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Editor's note: Over the next few months, the Catholic Spirit will feature a series of articles about the diocesan Office of Canonical and Tribunal Services, which handles a variety of tasks dealing with the laws of the church.

By Harvey Bollich and Michele Chan Santos

Correspondents

The diocesan Office of Canonical and Tribunal Services at the Pastoral Center in Austin exists to help the bishop carry out the laws of the church, which is known as canon law. Some of the primary duties of the Tribunal, as the office is commonly known, are to help those who are preparing to be married or who are seeking an annulment of a previous marriage.

On television at this very moment, there are a number of reality shows about couples in the process of getting married. Their focus is on the gown, the party, the food and church decorations, but not on the religious meaning of the ceremony or the purpose of marriage itself. For the Catholic Church, marriage is a sacrament and it is not to be taken lightly.

The sacrament of marriage

Deacon John Pickwell, who has worked with engaged and married couples for more than eight years, reminds couples that through their marital vocation, they undertake a heavy but not impossible burden.

“St. Paul emphasized that matrimonial love reminds us of the love which Christ has for his bride, the church,” he said. “For those baptized in Christ, marriage is a sacrament — a mystery and a sign — that communicates God’s grace.”

In today’s society, about half of all marriages, including those of Catholics, end in divorce, and most divorced couples later remarry. Therefore, the knowledge and the counsel of the Tribunal are in high demand. The Austin Tribunal Office handles about 250 cases per year, according to Deborah Patin, the office’s case manager and office manager.

Deacon Pickwell, who works in the Tribunal as an assessor or judge’s assistant, said when it comes to marriages, the Tribunal’s work is governed by the church’s canon 1055.

“The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life and which is ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring, has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament between the baptized.”

Based on canon law, the church has a fully developed legal system. In the Austin Diocese, Father Christopher Ferrer is the judicial vicar and Father Jozef Musiol is the adjutant judicial vicar and tribunal judge. The appeals court for the Austin Diocese is located in San Antonio; and the Roman Rota, the church’s “Supreme Court” is in Rome.

Robert Pine, a case manager and defender of the bond for the Tribunal, said 75 percent of the cases handled by the local Tribunal are related to annulments. For example, if someone were married and then divorced, and later sought to remarry within the Catholic Church, they would need an annulment of their first marriage. A declaration of nullity states that, according to church law, a given marriage was not valid (and therefore not binding) at the time the couple spoke their marriage vows. Annulments are also sought by people who have divorced and remarried and want their current marriage validated by the Catholic Church. There are several different types of nullities (annulments); all of them are handled by the Tribunal.

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Father Robert Kincl said the work of the diocesan Tribunal is one of the great works of justice and mercy by the church.

“A person should never fear approaching the Tribunal if he or she thinks a declaration of nullity is warranted. We are here to help with that process,” he said.

Deborah Patin, the Tribunal’s office manager and case manager, said working with people seeking annulments is a ministry of healing.

“It’s a healing process for couples who have divorced, which provides a new beginning,” she said. When someone petitions for an annulment, they are represented by an advocate who is generally a priest or deacon from their parish. The Tribunal holds workshops to train the advocates in parishes on how best to assist parishioners in filing the proper forms and documents, said Deacon Ray Sanders, an assessor in the Tribunal, who organizes the advocate workshops.

The Tribunal also offers workshops to help people in writing their petitions for annulments. Pat Thompson organizes these workshops and said they can be a spiritual and healing experience for people seeking an annulment.

Other concerns

The Office of Canonical and Tribunal Services is also highly involved in the process of couples marrying within the Catholic Church. For example, if a couple in the Diocese of Austin is preparing to be married, but their wedding will take place in another diocese (for example, the couple lives in Austin but is getting married in New Mexico) their forms will go through the Tribunal Office. Janie Cuellar takes care of this process for the Austin Diocese. The couple’s packet — containing their information and documentation that they completed a marriage preparation course — will be approved by the Austin judicial vicar and then sent to the other diocese where the marriage will take place. And if a Catholic is marrying a non-Catholic in a Catholic ceremony here, the judicial vicar also needs to give his approval.

History of marriage

The Catholic Church has a long history regarding the institution of marriage. In the first two centuries of the church, the typical Catholic wedding was held in the house of the bride’s family. The local bishop or priest was invited to pronounce the church’s blessing over the couple, a role otherwise performed by the bride’s father. Beginning in the next century, the wedding was transferred to the local church where more people could participate in the Eucharist in a public manner. The church became increasingly involved in rules for marriage because of the lack of uniform practices in the lands of the newly legalized Christian religion.

St. Leo the Great and St. Augustine clarified that marriage is between a man and a woman for the spiritual and material welfare of the couple and their children, and the couple’s commitment is marked by fidelity and permanence.

By the sixth century, the church assumed greater jurisdiction over marriage and other aspects of society for the sake of public good and order and the concept of indissolubility became formally added to marital doctrine.

In reaction to the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent in the 16th century defined Matrimony as one of the seven sacraments, condemned polygamy and taught that certain marriages could be dissolved only by church authority.

The Second Vatican Council in the 1960s raised the mutual welfare of the spouses on par with the good of the children as the main purpose of marriage. Marriage is both unitive (a bond of love) and

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procreative (open to children). Recently, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have strongly upheld the divine dignity of faithful, permanent and fruitful marriage unions.

For more information, go to the Tribunal's website go to www.austindiocese.org, click on the "Ministries" tab and then on the link to Canonical and Tribunal Services or call the office at (512) 949-2477.