

Is an Annulment the Same as a Divorce?

Jesus seems to be rather clear in today's gospel: "What God has joined together, let no one separate." Doesn't that mean that marriage is for life? Then how is it possible that so many Catholics are now celebrating a second marriage with the Church's blessing?

Catholics who celebrate a second marriage in the Church are able to do so because they have received an annulment of their first marriage. Some people believe that an annulment is the Church's equivalent to a civil divorce. This, however, is a misunderstanding of the annulment process.

A divorce breaks the civil bond of marriage. An annulment declares that a marriage did not have all that it takes to be a complete marriage in the Lord.

The civil laws of our country accept the premise that two married people can terminate their marriage with the approval of the state. The Church believes that if two baptized persons marry validly in the Lord, neither the couple, nor the state, nor the Church itself has the authority to dissolve that marriage.

An annulment does not separate what God has joined. It declares that what had been joined was not fully what God intended.

What is possible, however, is to examine a marriage that has already failed and ask whether some essential quality for a complete and valid marriage has been lacking from the beginning. When the Church is able to prove this, it can declare an annulment.

An annulment is not a divorce. A divorce breaks the civil bond of marriage. An annulment declares that a marriage did not have all that it takes to be a complete marriage in the Lord. An annulment does not separate what God has joined. It declares that what had been joined was not fully what God intended.

Furthermore ...

An annulment declares that a deficiency within a marriage has rendered it less than what it needs to be. Such a deficiency is not always apparent before the marriage begins. On their wedding day, most people are confident that they have the necessary resources to live a lifelong relationship.

Once the marriage has begun, however, new and disturbing factors can emerge. The couple may find themselves lacking the capability to assume the obligations of a deep human relationship. They may discover that hidden factors were coercing them to enter into marriage. They may even discover themselves so incompatible with their spouse that the mutual help and love of marriage cannot be attained.

Some couples in successful marriages could be suspicious of the deficiencies I just mentioned. "No marriage is perfect," they might argue. "No couple is fully compatible. Instead of ending the marriage and seeking an annulment, a struggling couple should just try harder."

Annulments ... are declared not for an *unwillingness* to live the married life but rather for an *inability* to do so.

Trying harder is an essential part of every successful marriage. Marriage requires hard work. If the failure of a marriage results from a lack of generosity and sacrifice, no annulment is warranted.

Annulments, however, are declared not for an *unwillingness* to live the married life but rather for an *inability* to do so.

As you can imagine, the distinction is sometimes difficult to determine. It is for this very reason that the Church insists upon an official and impartial process to discover the underlying reason for the failure of a marriage.

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