

Sacred Vows and Broken Bonds: The Effects of Divorce on Catholic Families in Mutare Diocese

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how divorce impacts the relationships between divorced individuals and their families. A descriptive research design was used, targeting divorced individuals, their children, and their parents within the Catholic community. The study employed purposive sampling, which included six divorced individuals (coded D01 to D06), twelve children of divorced individuals (coded C01 to C12), and twelve parents of divorced individuals (coded P01 to P12). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that many divorced individuals reported stronger emotional bonds with their children after divorce, although communication challenges were common. Support from the church varied—some participants felt supported, while others felt judged. Children expressed initial confusion and sadness but gradually adapted to the changes. Both parents and children used coping mechanisms such as seeking social support and focusing on personal resilience. Some participants found comfort in their faith, while others distanced themselves from the church. The study concludes that divorce affects individuals and families in complex ways, emphasizing the need for greater emotional and spiritual support from the church and the community. Such support could help divorced individuals and their children cope with the emotional and relational challenges of divorce.

Keywords: Divorce, Catholic Church, Mutare Diocese, indissolubility of marriage, family dynamics, pastoral care

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is more than just a union; it's a foundation for a fulfilling life. According to Vandenberghe (2000), it creates a deep spiritual bond that ties couples to their core values, meets the innate need for physical and emotional closeness, offers unwavering companionship, encourages healthier habits, and opens doors to broader social connections and legal advantages.

Divorce, once considered a taboo in many societies, has become increasingly common worldwide, with significant effects on families. Njiru and Brian (2021) define divorce as the termination or dissolution of a marriage. Sheykhi (2020) highlights that divorce, though a painful experience for families and societies, has become increasingly prevalent across various cultures. It marks the start of new relationships, with both men and women facing the challenges and opportunities of adopting new lives, values, and lifestyles. For Catholic families, divorce presents a particularly challenging issue because marriage is viewed as a sacred, lifelong commitment. Mudinyu et al. (2024) explain that the Catholic Church provides specific guidelines for a marriage to be considered valid. These guidelines are based on the Bible, which emphasizes that a man and woman are created to support each other. For instance, Genesis 2:18-24 describes how God created a woman as a companion for man, stating, "It is not right for the man to be alone." This passage underscores the unity of marriage, as a man leaves his parents to join his wife, and they become one.

The Catholic Church holds a strong belief in the sanctity of marriage and regards divorce as a violation of this sacred bond. Familusi (2019) opines that many Christian denominations in Africa take pride in individuals who choose to marry according to church doctrines, emphasizing the importance of establishing homes guided

by denominational and biblical teachings The Church further teaches that this union requires God's guidance to fulfill the purpose He intended from the beginning (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1608). However, changing social norms have led many couples to experience marital problems, resulting in difficult decisions regarding separation and divorce. These situations not only affect the individuals involved but also have broader consequences for children, extended families, and society as a whole. Divorce can lead to emotional struggles, financial difficulties, and shifts in family relationships, which ultimately disrupt the spiritual and social fabric of families and communities (Pope John Paul II, 1981).

The doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage, a cornerstone of Catholic theology, asserts that marriage is a lifelong, unbreakable bond. However, this doctrine can come under strain in the context of diaspora, where families face marital instability due to long-distance relationships, often driven by economic migration (Smith, 2019). Studies on divorce within Catholic contexts have shown that families experience substantial spiritual and emotional distress (Jackson & Hill, 2017). However, there is limited research focused on African dioceses, especially in Zimbabwe, where socio-economic factors, such as migration, contribute to marital instability (Moyo, 2018).

BACKGROUND

Divorce rates have been rising globally due to various social, cultural, and economic factors. In developed countries, the shift towards individualism, changing gender roles, and financial independence has contributed to the normalization of divorce. Lugendo (2023) alludes that in more developed countries, divorce is often due to individualism, changing social norms, and people seeking personal happiness. In contrast, in less developed regions, divorce remains a sensitive issue because of strong cultural and religious beliefs. However it happens. Lugendo (2023) explains that in developing countries divorce is often caused by financial problems, forced marriages, lack of education, and cultural pressures. In some places, patriarchal systems, domestic violence, and a lack of legal rights for women make it harder for women to stay in marriages. Despite the Catholic Church's continued advocacy for the preservation of marriage and family bonds, divorce rates are rising even in countries with large Catholic populations.

In Europe, particularly in countries like Italy and Spain, where Catholicism is deeply rooted, divorce is still often seen as a contradiction to the sacredness of marriage. However, rising divorce rates in these countries indicate a shift in societal norms. For example, in Italy, the divorce rate has increased by over 40% in the last few decades, despite the Church's firm stance on the indissolubility of marriage (Cattaneo, 2018). Similarly, in Spain, economic factors such as unemployment and financial instability have been linked to rising divorce rates, particularly in younger, urban populations (Moreno, 2020). These trends reflect a growing dissonance between traditional Catholic teachings and the realities of modern relationships.

In India, divorce is still a relatively rare occurrence due to deeply ingrained cultural and religious beliefs, particularly among Catholics. According to Tito (2024), divorce continues to be a highly stigmatized issue, particularly for women, who often face severe criticism and are unjustly blamed for marital breakdowns. Marriage is viewed as a sacred institution, and divorce is often stigmatized, especially in rural areas. However, in urban centers like Mumbai and Delhi, where Westernized values are more common, divorce rates have been increasing. Economic pressures, changing gender roles, and urban migration have contributed to marital instability. For Indian Catholics, divorce remains a sensitive issue, and the Church's teachings about marriage and annulment continue to shape how individuals approach marital breakdowns. Studies indicate that urban Catholic couples in India are increasingly seeking annulments, as they struggle to reconcile their personal experiences with the Church's doctrine (Pinto, 2019). The tension between traditional religious beliefs and evolving societal dynamics is thus becoming more pronounced.

Uroko and Enobong (2022) conducted a study on divorce among Christian couples in Yoruba land, highlighting the growing concern of divorce in recent years. Traditionally, the Yoruba people value marriage and family stability, with divorce seen as a negative outcome. However, rising divorce rates among Yoruba Christian couples are influenced by factors such as changing societal norms, economic pressures, and individualism. Challenges like financial difficulties, communication issues, domestic violence, and infidelity contribute to marital breakdowns. Additionally, younger generations often prioritize personal fulfillment over

cultural expectations. While Christianity views marriage as sacred, modern realities have made it harder for couples to maintain these values, raising concerns about the effects of divorce on individuals, children, and society.

In Zambia, divorce has become more common due to various factors, including infidelity, age gaps, and the increase in education levels. Traditional values, such as the Imbusa ritual for brides, were meant to ensure marital stability. However, in recent years, divorce cases have surged, particularly in Lusaka, due to issues like cruelty between spouses, with younger couples, between 20 and 45 years old, most affected. The average number of divorces recorded in Zambia was 28,001 in 2017, with Lusaka having the highest rate of 5,889 cases, largely due to cruelty, and other provinces like the Copperbelt and Muchinga seeing cases related to adultery and marital disputes. (Ogutu, 2007; Kendall, 2015; Nyakale, 2011; Amato, 2010).

Historically, marriage has been highly valued in Zimbabwe, with families viewing it as a lifelong commitment. However, factors such as economic hardships, migration, and shifting gender roles have led to an increase in marital instability. A study conducted by Douglas Mambure (2022) examines the rising divorce rates in Zimbabwe, focusing on the Midlands Provinces. The findings indicate a significant increase in divorce rates, particularly among urban couples. The main causes identified are infidelity, material disputes, and communication breakdown. Additionally, the study highlights the wide-ranging social, economic, emotional, financial, and mental health implications of divorce. It also points to gaps in the legal and support systems that hinder effective divorce resolution and post-divorce recovery.

While the Catholic Church continues to uphold the sanctity of marriage, its teachings on divorce and annulment are increasingly relevant for individuals experiencing marital breakdowns. In Zimbabwe, divorce in Catholic families not only carries social and legal implications but also has significant spiritual consequences, as individuals navigate the tension between their personal experiences and the Church's teachings.

Mutare Diocese, located in the eastern part of Zimbabwe, is home to a predominantly Catholic population that blends traditional Zimbabwean cultural values with Christian teachings. Economic migration in the region has contributed to fragmented family structures, further complicating marital stability and increasing vulnerability to divorce (Moyo, 2018). Although divorce remains culturally stigmatized, affecting how families cope with marital breakdowns, some parishes offer counseling, but there is currently no comprehensive pastoral framework in place to specifically address divorce (Mushonga, 2022).

Globally, the Catholic Church views marriage as a sacrament—a holy union reflecting the deep relationship between Christ and the Church (Pope John Paul II, 1981). This belief places marriage as a sacred and permanent commitment. According to the *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1056 teaches that marriage cannot be dissolved except by death, while canon 1141 highlights that a valid and consummated marriage cannot be ended by any human authority (Code of Canon Law, 1983).

The idea of marriage's indissolubility can be understood in two ways. On one level, it applies to all valid marriages, emphasizing that the bond is meant to last forever. On another level, it allows for rare exceptions under church authority, such as the Pauline and Petrine privileges. These exceptions show the Church's effort to balance its strict rules with compassion for individuals facing exceptional circumstances (Code of Canon Law, 1983).

The Church's teachings on marriage are deeply rooted in biblical texts. For example, Matthew 19:6 says, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate," reinforcing the belief that marriage is intended to be unbreakable. Historically, during the Council of Trent, the Church strengthened its stance against divorce in response to changing societal views, emphasizing that marriage is both sacred and permanent (Council of Trent, 1563).

In practice, life's challenges often lead some Catholics to pursue civil divorces. However, in the Church's view, civil divorce does not break the spiritual bond of marriage. When certain conditions are met—such as lack of true consent, psychological incapacity, or failure to follow proper procedures—the Church can issue an

annulment. An annulment means the marriage was never valid in the sacramental sense, even if it existed legally (Code of Canon Law, 1983).

From a psychological perspective, these teachings show the Church's focus on balancing its doctrine with the emotional well-being of its members. The Church provides pastoral care to help individuals in struggling marriages, encouraging reconciliation and emotional support. This approach reflects an understanding of the psychological strain marital difficulties can bring and underscores the Church's commitment to both its beliefs and the well-being of its faithful.

This belief in the indissolubility of marriage is increasingly challenged by rising divorce rates in countries like Zimbabwe. Economic hardship and long-distance marriages due to migration often exacerbate issues such as infidelity, leading to marital strain and increasing the likelihood of divorce (Chirenje, 2021). A report from Zimbabwe's Family Council (2021) indicated a 25% increase in divorce rates among religious couples, underscoring the growing societal challenges to marital stability within Catholic contexts.

Although global studies have explored the impact of divorce within faith communities (Jackson & Hill, 2017; Smith, 2019), few have focused on African Catholic contexts, particularly in Zimbabwe. This study seeks to fill this gap, offering a unique contribution to both the academic literature and the Church's pastoral response to divorce. By examining the psychological, social, and spiritual impacts of divorce on Catholic families in Mutare Diocese, the study will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative insights from clergy, divorced parents, and community leaders with quantitative data from surveys of affected families. The study aims to balance the Church's doctrinal teachings with empathy-driven pastoral care, providing a framework for responding to the needs of families affected by divorce (Smith & Smith, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Ethical Considerations: Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Zimbabwe's Research Ethics Board before data collection. The ethical guidelines ensured that participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, their rights, and the procedures involved. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with a clear emphasis on the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw at any time without facing negative consequences (Wiles, 2018). The confidentiality of participants' responses was maintained throughout the research process, ensuring that sensitive information was protected according to ethical standards (Creswell, 2014). These measures were important to protect the dignity and rights of the participants, especially given the sensitive nature of the study's topic (Wiles et al., 2008).

Research Design: A qualitative research design was used to explore the impacts of divorce on Catholic families in Mutare Diocese. This approach was helpful because it allowed for a deep look at the emotional, social, and spiritual effects of divorce, offering personal insights into how divorce affected individuals and the wider Church community. The qualitative design helped to better understand the phenomenon being studied by focusing on personal experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Target Population: The target population for this study included three main groups. First, divorced individuals who were members of the Catholic community in Mutare Diocese and had been divorced for at least one year. This group provided insights into the long-term effects of divorce on their emotional, social, and spiritual well-being. Second, children of divorced individuals who were still actively involved in the Catholic community. These children shared their perspectives on how divorce affected family dynamics, relationships, and spirituality. Lastly, parents of divorced individuals, who discussed how their children's divorce impacted the extended family, including emotional, social, and spiritual consequences.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size: Purposive sampling was used to select participants who met specific criteria relevant to the research. This technique was ideal for selecting individuals with direct experience of divorce—whether as the divorced person, a child of divorced parents, or a parent of a divorced individual. The study involved three groups of participants: Divorced Individuals: 6 participants (coded D01 to D06), Children of Divorced Individuals: 12 participants (coded C01 to C12), and Parents of Divorced Individuals: 12

participants (coded P01 to P12). In total, there were 30 participants who took part in the study. The sample size was justified based on the goal of obtaining in-depth, rich data from each group (Creswell, 2014).

Measures: Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews designed to explore the emotional, social, and spiritual impacts of divorce. The interview guide included questions tailored to each group.

Data Analysis: The qualitative data collected through interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis. This approach involved identifying and interpreting key themes and patterns in participants' responses to understand how divorce affected their emotional, social, and spiritual well-being.

RESULTS

Divorced Individuals

The first question required participants to provide insights into how their relationships with their children changed since their divorce. Participants' responses highlighted the emotional adjustments and strategies they employed to nurture their relationships.

Theme 1: Strengthened Bond with Children

Several participants described how their relationships with their children deepened post-divorce. They emphasized prioritizing time and emotional availability to compensate for the absence of a dual-parent household. Two participants voiced:

- *"I've become more involved in my children's lives. It's my way of ensuring they don't feel neglected."* (Participant D01, November 2024)
- *"Divorce pushed me to be more present emotionally and physically for my kids."* (Participant D04, December 2024)

Theme 2: Initial Challenges with Communication

Other participants reported struggles with establishing communication and trust, particularly during the early stages of divorce. Emotional strain and adjustment periods were common challenges.

- *"At first, my kids didn't want to talk to me, but now we're starting to rebuild that trust."* (Participant D03, December 2024)
- *"It was hard to get my children to open up initially. They were angry and confused, but things have improved over time."* (Participant D06, November 2024)

The second question sought to understand the kind of support participants received from their Catholic community after their divorce. Participants provided mixed responses, reflecting both positive and negative experiences.

Theme 1: Supportive Church Members

Some participants reported receiving emotional and practical support from members of their church community. This included regular check-ins, prayers, and assistance with family responsibilities.

- *"There were people who constantly checked on me and even offered to help with my kids."* (Participant D02, November 2024)
- *"My church group prayed for me and provided me with much-needed emotional support."* (Participant D05, December 2024)

Theme 2: Feelings of Judgment and Alienation

Conversely, other participants felt judged and stigmatized by their church community. This led to feelings of isolation and reduced engagement with church activities.

- *"I felt judged when I attended mass; it was like everyone saw me as a failure."* (Participant D06, December 2024)
- *"It was hard to continue going to church when I felt people were talking behind my back."* (Participant D03, November 2024)

The third question explored whether participants' relationships with their ex-spouses had evolved since the divorce. Two primary themes emerged from their responses.

Theme 1: Co-Parenting Cooperation

Some participants shared that their relationships had shifted to a cooperative dynamic, particularly when it came to parenting. They described working together for the well-being of their children despite personal differences.

- *"We're not best friends, but we've found a way to work together for the kids."* (Participant D04, November 2024)
- *"We now focus on co-parenting, putting aside our differences for the sake of our children."* (Participant D02, December 2024)

Theme 2: Continued Strain and Conflict

Others reported that their relationships with their ex-spouses remained strained. Communication challenges and unresolved conflicts were recurring issues.

- *"It's still hard to talk to my ex without arguing; we haven't reached a place of understanding."* (Participant D06, December 2024)
- *"We barely communicate unless it's absolutely necessary."* (Participant D03, November 2024)

The fourth question investigated how participants' spiritual lives were affected by their divorce and whether their involvement in church activities had changed.

Theme 1: Strengthened Faith

For some participants, divorce became a catalyst for spiritual growth. They turned to prayer and other religious practices as a source of strength and guidance.

- *"Divorce made me turn to prayer more often; it gave me strength."* (Participant D01, November 2024)
- *"I feel closer to God now because I've learned to lean on Him during tough times."* (Participant D05, December 2024)

Theme 2: Spiritual Alienation

Other participants reported feeling alienated from their faith due to perceived judgment or their own emotional struggles.

- *"I stopped going to church for a while because I felt like I didn't belong anymore."* (Participant D06, December 2024)

- *“The divorce made me question my faith, and I’m still struggling to reconnect with the Church.”* (Participant D04, November 2024)

The final question asked participants how they coped emotionally with the challenges of life after divorce.

Theme 1: Seeking Social Support

Many participants relied on their social networks, including friends, family, or professional counselors, for emotional support.

- *“My friends have been my backbone. I can always count on them to listen.”* (Participant D03, November 2024)
- *“Counseling helped me a lot; it gave me tools to manage my emotions better.”* (Participant D02, December 2024)

Theme 2: Personal Resilience and Adaptation

Some participants focused on personal growth and finding inner strength to navigate life after divorce.

- *“I’ve learned to be independent and focus on what makes me happy.”* (Participant D04, December 2024)
- *“It’s been tough, but I’ve found strength in knowing I can handle things on my own.”* (Participant D06, November 2024)

Children of Divorced Individuals

The first question required participants to share their feelings upon learning about their parents’ divorce. The themes that emerged were:

Theme 1: Confusion and Shock

Participants commonly expressed feelings of confusion and shock when first informed about their parents’ divorce.

- *“I didn’t understand why my parents were separating. It was hard to process.”* (Participant C01, November 2024)
- *“It felt like my world was falling apart when they told me about the divorce.”* (Participant C03, December 2024)

Theme 2: Sadness and Fear

Many participants described feelings of sadness and fear, particularly about how the divorce might affect their family structure and their own lives.

- *“I was sad all the time. I worried about whether my mom would be okay.”* (Participant C02, November 2024)
- *“I was scared of what my life would look like after the divorce.”* (Participant C04, December 2024)

Participants were asked to describe how their family life had changed since their parents’ divorce. The themes that emerged included:

Theme 1: Adjustments in Living Arrangements

Children highlighted significant changes in their living situations and routines.

- *“We had to move houses, and I now see my dad only on weekends.”* (Participant C05, November 2024)
- *“It’s strange not having both parents around all the time.”* (Participant C06, December 2024)

Theme 2: Improved Family Dynamics

Some participants noted that the divorce led to calmer and less conflict-filled home environments.

- *“Things are more peaceful now that my parents don’t fight all the time.”* (Participant C07, November 2024)
- *“I think it’s better for everyone; we’re not walking on eggshells anymore.”* (Participant C08, December 2024)

Participants were asked whether they felt supported by their Catholic community after their parents’ divorce. The themes that emerged were:

Theme 1: Supportive Church Members

Some participants described receiving emotional and spiritual support from church members.

- *“The youth group leader at my parish always checked on me, which made me feel cared for.”* (Participant C09, November 2024)
- *“There were some people who prayed for us and made me feel less alone.”* (Participant C10, December 2024)

Theme 2: Feelings of Judgment and Exclusion

Others felt alienated and judged by their church community.

- *“Some people at church avoided talking to me; it made me feel like we were different.”* (Participant C11, November 2024)
- *“I felt like everyone was blaming my family for something we couldn’t control.”* (Participant C12, December 2024)

Participants were asked to reflect on their relationship with the Catholic Church post-divorce compared to before the divorce. The themes included:

Theme 1: Strengthened Connection to Faith

For some participants, the divorce deepened their reliance on their faith.

- *“I’ve started praying more because it gives me hope.”* (Participant C13, November 2024)
- *“Church is where I go to feel at peace with everything that’s happened.”* (Participant C14, December 2024)

Theme 2: Spiritual Alienation

Other participants felt disconnected from the Church, associating it with negative emotions stemming from the divorce.

- *“I don’t feel as close to the Church anymore; it reminds me of my parents fighting.”* (Participant C15, November 2024)
- *“I stopped attending mass regularly because it felt uncomfortable.”* (Participant C16, December 2024)

The final question explored the emotional challenges participants faced and how they coped with them. The themes included:

Theme 1: Feelings of Loneliness and Anxiety

Participants shared struggles with loneliness and heightened anxiety post-divorce.

- *“I often feel like I’m on my own, even when I’m with family.”* (Participant C17, November 2024)
- *“I’ve started worrying about things more, like what will happen in the future.”* (Participant C18, December 2024)

Theme 2: Reliance on Social Support

Many participants highlighted the importance of support from friends, extended family, or counselors.

- *“Talking to my best friend about it has really helped me feel less alone.”* (Participant C19, November 2024)
- *“The school counselor was amazing; they helped me process everything.”* (Participant C20, December 2024)

Theme 3: Personal Growth and Resilience

Some participants described discovering inner strength and personal growth through the experience.

- *“I’ve become more independent and learned to focus on my own happiness.”* (Participant C21, November 2024)
- *“It’s been tough, but I feel stronger because of everything I’ve gone through.”* (Participant C22, December 2024)

Parents of Divorced Individuals

Parents were asked how their child’s divorce influenced family relationships. The themes that emerged were:

Theme 1: Strained Relationships

Some parents described increased tension among family members.

- *“It caused a lot of disagreements, especially about who was at fault.”* (Participant P01, November 2024)
- *“Some relatives took sides, which created a rift in the family.”* (Participant P03, December 2024)

Theme 2: Strengthened Family Bonds

Others noted that the divorce brought the family closer together as they rallied to support their child.

- *“We all came together to help my daughter; it made us stronger as a family.”* (Participant P02, November 2024)

- *"It's been a challenging time, but I feel like our bond as a family is now deeper."* (Participant P04, December 2024)

Parents were asked how they supported their child during and after the divorce. The themes included:

Theme 1: Emotional Availability

Many parents emphasized the importance of being present for their child.

- *"I tried to be there for her whenever she needed to talk."* (Participant P05, November 2024)
- *"I reminded him constantly that we loved him, no matter what."* (Participant P06, December 2024)

Theme 2: Encouragement of Faith

Some parents encouraged their child to turn to faith for comfort and guidance.

- *"I suggested she pray about it, and we went to church together more often."* (Participant P07, November 2024)
- *"We talked a lot about forgiveness and trusting God's plan."* (Participant P08, December 2024)

Parents were asked about difficulties they faced in their church community after their child's divorce. The themes that emerged were:

Theme 1: Stigma and Judgment

Some parents described feeling judged or ostracized.

- *"I felt like people were whispering about us during mass."* (Participant P09, November 2024)
- *"A few members of our community made hurtful comments about how we raised our son."* (Participant P10, December 2024)

Theme 2: Limited Support from Church Leadership

Others felt the Church did not provide adequate guidance or support.

- *"I expected more outreach from our priest, but it didn't happen."* (Participant P11, November 2024)
- *"The Church didn't really have resources for families like ours."* (Participant P12, December 2024)

Parents reflected on how their relationship with their child evolved after the divorce. The themes included:

Theme 1: Increased Closeness

Some parents reported that the experience brought them closer to their child.

- *"We've grown so much closer because she now shares more with me."* (Participant P13, November 2024)
- *"I feel like I understand my son better now that we've been through this together."* (Participant P14, December 2024)

Theme 2: Struggles with Communication

Others noted that the divorce created communication challenges.

- *“He became more withdrawn, and it’s been hard to get him to open up.”* (Participant P15, November 2024)
- *“We argue more now because emotions are still raw.”* (Participant P16, December 2024)

Parents were asked to describe how their relationship with the Church had changed since their child’s divorce. The themes included:

Theme 1: Strengthened Faith

Some parents found solace and strength in their faith.

- *“Praying helped me cope and gave me hope for my child’s future.”* (Participant P17, November 2024)
- *“Attending mass became a source of peace and guidance for me.”* (Participant P18, December 2024)

Theme 2: Disillusionment with the Church

Others expressed frustration or disconnection from the Church.

- *“I felt let down by how little support the Church offered us.”* (Participant P19, November 2024)
- *“I don’t feel as connected to my parish anymore; it’s been disappointing.”* (Participant P20, December 2024)

DISCUSSION

Divorced individuals in the study reported a mix of positive and negative experiences regarding their relationships with their children, church community, and spiritual life, reflecting the complex nature of divorce. Many participants described a strengthening of their emotional bonds with their children post-divorce, although they acknowledged initial communication challenges, aligning with findings from Jackson & Hill (2017), who noted that emotional connection can improve as divorced parents adjust to new family dynamics. However, this initial difficulty in communication also aligns with studies that point out the early struggles faced by families post-divorce (Smith, 2019).

Support from the Catholic community, however, varied significantly among participants. Some individuals reported receiving emotional support, while others felt judged and alienated, a finding that resonates with the work of Pope John Paul II (1981), who recognized the emotional distress divorce causes but also emphasized the need for the Church to provide compassionate support. This reflects a disconnect between the Church's doctrine and the lived experiences of those facing marital breakdowns. Similarly, Familusi (2019) highlights that, despite the Church's teachings on the sanctity of marriage, divorced individuals often feel marginalized, which may hinder their spiritual journey.

Relationships with ex-spouses were often characterized by attempts at cooperative co-parenting, although some participants continued to face tension. This observation concurs with studies like those of Amato (2010), who found that cooperative co-parenting can be an effective strategy for reducing conflict in post-divorce families, although it is not without its challenges.

In terms of spiritual life, participants experienced mixed outcomes. Some found solace and a deeper connection to their faith post-divorce, a sentiment echoed by the Catechism of the Catholic Church (no. 1608), which stresses the importance of God's guidance in navigating life's challenges. In contrast, others distanced themselves from the church due to emotional struggles, aligning with Smith & Smith's (2020) assertion that religious institutions often fail to meet the emotional needs of divorced individuals, leading to feelings of alienation.

Coping mechanisms among the divorced individuals ranged from seeking social support to focusing on personal resilience. These strategies are consistent with the findings of Sheykhi (2020), who found that individuals experiencing divorce often develop personal resilience as a key coping mechanism, but they also need external support, such as from their social networks or religious communities, to help them heal.

Children of divorced individuals initially expressed confusion, sadness, and fear, which were typical reactions to the disruption of family dynamics. This mirrors findings from Moyo (2018), who noted that children often struggle with emotional adjustment after divorce, particularly in the early stages. However, children did adjust to the changes, with some finding improved living environments while others continued to struggle with the absence of both parents together. This observation is in line with research by Pope John Paul II (1981), who emphasized that while children face significant emotional challenges in divorced families, with appropriate support, they can adapt over time.

The children's support from the Catholic community mirrored their parents' experiences, with some children feeling supported and others excluded. This reflects the findings of Jackson & Hill (2017), who reported that the extent of community support for children in divorced families is inconsistent, with some finding refuge in their faith, while others feel disconnected from the Church.

While some children experienced spiritual growth and increased church involvement, others felt alienated. This finding aligns with Pinto (2019), who observed that children of divorced families in Catholic contexts often struggle to reconcile their personal experiences with Church teachings on marriage, sometimes leading to a withdrawal from the Church.

Emotional coping strategies among children varied. Some relied on family or friends, while others developed personal resilience, reflecting findings from Lugendo (2023), who highlighted that the emotional coping of children in divorced families is multifaceted, influenced by both their social environment and personal coping abilities.

Parents of divorced individuals experienced strained relationships with extended family members but also reported increased closeness with their children as they navigated the changes. This finding supports the work of Cattaneo (2018), who found that divorce often leads to a reevaluation of familial relationships, resulting in strengthened bonds with children. Some parents found it crucial to provide emotional support to their children, while others felt that the Church did not offer adequate resources or support, mirroring the challenges faced by many individuals in religious communities as noted by Familusi (2019).

Relationships with the Church were divided, with some finding comfort, while others felt disconnected. This division reflects the tension between the Church's doctrinal teachings on marriage and divorce and the emotional and practical needs of its members, as noted by the Catechism of the Catholic Church (no. 1608) and Pope John Paul II (1981), who urged the Church to be a source of healing for those facing marital breakdown. However, as highlighted by Smith (2019), the Church's support for divorced individuals is often perceived as insufficient, leading to feelings of isolation among the faithful.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that while some participants found their relationships with their children and faith strengthened after divorce, others faced challenges, such as feelings of judgment from the Church and emotional struggles. Children, too, experienced mixed emotions but adjusted over time, with some finding support in their faith and others feeling alienated. There is a need for greater understanding and support from both the Church and the community to help divorced individuals and their families navigate these difficult transitions.

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