the

priests and the community members to realize that every one of them has their own sacred story, which cannot be generalized. Every divorced person is an image of God. They deserve all due respect as God's children and it is important to talk about them in the spirit of the Gospel. Their worst experience is to be considered a second-class Christian and not to belong to the Christian community any more.

At the same time they long for the marriage annulment process to be improved and properly formulated. The respondents stated that they would greatly appreciate the ability to receive the confession and communion. Some wrote that they long for being given the opportunity to remarry to those whose marriage could not be annulled. They also expect various types of spiritual help, such as spiritual exercises, conversation, and spiritual guidance. More opportunities for meetings, socializing, introduction to prayer, and lectures were among the common answers as well (Chart 6).

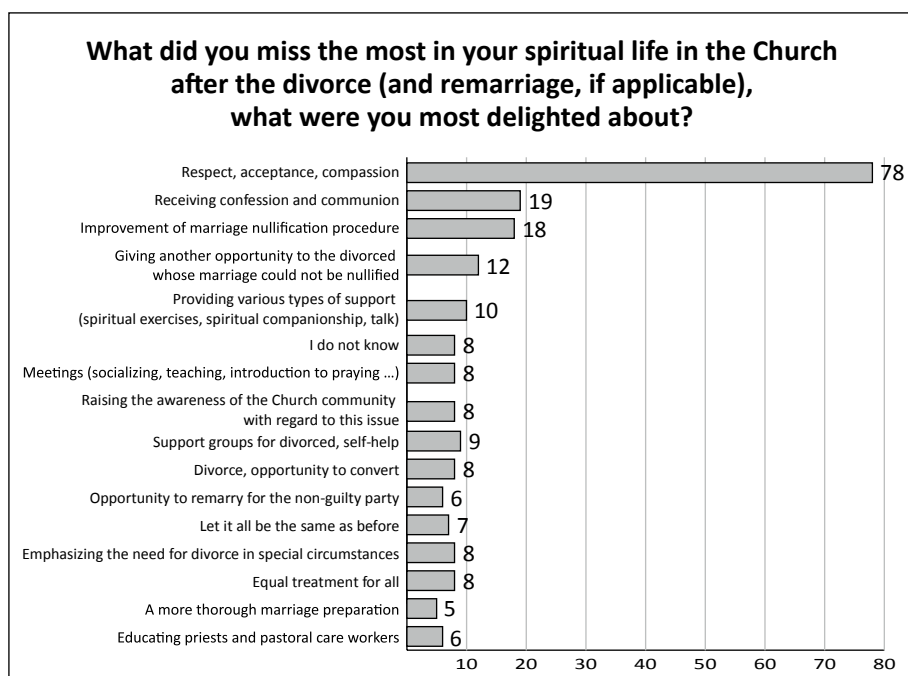


Chart 6: *What did you miss the most in your spiritual life in the Church after your divorce (and remarriage, if applicable), what were you most delighted about?*

For most participants, the summary of the answers analyzed can be expressed in two sentences written by one of the female participants: »The divorce helped me to grow as a person. I would never have attained such a deep relationship with the Lord and experienced the importance of forgiveness without this trial.« (Survey 2015) In other words, God's Spirit works in the life of the divorced (as well)

blessing them with His gifts. Nobody can persist in doing good and personally and spiritually by themselves. Entering the life with Christ and the Church is possible only by the power of the Holy Spirit (Jn 15).

2. Suggestions for the Pastoral Care of the Divorced

The above analysis implied that the God's Spirit is actively present in the life of most divorced couples. Furthermore, the majority of them experienced that the »defeat« in their marriage stimulated them through the Holy Spirit to invest more effort into their personal growth and into the relationship with Christ and the Church. Although many faced a lack of understanding by the priests and members of the Church community, they did not leave the community. Only those whose marriage could not be annulled and were only able to remarry civilly distanced themselves from the Church.

On the basis of the longings analyzed and the experiences of how the Holy Spirit worked in the life of the participants, three suggestions for the pastoral care of the divorced were developed: to improve the process of respectful acceptance, to improve the marriage annulment process, to create a path of repentance and forgiveness by considering the »defeat« in terms of spiritual growth.

2.1 Improving the Process of Respectful Acceptance

The analysis results indicate that the divorced first and foremost long for respectful understanding and acceptance by the priests and the Church community. At least in theory, the Church already supports this. Those who live by themselves after the marriage break-up already »deserve special respect by the Church«, because they remain faithful to their marriage vows (Doré 2004, 190). Nevertheless, the civilly remarried divorced couples need the practical loving and respectful acceptance more than the theory (John Paul II. 1982, 84). According to the Church doctrine, the Church does not exclude such married couples. In spite of Church encouragements, the facts show that these married couples are still being widely judged (Survey 2015). In the light of these facts, the archbishop of Strasbourg, Joseph Doré (2004, 191), asked the following from his priests: »I especially invite all pastoral carers to devote an effort so that the Christians might overcome all the prejudice and help the remarried to find their place in the Christian community.« Therefore, the first suggestion recommends that the pastoral care of the divorced is guided by the infinite and free mercy of the Father (Lk 6,36) and the pastoral love of Jesus Christ for every person (Jn 10, 13–17).

2.2 Improving the Marriage Annulment Process

The Church tribunals help discern what God united and what God did not unite. If one of the spouses entered into marriage willfully and maturely, but the other spouse did not, their marriage is not a valid sacrament, because the true intent was not present with one of them. The other spouse cannot be responsible for

this impediment. »In this way, the Church tribunals perform the duty of providing God's mercy to all who are no more bound to a non-existing or broken marriage. They can save them from misery for their entire lifetime.« (Lovše 2015)

The analysis of the divorced experiences reveals that the procedure used to determine the nullity of the consent to marriage is to be improved. The Church support in this aspect, limited largely to determining the nullity or validity of the consent to marriage, is insufficient. Even if nullity is determined in a specific case, this does not redeem persons in question of everything they experienced in this »apparent« marriage. Until such persons fully process and forgive all experiences, they are not ready to start threading on a new path in genuine freedom. Their »annulled marriage« was not only a legal formality. It was a concrete life that left various, occasionally tragical experiences on the body, soul, and spirit as well as on the memory and feelings. This issue cannot be resolved by a mere legal Church verdict on marriage nullity. The archbishop Joseph Doré (2004, 190) is aware of these issues, which is why he emphasizes: »The pastoral care of the Church – hurt by every marriage failure – must provide a place where such persons will be accepted, listened to, and directed so that all their wounds can be healed. This will also enable them to find personal and spiritual equilibrium as well as the right place in the Church community.«

The marriage annulment verdict will only bear the right fruit when the divorced person, asking for the verdict, enters into an appropriate program of comprehensive support. The support program should last at least as long as the marriage annulment process. Such a program would pave the way to a comprehensive forgiveness as well as to personal and spiritual growth. This would increase the chances of this person to walk on the path of a new marriage as a more responsible person after the positive marriage annulment verdict. It would also reduce the chances for the drama of the first marriage to repeat itself (Monbourquette 2007).

2.3 Creating a Path of Repentance and Forgiveness²

Every divorced person experiences his or her divorce in a different manner. To some, divorce represents a »defeat« of all their life hopes, dreams, and wishes they placed into their marriage and their spouse. To others, this is a salvation from the hell they lived in together with their children (Survey 2015). Every person who received the sacrament of the Holy Matrimony believed that this was the right way in their life and that their marriage would succeed. As a result, it can be sta-

² This is also one of the proposals put forward at the III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2014, 52): »Others [the synod fathers] proposed a more individualized approach, permitting access [to the sacraments] in certain situations and with certain well-defined conditions, primarily in irreversible situations and those involving moral obligations towards children who would have to endure unjust suffering. Access to the sacraments might take place if preceded by a penitential practice, determined by the diocesan bishop. The subject needs to be thoroughly examined, bearing in mind the distinction between an objective sinful situation and extenuating circumstances, given that 'imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors' (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1735).«

ted that the divorce is a type of »defeat«. Nevertheless, every person has his or her own way of dealing with this »failure«.

The above analysis showed that, through the »defeat«, many divorced experienced spiritual growth. The contemporary theology of spirituality often correctly contends that »defeat« is an integral part of life and that we cannot (and possibly must not) exclude it from it. Therefore, every refusal of this reality is unacceptable and does not comply with the genuine Christian spirituality. However, the »defeat« must be processed, before it can be accepted. It is important not to compare »defeat« with »decline«. The defeat only points to an end of something that has no future. After a defeat, the involved persons can shift their vision to genuine freedom and greater fullness of their life (Dienberg 2006, 58; Grün and Dufner 2006).

A priority task of pastoral care endeavors is to help people in the process of their constant conversion through conscious and unconscious discovery of the true image of God and by choosing to live in accordance with it (Prijetelj 2012, 169). This raises a question of whether pastoral care is utilizing all the possibilities of spiritual transformation that God can provide for every person, including a divorced person whose marriage could not be annulled. What can pastoral care do to enable every divorced person, who longs for this, to live his or her new marriage in community with the Church and receive the sacraments? How to add weight to the words and actions of the present-day Church (Rožič 2013)?

The opportunity of concrete path of repentance and forgiveness proposed by the Synod might prove as an efficient support for all divorced whose marriage could not be annulled. In this manner, the Church pastoral care could help them thread the path of personal and spiritual transformation and become witnesses of God's free mercy and love. This would bring the practice of the Catholic Church close to the pastoral care of the Orthodox Churches. The Orthodox Churches give the married couples who experience the death of their first marriage a chance to enter into a second marriage within the Orthodox community. Because they understand and consider human weaknesses and believe that repentance offers a new start, they allow for a second marriage. The Orthodox Church does not proclaim the first marriage as null, but as morally or religiously (spiritually) dead. The divorced spouse may remarry after they perform their penitence. However, the second marriage rite is performed on a lower level than the first and differs from it (Mateljan 2008, 60–63).

3. Conclusion

Can the divorce and remarriage of the divorced be understood as entering an engaged life with Christ and the Church? The given research revealed that, in spite of the limiting Church pastoral care, many survey participants experienced the divorce as a process of entering a deeper spiritual life. For the most part of the respondents, the process started when they accepted their »defeat« and began

to invest into their spiritual growth. Furthermore, three suggestions for the pastoral care of the divorced were developed based on the experiences and the longings of the participants: 1) to improve the process of respectful acceptance; 2) to improve the marriage annulment process; 3) to create a path of repentance and forgiveness by considering the »defeat« in terms of spiritual growth.

1) The participants' spiritual experiences challenge the Church pastoral care to devote a more conscientious effort in order to respectfully understand and accept all divorced persons. The fundamental attitude of pastoral care is inspired by the infinite mercy of the Father and the love of Jesus Christ for every person. It is guided by the understanding that the path of the Church first and foremost includes caring for the concrete person (John Paul II. 1979, 14). This means that the Church should also care for the divorced and civilly remarried.

2) The experiences of the divorced indicate a need to improve the marriage annulment process. If this process is to be complemented with a support program for comprehensive forgiveness and transformation, this will provide great support for the future life of the divorced. In this manner, their »defeat« can become a turning point in their personal, communal, and spiritual growth.

3) The civilly remarried persons, whose marriage could not be annulled, long for an opportunity to receive the sacraments of confession and communion. For them and for all those whose marriage could not be annulled, the Church pastoral care should create a specific path of penitence and forgiveness that would prevent its misuse (e.g. the divorced must meet all legal requirements for their children and for the joint property held with the spouse from their first marriage). Persons threading this path would be granted permission by the Church to start a new life in a new marriage. This would enable them to live in full communion with the Church and receive a fuller extent of God-given life through the sacraments. The practice of the Orthodox Church could assist in the creation of this path and would at the same time strengthen the ecumenical cooperation.

By performing such pastoral care that would actively build on these three reform suggestions, the Church would enable the divorced to enter the active testimony of God's love. Persons who experienced that they were saved by the inconceivable and free God's mercy cannot remain lukewarm Christians (Rev 3,16). The pastoral care of the divorced will bear as much fruit as it will follow the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is calling upon the entire Church (Rev 2–3) to spiritually discern where and how God acts. By means of spiritual listening and discernment, the Church will ever more understand how to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and provide effective support for the divorced.

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