

## Getting Started

How best to get started may vary from diocese to diocese, so a good first step is to contact a priest, deacon, or pastoral associate at your parish. Some people prefer the anonymity of calling the tribunal, which is usually located at the diocesan administrative offices.

In either case, you will be given forms to complete. You will need a copy of your civil marriage license. You will also need to obtain new copies of your baptismal certificate, which can be ordered from the parish where you were baptized. If that parish has been closed, the certificate can be obtained from the diocese.

If you or your spouse need to obtain an annulment before your marriage can be validated, someone will help you start that process.

## Preparing for Validation

This is your opportunity to learn more about your marriage and the Sacrament of Matrimony. You may be asked to meet with a priest, a deacon or a layperson. In some dioceses, you may be asked to attend a weekend retreat or a day of reflection.

If you have children, you will need to help them understand why you have chosen to have your marriage validated and what role you want them to play in the process. This is a teachable moment in which you can explain to them why it is important for you to ask God to strengthen your marriage and your family.

The final step will be planning the ceremony. Pope Francis urges couples to celebrate, not in a secular sense, but in a spiritual sense, telling a group of engaged couples preparing for marriage in 2014, "Make it so that, like the wine in Cana, the ext-

"I encourage the faithful who find themselves in complicated situations to speak confidently with their pastors or with other lay people whose lives are committed to the Lord."

~ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 312



rior signs of your celebration reveal the Lord's presence and remind you and everyone present of the origin and the reason for your joy."

### How to talk to a family member or friend about validity

Here are some simple suggestions for people with family members or friends in invalid marriages:

- Keep in mind that this couple may not realize that their marriage is invalid.
- Raise the subject in a matter-of-fact way: "I'm not sure you realize this ..."
- Give the couple a copy of this pamphlet to read.
- If you are not sure of the answer to one of their questions, promise to find out.

### For Additional Information

Guidelines for the validation of a civil marriage can be found in the Code of Canon Law at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/\\_P47.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_P47.HTM) (see Canons 1156-1165)

*Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), an apostolic exhortation by Pope Francis on marriage and family life, is available from OSV (\$12.95); it also can be found at [https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20160719\\_amoris-laetitia\\_en.pdf](https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160719_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf)

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# Is This Marriage Valid?



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Chances are you know Catholics who chose not to be married in a Catholic Church.

- Perhaps they eloped and were married by a justice of the peace.
- Or they were married in a Protestant, Jewish, or nondenominational ceremony without getting permission from the diocese.
- Or they got married in a park, on the beach, at a resort, or on a cruise ship.
- Or they were married in the backyard by a friend or family member who was ordained online.

The reality is that all of these marriages are legally valid from a secular standpoint. But none of these marriages are recognized as valid by the Catholic Church.

### What Constitutes Validity?

In the Catholic Church, marriage is a sacrament that a bride and groom confer upon each other when they profess their vows. The Church recognizes this marriage as a lifelong union that is blessed by God. It is the sacrament by which the marriage of a man and woman becomes holy and helps the couple bring each other to eternal salvation.

Pope Francis tells us that the Sacrament of Matrimony allows couples to share in the mystery of God's love.

"Jesus is ever present in their midst. He sustains them throughout life in their mutual gift of self, in fidelity, and in indissoluble unity. His love is a rock and a refuge

in times of trial, but more importantly, a source of constant growth in pure and lasting love" (address to married and engaged couples, August 25, 2018).

Couples who enter into an invalid marriage are missing many of the graces God offers when the marriage is sac

ramentalized. In addition, they can attend Mass but are not allowed to receive the Eucharist. They cannot be godparents at the baptism of a baby or sponsors during the Sacrament of Confirmation. In other words, they cannot participate fully in the sacramental life of the parish.



### Why Couples Marry Outside the Church

Some couples don't even realize that marriage outside the Catholic Church can pose a problem. Sometimes, the couple is in a rush to marry. Other times, they have fallen away from the practice of their Catholic faith. And sometimes, they get caught up in wedding plans without even thinking about the possibility of a Catholic wedding.

There are also couples who struggle through the pain of divorce and enter into a second marriage without seeking an annulment of their first marriage. In those situations, the Catholic Church still presumes the first marriage as valid, and they must go through the annulment process before it might be possible to enter a new marriage.

The good news is that there is a process by which Catholics in invalid marriages can enter into a sacramental union. This process is commonly referred to as "convalidation."

### What Is Convalidation?

The word convalidation comes from the Latin word *convalidatio*, which simply means "with validity." It is sometimes referred to as "having a marriage blessed" or "renewal of vows," and the Church actually focuses on the word validity (the Code of Canon Law uses both words). Making an invalid marriage valid is the process by which an earlier civil marriage ceremony becomes a



"What allows the spouses to remain united in marriage is a love of mutual giving supported by Christ's grace."

~ Pope Francis, Angelus, October 7, 2018

sacramental union in the eyes of God and the Catholic Church.

It involves a simple ceremony during which the couple expresses, in the presence of a priest or a deacon, their desire to be united in a true Catholic marriage and vows are exchanged. Most couples opt to have their original wedding rings blessed. The ceremony can take place with or without a Mass. Two witnesses must be present.

Some couples choose to have their marriage celebrated privately. Others plan a more elaborate ceremony with friends and family members in attendance. Some couples schedule it as quickly as possible when all is in order and the Church can legally (from the Church's view) witness the marriage. Others choose to wait for a special date such as the anniversary of their civil marriage, a birthday, or a time when family members and friends from out of town can gather.

### Why Bother to Validate?

There are spiritual benefits to couples that choose to have their marriages validated. They receive God's special blessing on their marriage and sacramental grace, which helps them to remain faithful to each other and to nurture children in good times and bad. They also gain the full recognition of the Catholic Church as a married couple, which allows them to receive the Eucharist and fully participate

in their parish.

Some couples say validation of their marriage also provides a sense of closure and peace of mind. It strengthens them in their relationship with God and brings them to a deeper understanding of their faith.

### The Most Important Question

If you were married outside the Catholic Church, now may be the time to ask yourself: Do I want to make my marriage valid?

God has given us free will and never forces us to do anything. His deepest desire is that each of us will respond to his love by choosing to move into a fuller relationship with him. But this is something that we must be willing to do without any pressure or force.

Sometimes, a non-Catholic spouse finds it difficult to understand why another ceremony is desired or even needed. If you are in this situation, talk to a priest about the possibility

of "sanation." The word comes from the Latin phrase *sanatio in radice*, meaning "healing at the root," and the process allows for the validation of a marriage without a formal renewal of consent.

