

SECTION ONE

Your life as a
newly married couple

The sacrament of matrimony



A holy, sacramental, permanent vow

The history of the Catholic Church is filled with many stories, accounts, and explanations of the multiple ways that God has revealed his love for his people. One special way that his love is revealed and shared is through the sacraments, which intensify and deepen our faith and increase God's presence within us. Of the seven sacraments, two have to do with our state in life.

This book is about one of these social/vocational sacraments—matrimony. (The other, holy orders, is the sacrament by which priests and deacons are ordained as ministers.) This book is for those who have been previously married and are now to remarry following divorce or spousal death. We begin with a review of the sacramental nature of matrimony within the Church.

One way that a sacramental marriage is different from other non-religious unions is that it is a vocation. One meaning of the word “vocation” is a special calling from God to a purpose and meaning for your life. So, a marital vocation is not just about two people falling in love, having a wedding day, and going on from there. Within the Church, the marital vocation is your call from God to live a life of love in his service.

What you will read next is the ideal—what a Catholic marriage can and should be. However, there are times when this ideal cannot

be reached. It can be that the two individuals were not compatible or were otherwise not able to live the life of a true sacramental marriage. As you consider remarriage, know that what we describe is possible for you as a couple if you keep God in your lives and work on the psychological needs of any good relationship.

As a sacramental bond, marriage can be described as a covenant or vow that is *permanent* and *monogamous*. When two people are married sacramentally, it is in the expectation that the couple will stay married until death. As in the vows your priest will lead you to take—“Do you take (name) as your lawful wife/husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and cherish until death do you part?”—there is a commitment made to each other that is not to be easily broken. During the Solemn Promise part of the vows, the priest will also say, “What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” In other words, the sacramental marriage is not to be disrupted, disturbed, or destroyed by outside forces.

Matrimony is called a social sacrament because it is lived out among other people. It starts on your wedding day and continues to grow as you keep God in your midst as a loving couple and as witnesses of his love to the world.

Married people have the honor and privilege of showing the world the power of God’s love for his people. Although we cannot fully understand divine love, we, as humans, can experience many facets of God’s presence. The love that a married couple shares—the connection, the intimacy, and the emotional bond—is an example of God’s love for all of us.

In this special way, the wife and husband give the sacrament to each other over the course of their life together. This love will intensify and grow over the course of the couple’s shared life experiences. It’s a sign to the world of Christ’s loving presence as he is in the midst of the couple’s love.

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Over time, the love of the couple becomes expansive—it will reach out to others who see the couple together in different places and in different contexts. It will nurture and spiritually nourish the lives of the children from this relationship, the lives of the neighbors and extended family members of the couple as well.

It's said that matrimony is a sacramental vocation in and for the Church. In this way, marriage represents a special way to give and grow in love. For the couple it is a unique way to fulfill themselves in the love of each other. Another way this love is expressed is to “be fruitful and multiply.” As Catholics, we accept children willingly.

In this sacramental expression, God is the third partner in all successful, fulfilling marriages.

The process of annulment

ARNIE'S STORY *“I can't do this.”*

Looking at the pages of questions, Arnie was frustrated over all that had to be done to complete his annulment paperwork. “I was married thirteen years ago. A lot of this is ancient history and I don't want to re-live my past.”

Arnie put the paperwork aside for a few days as he thought about his options. Now that he was divorced, he thought about just getting remarried in a civil ceremony and skipping the “church part.” He was still a bit angry over all that had happened. To make it worse, he felt guilty and ashamed as a divorced Catholic. His faith was still there, but he felt as if he was being tested.

A week later, he decided he would tackle his paperwork with a better attitude. In reviewing the questions, he realized that the annulment was a good way to review what did happen in his first marriage. He could also begin to see that both he and his former wife had done some things right and wrong.

The more he plowed through the questions and reflected on his marriage's early days, the more he realized that neither

he nor his wife had really appreciated what was being asked of them as sacramentally married people.

By the time he had written his last word and contacted his witnesses, Arnie was able to realize that he and his former wife had been too young, too immature, and not ready for the commitment that they thought they could make.

He also realized that in completing such a thorough review, he was now in a better place to move forward in his new relationship. He and his fiancée read parts of what was written and were able to see how they could learn from the past. In so doing, they felt they might avoid some of the mistakes Arnie was now old enough to admit and appreciate the ways in which he could be a better husband.

And with the annulment, a lot of his anger went away as well. He felt that he had received a gift of healing from his Church. His faith strengthened, Arnie was ready to move forward with his new love and new life.

God understands human frailty and imperfections, and his Church allows for ways to correct obstacles (impediments) that did not allow for a true permanent sacramental bond. Annulment, mistakenly referred to as “Catholic divorce,” is anything but that.

The process of annulment is a great healing procedure that allows hurt and wounded Catholics to review what happened in a failed marriage and make sense of what went wrong. The annulment is an appeal to a diocesan-level version of an appellate court review. The appellate court reviews whether your sacramental bond was valid, meaning that at the time of your marriage, you and your partner were both capable of understanding and fulfilling the duties and obligations of this special sacrament.

If you are having any difficulties in getting cooperation from other people as you complete the annulment documents, we suggest you

meet with your parish priest for advice and recommendations. (Any person who was previously married—either in any church or through a public ceremony—must also go through the annulment process in order to be open to the sacrament of matrimony.)

If you're taking this remarriage preparation program in anticipation of a new wedding after divorce, you know well that an annulment is another way to reconcile your past pain. We hope your experience with your annulment is healing.

We now turn to a series of issues that remarried people will likely face as they enter into their new vows. Most of what you will read in this handbook is the product of a remarriage preparation program from the Diocese of St. Petersburg and its Office of Marriage and Family Ministry.

It's been our good fortune to find our personal ministry in this work, and this book reflects the experiences of years of work in this area.

STOP & TALK

- *How important is it for each of you to receive the sacrament of matrimony rather than have a non-religious based ceremony?*
- *What will you do to live as a married couple as witnesses to the world of God's love?*
- *If you have completed an annulment, please discuss how the process was helpful in healing old wounds from your first marriage.*