

**Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius**  
**June 5, 2016**  
**Spiritual Ponderings**  
**10 Thoughts on Annulments**

On the fourth Tuesday of the month, I host at Epiphany of Our Lord Parish an evening of prayer and faith witnessing, that I call a "Covenant Night." On a side note: I believe these Covenant Nights are one of the best kept secrets in the Catholic Church and I would like to invite everyone to attend one. Our Covenant Nights begin with a speaker who I have chosen to come and share his or her faith life with the people who are attending. I basically ask the speakers to simply talk about why they are Catholic and how has God made an impact in their lives. I believe one of the great things about these Covenant Nights is that most of the people that I ask to speak are not professional Church speakers. They are just people who I have come to know and admire throughout my years in the seminary and as a priest.

A few of the people that I had invited to come and speak, I knew had gone to the annulment process and had remarried in the Catholic Church. While knowing this was a part of their background, I in no way tried to force them to speak about their experience of getting an annulment but to my great surprise each one of them did plus two other friends, who I had not known had been divorced and remarried talked about their annulment experience. The thing that surprised me the most was that they all used the same word to describe the process of getting an annulment and that word was "healing." This was definitely not a word that I was expecting to hear in a conversation about annulments. As we continue Pope Francis's Year of Mercy, I would like to share with you 10 thoughts about Annulments that I hope will give you a better understanding the Catholic Church's teaching on Marriage. For help with this I am turning to Rev. Ronal T. Smith's book called *Annulment: A Step-By-Step Guide for Divorced Catholics*.

**1. Annulments Can Be Healing**

As I listen to each of the speakers talk about the annulment process and how they found it healing I saw some patterns emerging that I have seen in other healing stories and in my own inner life of being healed by God's grace. There seemed to be a sense of coming to grips with what part of the marriage failing was their part and what was their spouses part. Sometimes before the annulment process they talked about taking all the blame for the marriage failing. "If only they had been a better spouse..." or taking none of the blame "it was my spouses fault." It seemed that through the prayer and questions that had to be answered that the person who actively and prayerfully participated in annulment learned to accept what was their responsibility for the marriage falling apart and nothing more.

Somewhere in this process, it also sounded like the people who really invested in the process were able to see that God still loved them despite the fact that they with their spouse had failed in marriage and anytime we encounter God's unconditional love for us, we discover healing.

**2. Annulments Are Not Catholic Divorces**

It is important to realize that annulments are not Catholic divorces; if they were than everybody could get one with very little problem. A civil divorce decrees that the couple were once married and is no longer married. A Catholic Annulment decrees that the marriage never actually took place for one reason or another. The bride and groom never became husband and wife for some grievous reason. For example one of them was not in control of his or her actions because of alcohol, drugs, blackmail, undue force, etc. The person therefore in the eyes of the Church is not free to enter into marriage or they are not able to make the consent, the commitment, required for marriage. If you want to know whether someone has good grounds for an annulment, it is best to speak with an advocate (Church lawyer). Never assume one way or the other.

Remember that part of the marriage vows has to deal with "for better or for worse." If a person had a right to get out of marriage when things get a little rough then marriage would not really be that sacred of institution. A person should never be able to get out of an oath lightly (doctors, soldiers, lawyers, judges, etc.). Part of what makes marriage so special is that spouses are agreeing to remain by each other's sides in good times and in bad times. If people can break their promise at any moment then marriage loses its value. The English poet Thornton Wilder put it this way in his poem called *The Promise*.

I didn't marry you because you were perfect. I didn't even marry you because I loved you. I married you because you gave me a promise. That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage. And when our children were growing up, it wasn't a house that protected them; and it wasn't our love that protected them - it was that promise.

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**Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius**  
**June 12, 2016**  
**Spiritual Ponderings**  
**Thoughts on Annulments**

Last week, I began to share with you some of my thoughts on the Church's teaching about Annulments. It is my hope that these reflections will help you understand what an annulment is and how the process of going through an annulment can be surprisingly healing experience. For help with this I am turning to Rev. Ronald T. Smith's book called *Annulment: A Step-By-Step Guide for Divorced Catholics*.

### **3. The Annulment process should be more about dialogue than conflict.**

In a dialogue we find two or more people trying to discover the truth of a situation or the best way of doing something. Everyone in a dialogue is considered a winner if the correct answer is discovered even if it in some way hurts the people involved, financially, physically or mentally. In a conflict however one or more people in the process have to "win" or "get their way" and are not concerned about the truth or the right way to do something. In a dialogue lying and attacking the other person is never permitted because they only make it harder to find the truth but in conflict both of them are allowed under the excuse of "whatever is necessary to get my way."

I can only imagine how difficult it can be to enter into a dialogue with someone who had promised to love you forever and now has hurt you so greatly that you desire to permanently separate from him or her. More lying, name calling, etc will not solve your problem. Only the truth in this situation can set you free and bring healing. In order to help with this the Church provides ministers advocate (someone helping the parties involved) a defender of the bond (whose job it is to defend the bond of marriage and thus they try to present evidence to the judge that shows the marriage as being valid and finally a judge (sometimes more) who all do their best not to make everyone happy but rather to find the truth of the situation. The Church officials are most happy when they feel that the truth has been discovered so for example the defender of the bond is not happier when the judge decrees the marriage valid if in fact it was not a valid marriage. Living in the truth of a situation is always better than living in a delusion.

### **4. Marriage is Given the Benefit of the Doubt**

As I have mentioned before an annulment is a legal proceeding and in this legal proceeding the validity of the marriage is given the benefit of the doubt. In other words, we assume that the marriage is valid and it is up to the two parties involved to prove that it was not. This is why it is important to have witnesses. A witness is someone who is willing to go on record and say that the marriage was in trouble before it began. If you are going through an annulment process make sure your witnesses know to speak freely and honestly even if some of the things they have to say are not so positive about you. Many canon lawyers point out that these witness statements are often the most beneficial.

When I was suffering from depression, it was helpful for some good friends to point out to me how I was causing some of my own problems. I had a lot of self-fulfilling prophecies and a real negative attitude that was holding me back. Seeing them and learning how to correct them helped in my healing process a lot. I think this was because it gave me hope that I was not destined to keep making the same mistakes over and over again.

I also believe that good marriages are a lot of hard work. Couples have to keep their negative feelings (which all couples have) from overcoming their positive feelings. This is not always easy. There are many factors that can play into a marriage heading toward a civil divorce. Family of Origin issues can be one major cause. One spouse may not know what healthy marriage behavior looks like. Instead of throwing in a towel couples should seek professional help. On a

side note, make sure you get good professional help. I have gone to many counselors in my life time for my own personal health and there were some that were good and some that were bad. I tried to stick with the good and have nothing to do with the bad.

As Catholics too we believe in original sin and that the ideas of this world are not the best. Our world sometimes teaches us if we are not careful that our family life is like a cocoon that must be escape in order to find fulfillment instead of teaching us that each member of our family is a gift from God.

With all of this being said, I do believe that I have met individuals who have received annulments and have gone on to marry the right person on the second try and thus it is good to have the annulment process so that people are not stuck in a relationship God did intend them to be in.

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**Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius**  
**June 19, 2016**  
**Spiritual Ponderings**  
**Thoughts on Annulments**

We return again this week to the sometime difficult topic of the Catholic Church's teaching about Annulment. As I stated when I first started this series of reflection, I wanted to tackle this topic after listening to others who had gone it through describe it as a process that brought a lot of healing into their lives. For help with this I am turning to Rev. Ronald T. Smith's book called Annulment: A Step-By-Step Guide for Divorced Catholics. (Quotes from his book will be in bold)

**5. Annulments do not make the children illegitimate**

I was told by a cannon lawyer once that one of the main reasons that a person does not seek an annulment is because they fear that their children will be considered illegitimate. The cannon lawyer went onto state that this is not the case. In Church law it states that any child whose parents' marriage is decreed annulled is still consider legitimate. He went on to explain that the word "legitimate" means something like "declared legal" and therefore if the laws says they are legitimate then they are legitimate.

If questions arise, please do not try to represent yourself as your own lawyer even if it is only in your head. Take time to talk to someone who really knows what he or she is talking about. There are many times that I take the time to consult with two or three priests before making a decision because I know that I am not perfect and I do not know everything.

**Since an annulment is a judgment solely of the Catholic Church, it is a solely a spiritual matter. It has no civil effects on the children or the parties involved. This is one of the reasons a person must have obtained a civil divorce before the Catholic diocesan marriage tribunal will consider the case. The Catholic Church cannot annul a marriage that is still recognized as valid by a civil jurisdiction.**

**6. It is fair for Catholics to expect Non-Catholics to go through annulment.**

**It may seem unfair that a non-Catholic is required to go through the Catholic Church's annulment procedure in order to marry a Catholic in the Catholic Church. The Church requires this, however, because it values the permanence and the sanctity of marriage between all couples, not just between Catholic Christians.**

A couple of key Church teachings come into play here. The first is that the priest or deacon only witnesses the marriage and that it is the two spouses that celebrate the wedding (that are the ministers of the wedding). It is through their exchange of consent that the marriage comes about and not through the words of the priest or deacon. In other words, I cannot stand on a street corner and grab a random guy or a random girl and declare them to be husband and wife with any legal or religious implications. They do not become husband and wife but rather they remain complete strangers who have just shared an experience of running into a religious crazy on a street corner.

We believe that Protestant couples who intend to inter into marriage are just as capable of entering into marriage as two Catholic people are. Therefore the marriage of two Protestants is considered valid until proven otherwise. This is why they need to go receive an annulment also. There are many non-Catholic couples who show that they have the ability to commit themselves to each other in good times and in bad and the Church needs to uphold the sanctity of marriage as it upholds the validity of the oath of a soldier, a doctor, a President of the United States, etc.

### **7. The Time of Annulment Takes Depends on the Participation.**

There is no doubt about it that our generation has become spoiled by how fast information can travel in our world today. We have devices in our hands that allow us to send a signal into space to a satellite which tells that satellite to contact another person on the earth (and this person could be thousand miles away). There are some things that you cannot speed up like home cooking, spending time with a love one, etc. without it affecting the quality. The Church prefers quality over speed and so she insists on handwritten communication instead of e-mail. She insists on talking with the people involve instead of watching five minute "audition tapes". This also ensures that the people involved both know who is giving the testimony and that confidentiality is protected. The fast the people turn in the items that are request for the faster the process moves along. If the Church has to wait for each deadline to expire the process will take longer.

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**Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius**  
**June 26, 2016**  
**Spiritual Ponderings**  
**Thoughts on Annulments**

I hope that you have found this series on ponderings on annulment has been helpful and insightful. As I was sitting down to write this last spiritual pondering, I find myself still amazed at some of the wisdom buried in the annulment process and I can see how for some it can be a healing journey. I want to make clear that just because I think can be a healing journey that does not mean I think it is an easy journey. Like Bartimaeus, a person must be willing to throw away his old way of living (symbolized in the story of Bartimaeus by Bartimaeus throwing away his cloak) and sometimes we have to like Zacchaeus play the part of the fool (symbolized by the old man climbing a tree in order to see Jesus pass by). All I can say to this is that I know the person I am now (after my treatment for depression) is much better than my life before I faced my need for healing. Secondly it seems to me that I have run into many people who can say the same about their entering into the annulment process.

### **8. Remember the Goal is the Truth**

I have been with friends who have gone through the annulment process only to receive the answer from the Church court that their previous marriage was still valid. This was obviously not the answer that they wanted to hear. It is important to remember that this not necessary the end of story because the Church truly wants to discover the truth of the situation to the best of its ability and therefore allows the person applying for annulment to apply for another annulment under different grounds. Thomas Edison who tried invented the light bulb had tried over 100 different filaments before finding the right one. He did not see his past failures as mistakes but rather as steps forward toward the invention of his dream.

The amount of money one pays does not determine the outcome of the annulment case. If the Church had her way there would be no charge for an annulment. Unfortunately the process requires professionals in church law and secretarial staffs etc. and these people (especially the lay people) have a right also to a decent wage. The Church does keep down the cost of the proceedings to the bare minimum by using volunteers (who are trained as well but volunteer their time) to help with some of the proceedings. In addition the Church often uses a sliding scale when it comes to charging its fees. I am pretty confident that no one had ever been denied an annulment because of a lack of payment.

### **9. Divorced Catholics are Not Bad Catholics**

Every once in a while, I will hear a story on the news about a piece of movie memorabilia being auctioned off and I am almost always surprised at the price the item catches. It is further proof to me that human beings have a strange way of placing a value on things and people. We often judge things based on whether they will help us achieve something (utilitarian) and how perfect they are (mint condition). Our judgments are often changeable/flexible etc. The value that God places on something does not fluctuate. He loves us unconditionally. We are always valued by God.

God's true power/love often manifests itself the most when I realize that God still loves me despite my imperfections.

#### **10. Forgiveness Does Not Mean Acquitting**

One of the biggest obstacles, I find in people's lives in regards to healing is the mistake of confusing acquitting and forgiveness. Acquitting means that we say the person is innocent because he or she did not commit a crime. Forgiveness on the other hand acknowledges the action that wounded us and instead of revenge we return mercy.

A person going through an annulment prayerfully I think will discover it easier to take ownership of his or her part of the divorce and thus find it easier to forgive him or herself and move on. The person going through an annulment will also begin to see the more that they focus on getting revenge on their spouse the more they are drinking a poison hoping their spouse would die. Sometimes the person learns that they must forgive themselves.

I know that when I was going through treatment for depression this was one of the big things I had to learn. If you find yourself still wanting to punish your ex-spouse or yourself you might need to talk to a professional about it. In the end I came to realize the angrier I got at them the more I was hurting myself and the less it bothered them.

