

Annulment Not ‘Catholic Divorce’

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Herald Columnist

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As many of you may know, I’ve been “cheating” on you for quite some time, writing another column for CatholicMatch.com (www.catholicmatch.com), a Web site for Catholic singles. On that site, I’ve written a series of articles on the questions surrounding annulment. This is obviously a big issue with Catholic singles, many of whom are divorced, and the rest of whom regularly confront the question of whether or not to date someone who is divorced.

I realize this audience is a little different, in that it is not made up entirely of single persons. So, no five-part series here. But there are enough of you out there dealing with the issue of annulment that I thought it would be worthwhile to at least do one.

My primary concern is that a lot of people have come to view annulment as some kind of “Catholic divorce,” which it is not. The Church teaches, and has always taught, that a valid sacramental marriage is indissoluble. In other words, marriage constitutes a permanent union. We didn’t just make that up. We take it from Christ, who said that he who divorces his wife and takes another commits adultery (cf. Mt 19:4). Marriage isn’t just a social invention. It is a divine institution. Something happens to us on the spiritual level when we marry. God joins our souls together. And Christ was clear that, once that happens, it can’t be broken.

So where does that leave all of the very good, very well-intentioned, very faithful Catholics who have found themselves in disastrous marital situations? Women discover their new husbands’ child-porn collections, men discover that their wives never intended to have children, couples marry while they’re wildly immature and have no earthly idea what they’re getting into. The list goes on and on. How do we sensitively deal with those situations while still upholding the sacredness and permanence of marriage?

It is important to understand that, just as God instituted marriage, so He created it to be a very specific institution. Marriage is a total self-donation of two persons. It is permanent, faithful and open to God’s gift of new life. If two people are standing up on the altar committing to something else, some alternative definition of marriage they’ve created in their heads, then what is happening that day is not a sacramental marriage. Likewise if they are not mature or emotionally healthy enough to understand that to which they are committing, or if one party or the other is withholding information that is “material” to the marriage decision, then we have reason to believe that no sacramental union is actually taking place.

This is the basis for the Church’s teaching and practice on the annulment of marriage.

It’s not that a marriage used to exist and now it doesn’t. It’s that, because of factors present at the time of the marriage, no sacramental union ever took place.

I know the Church grants a lot of annulments. That, of course, means either that we’re marrying a lot of people invalidly, or that we’re declaring null some marriages that were actually valid. I wouldn’t dare to presume which is the case, except to say that given the larger culture’s ideas about the disposability of marriage, it wouldn’t be surprising if a lot

of people are standing up there without having a clue as to the real nature of marriage. I'm very glad that the Church makes the annulment process available to Catholics who have found themselves in difficult situations. I don't want those who made young or ill-advised decisions to have to suffer needlessly for the rest of their lives. In some cases those marriages weren't actually valid, and I'm grateful that the Church goes out of her way to serve those people and address those situations.

What concerns me is making sure that the sheer volume of granted annulments not compromise Catholics' understanding of the indissolubility of a valid sacramental marriage. I have heard single Catholics say "Well, sure he's divorced, but he can just get an annulment and then we can get married."

I'm very uncomfortable with the presumption of the nullity of any particular marriage. It is as if we have come to believe that any marriage can be erased provided that one of the parties goes to the tribunal and fills out the correct paperwork. And that is a very dangerous mentality.

A marriage is presumed to be valid and sacramentally binding until a tribunal finds otherwise. You and I may have our opinions, but we are not tribunals. And so I always encourage Catholic singles and divorced persons to respect the annulment process, and to refrain from dating divorced persons, or from dating as divorced persons, until an annulment has been granted. I also encourage them to respect the possibility that an annulment may not be granted. I realize that, given the number of annulments in the United States today, that can feel more like a theoretical exercise than an actual possible outcome. But even so, I think it's an exercise that reminds of us of the sacredness and indissolubility of marriage.

And that can only be a good thing.

Bonacci is a frequent lecturer on chastity.