

Divorce & Remarriage for Those Entering the Catholic Church (RCIA Edition)

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is a process designed by the Catholic Church to welcome new members to its faith. Every once in a while a difficulty arises when a divorced and remarried person desires to become Catholic. This person may need to approach a church Tribunal to seek an annulment before entering into full communion with us. This document is designed to help such persons come to understand the theology of the Catholic Church regarding marriage and its process which determines whether a person is free to marry again.

What is Marriage?

As Catholic Christians, we have a long-standing and beautiful understanding of marriage. Marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman which establishes a partnership for life. Marriage is a vocation which fosters the good of the spouses and naturally leads to the procreation and education of children.

The Catholic Church understands that marriage takes place when two persons exchange consent through wedding vows according to the norms of their own faith tradition. In fact, we believe that even marriages involving unbaptized persons come into existence with the exchange of vows according to their beliefs and practices.

Whenever two baptized persons marry in this way, we believe that God has made them one in the sacrament of marriage (cf. Mt. 19:5). Because Jesus taught the indissolubility of marriage—"therefore, let no one separate what God has joined" (Mt. 19:6)—we believe that it is impossible for any human power to break the God-made bond, or covenant, between husband and wife.

For the marriage bond between husband and wife to be established by God, a number of intentions must be made by the couple at the time of their marriage. The couple must know what marriage is and they must intend the marriage to be lifelong and open to children. They must intend fidelity and their mutual good. They must also have the physical and psychological ability as well as the personal maturity to follow through on what they have intended.

When all of the above factors are brought together, a sacramental, indissoluble union is established by God. The Catholic Church recognizes, respects, and presumes this type of enduring marriage bond between two persons of any faith background (and in a similar way between unbaptized persons), even if the civil government, because of divorce, no longer recognizes that a marriage exists.

So, What Exactly is an Annulment?

Is it ever possible to enter a second marriage? Sometimes we need to question our presumption regarding the presence of a sacramental marriage. The Catholic Church recognizes that there are times when the wedding ceremony was beautiful, the right words were spoken, and even children were born of a marriage but, for a variety of reasons, something necessary for the establishment of the marriage bond was missing. When this is the case, it is clearly possible to have two persons, legally married, but never actually joined together by God in a sacramental union.

To be clear, an annulment is not a "Catholic Divorce." The Church does not have the power to divorce any persons who have been united by God. An annulment states that the enduring sacramental bond of marriage was never present from the very beginning of the marriage. If this is decided by the church Tribunal, the persons are free to marry again.

With this stated, it must also be made clear that an annulment in no way affects the legitimacy of the children of such a previous marriage. Similarly it has no bearing on other natural and civil obligations such as child support or custody. A church annulment does not imply that the marriage never existed, but only that it did not have the character of a sacrament. The Church does not seek to assign blame for the marriage breakup to any of the persons involved.

Does Divorce Affect my Entrance into the Catholic Church?

Please remember that a divorce alone would not affect, or hinder in any way, your entrance into the Catholic Church. However, if you are divorced and remarried a question does arise. We presume and respect all marriages, even one which ended in a civil divorce. Every prior marriage must be examined, since each is presumed to be a lasting, lifelong commitment. Until it is shown otherwise, you would not be free to enter into another marriage without the appearance or occasion of serious sin. If you are divorced *and remarried*, the sacraments of initiation which you desire to receive may need to be delayed until a Tribunal has examined your prior marriage(s) and issued a decision.

How Would I Begin the Annulment Process?

You should first consult with the person who coordinates your RCIA process. This may be a layperson, a priest, or a deacon who will help you determine whether or not an annulment of a prior marriage is necessary. *Every* prior marriage situation must be addressed and evaluated carefully and individually.

If an annulment is needed you will be asked to give a history of your prior marriage. You will then be directed to contact the Archdiocese of Baltimore's Tribunal, the Church Court which will review your petition and make a decision in your case. At some point, a member of the Tribunal staff will ask to interview you personally.

After all the necessary information has been gathered, you will need to wait for a decision of the Tribunal. This wait can be frustrating, as it may take many months. Because of the number of marriage cases pending before the Tribunal and the detailed and careful process with which each one is handled, it is never possible to expedite anyone's request for a declaration of nullity, or to promise a definite date of conclusion, or even to promise a favorable decision.

The cost of the process is shared by the Archdiocese of Baltimore and you (the petitioner). You will be asked to pay a maximum of \$500, depending on the type of process the Tribunal must use in your case. Your fee is about one half of the actual expenses, which cover secretarial, professional, and operational costs. There are a variety of payment plans available and no one is ever denied an annulment because of their inability to pay.

A Few Final Comments

While this process can dredge up painful memories from the past, we have found that most persons find new strength, understanding, and healing by discussing their prior marriage with a person who represents the Church. As a recent petitioner told us, "It was a great healing for me." Another petitioner said, "I understand myself and my marriage now!" All those involved in helping you through this process view our work as a ministry.

We understand and appreciate the effort any person needs to put forth when seeking an annulment. The process could be seen as an obstacle to your full acceptance of the Catholic faith. However, it could also be seen as a means of personal and spiritual growth toward the happiness you were meant to enjoy with God. Please don't allow any questions or doubts to keep you from approaching the Tribunal about a former marriage. Talk over your concerns with a priest or RCIA coordinator.

May God bless you as you seek communion with us in the Catholic faith. If you are divorced, may the Lord's mercy touch the memories of this painful time in your life through the Church. Should you decide to seek an annulment, may it be a source of healing for you.