



ARE WE THERE YET? THE LENGTH OF THE ANNULMENT PROCESS

Among the most frequently asked questions that we receive at the tribunal office about the annulment process is: How long is this going to take? The answer is invariably some polite variation of: We have no idea. That's because the above question is based on a mistaken idea that the length of the process is determined by the tribunal.

This idea is flawed for several reasons. First, while we have some policies particular to our tribunal, the majority of the norms governing the process are established by universal Church law, which all tribunals are bound to follow. Second, much of the time that the annulment process takes depends on variables that are beyond the tribunal's control. These include such things as the kind of case it is, the relevant grounds involved, and the speed with which the parties and witnesses complete their tasks. That is why we simply cannot determine at the outset how long a particular case will take.

Pastoral ministers assisting persons seeking an annulment should emphasize this point, particularly with persons seeking to enter a new marriage or to enroll in RCIA. Under no circumstances should a wedding date be set for a couple if either of the parties has an unresolved prior marriage. That is why, after determining that at least one of the parties is a Latin Catholic, the first question to ask before taking any other step is whether either of them has ever been married before. If either of the parties has been married before, please do not schedule a wedding date or do any other marriage preparation with them unless and until all prior marriages have been resolved and the parties are free to marry.

The same is true for adults in invalid marriages due to prior marriages when seeking to participate in the RCIA. Regardless of their personal religious life, such persons are in an objective state of manifest grave sin and therefore are generally not free to receive the sacraments (c.f. canons 843 §1 & 915). While they appropriately can and should be invited to participate in many ways in parish prayer, faith formation, and service activities, they should not be formally accepted into the RCIA unless and until all prior marriages are resolved and their current

marital situation is rectified. Unfortunately, in their desire not to discourage potential converts, pastors sometimes do accept such persons into the RCIA and thus create the expectation that they will receive the sacraments at the Easter Vigil. This well-meant practice is not only misleading, but unnecessary. In cases of pastoral need, adults can receive the sacraments of initiation outside of the Easter Vigil (*Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, 26), and, in fact, the confirmation of un-catechized Catholics and the reception of Christians baptized in another tradition generally should take place outside of the Easter Vigil (*National Statutes for the Catechumenate*, 26 & 33). We need to abandon the common "one size fits all" approach to the RCIA and make room for pastoral flexibility; people can be welcomed into the Church when they are ready, personally and canonically, not just once a year.

Keeping that in mind, keep the faith, love God's people, and always honor the code!

