



DIOCESE OF GRAND RAPIDS

Marriage Tribunal – FAQs

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What is marriage? – The Church defines marriage as ‘a covenant by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of their whole life, and which of its own very nature is ordered to the well-being of the spouses and to the procreation and upbringing of children, has, between the baptized, been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament’ (canon 1055).

What does the Church teach about divorce? – Divorce is a unique experience and is the result of incidents that erode a relationship between a husband and wife. The Church accepts as normative Christ’s prohibition of divorce (cf. Matthew 19:3-9).

Are divorced people excommunicated? – No, individuals who go through the trauma of divorce are not excommunicated from the Church and the other six sacraments.

May divorced and remarried individuals receive Communion? – A person who is divorced and not civilly remarried is welcome to participate in all of the sacraments. People who are divorced and have been civilly remarried are not free to receive the sacraments until their previous marriage(s) is examined for nullity.



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What is the purpose of a Tribunal? – Under the direction of the Bishop, the Tribunal addresses all matters regarding canonical law.

What is an “annulment?” – A declaration of nullity, often referred to as annulment, is a document whereby the Church has determined a marriage was invalid from the beginning.

Why would a marriage be declared null and void from the beginning? – Because at the time of the exchange of consent (wedding ceremony) an essential element was missing.

How long will the process take? – Typically, an ordinary process (formal case) takes twelve to fourteen months. This depends on the type of case, the active participation of the parties and witnesses, and the quality of the testimony.

Is there a fee for the process? – No, there is no charge for this service. The cost of running the Tribunal are collected from the annual Catholic Services Appeal (CSA).

Does an annulment affect the legitimacy of children? – No. Civil legitimacy of children is determined by the laws of each state. The marriage nullity process is purely a canonical matter and has no civil effects whatsoever. A Church declaration of nullity does not affect the legitimacy of children, property rights, inheritance rights, visitation rights, names, etc. A declaration of nullity simply states the attempted marriage was never a sacrament.

Does the nullity process have civil effects? – No, the process addresses only the sacramental nature of marriage. The decision has no effect in civil law.

Does a declaration of nullity mean the marriage never existed? – No. There will always be a civil record of the marriage. There will always be a canonical record that a marriage was attempted.

Does my former spouse have to be contacted? – Yes, canon law requires the former spouse be contacted. One’s former spouse has the right to know about the process. There are no exceptions.

Does the person petitioning need to contact his/her former spouse? – The petitioner will need to supply the former spouse’s contact information; however, the Marriage Tribunal will reach out in regard to the pending case(s).

What if there is a grave fear due to abuse? – The Marriage Tribunal must contact the former spouse. The staff of the Tribunal will ensure the contact information of the person who suffers from fear of the other party is not revealed.



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What if I do not have his/her contact information? – With the internet as a tool, one is often able to find the other person with minimal effort.

Why do I need witnesses? And what if I don't have any? – Church Law requires the naming of witnesses.

Who may be a witness? – Anyone who has sufficient knowledge about the courtship, engagement, and marriage ceremony.

- Best choices for witnesses
 - Parents
 - Siblings
 - Best Man/Maid of Honor
 - Aunts/Uncles/Cousins
 - Friends

How many witnesses are needed? – Three to six witnesses are the ideal. The number is dependent on the quality of the testimony provided by each witness.

I am not Catholic, so why do I need an annulment from the Catholic Church? – The Catholic Church takes marriage very seriously – whether it involves a Catholic or not. All marriages are considered valid until proven otherwise and must be investigated.

What if I got married in another country? – As long as the petitioner or former spouse resides in the Diocese of Grand Rapids the Tribunal can process your case, regardless of where the wedding took place. However, civil documentation will still be required.