

# Annulment

A Catholic declaration of nullity, commonly referred to as an “annulment”, is a difficult issue for many Catholics. It is also widely misunderstood both by the Catholic faithful and those outside of the Church. The process often looks and feels like it is juridical and yet most of those who go through the process report how it has brought closure and a sense of peace.

It is our hope that through the questions and answers below that the divorced reader is both informed and encouraged to participate in this healing process concerning a difficult time in their life.

It is important to note that each Diocese has its own set of processes and guidelines. Much of the information contained in this website is specifically related to the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois.

## Annulment FAQ

### What is an Annulment?

What it is not might be important first.

- An annulment is not Catholic divorce. Divorce is a civil process that is concerned with distribution of assets and custody of children.
- It is not about assigning or placing blame.
- It is definitely not about illegitimizing children
- It is not about erasing the past.

When the person seeking an annulment comes to the Church their posture is really a simple question. “Was this my one and only ‘sacramental’ marriage?” The Church examines in detail the marriage to determine if, right from the start, some essential element was missing in the relationship. Was the ceremony done properly? Was each person truly free to marry? What was the intent and understanding of the individuals at the time of the marriage? What was the maturity of the bride and groom at the time of the marriage? All of these and more have a place in this examination. The answers are not always so easy to come by and often require a bit of work to uncover. But, if a problem is uncovered in the process, it may mean that the spouses did not have the kind of marital link that binds them together for life and the Church can then declare the marriage null.

### What are the benefits of an annulment?

The first benefit, of course, is that the petitioners may now celebrate a new marriage in the Catholic Church or have an existing marriage “blessed” or recognized by the Church. There can, however, be a deeper and much more spiritual benefit.

Divorce is a kind of death experience, with the grieving that normally accompanies life’s

end. Thus a divorced person may know the typical grief feelings or conditions of denial, anger, bargaining, sadness and acceptance. But divorce in some ways is worse than death. It can involve rejection and self-doubts. The divorced person may ponder questions like: Why me?; What did I do wrong?; How did I fail? There also may be resentment toward the ex-spouse.

The thorough reflection, writing and discussion with trained Church ministers involved in the annulment process, while often revisiting painfully sensitive areas, can ultimately help heal wounds and bring about closure. The petitioner may view the overall past marriage in a new light, let go of hurts or doubts and move on to a new, more productive and more peaceful life.

#### What does the process look like?

Each case is fairly unique and so the process can vary. In general, the process starts by talking with a trained lay minister at Holy Family, about the desire to explore the possibility of an annulment. They will of course want to get to know the petitioner (one seeking the annulment). At some point the petitioner will be asked to tell the story of the courting relationship, marriage ceremony and marriage relationship and how it was that they ended in divorce. With this there is a framework for further discussion. It will be necessary to understand prior marriages and divorces that may be applicable in either of the couples background. The priest or minister would then agree to be the advocate for the petitioner. During this initial meeting, an application can be filled out, a list of necessary documents will be identified and various approaches to the case will be considered. If necessary a formal questionnaire will be given to the petitioner for completion at home. Most petitioners take about 2 to 4 weeks to fill out the questionnaire and to acquire the additional documents. At that point, a second appointment with the advocate occurs to review and clarify the answers to the questionnaire.

Once the documents and questionnaire are finished the advocate will submit everything to the Diocesan Tribunal Office for review and processing. They will contact the witnesses provided by the petitioner, collect additional information and verify all of the information submitted. They will then make an initial evaluation and prepare the case. The case will then be reviewed by another tribunal in another diocese and a formal decision is given.

While some cases are technical in nature and can be done quite quickly. Occasionally communication with Rome has to occur which may lengthen the time it takes to complete a case. Formal cases may take a year, sometimes longer, to finish. A lot depends on how much leg work the petitioner is able to do up front, the cooperation of witnesses and the timeliness of everyone involved concerning required information.

If I am divorced, can I be part of the Church?

Yes. While the breaking up of any significant relationship is filled with pain and sometimes regret from sinful behavior, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is sufficient for this. It is only when a Catholic remarries after a divorce of their own or to another who has been divorced without the issuance of a declaration of nullity that there becomes an ongoing state of serious sin.

Why must a divorced Catholic complete the annulment process before remarrying?

There are a couple of Scripture passages that the Church is compelled to take seriously. Genesis 2:24 describes God's intent for us in marriage: "*That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body.*" Mark's Gospel in 10:1-12 gives us Jesus' words on the subject. Here he is being challenged by the Pharisees on the subject of divorce. Jesus is clear when he says: "*Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate.*" He even clarifies his position when he speaks of remarrying after divorce in terms of adultery. The Church cannot condone remarrying into a state of sin. Still the Church recognizing the brokenness of men and women senses that not every relationship is "what God has put together" and is therefore not "sacramental." Therefore the annulment process exists to examine that exact question.

Does a non-Catholic intended spouse have to endure an annulment process?

Yes. If a Catholic wishes to marry in the Church, even to a non-Catholic where there has been a previous marriage on the side of the intended spouse, then either that marriage must have come to an end as a result of the death of the prior spouse, or the Church must have issued a declaration of nullity, concerning that previous marriage. The Catholic Church views all marriages with respect. It presumes that they are true or valid. It considers all marriages, even those of non-believers, to be sacred and sacramental and thus covered by the words of Christ about divorce.

This can be difficult for non-Catholics to understand. However, they are seeking to marry a Catholic who is bound by the teaching of the Church and Christ's words in Scripture.

Who else will be questioned during the annulment process?

The ex-spouse (respondent) will be contacted by the Tribunal Office. Their participation is greatly helpful and welcomed. However if they do not respond this will not stop the process. Remember this is not about pointing blame. It is only fair that both persons have an opportunity to present their sides of the marriage. Sometimes all that is needed is the place where they were baptized and approximate date. If the petitioner is asked to fill out an in depth questionnaire then so will the respondent.

In formal cases the respondent and the petitioner will be asked to supply witnesses who are able to speak about the relationship during the courting, engagement and

marriage life of the couple. They will be contacted by the Tribunal and asked to complete a brief questionnaire.

[Is there a fee for the annulment process in the Diocese of Grand Rapids?](#)

At this time there are no fees to either the petitioner or the respondent. This process is seen as an opportunity for reconciliation and healing. Donations to the diocese and or parish to cover costs are always welcome as the cost of cannon lawyers, clerks, filing system, copies and postage to process annulments is not unsubstantial.

[Is there a brochure with additional information?](#)

Yes, the brochure is available through the Parish Office or at the Welcome Desk (off South Gathering Space). You may also go to the Tribunal website for the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois [here](#).

[How do I get started?](#)

If you are a parishioner of Holy Family, email or call Fr. John or Sr. Judith at 217-483-3772 and ask for an appointment with a procurator/advocate to meet with you to discuss the annulment process.