

A Time to Wed:
Convalidating the Marriages of Catechumens and Candidates
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Convalidate the marriage of catechumens and candidates as soon as their annulments come in. When two people are eligible to celebrate a valid, binding marriage in the Catholic Church, do it. Don't wait until Easter. Give them a nice celebration.

Annulments and Convalidations

We face this situation with many who wish to become Catholic. Some have been married before, or their spouse was previously married. Or it's the first marriage for both, one of whom is a Catholic, but they never were married in the Catholic Church. In all these circumstances the marriage needs to be convalidated. (The last case, though, does not require an annulment.) We use other words for this ceremony: We speak of having the marriage "blessed", "solemnized" or "validated", for example. It means the same thing. A marriage formerly not recognized by the Catholic Church becomes recognized.

It usually happens in a simple ceremony in which husband and wife exchange their consent. To many, it feels like a renewal of wedding promises. But to the Catholic Church, it is the first time these words by this couple mean something spiritual.

Oh, there was a marriage in another manner of speaking. The bride and groom had a ceremony years ago. They started a life together. They probably had some children. They sacrificed. They watched television together. But our church recognizes a marriage only under certain other circumstances. We accept the validity of most first marriages. But if a divorced person remarries, we wonder what happened to the original consent. This person once said "forever". Now he or she has said it again. What does it mean to say "forever"? Do we have some assurance that the subsequent marriage means something the first one did not?

Out of those questions came the annulment process, which strives to ascertain whether or not the first marriage possessed the qualities we expect marriage to have. One of those qualities is permanence. If the marriage did not last, that is one clue that the original marriage was not "marriage" as we understand it.

An annulment is purely an ecclesiastical investigation. The State has no concern about it. People often ask, "If I get an annulment, does it mean my children are illegitimate?" Well, no. Just as our church doesn't recognize every marriage that the State does, so the State doesn't recognize the annulments of the church. If divorce did not render the children illegitimate, a

Catholic annulment won't either. An annulment has nothing to do with the children. It has to do with the spiritual quality of the marriage.

Once an annulment is in, the previous marriage is no longer considered binding, and the person who requested the annulment is eligible to have his or her present marriage convalidated.

A Time to Wed

Some parishes wait till Easter. They put the sacraments together. Some have the custom of convalidating marriages on Holy Saturday morning, as a prelude to the celebrations of baptism, confirmation and communion.

However, this practice doesn't make much sense. Marriage is not a sacrament of initiation, and it has no relationship to the liturgical year. Marriage is celebrated whenever the couple is suitably prepared and properly disposed. The convalidation has more to do with the arrival of the annulment than with the rites of initiation. The most logical time to convalidate the marriage is when the annulment is complete.

Besides, we are not supposed to celebrate sacraments on Good Friday or the morning of Holy Saturday. Look it up in your sacramentary. Turn to the Good Friday liturgy, and read the very first rubric: "According to the Church's ancient tradition, the sacraments are not celebrated today or tomorrow." The same rubric appears in the third edition of the *Missale Romanum*, but with this clarification: except for Penance and the Anointing of the Sick. So, marriage really should not be celebrated on these days.

One could argue that the convalidation of a marriage involving an unbaptized person does not disobey this rubric. Such a marriage is binding and valid, but not a sacrament. A person must be baptized in order to participate in any other sacrament. Any time a Catholic marries a faithful Jew, for example, the marriage is not considered a sacrament because the Jew has never been baptized. If the unbaptized person ever seeks Christian initiation, the act of baptism changes the quality of the marriage as well - the marriage becomes a sacrament at the same time. There is no need for the husband and wife to exchange their consent on that occasion. The act of baptism sacramentalizes the marriage.

So, one could argue that it does not break the letter of the law to convalidate the marriage of an unbaptized person on the morning of Holy Saturday. "Sacraments" are forbidden - and the marriage of a catechumen is not one. But the spirit of the law is clear. Besides, there is no need to delay the ceremony. When the annulment is in, the time to wed has arrived.

Resistance and Grace

Many people consider an annulment as appealing as a root canal. People in a second marriage have worked hard at putting the divorce behind them. They really don't want to think about it again. But the Church will ask them a

lot of very personal questions about life before, during and after the first marriage. It will bring up a lot of memories people are trying to forget.

Annulments pose a problem in a typical catechumenate, according to *Journey to the Fullness of Life*, a report on the implementation of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* in the United States (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 2000). Participants in the catechumenate listed as its greatest weakness “that it didn’t clarify annulment issues at the beginning” (23). The most common reason cited for discontinuing participation was “My spouse or I need an annulment” (24). Getting an annulment was one of the conditions cited for possibly returning to the process of joining the church (24). A number of bishops pointed to remarriage and annulment cases “as impeding people’s entry into the Church” (26). One candidate said to this author, “It shouldn’t be this hard to join your church.” Annulments are not popular, and the paperwork they demand discourages many people from trying - and they discourage some from becoming Catholic.

This is unfortunate because annulments can make a positive contribution to a person’s life. Annulments can help people reflect on their life in a caring context. They can give people new insights into the decisions they made in the past, the kind of persons they used to be, and the growth they have experienced over the years. This process can affirm some of the most important and painful decisions people have made. Through an annulment, a person can virtually hear the voice of the Church saying, “Yes, you were right. You were right to end the first relationship. You realized it was not what marriage should be. We agree. That was not marriage.” For a person experiencing a subsequent relationship that *does* feel like marriage, these can be healing words indeed.

Those who approach the Catholic Church for annulments may be divorced Catholics, Christians of other denominations, or the unbaptized. Usually one or both parties will benefit from the annulment. A Catholic who divorces and enters a second marriage without an annulment is asked not to receive communion. When an annulment is completed, and the subsequent marriage is convalidated, the Catholic party is eligible for communion.

So if the catechumen or candidate requesting the annulment is married to a Catholic, the Catholic will benefit as well. This is the most compelling circumstance to convalidate the marriage as soon as possible. The Catholic will be able to return to communion. If the annulment arrives in the fall or the winter, it would be punitive to wait until spring for the convalidation. When the marriage is recognized by the church, the couple will enjoy the peace that comes from the spiritual nature of their union.

Pastoral Strategies

When visiting potential catechumens or candidates, try to learn their marital status early. If an annulment will be necessary, be honest about it early on. Promote the benefits it will bring. Provide help to get the process

started. Support those seeking an annulment as the process unfolds. If the person is already baptized, encourage him or her to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation before the convalidation.

You may occasionally find that one spouse does not wish to participate in a Catholic marriage ceremony. He or she considers, for example, that the marriage is already valid because the two have already exchanged their consent. In such cases, the church can recognize the marriage on paper: a “sanation” of the union may take place. The necessary documents are assembled and the church proclaims in writing that the union is valid.

But normally the convalidation takes place in a simple ceremony. Once the annulment has arrived, fill out whatever paperwork is required for the marriage. An extra step is necessary if one party is not a Catholic. Some people prefer to wait until *after* Easter to convalidate in order to avoid the extra paperwork. But it is worth the little effort it takes to celebrate marriage as soon as possible.

The priest or deacon who presides uses the *Rite of Marriage* as he does for any other celebration of this sacrament. It need not take place during mass, but it may. At least two other people need to be present as witnesses. They need not be Catholic. Family and friends may be invited. Most couples want this ceremony to be simple, but they may plan to include elements such as music and a procession.

Gather at church with the other guests. Pray. Proclaim the scriptures. Witness the consent. Bless. And rejoice. Then, when the time comes for baptism, confirmation and communion, celebrate those sacraments together at another time. But convalidate the marriage now.

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