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The Catholic Church on Marriage, Divorce, and Annulments

by Marcellino D'Ambrosio, PhD

What exactly does the Catholic Church teach about sex, Marriage, Divorce, and Annulments? This article is a first step towards understanding Catholic teaching about these emotional and complicated topics. Other Catholic resources on marriage, divorce and annulments are noted below.



Lots of people are angry with the Catholic Church. Sometimes it is because of inexcusable faults and sins of certain Catholic leaders, ordained and lay.

But often it is the Church's teaching that people find offensive, especially its moral teaching. The Church's prohibition of premarital and extramarital sex, its rejection of homosexual marriage, abortion, and contraception makes the blood of many boil. In a society with a 50% divorce rate, the insistence that marriage is forever appears outdated, heartless, and judgmental. How different the Catholic Church is from Jesus, they say, who accepted everyone, even the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:1-11).

In Mark 10:2-16, this gentle, accepting Jesus bluntly states that divorce was never part of God's perfect plan. The man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. That sounds rather harsh to many ears.

For two thousand years the Catholic Church has labored to be faithful to its founder's word in its teaching on the indissolubility of marriage.

But wait a minute, they say. Is not the Church hypocritical here? Does not its practice of granting "annulments" just a way of approving through fancy legal maneuvering what it denies in its official teaching? If you know the right people,

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can't you just "buy" a church-approved divorce? Sounds kind of like the Pharisees, doesn't it?

Let's stop for a minute and ask what makes a marriage. Is it a legal ceremony and a marriage license? Is it a Church ceremony with organ, candles, and priests? Is it the bodily union of the partners?

The Catholic church teaches that while all of these are important, none is what cements the marriage bond. Marriage is a covenant, a relationship established through the free, informed consent of both parties. It happens when two people who are free to marry and are physically and emotionally capable of marriage give themselves to each other, understanding that marriage means openness to life and commitment to faithful love till death. When that happens between two unbaptized people, a natural marriage bond is formed that is greatly respected by the Catholic Church. When it happens between two baptized persons, the Holy Spirit is poured out and the natural bond is elevated to a supernatural sacrament. The natural blessings of marriage are the companionship, mutual support and intimacy of the spouses plus the possibility of sharing in God's creative, life-giving work—the procreation and education of children. In a sacramental marriage, there is an additional goal—the spouses accept the vocation to be a prophetic, visible sign of the unbreakable covenant between Christ and His Church.



In both these cases, God has joined the couple and the two have become one—the first on a natural level, the second on both natural and supernatural levels.

So how can the Church possibly allow for "annulments?" Are not exceptions to the rule unacceptable?



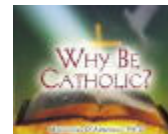
First of all, Jesus and St. Paul note some "exceptions" to the absolute prohibition of remarriage of the divorced (Mat 5:32, Mat 19:9, I Cor 7: 15). Why is this? Because it is possible for people to go through a ceremony without the marriage bond being forged. Perhaps one person entered into marriage with no intention of ever being open to children. In the contraceptive society that we live in, would this be surprising? Perhaps one partner married not freely, but under pressure, let's say of a pregnancy. When the church declares that the parties of a failed marriage are free to marry again in the Catholic Church, it usually means that the circumstances of the

failed marriage were examined thoroughly by two groups of church experts in two different diocese and it was determined by both groups that the marriage bond was never truly formed.

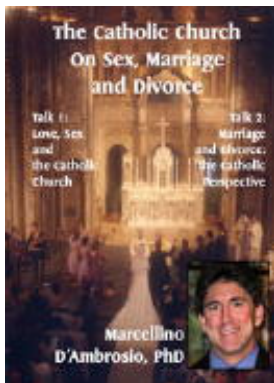
Those who've experienced the tragedy of divorce and feel alienated from the Church need to know that they are loved by Christ and the Church. They should seek counsel and, where appropriate, initiate an examination of the failed marriage by Church authorities.

For those who are married or contemplating marriage, know that the Church's teaching comes from the Lord Himself and that is a testimony not to some sort of old-fashioned prudishness, but rather to the power and beauty of a state in life that points beyond itself to heaven.

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