

Liturgy of the Word: Transition from Married to Unmarried Life

PURPOSE

When we join in marriage, we participate in a grand ritual of promise and joy. However, many marriages result in divorce and annulment, and we do not enlist the power of ritual to help us move through the profound grief and pain of this time. The purpose of this Liturgy of the Word is to mark the transition from a married to an unmarried state of life, gently inviting the couple into healing through a loving acceptance of this reality.

SPECIAL FEATURES

This liturgy has the following special features:

- The Rite of Thanksgiving gives each spouse the chance to share about the gifts they have received through their married state of life.
- The Rite of Reconciliation creates space for each spouse to honestly acknowledge and take responsibility for the ways in which they hurt one another.
- The Ritual of Parting marks the transition from a married to an unmarried state of life.

- The Blessing and Exchange of Gifts invites each spouse to bless the other with kind words and a symbolic gift of hope for the next chapter of life.

LOCATION

This liturgy is designed to be held in a healing environment that honors this tender transition. You can select a room in your home, an outdoor natural space, a family member or friend's home, or any other appropriate location. Select a place that provides enough privacy to share openly.

PARTICIPANTS

Often family and friends are drawn into the separation of the married couple. Invite anyone who has walked closely with you during your marriage and who may also be in need healing and have the maturity to participate without causing division and hurt. Consider whether your children should be present.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

- This liturgy is designed for couples with a certain level of maturity who desire (or at least desire to desire) the best for one another, even through the hurt.
- This liturgy assumes familiarity with the Catholic Mass.
- To create a prayerful and moving liturgy, read through the preparatory notes and script carefully. Leave ample time to pray and prepare.
- Instructions throughout the script are in red type. Send any questions to Father Anne at vaticanreject@gmail.com.
- If you have received this liturgy from a friend, please make a donation at www.fatheranne.com to support this pastoral ministry to people in need.
- Scripture quotations are from New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition, copyright © 1989, 1993 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

POSSIBLE MODIFICATIONS

As with any Threshold Liturgy, you are free to modify the content or rituals to better suit your needs.

A MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

I deeply sympathize with the pain and heartache you are experiencing during this transition. I pray that the rivers of grief that run through you serve ultimately to make the canyons of your heart more beautiful. May the Spirit penetrate you, deepening your faith in the unfailing promise that new life patiently and faithfully rises from the ashes.

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ADVANCED PREPARATION CHECKLIST

One or two weeks before the liturgy:

- Talk with your spouse and set a date and location for the service. Select a date that allows you enough time to prayerfully prepare so as not to add undue stress.
- Invite friends and family who are mature and will bring a disposition of healing and hope to the service. Explain the liturgy to them to help them feel more comfortable.
- Prepare in a special way any children who will be present. If necessary, inquire with a child psychologist.
- Both spouses must take ample time to pray and prepare for the liturgy. *Read the script carefully.* Prepare a 2-3 minute reflection for each bullet point:
 - Rite of Thanksgiving: What do I appreciate about my spouse? What is one or two favorite memories that I cherish? What gifts and blessings has been given me through this sacred union?
 - Rite of Reconciliation: What are the ways that I hurt my spouse? What is one or two particular things I regret? What do I wish I did differently? What apology do I want to offer? Write your reflections down on individual strips of paper. These strips will be burned during the service.
 - Blessing and Exchange of Gifts: What good things do I wish for my spouse in this next chapter? What do I hope for our relationship (e.g., to remain friends, to be successful co-parents, to be at peace with one another, etc.)?
- At the Blessing and Exchange of Gifts, the spouses will offer one another a gift that symbolizes new life and the goodness you wish for your spouse. This could be a photograph, a song, a piece of art, an item from nature, or an item from your life together. Select a gift and prepare to share with your spouse why you chose it.

- Select a presider for the liturgy. The presider is the main celebrant who guides the group through the prayer service. A desirable choice for this role is someone who knows and loves you both, who is comfortable with people and with emotion, and who can set a prayerful and loving tone for the liturgy. Provide the presider with the script and go over any questions they may have.
- Select three (3) readers, one for each piece of scripture—the first reading, the psalm, and the Gospel. Provide each reader with a copy of their passage. Ask them to prayerfully prepare the reading. If they are unfamiliar with reading scripture during a liturgy, suggest that they privately practice proclaiming the passage aloud in a way that gently and prayerfully conveys its meaning.
- These readers will also read one of the Prayers of the Faithful on page 13. Give them a copy of a prayer and explain the point in the service at which they will read it.
- Select a reader to read the Poem of Consolation on page 17. Give them a copy of the poem and ask them to prayerfully prepare it. Explain the point in the liturgy at which they will read the poem.
- Hold a meeting with the presider and the two spouses. Run through the structure of the liturgy (do not actually share your reflections) to make sure the three of you understand the flow.

DAY-OF PREPARATION CHECKLIST

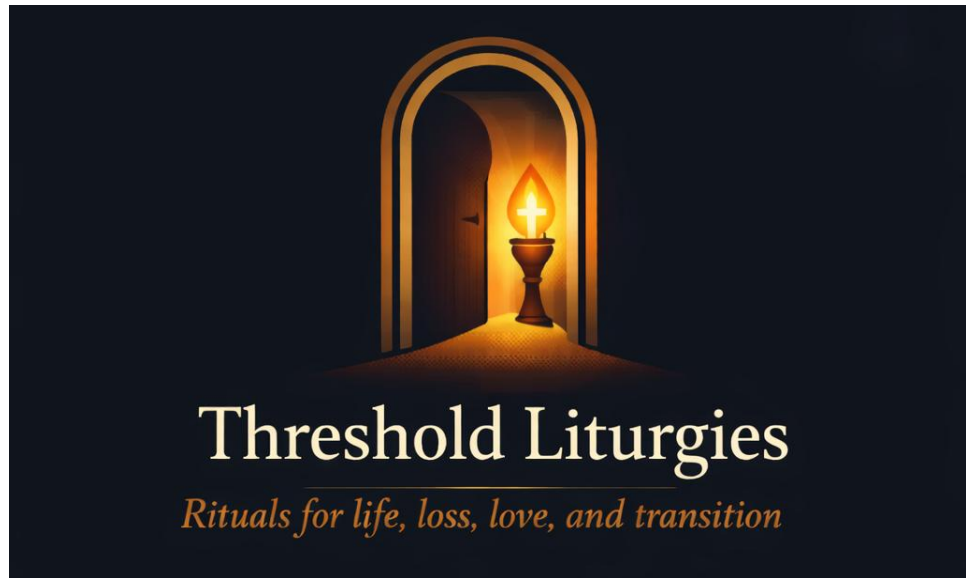
On the day of the liturgy:

- Gather the following items:
 - Altar space
 - Fabric, flowers, and candles to decorate the altar
 - One pretty glass bowl
 - One white pillar candle to place in the glass bowl
 - Sand or pebbles to pour around the pillar candle
 - Lighter, Kleenex
 - Printed script for the presider (p. 7 to 17)
 - White three-ring binder
 - Printed scripture passages for each reader—First Reading, Psalm, Gospel, and Poem of Consolation
 - Printed Prayers of the Faithful for each reader

- Create an altar space. Prayerfully decorate it with fabric, candles, and flowers.
- Put the printed script in the binder for easy use. Give the presider the copy of the binder with the script.
- Give each reader a copy of the scripture, prayer, and/or poem they will be reading. Remind them at which point they will speak.
- Place the glass bowl on the altar and position the white pillar candle in the center of the bowl. Pour sand or pebbles around the base of the candle to a depth of about one or two inches (optional).
- Have the symbolic gifts and any necessary notes for the spouses' reflections in a handy location. Place the strips of paper for the Rite of Reconciliation on the altar.

AT THE START

- When you are ready to begin, signal the presider to welcome everyone:
 - Thank people for coming
 - Go over the flow of the liturgy
 - Answer any questions
- When ready to proceed, the presider signifies the start of the service by lighting the candles on the altar. After lighting all the candles, the presider lights the pillar candle in the bowl last. As that candle is lit, the presider silently invites the Holy Spirit to come and be present with those gathered.
- The presider holds some long moments of silence, then invites the assembly to stand.



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OPENING PRAYER *(Presider)*

Assembly stands.

We begin in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *(All bless themselves with the sign of the cross.)*

The Lord be with you.

-- *(All answer) And with your spirit.*

Today we gather to acknowledge that our friends *[names]* are transitioning from a married to an unmarried state of life. Their partnership has brought many blessings. They have laughed, they have struggled, they have grown. They have welcomed children. *[Omit if the couple has no children.]* They have made a life together.

Through it all, they have strived to love one another well. Often times, they succeeded. *(pause)*

Yet, not every marriage endures all things. We strive to love perfectly like God, and often we fall short. Sometimes we painfully discover that ultimately we are unable to honor the promises we made at one time—though we made them with the purest of hearts, in the deepest of faith. *(pause)*

Today, before *[names]* part ways, we gather to thank God for the many gifts granted them, and to humbly ask that God's healing mercy wash over them as their one heart, once again, parts into two. *(pause)*

PENITENTIAL RITE *(Presider)*

As we begin, let us take a moment to praise our loving God.

Lord Jesus, you are slow to anger and rich in kindness. Lord, have mercy.

-- *(All answer)* Lord, have mercy.

Christ Jesus, when we cannot see a path forward, you make a way in the wilderness. Christ, have mercy.

-- *(All answer)* Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you never fail to make all things new. Lord, have mercy.

-- *(All answer)* Lord, have mercy.

COLLECT *(Presider)*

Let us pray: *(pause)*

Almighty and ever-living God,
hear the breaking of our hearts as we grieve
for *[names]* and the pain and sorrow they feel.
In your great mercy, help them to let go
of any broken promises or dreams,
of all they failed to do and be for one another.
Send forth your Spirit to accompany them
as they say goodbye to the life they have known,
and help them to turn and face with courage and hope
the new path ahead.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God for ever and ever.

-- *(All answer)* Amen.

Assembly sits.

FIRST READING: HEBREWS 4:12-16 *(Reader 1)*

A reading from the Letter to the Hebrews

Indeed, the word of God is living and active,
sharper than any two-edged sword,
piercing until it divides soul from spirit,
joints from marrow;
it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
And before him no creature is hidden,
but all are naked and laid bare
to the eyes of the one to whom
we must render an account.
Since, then, we have a great high priest
who has passed through the heavens,
Jesus, the Son of God,
let us hold fast to our confession.
For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize
with our weaknesses,
but we have one who in every respect
has been tested as we are, yet without sin.
Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness,
so that we may receive mercy
and find grace to help in time of need. *(pause)*

The Word of the Lord.

-- *(All answer)* Thanks be to God.

PSALM 103:8-18 *(Reader 2)*

The Lord is merciful and gracious.

-- *(All repeat)* The Lord is merciful and gracious.

The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

-- *(All repeat)* The Lord is merciful and gracious.

For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.

-- *(All repeat) The Lord is merciful and gracious.*

For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust
As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.

-- *(All repeat) The Lord is merciful and gracious.*

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting
on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,
to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.

-- *(All repeat) The Lord is merciful and gracious.*

GOSPEL: LUKE 10: 25-28 *(Reader 3)*

Assembly stands.

A reading from the Holy Gospel according to Luke
-- *(All answer) Glory to you, O Lord.*
(All trace a cross on forehead, lips, and heart.)

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.
"Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"
He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"
He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your strength,
and with all your mind;
and your neighbor as yourself."
And he said to him, "You have given the right answer;
do this, and you will live."

The Gospel of the Lord.
-- *(All answer) Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.*

Assembly sits.

RITE OF THANKSGIVING *(Presider)*

We spend the entirety of our lives learning how to live out Jesus' mission to love. Sometimes this mission is effortless, but often it challenges at the deepest level of soul. Yet, the Lord continues to beckon us forward, inviting us to become more authentically ourselves through the act of loving—especially when it is most difficult. *(pause)*

I now invite forward *[names]*. *The spouses come forward.*
Please face one another. *The spouses face one another.*

Before you part ways, let us give thanks to God for the goodness that has flowed through your partnership.

SPOUSE 1

[Spouse 1], you may now share with *[Spouse 2]* what you appreciate about her/him/them, and express some of the blessings you have received through your married state of life.

Spouse 1 shares his/her/their reflections.

SPOUSE 2

[Spouse 2], you may now share with *[Spouse 1]* what you appreciate about her/him/them, and express some of the blessings you have received through your married state of life.

Spouse 2 shares his/her/their reflections.

RITE OF RECONCILIATION *(Presider)*

Having given gratitude to God for the blessings bestowed upon you, you are now asked to humble yourselves before the Lord and take responsibility for your limitations.

Please take your offerings from the altar.

Each spouse takes their own strips of paper from the altar.

Reverse the order of who speaks first to add balance to the service.

SPOUSE 2

[Spouse 2], please express to [Spouse 1] your regrets. Spouse 2 shares his/her/their reflections. Allow ample time for this sharing.

Please give your offering to *[Spouse 1]* and repeat after me:
"I am sorry that I hurt you. Will you forgive me?"

Spouse 2 holds out the strips of paper to Spouse 1 and repeats:
"I am sorry that I hurt you. Will you forgive me?"

Spouse 1 answers: "Yes, with the grace of God, I forgive you."
Spouse 1 takes the strips of paper from the Spouse 2. Spouse 1 lights each strip one-by-one with the pillar candle in the glass bowl on the altar. Once each strip is lit, drop it into the glass bowl and allow it to burn. Make sure each strip is well lit before dropping it into the bowl.

SPOUSE 1

[Spouse 1], please express to [Spouse 2] your regrets. Spouse 1 shares his/her/their reflections. Allow ample time for this sharing.

Please give your offering to *[Spouse 2]* and repeat after me:
"I am sorry that I hurt you. Will you forgive me?"

Spouse 1 holds out the strips of paper to Spouse 2 and repeats:
"I am sorry that I hurt you. Will you forgive me?"

Spouse 2 answers: "Yes, with the grace of God, I forgive you."
Spouse 2 takes the strips of paper from the Spouse 1. Spouse 1 lights each strip one-by-one with the pillar candle in the glass bowl on the altar. Once each strip is lit, drop it into the glass bowl and allow it to burn. Make sure each strip is well lit before dropping it into the bowl.

After some moments of silence, the presider gestures the assembly to stand.

PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL

Assembly stands.

(Presider) You have given thanks to God, and you have offered forgiveness to one another. Let us now bring our prayers before the Lord:

(Reader 1) We pray in thanksgiving for the lives of *[names]*, for the companionship with which you have blessed them, and for the deep and true Christian love they have practiced today. We pray to the Lord.

-- *(All answer)* Lord, hear our prayer.

(Reader 2) We pray for all married couples who are struggling in their vows to love one another. Please bless them with patience, humility, wisdom, and direction. We pray to the Lord.

-- *(All answer)* Lord, hear our prayer.

(Reader 3) We pray for the children of divorced parents who are affected in ways seen and unseen. Pour out your peace upon them, and help them to know in their hearts that the split of their parents is not of their doing. May they feel deeply loved. We pray to the Lord.

-- *(All answer)* Lord, hear our prayer.

(Presider) Lord, we know that you hear us and so we lift these prayers up to you through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Assembly remains standing.

OUR FATHER *(Presider)*

God of Life, we now join hands and offer the prayer that Jesus left us. *Join hands. Singing this prayer is strongly encouraged.*

(All) Our Father, Who art in Heaven,
hallowed be Thy name;
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done
on earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
Amen.

SIGN OF PEACE *(Presider)*

The peace of the Lord be with you.
-- *(All answer) and with your spirit*

Let us offer each other a sign of Christ's peace.

Exchange a sign of peace.

Please be seated.

RITE OF PARTING

The time has come for *[names]* to part ways. Please come forward and face me. *[Names]*, you have freely chosen to leave your married state of life. Do you wish to continue?
Each spouse separately answers "yes."

[Spouse 1], do you desire to be released from your marriage vows? Do you agree to let go of what once was and embrace the return to an unmarried state of life? Do you trust God to guide you through this transition and lead you into new life?

Spouse 1: I do.

[Spouse 2], do you desire to be released from your marriage vows? Do you agree to let go of what once was and embrace the return to an unmarried state of life? Do you trust God to guide you through this transition and lead you into new life?

Spouse 2: I do.

BLESSING AND EXCHANGE OF GIFTS *(Presider)*

[Names], I invite you now to bless one another and send your former spouse forward into this new chapter in light and hope.

[Spouse 2], please bless *[Spouse 1]*.

Spouse 2 expresses the good things and new life he/she/they wish for Spouse 1. He/she/they present a symbolic gift and explains its meaning. Once Spouse 2 has concluded, the presider continues with the following:

Repeat after me: "Take this gift as a sign of my hope and prayer for you. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." *Spouse 2 hands the gift to Spouse 1 and repeats after the presider.*

SPOUSE 1

[Spouse 1], please bless *[Spouse 2]*,

Spouse 1 expresses the good things and new life he/she wishes for the Spouse 2. He/she/they present a symbolic gift and explains its meaning. Once Spouse 1 has concluded, the presider continues with the following:

Repeat after me: "Take this gift as a sign of my hope and prayer for you. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." *Spouse 1 hands the gift to Spouse 2 and repeats after the presider.*

*The spouses may embrace if desired.
Once they release, allow some moments of silence.*

[Names], you are now returned to an unmarried state of life. May your new lives be blessed by God's Holy Spirit.

Let us now pray with the Poem of Consolation.

Cue Reader 4 to read the Poem of Consolation.

POEM OF CONSOLATION: *(Reader 4)*

A reading from "Song of the Open Road" by Walt Whitman

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me
leading wherever I choose.

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune,
I myself am good-fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more,
postpone no more, need nothing,
Done with indoor complaints,
libraries, querulous criticisms,

Strong and content I travel the open road.

Allow some moments of silence.

CLOSING PRAYER *(Presider)*

Please stand. *Assembly stands.*

Let us pray: *(pause)*

Holy and eternal God, be with us
as *[names]* begin their lives anew.
Give them strong and wise friendships,
open and courageous hearts,
and hope for the future.

Above all, direct their hearts—and ours—
to remember that from the rising of the sun to its setting
you are always and forever
the faithful and unfailing love
of our lives.
Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

-- *(All answer) Amen.*

CONCLUDING RITE *(Presider)*

The Lord be with you.

-- *(All answer) And with your spirit.*

May Almighty God bless us, protect us,
And keep us for everlasting life.

(All bless themselves with the sign of the cross)

-- *(All answer) Amen.*

Let us go in peace, glorifying the Lord with our lives.

-- *(All answer) Thanks be to God.*

Blow out the candles on the altar.

Bury the ashes from the Rite of Reconciliation in the earth.

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