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WIDOWS

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An analysis of some of the dangers and temptations on the one hand, and obligations and opportunities on the other, that must be faced by widows.

PROGRAM FOR WIDOWS

D. F. MILLER, C.S.S.R.

One of the most difficult adjustments that any human being is ever called upon to make is that of the good wife, not yet far advanced in years, whose beloved husband is taken from her by death. At the same time it may be said that far too little has been written to help such widows face their new problems courageously, and build up attitudes and habits that will save them from self-pity and bring them a measure of peace.

In September of 1957, Pope Pius XII delivered a magnificent instruction for widows to the World Union of Family Organizations. This instruction will surely be the basis and beginning of many more practical and spiritual treatises for widows, just as it is for the practical thoughts that are set down here. These

should be of value, not only to those who are widows as of now, but to all wives, who, without undue panic or horror, should prudently make themselves aware that one day, in the providence of God, the problems of widowhood may be theirs.

The essential psychological factor that makes young or middle-aged widowhood a great trial is the pattern of dependence between husband and wife that is set up by a successful marriage. The pattern applies to both husband and wife, but more completely to the latter. The wife ordinarily depends on the husband for all the material things she needs for herself personally and for her home; she depends on him for companionship, sympathy, encouragement, love; she depends on him for protection from the world.

It is natural, then, that if the husband is suddenly or even after an extended illness taken by death, there will be not only the usual sense of shock and bereavement, but a feeling that, in the loss of the one on whom she depended so

much, the whole world has collapsed around her.

It is for this reason that many widows never seem to adjust themselves to what God has decreed. Instead they either fall into a continuing state of self-pity that makes them a trial to all who know them, or rather frantically and foolishly and sometimes even immorally seek compensations for what they have lost.

Pope Pius XII described these dangers well. "Some widows," he said, "abandon themselves to a kind of passive resignation. They lose interest in life and refuse to come out of themselves. Others, on the contrary, try to forget; they create excuses for themselves which dispense them from facing their real responsibilities in a loyal and courageous manner."

A well thought out and actively undertaken program will prevent such tragic happenings. The program will include:

1. A right and reasonable period of mourning.
2. Strong measures to adjust

to loneliness. 3. Readiness for special temptations. 4. The adoption of a right attitude toward possible re-marriage.

1. REASONABLE MOURNING

Grief over the loss of one dearly beloved is the most natural and spontaneous thing in the world. Such grief causes irresistible tears, just as Christ Himself wept over the death of His friend Lazarus and in sympathy with the tears of the sisters of the dead man, even though He knew that He would raise Lazarus from the grave. There is nothing ignoble about such tears. They draw forth the sincere sympathy of all the relatives and friends of the one bereaved.

Civilized society has sanctioned the custom of one's manifesting the natural grief over the loss of a loved one by a reasonable period of mourning. During that time the bereaved person withdraws from the activities of the world. Relatives and friends do everything possible to bring what comfort and relief they can.

Gradually they hope to see the passage of time and their own consoling words and actions take much of the sting out of the first acute pangs of sorrow.

There are three things that can make a widow's grief unreasonable, and the normal period of mourning powerless to heal or at least soothe the wound that has been received.

The first is the failure to apply the principles of faith and hope in God to the inescapable sorrow that is being experienced. In its worst form, this manifests itself in sullen bitterness against God. In less extreme forms it is present when the widow simply refuses to think of her sorrow in relation to the providence of God, the sufferings of Christ and His Mother, and the revealed value of suffering for the welfare of the soul of the departed and as atonement for her own sins and the sins of the world.

Grief becomes bearable only in so far as these basic truths are pondered. The widow must force herself to make acts

of faith in God's providence, that is, in the fundamental truth that God permits nothing to happen without a reason that will be known in eternity, even though what happens seems unreasonable in time. She must cultivate a strong hope that she will see her husband again, and in that hope do everything possible to bring relief to her husband, who may be suffering in purgatory.

She must, moreover, think of her own suffering as light in comparison with that of her Saviour on the cross, and of His Mother standing beneath it as He died.

Finally, she must recognize the spiritual value of suffering. If she has ever committed a mortal sin in her life, or even a deliberate venial sin, she must accept her bereavement as a far lesser punishment than her sin actually deserved. She should also think of the words of Mary to the children at Fatima, to the effect that many souls who are rushing headlong toward hell can be saved only by the patient acceptance of God-sent

suffering on the part of Christians still living in the world.

These spiritual convictions are absolutely basic. Without them, no other measures for relieving grief will prevent self-pity or lasting bitterness against God.

2. ADJUSTMENT TO LONELINESS

The special kind of loneliness experienced by a wife who has lost a good husband clearly calls for a definite program which, while it will not stifle all loneliness, will make it fruitful and meritorious. The program must have three distinct parts.

a. The first is a vigorous determination to keep herself busy at some useful work.

In case she has children who are still going to school, this part of the program will ordinarily be easily provided for. Though it is a sad thing, from one angle, for growing children to be left fatherless, from another angle it is a blessing for the widow to have pressing tasks at hand that must be done. In a way she

should feel that God has a very special confidence in her. He has made it clear that she has the ability and strength and grace to be both a father and mother to her children. He wants her to apply herself to this task with undoubting confidence that He will be at her side with ready help for all her needs.

This is true even in the case where economic pressures make it necessary for the wife to get a job in order to support the children. Sometimes in very remarkable ways solutions will be found to the difficult problem of keeping up the home and holding down a job, if the widow places herself entirely in God's hands.

Even when there are no children, or when the children have grown up and left the home, the widow should, within a reasonable time, look for some regular work to do. This can take the form of a commercial job, or, if she is well off, work for a religious or charitable organization. There are all sorts of openings for this sort of thing. It cannot be stressed too strongly that she should not give her-

self up to an idle life, in which her grief will become more intense and profitless as the years roll by.

b. The second part of the necessary program for assuaging loneliness is the leading of an active spiritual life. If at all possible in conformity with her other duties, this should mean frequent and, at best, daily Mass and Communion. It should mean willing participation in the affairs of her parish, both spiritual and temporal. The widow who drifts away from God and from spiritual activities, instead of drawing closer to God as a result of her loss, gives sad proof that she never possessed a very genuine religion. The only real cure for loneliness, and this applies to many an unhappy wife as well as to widows who had been happy wives, is to be found in a life of true friendship with Jesus Christ.

c. The third part of the program necessary for lonely widows is a reasonable amount of recreation. It sometimes happens that widows adopt and thrust upon

all who know them an attitude represented by the words: "I shall never enjoy myself again." They spoil social gatherings by their complaints and gloominess; they resent anybody who suggests that they do something that might relax them for a little while.

After a reasonable period of mourning, during which it is proper to avoid gaiety and pleasure-seeking, a widow, like everybody else, needs recreation and relaxation. This can take the form of a trip now and then, of pleasant participation in social and family gatherings, and of attending decent public entertainments. Refusing participation in all such things for an indefinite period can only warp the character of anyone.



3. READINESS FOR SPECIAL TEMPTATIONS

There are two special kinds of temptation that widows must face as a result of the bereavement they have suffered. They have been hinted at in all that has been said here previously; but they should be analyzed directly and in detail.

The first is the temptation to be and to remain resentful against God. It is understandable that in the first wave of grief, a widow may have a very difficult time resisting thoughts of bitterness against God. But when the first shock is over, and there has been time to think and meditate and pray, there is no excuse for a Christian's refusing to say from her heart: "Thy will be done, O God." There is no excuse for her giving to others the impression, by her continuing complaints and gloomy attitude, even months after the loss of her husband, that she holds it against God that He did so cruel a thing to her. Above all, for a widow to stay away from the sacraments and to do little praying is to multiply her

miseries and to deprive herself of any real hope of relief.

Therefore, from the first moment in which she is able to think calmly after the shock of bereavement, every widow must brace herself to resist these temptations: 1) to speak as if God had been cruel and unjust to her; 2) to act, by moping and complaining, as if God had made life so miserable for her that she would never smile again; 3) to turn her back on the very God who died on a cross for her redemption and eternal happiness, by giving up regular practices of religion.

The second is a temptation that may very well flow from her giving in to the first. It is the temptation to seek comfort and compensation for the loss she has experienced in sinful associations with men. This is the age-old outgrowth of self-pity which eventually could make a widow say: "I have a right to some happiness; I have a right to look for and accept love, even though it be sinful love."

As will be stated, below, it is not wrong for a widow to consider the pos-

sibility of remarriage, and after an appropriate and decent period of mourning, to take up lawful company-keeping as a possible preparation for a second marriage. But two things are forbidden, and they must be mentioned because they constitute all too common temptations.

One is to accept the attentions of, and to enter into steady company-keeping with, a man who is validly married but divorced or separated from his wife. (We hardly need mention the terrible evil of accepting attentions from any man who is married and living with his wife.) There is a special attraction between lonely people. A divorced man is lonely and a widow is lonely, and if the widow is not stoutly prepared to avoid sin at any cost, and ready to flee from the least occasion, she may succumb to a close friendship that can be an occasion only of infidelity to God and even of the loss of her soul.

The other evil is that of entering into friendship with anyone without the strictest observance of the rules of modesty

and chastity. This has to be mentioned because temptations to unchastity, which anyone may experience, are always made stronger by loneliness. Loneliness makes one long for sympathy and affection. A widow who receives such sympathy and affection will find that she must draw on special resources of grace and will power not to permit the signs of affection to go too far, that is, into the realm of sin.

4. ATTITUDES TOWARD REMARRIAGE

Three different attitudes may be adopted by a widow in this regard. They may be called 1) the spiritually perfect attitude; 2) the less perfect but not wrong attitude; 3) the spiritually imperfect attitude.

The spiritually perfect attitude is that by which a widow decides, with due deliberation and perfect freedom, that she will not marry again.

St. Paul expresses the perfection of this attitude in the words: "A woman is

bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband die, she is at liberty. Let her marry to whom she will: but only in the Lord. *But more blessed shall she be, if she so remain*, according to my counsel.” (1 Corinthians, 7:39-40)

Pope Pius XII spoke at greater length on the same theme in his address to Family Organizations concerning widows. “Although the Church does not condemn remarriage, she shows her predilection for souls who wish to remain faithful to their spouse and to the perfect symbolism of the sacrament of marriage. She rejoices when she sees the spiritual riches being cultivated which are proper to this state. The first of these, it seems to us, is a strong conviction that, far from destroying the bonds of human and supernatural love which are contracted in marriage, death can perfect them and strengthen them.”

The widow, therefore, who wants to do the most perfect thing in the eyes of God, will dedicate the rest of her life to

the service of God without remarriage. This will be impossible unless she adopt a genuinely spiritual and supernatural way of living. In due time, however, it is even possible for such widows to make a perfect vow of chastity, and thus add immeasurably to the merit they are amassing for heaven.

The less perfect, but by no means wrong or condemned attitude of a widow toward remarriage is that whereby she does not make a final decision that she will never remarry, but neither does she set her mind on finding another husband. She leaves the future open, meanwhile living up to the program outlined here in every detail. She adopts the attitude that if, some years after the death of her husband, an opportunity for a good, holy marriage should present itself, she would then make her decision with the advice of a good confessor.

The important point is that she does not center all her thoughts and anticipations on another marriage. She leaves

the possibility of that in the hands of Providence, determined to be a good widow, even if she never becomes a re-married widow.

This open-mindedness toward possible future marriage can in the course of time be replaced with a resolve not to marry for the love of God and in spiritual fidelity to her first husband. When such a decision is made, it should be accompanied by a complete dedication of her life to God, backed up by a definite and detailed spiritual program for daily living.

The imperfect attitude toward remarriage is that of the widow who, almost before a decent period of mourning for her husband has passed, makes it obvious to everybody that her main desire is to find another man who will marry her. We call this imperfect because it usually leads to neglect of primary duties, such as caring for the children who are dependent on her; it drives her into the path of many temptations, not the least of which is that of entering an invalid

marriage; and it deprives her of all peace of mind when it turns out that she cannot quickly fulfill her desire. If remarriage is to be thought about at all by a widow, it should be thought about merely as a possibility in the sense described above.



CONCLUSION

Pope Pius XII ends his instruction for widows on a beautiful note. He speaks of them as having a special vocation in the world. "The widow," he says, "has a special message for those about her. She lives more by faith, who through sorrow has won access to a more serene and supernatural world . . . to those who are too self-enclosed or withdrawn into themselves and have not yet discovered the full meaning of conjugal love, she will teach purification, necessary detachment and the unwavering fidelity that love requires.

"In regard to other widows, she will feel herself bound in a special way to help them fulfill their sacrifice and understand its significance. . . . For all, she will be one whose silent and tactful charity hastens to render service with a word or a gesture wherever a more pressing need or a greater sorrow shows itself.

“In her family or professional relationships, or with her friends, she will introduce the distinctive note that characterizes her apostolate: the testimony of her faithfulness to a beloved memory, and of her having found in this faithfulness and the renunciation it involves a more profound, more stable, more luminous happiness than that which she had to renounce.”



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