

2023

Finding joy in a new beginning: a journey of healing and restoration in the Roman Catholic annulment process

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/46088>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

BOSTON UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Project Thesis

**FINDING JOY IN A NEW BEGINNING:
A JOURNEY OF HEALING AND RESTORATION IN THE
ROMAN CATHOLIC ANNULMENT PROCESS**

by

TERESA A. NIZZA

M.A., Franciscan School of Theology, 2006

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry

2023

Approved By

Project Thesis Advisor

Claire E. Wolfeich, Ph.D.
Professor of Practical Theology and Spiritual Studies

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to all the Catholic women who suffer the grief of a broken covenantal bond created in the Sacrament of Marriage.

**FINDING JOY IN A NEW BEGINNING: A JOURNEY OF HEALING AND
RESTORATION IN THE CATHOLIC ANNULMENT PROCESS**

TERESA A. NIZZA

Boston University School of Theology, 2023

Project Thesis Advisor: Claire E. Wolfteich, Professor of Practical Theology and
Spiritual Studies

ABSTRACT

This initiative will seek to transform the suffering experienced by Catholic women when a marriage covenant ends through a research-based project to reimagine the Roman Catholic annulment process. This project is intended to increase awareness of the annulment process to foster healing and restoration. The Roman Catholic annulment process, dating back to A.D. 110, historically focused on a more transactional approach to breaking the covenantal bond established in a Catholic marriage. This process will help women view and experience the annulment process as a journey toward healing and restoration leading to new relationships with self, others, and God. Finding joy in a new beginning brings hope. Yet finding a new beginning in the annulment process is an experience of faith. The study examines Catholicism as a way of life in the broader context of sacramental theology. The sacramental life centers on seven interrelated sacraments. The sacrament of marriage creates a covenantal relationship and life-long marital bond. This bond cannot be dissolved. There is no Catholic divorce. Therefore, when a civil divorce occurs, a complex cycle of grief follows. While marriage remains a

significant part of the fabric of our society, approximately 50% of all U.S. marriages end in divorce. Despite controversy regarding the annulment process, it can be a life-giving journey that transforms suffering. Church documents provide vision, clarity, and the opportunity for Catholics to understand teachings on marriage, divorce, and annulments. The project will include a group of 8-10 Catholic women, who were married in the Church and experienced a civil divorce. These women will build trust, develop authentic relationships, and support each other as they journey together. The group will be structured using the Bridges Transition Model which highlights three stages of transition: endings, neutral zone, and new beginnings. This one-year project will be evaluated using information gathered during individual and group sessions. A structured outline has been established for the project and aligns with the steps in the annulment process.

Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations	x
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Background	1
Statement of the Problem	7
Summary	12
Chapter 2: Catholicism: A Way of Life	15
A Sacramental Faith Tradition	16
The History of Sacramental Theology	19
The Seven Sacraments and Their Interrelationship	20
The History and Origins of the Sacrament of Marriage	24
The Marriage Bond and the Covenantal Relationship	27
Chapter 3: Impact of Divorce and the Broken Covenant.....	30
The Narratives	30
Emotional: The Cycle of Grief and Suffering	35
Psychological: Impact on Relationship with Self	37
Spiritual: Separation from Individual, Community and God	39
Chapter 4: Reflections on Marriage and Divorce Data	43
Data on Marriage and Divorce Data in the United States	43
Reasons for Marriage and Divorce	45

The Impact of Age on Divorce	46
Annulment Data	49
Trends in Marriage, Singleness, and Divorce	52
Shifts in Thoughts About Marriage and Cohabitation	54
Chapter 5: The Annulment Process	63
What Is an Annulment?	63
The History and Origins	64
The Connection to Tradition, Theology, and Scripture	68
Recent Changes to the Process	71
The Annulment Process Today	74
Chapter 6: Healing and Compassion	78
Why It's Necessary	78
Transformed Suffering in the Catholic Tradition	80
Forgiveness and Reconciliation	81
The Sacrament of Penance in the Roman Catholic Church	83
Healing and Restoration	86
New Beginnings and Relationships	87
Chapter 7: Reimagining the Annulment Process	90
Support and Advocacy for Catholic Women	95
The Gift of Faith and Community	97

Chapter 8: Vision, Clarity, and Opportunity	99
Understanding Church Documents and Authority	99
Church Documents Addressing Marriage and Family Life	101
What This Means and Why It’s Important?	121
Chapter 9: Conclusion	124
And Now, What?	124
Proposed Action Plan: Connecting Vision and Context	124
Evaluation	129
Future Insights and Future Opportunities.....	132
Appendices	134
Bibliography	139
Vita	148

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A.D.	Anno Domini, Latin for “in the year of the Lord”
ACS	American Community Survey
ASE	Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae
CARA	Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
IPUMS-USA	Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, United States of America
NCHS	National Center for Health Statistics
NCFMR	National Center for Family and Marriage Research
OCD	Official Catholic Directory
USCCB	United States Catholic Conference of Bishops
USCB	United States Census Bureau

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

This initiative will seek to transform the suffering experienced by Catholic women when a marriage covenant ends through a research-based project to reimagine the Roman Catholic annulment process. This project is intended to increase awareness of the Catholic annulment process to foster healing and restoration. The Roman Catholic annulment process, dating back to A.D. 110, has historically focused on a more transactional approach to breaking the covenantal bond established in a Catholic marriage.¹ An annulment is most often sought after by Catholics to clarify their status within the Church after a civil divorce and before they remarry in the Catholic Church.² In my role as a transformative leader, my intention is to help women view and experience the annulment process as a journey toward wholeness in which healing and restoration lead to new relationships with self, others, and God. My own experience with the annulment process ignited my passion and affirmed my belief to pursue this path and leadership journey with divorced Catholic women in my parish community and beyond. This remained true as the process unfolded and revealed the reasons for the end of my 20-year marriage. After two years of reflection, I moved beyond the questions of Why? and What happened? I reached the point where I could hear: “And now, what?” The answer proved to be transformative.

¹ “The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp, Chapter 5. The Duties of Husbands and Wives,” New Advent, accessed November 24, 2022, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0110.htm>.

² “Catholic Annulment, Was a Marriage Valid?” BeginningCatholic.com, August 19, 2020, accessed March 2, 2021, <http://www.beginningcatholic.com/catholic-annulment>.

Finding joy in a new beginning brings hope. Yet finding joy and a new beginning in a journey of healing and restoration in the Catholic annulment process is an experience of faith. This is a complex claim, especially for non-Catholics or those who are not grounded in the Catholic faith tradition. In fact, it may even be complex for Catholics to understand and accept. As a guide who has become proficient in the study of the Catholic annulment process, my intention is to make the complex simple while ensuring an accurate translation of my research, insights, and observations to support this claim. For many Catholics, their experience within the Catholic faith tradition and the Catholic Church, result in disappointment, disillusionment, and harm rather than joy or a new beginning.

One of the main characteristics of Catholicism is that it is a sacramental faith tradition. What does this mean and why does it matter? Catholic theologian Richard McBrien writes: “The sacraments, as signs of grace, express and realize the sacramental nature of the Church; as causes of grace, they mediate the saving presence of God; and they are both signs and causes of our communion with one another and with God.”³ The sacraments have a Christological (Christ) and ecclesiology (Church) dimension, in other words, they are acts of Christ in the Church. The sacramental life centers on seven sacraments: Baptism, Reconciliation, Eucharist, Confirmation, Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony and Holy Order. These sacraments are interrelated and cannot be viewed or studied separately from each other. The sacraments of Christian initiation are Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. The sacraments of forgiveness and healing are

³ Richard P McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 785.

Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick. The sacraments of vocation and commitment are Matrimony and Holy Order. While the sacramental life is intended to support the life and mission of the Church, many Catholics find themselves unable to make the connection beyond the rituals associated with the sacraments, rituals such as weddings, funerals, and celebrations. As Catholics, the everyday experience of sacramental life is realized in the sacrament of the Eucharist through the liturgy: “For the liturgy, through which the work of our redemption is accomplished, most of all in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church.”⁴ While the meaning of the liturgy cannot be understated, its purpose may not be as deeply connected to the sacramental life of an individual as the Church intends.

An annulment is not a sacrament, yet the process can provide an opening and space for signs of grace and the saving presence of God. While circumstances leading to the process are painful, it can result in a deeper connection to the sacramental life and the opportunity for healing, restoration, and a new beginning. Although the Catholic annulment process is directly tied to the sacrament of marriage, the interrelationship to all of the seven sacraments will be explored.⁵

Catholics believe God intended marriage to be a permanent, exclusive, and lifelong relationship open to new life. While strong marriages and families are often considered the building blocks of society, the unfortunate reality is that divorce has

⁴ Second Vatican Council, “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium, 4 October, 1963,” in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1975), sec. 2.

⁵ McBrien, *Catholicism*, 784.

become common even for Catholics. Divorce is often devastating as relationships change and become more fragmented including relationships to spouse, self, family, friends, parish community, Church, and God. While broken relationships can mend and reconciliation may occur over time, women initially report extreme difficulty relating to self and to failure in their relationships.

Lisa Duffy, Catholic author, speaker, and divorce recovery expert who has more than 20 years' experience helping women rebuild their lives after divorce states: "The cross of divorce, in my opinion is one of the heaviest you can bear."⁶ She believes a Catholic annulment is an important step in this process. She speaks from personal experience and from counseling hundreds of women while documenting their stories. This process of healing brings clarity on many levels. While Catholics are not required to initiate the annulment process unless they wish to remarry in the Church, there are other reasons to participate beyond re-marriage. These reasons include:

1. Provides a level of healing that is unusual to find.
2. Offers the opportunity to affirm standing within the Church.
3. Provides clarity to the spiritual reality of the divorce and annulment.
4. Offers a view beyond the civil court ruling and social outcomes of the divorce.⁷

Yet most Catholics are unaware of these benefits as information is not widely communicated or available. As a result, most Catholics become confused, or they are simply unaware of the benefits. There is also significant confusion in the mainstream

⁶ Lisa Duffy, *Mending the Heart: A Catholic Annulment Companion* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2018), 15.

⁷ Duffy, *Mending the Heart*, 15.

regarding the annulment process. Many within and outside the Church perpetuate myths and misinformation. Since it is a legal process within the Church, the language can be confusing and difficult to comprehend. Therefore, it can be a challenge to find answers and to fully understand the purpose and meaning. As a result, Catholics often find it easier to accept the myths and misinformation.

The Catholic Church upholds the teaching that marriage is created as a permanent union and Catholics are bound by this teaching. As a result, divorce is not a consideration. The Catholic Church does not view marriage as simply a legal contract; it is viewed as a sacramental covenant. Therefore, in the eyes of the Church, the process of dissolving a marriage is not simply the act of dividing property, assets, and the parting of ways. However, since divorce is an unfortunate reality, it requires the Church to address it on a realistic level. While there are no Catholic divorces, the Church offers annulments as a process, tool, and method for clarification and healing when a relationship ends. Yet this process can be viewed as daunting and painful often leaving individuals wondering whether it is worthwhile.

Many individuals who have experienced a civil divorce perceive the annulment process as a Catholic divorce or yet another legal procedure with lawyers, witnesses, paperwork, and legal challenges. However, if an annulment can be viewed and experienced as a process with tools and guides to help an individual reflect on the “big picture” of their marital relationship and why it failed, it can result in a very different experience than the civil process. More importantly for the Church and for the individuals, it is intended to answer the question of whether a valid marriage bond

existed. Amid all the celebration and ritual, was a covenantal marriage bond created on the wedding day? What does it mean to create a valid marriage bond, and if it didn't exist, how would the individuals know? This can be a bold and painful realization that may not be easily accepted as most individuals and couples take vows seriously and believe they have indeed created a valid marriage bond. Once the individual can fully embrace and reflect on the meaning of this bond, it becomes easier to gain clarity and understand whether it existed.

In 2016, Pope Francis surprised the faithful when he responded unexpectedly to questions regarding the condition of sacramental marriage in the Catholic Church. His statement, "the great majority of sacramental marriages are indeed invalid as individuals marry without a full understanding of the permanence and fidelity required in a marriage" appeared to question the good will of individuals' entering marriage. The faithful were puzzled and discontent with his statement. Yet it was later clarified that the context of the question was grounded in the pastoral difficulties that emerge during marital breakdowns. The Pope later attested to the pastoral burden he feels for healing the root cause of the marriage crisis. Further statements from the Vatican expressed the pope was observing a crisis and did not intend to contradict Church teachings regarding validity as it relates to sacramental marriage.⁸ This leads to the question: "What is a valid marriage bond?" It is an important question that will be addressed as it is a key element in the annulment process.

⁸ C.C. Pecknold, "Defending the Pope, Defending Marriage," *The National Review*, June 6, 2016, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/06/pope-francis-marriage-comments-are-great-majority-sacramental-marriages-invalid/>.

Statement of the Problem

Catholic women often enter a different cycle of grief when a marriage ends. In her book: *Divorced. Catholic. Now What?* Lisa Duffy describes the unique impact of divorce on Catholic women and the accompanying pain and suffering.⁹ While marriage and divorce are common in Western culture, marriage in the Catholic Church creates a covenant signifying a sacramental bond established by God.¹⁰ According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops,

The Sacrament of Marriage is a covenant, which is more than a contract. Covenant always expresses a relationship between persons. The marriage covenant refers to the relationship between a husband and wife, a permanent union of persons capable of knowing and loving each other and God. The celebration is also a liturgical act held in a public liturgy at church.¹¹

Therefore, a marriage in the Catholic Church varies considerably from a civil union or a contract that legally binds two people. Consequently, when divorce takes place, it foreshadows a change in the covenantal relationship established between the couple, God, the Church, and the parish community.

While progress has been made in clarifying the status of divorced Catholics, stereotypes and myths continue to harm women impacting their status and participation in Church life and living out their faith. Standards, rules, and Canon Law notwithstanding, women report treatment as second-class citizens, separation from the Church, isolation from their faith community, refusal of Eucharist, exclusion from ministry, severed

⁹ Lisa Duffy and Vince Frese, *Divorced. Catholic. Now What?* (Alpharetta, GA: Journey of Hope Publications, 2011).

¹⁰ Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2012), 409-410.

¹¹ "Matrimony," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, August 28, 2020, <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/matrimony/index>.

relationships, abandonment by parish members, and being labeled as a person who is not in the state of grace. Even though formal separation or exclusion from Church life is not an official act or consequence of divorce in the Catholic Church, it is often women's experience.

Catholic women who divorce confront multiple layers of grief as they face the legal dissolution of their marriage, separation from Church and a broken relationship with God. There is a significant amount of existing research on the relationship between grief and divorce, yet it is not specific to Catholic women. The Pew Research Center has conducted research on divorce among Catholics, yet this research does not focus specifically on grief. However, it contains valuable data on the emotional and psychological impact of divorce. The data provides insight into depression, anxiety, loss, the emotional impact of divorce, the state of divorce in the United States, perspectives on long-term marriages ending in divorce, and participation in parish communities post-divorce and annulments.¹² Duffy's writing provides insight into the multi-layers of grief experienced by Catholic women following divorce. These stories and narratives align with my experience in ministry during the past several years as divorced Catholic women shared their experiences of grief. They acknowledge a grief that begets suffering.

The first layer of grief is the legal dissolution of a marriage. While a civil divorce is intended to end the legal duties and responsibilities of marriage, research shows that a legal dissolution of a marriage is not simply a legal technicality. When a marriage ends, it is often an emotional rollercoaster that leaves women with feelings of significant loss

¹² Rich Morin, "Is Divorce Contagious?" Pew Center Research, September 20, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/10/21/is-divorce-contagious/>.

accompanied by grief. In the book: *Collaborative Divorce: The Revolutionary New Way to Restructure Your Family, Resolve Legal Issues and Move on with your Life*, Pauline Tesler and Peggy Thompson provide perspectives on grief and sorrow, guilt and shame, and fear and anxiety that take place with divorce. “We know from research, theoretical writings, and personal experience with thousands of people going through divorces that the emotional impact of divorce is as severe as that of a death in the immediate family.”¹³ Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a Swiss-American psychiatrist and author of the revolutionary book: *On Death and Dying* expressed the five stages of grief as: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.¹⁴ Studies have shown similar stages of grief occur during and after the civil divorce process. These stages have been identified as: denial, fear, anger, bargaining, guilt, and depression. Like the stages of dying, the stages of divorce are a cycle that take place in no particular order or sequence; divorce is experienced much like a death or a loss of a particular way of life.¹⁵

The next layer of grief, beyond the legal separation from an individual, is the separation from a parish community who witnessed the covenantal union in a public liturgy. As women struggle with the separation caused by divorce, they also face a more complex separation from their community. The shame and brokenness of divorce intensifies in a broken community covenant leaving women feeling alone and marginalized. This was evident to me, as a divorced Catholic woman, when I was asked

¹³ Pauline H. Tesler and Peggy Thompson, *Collaborative Divorce: The Revolutionary New Way to Restructure Your Family, Resolve Legal Issues, and Move on with Your Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2006), 13.

¹⁴ Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969).

¹⁵ L. J. Burke, “7 Stages of Grief During and After Divorce,” *DivorceMag.com*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.divorcemag.com/articles/stages-of-grief-during-and-after-divorce>.

to step down from an active ministry role. While asked, and not directed to remove myself from ministry, if I decided to stay, financial resources would be withheld from my parish community. There was no choice other than to resign, which furthered the separation from my beloved community. Despite efforts to stay connected beyond the ministry role, relationships became awkward.

Pew Research Center studies reveal significant misconceptions and confusion related to status of divorced Catholics and annulments. As a result of these misconceptions, Catholics experience separation and isolation from the Church and the parish community.¹⁶ As I began to share my story with women, similar stories emerged acknowledging loneliness, separation, grief, and suffering. One woman's experience, prompted by a well-intended yet misinformed community member regarding her standing in the church, led to a refusal of Eucharist. The Sacrament of the Eucharist, also referred to as Communion, is one of the most central and important sacraments in Catholicism. Jesus Christ is truly present in the Eucharist under the appearance of bread and wine which creates a covenant between humanity and God. In the absence of this communion, a spiritual, emotional, and psychological void is created in the previously intimate relationship with God. Once again, this is a grief that begets suffering.

The final layer of grief experienced by Catholic women results from a broken relationship with God. In addition to the grief and separation experienced in the loss of human relationships, the divine relationship established with the couple in a marriage

¹⁶ Michael Lipka, "Most Catholic Hope for Change in Church Rule on Divorce, Communion," Pew Research Center, September 20, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/26/most-u-s-catholics-hope-for-change-in-church-rule-on-divorce-communion/>.

covenant, intended as a permanent union to love each other and God, also ends. While individual relationships with God existed previously and will in the future, the end of a commitment established by a marriage covenant creates a death of a particular kind of relationship with God. The end of this relationship is caused by a failed marriage and a broken covenant thereby leaving women with feelings of shame, guilt, separation, grief, and suffering.

Even though most Catholics and non-Catholics enter marriage with a belief it will be a lifelong relationship and it is the foundation of society, the reality is many marriages end in divorce and grief accompanies the end of the relationship. However, marriage remains a significant part of the fabric of our society with more than 2.2 million marriages reported annually and more than 800,00 divorces nationwide.¹⁷ The American Psychological Association reports 40 to 50% of U.S. marriages end in divorce.¹⁸ Further studies confirm the current national U.S. average marriage rate is 6.9 per 1,000 population with the divorce rate at 3.2 per 1,000 population.¹⁹ This holds true in my home state of Maine where the average divorce rate is at 3.4 per 1,000 population.²⁰ Evidence suggests Catholic rates of divorce while slightly lower are similar to the general population. This means almost half of the married Catholic women in the U.S. experience difficult and complex layers of grief and suffering when their marriages end.

¹⁷ “Marriage and Divorce,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, August 19, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/marriage-divorce.htm>.

¹⁸ “Marriage and Divorce,” American Psychological Association, August 20, 2020, <https://www.apa.org/topics/divorce>.

¹⁹ “Marriage and Divorce,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

²⁰ “Divorce rates by State: 1990, 1995, and 1999-2018, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, August 19, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/state-divorce-rates-90-95-99-18.pdf>.

Summary

In her book: *Boundless Compassion: Creating a Way of Life*, Joyce Rupp shares these words by St. John of the Cross:

*I saw the river over which every soul must pass
to reach the kingdom of heaven,
and the name of that river was suffering;
and I saw the boat which carries the souls across the river,
and the name of that boat was love.*

St. John of the Cross, River of Suffering

Rupp uses the river as a metaphor to transform the human spirit: “The energizing flow of rivers through land and rock often sculpts magnificent canyons and passageways.”²¹ The river becomes a metaphor for the power of suffering to transform the human spirit. God wants everyone to enter into their own humanity, to feel and experience it, not avoid it. There is both joy and suffering in being human. While humans don’t usually question why joy befalls them, they often ask: Why must we suffer? Yet the answer is elusive. Even when Job pleads to God for an answer, he does not receive one.²²

While the meaning of suffering is often unknowable, Catholics find insights in the Passion of Jesus. On the cross, Jesus embraced human suffering and through this voluntary suffering, attained human salvation from sin and death. He transformed suffering into salvific love and as a result, gave it new meaning and a saving power. Therefore, Catholics can find meaning and purpose in suffering not as a conceptual

²¹ Joyce Rupp, *Boundless Compassion: Creating a Way of Life* (Norte Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2018), 71.

²² Job 4:8 (NIV).

solution to a theoretical problem, but as a tangible path to holiness. Jesus not only redeemed humankind from sin and death, but He also redeemed them from suffering. Jesus transformed suffering into redemption and eternal life.

While grief and suffering are real, the good news is that suffering, once transformed, is not the end, it's the beginning. It provides a tangible path for individuals to create a renewed trust and freedom by establishing new beliefs and actions while letting go of former behaviors and patterns. Trusting relationships are grounded in mercy and justice through forgiveness and reconciliation. The awakening to forgiveness often leads to reconciliation as it begins to mend the multiple layers of grief for an integrated healing to take place. This integration is foundational for authentic relationships that nurture love and compassion allowing humankind, and specifically women who have experienced the pain and suffering of divorce, to thrive. "Universal peace can only come if we develop and awaken the capacity to love people, to respect them deeply, to live authentic relationships with others, to yearn for truth and justice in the huge family of humanity."²³ As women cultivate authentic relationships by advocating for themselves and for other women in the Church, they will demonstrate and model joy in a new beginning in their journey of healing and restoration.

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) reports approximately 19,000 annulments were initiated in the United States in 2019 and approximately 20,000 per year for the past ten years.²⁴ While not all Catholic women

²³ Jean Vanier, *Jean Vanier: Essential Writings*, ed. Carolyn Whitney-Brown (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 53.

²⁴ "Frequently Requested Church Statistics," Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, accessed August 19, 2020, <https://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>.

will choose to initiate an annulment, the purpose of this project is to invite women to consider the possibility and to reimagine the process. Often new beginnings start with an ending. While suffering and loss may occur with an ending, there can be joy in a new beginning. Yet this joy may come with a fear of the unknown, anxiety and confusion. As a transformative leader in my community, I intend to lead women toward imagining a new beginning and reimaging the annulment process as a way to enter into a new relationship with self, others, the parish community, and God. We move through the cycle of grief by the grace of God while reimaging the narratives and images that shape our experience of love and suffering. In the Catholic Church, we are blessed to have the annulment process to support and guide our reflection, reconciliation, and restoration toward wholeness. This project will initially gather a small group of 8-10 women to build trust, develop authentic relationships and support each other as they journey together in the process of healing, forgiveness, closure, and a new beginning.

Chapter 2: Catholicism: A Way of Life

To fully embrace and begin the journey toward healing and restoration in the Catholic annulment process, it is key to understand Catholicism as a way of life. This means a way of life as an individual, in community with others, and in relationship with God. Richard McBrien describes Catholicism as a “tradition, way of life, and a community. It is a way of being human, religious, and Christian...comprised of faith, theologies, and doctrines and is characterized by specific liturgical, ethical, and spiritual orientations and behaviors; at the same time, it is a people...with a particular history.”²⁵ The word Catholic originated from the Greek adjective, *katholikos* which means “universal” and from the adverbial phrase *kath’ holou* meaning “according to the whole.” According to McBrien, Catholicism must be understood within a wider context as a way of being human first, followed by a way of being religious, followed by a way of being Christian.

There are three principles that distinguish the Catholic tradition from other Christian Churches and traditions: sacramentality, mediation, and communion. The unique configuration of these principles makes it distinctive. Sacramentality allows Catholics to see God in all things, mediated through the human, material, and finite, resulting in communion which creates the unity of humankind.²⁶ In addition to these distinguishing principles, Catholicism emphasizes tradition, reason, analogical imagination and its universality which includes a both/and perspective vs. an either/or

²⁵ McBrien, 3.

²⁶ McBrien, 17.

approach to Christian faith and practice.²⁷ Catholicism has a sacramental perspective that “sees the divine in the human, the infinite in the finite, the spiritual in the material, and the transcendent in the immanent, the eternal in the historical.”²⁸

This makes life and reality sacred and invites humankind to connect the human and divine story. Mark Nepo, educator, poet, spiritual advisor, and author of *The Book of Awakening* offers an example of both/and in his view of *grace and effort*. Nepo shares we must be open to the invitation of grace that is always and everywhere available to humankind. Yet it is not simply about accepting the invitation to grace, it is about trying to embrace life more fully through our behavior and actions. A Catholic way of life includes our relationship with ourselves, the human community, the Church, and God.

A Sacramental Faith Tradition

Understanding Catholicism in a wider context is necessary to understand the Catholic way of life and Catholicism as a sacramental faith tradition. A sacramental faith tradition supports and affirms a Catholic way of life described by McBrien as being human, religious, and Christian. Catholicism is a sacramental faith tradition centered on the seven sacraments, principally, the Eucharist. These seven sacraments: Baptism, Reconciliation, Eucharist, Confirmation, Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony and Holy Order have an ecclesiological and Christological dimension. While they are acts of Christ in the Church, they are also acts of the Church through which Christ can act on humankind's behalf.²⁹ These seven sacraments are not distinct from each other; they are

²⁷ McBrien, 17.

²⁸ McBrien, 9.

²⁹ McBrien, 784.

not seven separate sacraments. They are unified. The sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist are part of the Christian initiation process; the sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick are linked as sacraments of forgiveness and healing; and the sacraments of Matrimony and Holy Order are connected to commitment and vocation. These seven sacraments, in the classical Augustinian sense, are visible signs of an invisible grace. While God's grace is not visible to humankind, the visible reality is materialized in the outward expression of the way sacraments are administered and received.

During this process, the three distinct features of Catholicism are engaged: sacramentality, mediation, and communion.³⁰ Sacramentality has historically been defined as a divine presence or a visible sign of invisible grace. Pope Paul VI shared a more contemporary definition of a sacrament in his opening address in 1963 at the second session of the Second Vatican Council: "a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God" thus all reality is sacred. This sacramental vision sees and experiences God in all things: humankind, communities, places, events, movements, objects, the environment, the world, and the cosmos. Everything visible, concrete, and finite in the past, current, and future include a divine presence.³¹ It is in these "material realities" that Catholics meet the invisible God. The Catholic faith tradition believes our greatest encounter with God and God's with humankind is through Jesus Christ. Moreover, the Church is the essential place where humankind and Christ meet each other. It is in and through the

³⁰ McBrien, 785.

³¹ McBrien, 9.

seven sacraments that the ecclesial encounter with Christ is materialized, expressed, and celebrated.

In the second principal, mediation, God is both present within the sacramental action and God accomplishes something. As a result, this reality not only embodies God's presence, but it also becomes a mediated experience. This experience creates a spiritual awareness and consciousness that is embedded in the historical and in the reality that God is present and active. In Catholicism, the commitment to mediation is realized through the role of the ordained minister. However, the mediation is not intended to inhibit the encounter between God and the human person. It is meant to support the person and the community of faith in the realization of the sacrament.³²

The third principal, communion, affirms that the human person's encounter with God is mediated and communal. Even though there is an individual and personal nature to the encounter, it has a communal quality achieved through the sacraments by the mediation of a faith community. This is one of the reasons for the importance placed on the Church in theology, doctrine, pastoral practice, moral vision, and devotional life. "Catholicism has always emphasized the place of the Church as the sacrament of Christ, mediating salvation through sacraments, ministries, and other institutional elements, and the Communion of Saints and the People of God."³³ These three principles are at the heart of the unique Catholic understanding and practice of faith.

³² McBrien, 12.

³³ McBrien, 13.

The History of Sacramental Theology

Sacramental theology is embedded in the Catholic way of life and tradition. It holds the belief that God delivers grace to humankind through the external acts of the seven sacraments established by Christ. Grace has been described as a gift of love that invites humankind into relationship with God. Sacramental theology was developed in the Middle Ages. It is defined as the systematic study of the sacraments reflecting on liturgical celebrations along with observations by theologians and teachers.³⁴ While the Councils of Trent and Vatican II insisted on essential characteristics of the sacraments, a binding definition of the word sacrament was never established by the Church's magisterium. The term sacrament originated from the Latin meaning: "that which produces holiness." Yet it was originally used in Christian theology as a translation of the Greek word "mystery." In the fifth century A.D., Augustine defined sacrament as the "visible form of invisible grace" and "a sign of a sacred thing." Later Thomas Aquinas refined this definition to designate the acts ordained by Christ for sanctification; this definition has continued through modern times.³⁵ The Church describes sacraments as visible signs initiated by Christ and revealed ritually in the church community to bring the Church into the experience of the paschal mystery.

The history of sacramental theology can be explored and affirmed through scripture. Sacramental celebrations and the intervention of God in human history were expressed by biblical authors. Biblical witness is expressed in every act of liturgy and

³⁴ "Sacramental Theology," Encyclopedia.com, accessed August 21, 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/sacramental-theology>.

³⁵ Emily Daw, "What is Sacramental Theology?" Practical Adult Insights, January 29, 2023, <https://www.practicaladultinsights.com/what-is-sacramental-theology.htm>.

sacrament through God's word to the people of Israel. The communal nature of God's revelation to His chosen people and their response through conversion was ritualized in liturgy through the sacraments. The Hebrew view of memorial is another way to understand the sacraments and liturgy in scripture. In this context, the events of saving history are accomplished and preserved in the present and fulfilled in the future. These memorials that celebrate God's intervention in saving history, emphasize the Exodus and the Paschal Mystery. The Paschal Mystery represents the salvation and redemption of humankind. The people of Israel brought witness to a future manifestation in the Church. Pope Leo I shared: "What was visible in Christ has passed over into the Sacraments of the Church" (*Sermo 74; Patrologia Latina 54:398*). It is through these visible signs of grace that Christ's redemptive work continues in the present.

The Seven Sacraments and Their Interrelationship

Catholicism is committed to the principle of sacramentality which is the belief that everything is capable of embodying and expressing the divine. In addition, this belief holds that there is a mysterious dimension in all reality filled with the hidden presence of God. As a result, God connects with humankind through the finite and the visible; this is sacramental encounter. Christians experience the ultimate sacramental encounter with God in the humanity of Jesus Christ. In Catholicism, the Church is considered the sacrament of encounter with Christ and with God. The term sacrament, in this context and in the broadest sense, describes any "finite reality through which the divine is

perceived to be disclosed and communicated, and through which our human response to the divine assumes some measure of shape, form, and structure.”³⁶

According to St. Augustine, sacraments include religious rites, rituals, symbols, and revealed teachings of both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Augustine expressed the significance that all sacraments are connected to the great sacrament-mystery of Christ and Church. He further sought significance in the sacraments as sacred signs and the validation of receipt and acceptance. Isidore of Seville, however, emphasized the secret nature of the sacraments and the hidden realities as opposed to the characteristics stressed by Augustine; in particular, those characteristics related to sacraments as signs. After the work of Augustine and Isidor of Seville, from the 9th through the 11th century, the focus became the symbolic presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In the 12th century, a synthesis began to take shape largely based on the work of Peter Lombard. Lombard introduced the term “cause” to define what the sacraments accomplished. One of the most important matters to arise from Lombard was a way to describe how the sacraments effect what they signify. Lombard was the first person to use the word “cause” to explain the effects of sacraments.³⁷ He identified the sacraments as unique among signs due to their causal efficacy. To comprehend causality fully, it is important to understand that sacraments are signs that cause grace exactly in accordance with their nature. Therefore, they affect what they signify.³⁸

³⁶ McBrien, 801.

³⁷ Peter Lombard, *The Sentences, (Summa Sententiarum)*, Books 1–4. translator, Giulio Silano, 4 vols. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007-2010). I, VI.

³⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 2nd, rev. ed., 3a, 62.1.

It has been commonplace, since the 13th century, to express this unique efficacy of the sacraments by use of the phrase “ex opere operato” which was introduced by the Council of Trent.³⁹ It means the grace given is the effect of the rite which highlights grace as a gift from God. It is not a human achievement or effort by the individual or the minister. Therefore, this means these external signs of grace, the sacraments, are received only through faith. Lombard’s summary of Catholic teaching was called: *Liber Sententiarum*. This work classified the theology of the sacraments and arranged the teachings from Scripture into a system. It became a highly regarded work used in commentaries of succeeding theologians.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, systematic definitions emerged. Thomas Aquinas provided one of the most significant definitions: "A Sacrament is a sign of a sacred thing in as much as it sanctifies."⁴⁰ He further defined the sacraments as signs of three things: the Passion of Christ, grace, and glory citing signs of redemption in scripture.⁴¹ With the development of scholastic theology, the emphasis was placed on the signs being causes of the grace signified. Aquinas is credited with keeping a balanced view of the sacraments as signs that cause and do so in accordance with their nature as signs. At the Council of Trent in the 16th century, the Church finally committed to the seven Sacraments of the New Law.⁴²

Over time, elements such as personal encounter, ecclesial dimension, and worship emerged and were emphasized. The Second Vatican Council’s *Constitution on the Sacred*

³⁹ Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: A Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations of the Catholic Church*, ed. Peter Huenermann, (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, CA, 2012).

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 3a, 60.2.

⁴¹ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 3a, 60.3.

⁴² Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 1601.

Liturgy states: "The purpose of the Sacraments is to sanctify participants, to build up the body of Christ, and, finally, to give worship to God; because they are signs that also instruct. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it; that is why they are called 'Sacraments of faith.'"⁴³ According to McBrien, they not only convey grace, "the act of celebrating them most effectively disposes the faithful to receive this grace in a fruitful manner, to worship God duly, and to practice charity."⁴⁴ The Second Vatican Council provided clarity that the Sacraments are the primary actions in which Christ's work of worship and salvation continues in our times. In addition, Christ is the principal priest in all sacramental actions. When celebrating the sacraments in this way, it provides a way for the faithful to receive grace in this manner.⁴⁵

Sacraments are described as: signs of faith; acts of worship; signs of the unity of the Church and signs of Christ's presence. There is a sign or ritual (*sacramentum tantum*), the immediate effect (*res tantum*), and the lasting effect (*res et sacramentum*).⁴⁶ The sacraments the Church does not repeat with an individual are known as "character" sacraments. This means they "seal" Christians as members of the Church. There are three-character sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Order. There are four non-character sacraments which have a lasting effect: 1. Matrimony, the bond of union between two individuals; 2. Reconciliation, the healing of the separated individual from the Church; 3. Anointing of the Sick, the healing of the sick; and 4. Eucharist, the real

⁴³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1123.

⁴⁴ "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy," Second Vatican Council.

⁴⁵ McBrien, 7.

⁴⁶ McBrien, 802.

presence of Christ.⁴⁷ The minister of the sacrament acts on behalf of the Church carrying out the intentions identified in the Councils of Florence and Trent. The individual receiving the sacrament must be predisposed by faith, conversion, or devotion. The sacrament of marriage must be understood in the context of these inter-relationships and the Catholic way of life.

From a Catholic perspective, individuals enter the Church through the rite of Christian initiation which includes three sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. This initiation emphasizes unity among the sacraments, including the relationship with the mission of the Church and the local church's role in the individual's growth in faith.⁴⁸ While all Catholics are initiated into the Church in the same way, they are not expected to live their Catholic faith in the same way. However, many are called to live in union with another in marriage. The sacrament of marriage, like the sacraments of initiation, are directed to the nature and mission of the Church. In the sacrament of matrimony, the Catholic community provides witness to the connection between Christ and Church demonstrated through the commitment of marriage. The Church is revealed as a community called forth with the couple as a family committed to a life of mutual love and service.⁴⁹

The History and Origins of the Sacrament of Marriage

According to author Stephanie Coontz, the origins of marriage can be traced to early tribal group relationships. Marriage was a strategic means to establish diplomatic

⁴⁷ McBrien, 802.

⁴⁸ McBrien, 831.

⁴⁹ McBrien, 851.

trade that eventually evolved into relationships of consent, love, and commitment.⁵⁰ During the 11th century, the desires and consent of the couple were given little consideration. However, over time, the Benedictine monk Gratian began to focus on the consent of the couple and raised its level of importance.⁵¹ Gratian gained agreement to formalize marriage in 1140 with his canon law textbook, *Decretum Gratiani*. The *Decretum* obligated couples to provide consent and to consummate their marriage in order for a marital bond to be created. It was no longer sufficient for the couple to simply be present at a ceremony. His book shaped the foundation for the Church's marriage rules in the 12th century and set the rules for marriage and sexuality in a changing social environment.⁵² During this time, Catholic writers and theologians began to refer to marriage as a sacrament and a sacred celebration connected to the experience of God's presence. In 1563 the Council of Trent officially recognized marriage as a sacrament.

The history of marriage is revealed in scripture. Catholics believe marriage is deeply rooted in the Hebrew Bible in the concepts of creation and covenant. In Eph. 5:25-33, Jesus uses marriage as a symbol of His love for the Church. The New Testament is said to be ambivalent to marriage, yet it links the union of Christ and the Church. This ambivalence passed through the Church's history through Augustine and others, including negative attitudes about marriage and sexuality, yet no one denied the sacredness of marriage. The sanctity of marriage was eventually confirmed by the

⁵⁰ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History, How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

⁵¹ "Gratian Italian Scholar," Britannica, accessed September 2, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gratian-Italian-scholar>.

⁵² Lauren Everitt, "Ten Key Moments in the History of Marriage," *BBC News Magazine*, March 14, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17351133>.

Councils of Florence and Trent. The theological and pastoral dimensions of marriage were renewed by the Second Vatican Council. “During Vatican II, a new perspective emerged on marriage: (1) It is a covenant, not a contract; (2) mutual love is not “secondary” to the begetting of children; (3) mutual love is sanctified by the sacrament; (4) its sacramentality is not automatic; it requires faith; (5) the consummation of marriage encompasses more than one biological act; and (6) the sacrament incorporates one more fully into the mystery of the Church.”⁵³ The Council’s theology supported the new Rite of Marriage which addressed: the covenantal nature of the marriage bond, the essential element of mutual affection in body and mind, the importance of the procreation and education of children, the virtue of faith in marriage and the significance of the eucharistic as it relates to marriage.”⁵⁴

Today, the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB) describes marriage as both a “natural institution and a sacred union” embedded in the divine plan for creation. The Church teaches a valid marriage of baptized Catholics is both a sacrament and a saving reality. A sacramental marriage creates a covenantal bond that demonstrates to the world, in human terms, the “faithful, creative, abundant and self-emptying love of Christ.” Marital love is “manifested in fidelity, passion, fertility, generosity, sacrifice, forgiveness, and healing, makes known God’s love in their family, communities, and society.” This marital love “confirms and strengthens the human value of a marital union.”⁵⁵

⁵³ McBrien, 877.

⁵⁴ McBrien, 858.

⁵⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1612-1617; 1641-1642.

The Marriage Bond and the Covenantal Relationship

The Catholic Church's position on the sacredness of marriage is embedded in the Genesis creation narrative: "The Lord God said: 'It is not good that the man should be alone'... Therefore, a man leaves his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:18, 24 NIV). God blesses the union and directs them to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28 NIV). In the Hebrew Bible, marriage is portrayed as an institution that upholds the husband's clan and therefore, children are viewed as a blessing and a gift from God (Gen. 24:60 NIV). The most important distinction given to marriage in the Hebrew Bible is the covenant between Yahweh and Israel (Hos. 2 NIV; Jer. 2:2 NIV; Jer. 3:20 NIV; Is. 54:4-5 NIV). Hosea comprehends his marriage to embody the covenant between God and Israel.

In the New Testament, Jesus affirms and deepens the concept of marriage. Jesus references the oneness and commitment that emerges between two people in a marriage. He also states neither person be cast aside. Jesus speaks against divorce noting one who marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Mt. 5:31-21; Mt. 19:3-12 NIV). Yet Jesus also consistently refers to marriage as a way of life in the current age and states there will be no marriage in heaven (Mk. 12:25 NIV).

The USCCB confirms the sacrament of marriage is more than a contract; it is a covenant which articulates a relationship between persons. The marriage covenant is considered a permanent union of two people who are both capable of knowing and loving each other as well as God. Marriage is also considered a liturgical act which is celebrated and embraced publicly at church. In this public liturgy, the couple witness Christ's

spousal love for the Church as well as their love for each other. A blessing expressed in the marriage ceremony states: "Father, you have made the union of man and wife so holy a mystery that it symbolizes the marriage of Christ and his Church."⁵⁶ The USCCB recognizes and affirms scripture begins with the creation and union of man and woman and ends with "the wedding feast of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:7, 9 NIV). Scripture often refers to the importance God places on marriage and its renewal in Jesus' covenant with His Church.⁵⁷

The marriage covenant is described in the Catechism of the Catholic Church in the following way: "The marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman form with each other an intimate communion of life and love, has been founded and endowed with its own special laws by the Creator. By its very nature it is ordered to the good of the couple, as well as to the generation and education of children."⁵⁸ In the Rite of Marriage, both individuals are asked to commit to loving each other faithfully and completely, to love as God loves.⁵⁹ In the Catholic Church, marriage, as viewed by God, is a union between two persons that is faithful, exclusive, and lifelong. In this Catholic union, the couple commit wholly to each other and their responsibility to care for each other and their family. While not everyone is called to living life in this type of union, the call to marriage is woven into the human spirit and draws people together in a "mutually and equally loving union" open to the procreation of children.⁶⁰ These are considered truths

⁵⁶ "Matrimony," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

⁵⁷ "Matrimony," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

⁵⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1660.

⁵⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1601.

⁶⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1602-1605.

present in the order of nature and in light of human reason that are confirmed through the covenant and by divine Revelation in Scripture.⁶¹

In the context of the marriage bond and a covenantal relationship, Catholicism must be understood as a way of life. It's a particular way of being human. We choose this life as an individual and in community. As a people, we have a history and sacramental perspective that makes life and reality sacred. The unified sacraments are visible signs of invisible grace. Sacramental theology grounds us in the belief this grace is a gift of love that invites humankind into relationship with God. This grace is delivered to humankind through the sacraments established by Christ. The sacrament of marriage is considered a sacrament of vocation and commitment in which individuals are called in union with each other to love faithfully and completely, to love as God loves.

⁶¹ "Between Man and Woman: Questions and Answers About Marriage and Same-Sex Unions," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, August 28, 2020, <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/matrimony/index>.

Chapter 3: Impact of Divorce and the Broken Covenant

The Narratives

Catholics are more aware of the Church's teaching on marriage than divorce. Early education on the sacraments provides basic foundational knowledge. In addition, education on the sacrament of matrimony is required prior to marriage in the Church. This information is easily accessible and available to Catholics. However, teachings on divorce are less accessible and less sought after. Marriage brings thoughts of joy, plans, children, and living in a faith community as a couple. Divorce, on the other hand, casts a dark shadow on our culture and relationships. Yet individuals and couples do not anticipate divorce will occur as they begin marriage preparation. Even Pope Francis questions whether individuals truly understand the significance of a sacramental marriage. He created controversy in 2016 when he responded to questions about the condition of sacramental marriage in the Church. The Pope responded that "the great majority" of sacramental marriages were invalid. He believed that men and women enter marriage without a complete understanding of the permanence and fidelity required.⁶² Yet others believe that people do regard marriage as permanent and understand the importance of fidelity. In addition, they presume that marriage will be a long term, exclusive relationship that will bring new life. However, it begs the question as to why so many marriages end in divorce.

Divorce ends a relationship from a legal perspective and changes the couples and individual's status in civil law. However, the bond established in a Catholic marriage

⁶² Pecknold, "*Defending the Pope, Defending Marriage.*"

cannot be dissolved by any human power. Therefore, divorce is not possible between two baptized persons married in the Catholic Church. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Church is strong in its position that “a ratified and consummated marriage cannot be dissolved by any human power or for any reason other than death.”⁶³ Therefore, individuals are not free to remarry in the Church after a divorce.

Annulments were traditionally sought after from divorced Catholics who wished to re-marry in the Catholic Church, yet an annulment is not a Catholic divorce. While a civil divorce focuses on the relationship from a legal perspective ending the marital union, an annulment recognizes the marital union never really existed. The couple’s marriage, once annulled by a Church tribunal, recognizes the couple was never bound in marriage and therefore, they are free to remarry in the Church.⁶⁴ The Church has not waived on this teaching and if an individual remarries without an annulment, it is viewed as adultery by the Church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “Contracting a new union, even if it is recognized by civil law, adds to the gravity of the rupture: the remarried spouse is then in a situation of public and permanent adultery.”⁶⁵

The Church views the individual Catholic obligation to be the universal moral law of God. The moral law of God relates to the marriage covenant which is considered the foundation for family and human society. The Church states that human society, families, and individuals cannot flourish when marriages are broken, and families are

⁶³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2382.

⁶⁴ Leila Miller, “Eight Things You Have to Know About the Church’s Teaching on Divorce,” *Catholic Answers*, March 24, 2017, <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/eight-things-you-have-to-know-about-the-churchs-teaching-on-divorce>.

⁶⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2384.

traumatized.⁶⁶ Moreover, in the Church's view, there is a significant difference between someone who has genuinely been faithful to the sacrament of marriage vs. someone who has shattered a canonically valid marriage.⁶⁷ The Church uses the term "tolerate" in the context of civil divorce only if there is no other option to secure legal and financial rights or care of the children.⁶⁸ The Church's teaching regarding marriage remains it is indissoluble yet it has tolerated modifications through dispensations. However, even in the case of the Church's tolerance, it does not break the marital bond which stays intact between the two persons and God. Catholics are called to a different and higher standard than the secular culture given the concept of marriage as a sacrament.⁶⁹ While Catholics accept this higher standard that embraces the sacred bond and covenant created in the sacrament of marriage, many find their marriages end with a broken covenant.⁷⁰ The impact of divorce and the broken covenant is experienced on an emotional, psychological, and spiritual level.

While the church establishes an expectation that marriage is a life-long relationship, many find that changing societal norms impact their relationships. For thousands of years, marriage served many economic, political, and social functions related to individual needs. It was not about two individuals love and commitment to each other. The purpose of marriage was to acquire or gain political and economic advantage. In the last two hundred years, these economic and political advantages have shifted to institutions and marriage is now considered a personal and private relationship

⁶⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2384.

⁶⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2386.

⁶⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2383.

⁶⁹ Miller, "Eight Things You Have to Know About the Church's teaching on Divorce."

⁷⁰ Cootnz, *Marriage, A History, How Love Conquered Marriage*, 306.

focused on emotional and sexual desire. This focus has brought both positive and negative consequences.⁷¹

Since the purpose of marriage became about love, when love waned, divorce emerged. As people began to view relationships as more important than simply the economic and political aspects, they demanded more social respect. In addition, people began to shift the new values about love and self-fulfillment to the idea that individuals could create meaningful lives outside marriage as well. Therefore, it became clear that not everything in society required an organized approach or marriage between two people.⁷² Women began to have legal autonomy and economic self-sufficiency, removing barriers to living a successful life and personal autonomy. Men no longer required domestic dependence on women as in the past. As a result, there were fewer reasons to marry in order to create a successful life and long-lasting relationship. These changes impacted the idea of marriage and how individuals approach their personal lives, sexuality, work, care for children and the elderly. To some, these changes have presented liberation from more restrictive roles and lives. To others, these changes have negatively impacted support systems.

Married people in Western Europe and Northern America report they are generally happier, healthier, and in a better position economically and psychologically than people in other arrangements.⁷³ However, studies reveal while marriage remains a trend, other types of commitments and arrangements such as cohabitation and the single

⁷¹ Coontz, 307.

⁷² Coontz, 309.

⁷³ Coontz, 309.

life are increasing. While these commitments may have similar expectations, these couples and individuals are not always viewed as favorably as married couples. In the United States, marriage provides a positive vocabulary and public image around high standards related to behaviors and role models for adult relationships. Studies reveal, on the average, couples benefit from marriage yet individuals in unhappy marriages are more psychologically distressed than people who stay single. In addition, the advantages of marriage may wane if the relationship experiences challenges.⁷⁴

In a three-year study of married couples with mild hypertension, results showed when couples spent time together, their blood pressure decreased. On the contrary, unhappy couples had a rise in blood pressure with increased time together. If a disagreement occurred or a highly critical partner was in a relationship, an individual's personal health including blood pressure, compromised immune functions, and worsening chronic illness symptoms occurred. Studies show women are at more risk than men in a bad marriage. Men repeatedly show they continue to receive some health benefits in marriage compared to single life. Much of this relates to women who provide the emotional and physical support to make life easier and smoother for the spouse. Research shows unhappy women experience higher rates of depression and alcohol use than single women as well as high cholesterol and decreases in immune functions.⁷⁵ Studies at the University of Pittsburgh and in Oregon show that unhappy married women in their forties are at a higher risk for heart attacks and strokes compared to happily

⁷⁴ Coontz, 310.

⁷⁵ Coontz, 310, 311.

married women or women who never married. Long term studies show that unequal decision-making power was related to an increased risk in women's death.

Researchers claim if it's true for an individual marriage, its true for society. While there is more choice in today's world regarding the decision to marry, the economic structure and values of society impact individual decisions. However, decisions about marriage rest with individuals, not society and there are many good reasons why people decide to marry. While the Catholic Church has not changed or evolved its perspective on marriage, there is agreement that a deep commitment to another person in a healthy marriage creates a life that is healthy for the individual, the couple, the family, the faith community, the church, and society. However, when a healthy marriage shifts to an unhealthy relationship and a marriage dissolves, individuals enter a cycle of grief and suffering. Given the covenantal nature of the relationship and bond established in a Catholic marriage, Catholic women confront a more complex grieving process.

Emotional: The Cycle of Grief and Suffering

“Marriages usually begin with high expectations. Divorce marks the end of a marital relationship and a dream.”⁷⁶ While we often associate grief as something that occurs after a death, grief and grieving are a natural process that follow any loss. There are many losses that come with divorce and the end of a significant relationship. These losses include the physical loss of another individual, loss of companionship, loss of security, and/or financial loss. Each of these losses are experienced differently within the

⁷⁶ Mary K. Lawler, RN, Ph.D., “Transitioning Through Divorce: Grieving the Lost Marriage,” *OSU Extension*, March 2017, <https://extension.okstate.edu/fact-sheets/transitioning-through-divorce-grieving-the-lost-marriage.html>.

broader scope of divorce and must be acknowledged and grieved. Some have described grief as an emotional response to a loss of a person or thing which was profoundly loved.⁷⁷ Therefore, it stands to reason when a marriage dissolves, grief emerges. Regardless of the emotions at the end of a relationship, at the beginning and during the relationship, love prevailed. However, when love is lost, the acute pain that accompanies the loss is called grief. The loss of the marital relationship involves much more than simply a physical move away from another individual. It includes the loss and death of a relationship and a way of life. Yet grief during a divorce is a reality not always acknowledged. It is necessary to be aware of the stages of grief to allow and accept these feelings as part of the grief process. According to Kübler-Ross, there are five stages of grief that take place when people are met with shattering loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.¹ While these stages are not linear and do not take place in any specific order, it is important for individuals to acknowledge and move through them allowing grief to take place.

Experts agree that individuals experiencing divorce move through stages of grief when their relationship ends. Denial often shows up as hope – hope the spouse seeking the divorce will have a change of heart. Anger during a divorce can be overwhelming and felt broadly toward people, the situation, and life itself. It can be positive or negative – a springboard to heal and grow or detrimental to moving forward. Bargaining may be demonstrated by an individual who tries to negotiate or who displays desperate signs of

⁷⁷ “The Stages of Grief in a Divorce,” Choosing Therapy, last modified, January 30, 2023, <https://www.choosingtherapy.com/stages-of-grief-divorce/>.

hope to save the marriage. Depression can be experienced as feelings of hopelessness, loneliness, sadness, and an inability to see beyond the current state. In this vulnerable state, individuals often face unbearable pain and reality sets in as they experience the loss of a way of life. Yet it is important for individuals to experience pain and sadness in order to move on. Acceptance is the acknowledgement the relationship has ended, and a new life and chapter can begin. This stage helps provide closure and acceptance to move ahead.⁷⁸

Experts acknowledge that one reason grieving a divorce is complicated, unlike the grief experienced with death, is that both individuals are still alive and physically present, yet the relationship is gone. This loss is referred to as an ambiguous loss as it may feel like the grieving process is unnecessary as the loss is intentionally initiated by one or both individuals.⁷⁹ The grief of a divorce, much like the grief associated with death, is a process not a series of steps. It is common for individuals to experience stress and anxiety associated with the separation, working through the loss, and coping with thoughts and feelings so that ultimately, they can find meaning and move through the loss.⁸⁰

Psychological: Impact on Relationship with Self

Experts agree that individuals who experience divorce confront many psychological issues such as “increased stress, lower life satisfaction, depression, increased medical visits, and an overall increase in mortality risk compared to those who

⁷⁸ Darcy L. Harris, ed., *Counting Our Losses: Reflecting on Change, Loss, and Transition in Everyday Life* (New York: Taylor and Francis Group LLC), 2011.

⁷⁹ Melissa Porrey, LPC, NCC, “Working Through Grief after Divorce,” *Verywell Health*, November 29, 2021, <https://www.verywellhealth.com/divorce-grief-5208157#citation-4>.

⁸⁰ Romeo Vitelli, PhD., “Life After Divorce: Is Divorce Always Going to Have a Negative Impact on the People Involved?” *Psychology Today*, July 13, 2015, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/media-spotlight/201507/life-after-divorce>.

remain married.”⁸¹ Oftentimes, a happy marriage helps to balance other normal stresses in life. Yet many people build their personal sense of identity and self-identification within their marital status. Therefore, when a divorce takes place, individuals are faced with changes to their perception of themselves which can make the divorce process very difficult.⁸² A variety of studies and research have focused on the psychological effects of divorce. The *Journal of Family Psychology* published a study of the psychological impact of divorce on middle-aged adults across the U.S. A project called Midlife in the United States was a longitudinal study that included 7,000 women and men who were interviewed on lifestyle-related topics such as emotional issues, personality traits, medical history, and satisfaction in life. In addition to questions about marital status and satisfaction, participants were asked about coping with divorce. The results of the ten-year study revealed divorced people experienced a decrease in life satisfaction compared to participants who remained married. While this was truer for women than men, the life satisfaction among divorced and married men proved to be significantly less. However, the level of satisfaction around life post-divorce was largely contingent upon the quality of the marriage. Specifically, women who experienced unhealthy marriages reported better quality of life while women with healthy marriages often had lower life satisfaction post-divorce.

The overall results of this study mirror similar studies that reveal married women and men in healthy marriages are happier than those who are separated or divorced. Yet

⁸¹ Vitelli, “Life After Divorce: Is Divorce Always Going to Have a Negative Impact on the People Involved?”

⁸² Anna Kołodziej-Zaleska and Hanna Przybyła-Basista, “Psychological well-being of individuals after divorce: the role of social support,” *Personality Psychology*. (2016) nr 4, s. 206-216, doi 10.5114/CIPP.2016.62940.

individuals in unhealthy marriage report increased life satisfaction following divorce.

These unhealthy marriages often include abuse and therefore, divorce comes as a relief and de-stressor to post-life divorce. Studies reveal that women bear most of the burden in these situations as divorce is not considered an acceptable solution to an unhealthy marriage. As a result, women continue to feel the stress of an unhappy marriage even in a post-divorce state. This study and others reveal that women and men experience divorce differently. Women report more of an emotional investment in relationships than men. Overall, the psychological impact of divorce remains stressful on both individuals, yet the post-divorce life satisfaction is often contingent upon whether the marriage was healthy.⁸³ Divorce is a transition period in which individuals must face changes in the family system and life. While psychological well-being is an important factor in the adjustment process, it does not come easily for a variety of reasons, given the loss associated with the change and transition. Studies continue to affirm the devastating psychological impact of loss related to the dissolution of marriage. Research reveals that social support is a primary resource for moving through the loss and adjusting to post-divorce life.⁸⁴

Spiritual: Separation from Individual, Community, and God

In addition to the emotional and psychological impact of divorce, Roman Catholic women experience a spiritual dimension of loss that adds another layer of grief. While limited scholarship exists specifically for divorced Roman Catholic women, research on

⁸³ Elizabeth J. Krumrei-Mancuso, Annette Mahoney, and Kenneth I. Pargament, "Divorce and the Divine: The Role of Spirituality in Adjustment to Divorce" (2009), Pepperdine University, Faculty Open Access Publications, Paper 162, https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/faculty_pubs/162.

⁸⁴ Krumrei-Mancuso, Mahoney, and Pargament, "Divorce and the Divine."

the spiritual impact from divorce has been studied. Research reveals the spiritual dimension of divorce is complex. Many individuals and couples report they experience both spiritual coping and struggles as they move through the end of their relationships. This process often leads to increased post-traumatic growth and depression. An article published by faculty in Pepperdine Digital Commons at Pepperdine University, titled: *Divorce and the Divine: The Role of Spirituality in Adjustment to Divorce*⁸⁵ reveals the results of a study that assessed three spiritual responses to divorce that relate to psychological post-divorce adjustment. These three responses follow.

Spiritual Response: This response identified divorce as a sacred loss. Respondents engaged in adaptive spiritual coping to address spiritual struggles. The study examined 100 divorcing adults; 55% were female. The total percentage of individuals that described the divorce as a sacred loss was 74%. Spiritual struggles were reported with 78% of the individuals and 88% of participants engaged in spiritual coping. Spiritual struggles tied to increased levels of depression, while adaptive spiritual coping led to greater post-traumatic growth. The study revealed that spiritual coping and struggles contributed in a unique way to the individual's adjustment in comparison to other types of non-spiritual coping and struggles.

The study identifies terms such as *holy matrimony*, *sacred union*, and *gathering in the presence of God* shared in the wedding ceremony and rituals that express spiritual meaning for individuals and couples.⁸⁶ Therefore, when a sacred bond is broken, the individual's psychosocial adjustment can be profound. The study claimed this is

⁸⁵ Krumrei-Mancuso, Mahoney, and Pargament, "Divorce and the Divine."

⁸⁶ Krumrei-Mancuso, Mahoney, and Pargament, "Divorce and the Divine."

especially relevant in the United States, considering it has the highest divorce rate and most individuals have a religious framework for understanding the world. When sacred aspects of lives are broken, life can become particularly stressful.⁸⁷

Spiritual Coping: The Pepperdine study addressed an earlier theory in which spiritual coping was used to address the potential psychological pain caused by the association of a divorce in a negative spiritual light. One of the goals of the study was to determine the extent in which individuals viewed divorce as a sacred loss and if they used spiritual methods to cope with spiritual struggles. Individuals report engaging with God in prayer, private rituals, or public worship to overcome negative feelings associated with the divorce. Individuals also reported they sought spiritual purification and absolution for wrongdoings that contributed to the divorce. The study indicated that individuals often attempt to seek comfort in their faith community and with clergy. Individuals report divorce can upset their spiritual understanding of the world and life.⁸⁸

Spiritual Struggles: The study revealed divorce may lead to spiritual struggles or negative religious coping with individuals feeling cut-off, punished, or abandoned by God, clergy, or their faith community. They may experience spiritual guilt, doubt, and internal moral conflicts. Spiritual struggles are often experienced as feelings of rejection or being judged by an individual's faith community. The study revealed that sacred loss was associated with worsened psychological distress and higher levels of depression.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Krumrei-Mancuso, Mahoney, and Pargament, "Divorce and the Divine."

⁸⁸ Krumrei-Mancuso, Mahoney, and Pargament, "Divorce and the Divine."

⁸⁹ Krumrei-Mancuso, Mahoney, and Pargament, "Divorce and the Divine."

However, it was revealed that adaptive spiritual coping in fact decreases emotional distress and increases well-being over time.⁹⁰

When individuals interpret divorce as a sacred loss, it often disrupts the individual's larger spiritual plan for life and living fully within their faith community.⁹¹ Individuals report they expected the sacred status of marriage would guarantee commitment from their spouses and protection by the divine. These expectations, once shattered, add to the pain of the divorce and deepened depression. Research indicates that individuals tend to have greater investment in those parts of life they perceive to be sacred and therefore, derive greater benefit from them.⁹² For individuals who perceive divorce as a sacred loss, they may experience a more profound disappointment and despair. It makes sense that spiritual struggles and feelings of betrayal, abandonment, punishment by God or experiencing moral guilt may lead to greater depression. These experiences are likely to diminish the psychological and emotional ability to adapt to the numerous and varied changes related to divorce.

The impact of divorce and the broken Covenant is expressed and experienced on an emotional, psychological, and spiritual level. This stands to reason since the sacrament of marriage is intended as a lifelong commitment. Because most couples enter marriage with high expectations, the impact of divorce and a broken covenant often results in a

⁹⁰ Krumrei-Mancuso, Mahoney, and Pargament, "Divorce and the Divine."

⁹¹ A. W. Geiger and Gretchen Livingston, "Eight Facts About Love and Marriage in America," Pew Research Center, February 13, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/13/8-facts-about-love-and-marriage/>.

⁹² "Provisional Number of Marriages and Marriage Rate United States, 2002-2020," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, August 19, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/national-marriage-divorce-rates-00-20.pdf>.

cycle of grief and suffering. The emotional, psychological, and spiritual aspects of this cycle of grief mirror that of a death; a death of a way of life that requires healing and restoration.

Chapter 4: Reflections on Marriage and Divorce Data

Data on Marriage and Divorce in the United States

While narratives are important, this chapter will provide some key data points on marriage, divorce, and annulment rates in the United States. The primary sources of this data include: Barna, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), The United States Census Bureau, and The Centers for Disease and Control (CDC). These organizations track and trend marriage and divorce rates as well as factors influencing shifts in relationships such as social, economic, financial, generational, age, gender, and religion.

The U.S. Census Bureau reports the rates of both marriage and divorce in the United States have steadily decreased during the past twenty years. Research reveals the nature of relationships have significantly changed during this time. There are several factors causing a shift in the landscape including individuals staying single longer, cohabitation, same-sex marriages, interracial and interethnic marriages. Recent studies reveal that marriage rates, which were once stable, have decreased by 8 percent since 1990. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, data compiled in 2018 shows that Americans are remaining single longer with the highest median age on record for first marriages at 28 years of age for women and 30 years of age for men.⁹³ The Center for

⁹³ “Marriage and Divorce,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) reports a steady decline in Catholic marriages since 2005, with 207,112 in 2005; 168,400 in 2010, 148,134 in 2015 and 97,200 in 2021. These trends align with the broader data on all marriages in the U.S. The U.S. data for annulments shows a steady decline as well since 1995 with 57,018 in 1995; 49,973 in 2000, 33,727 in 2005, 26,025 in 2010, and 23,302 in 2015. This data is compiled and reported every 5 years; the 2021 data has not been posted.

The most recent data from the CDC reports the number of marriages in 2020 were 1,676,911. The marriage rate is 5.1 per 1,000 of the total population.⁹⁴ The number of divorces were 630,505 (45 reporting states and D.C.). This represents a divorce rate of 2.3 per 1,000 of the total population (45 reporting states and D.C.).⁹⁵ In 2000, data shows the marriage rates as 8.2 people per 1,000 of the total population with a total of 2,315,000 marriages (not including Georgia and Louisiana). In 2000, the national divorce rate was 4 per 1,000 of the total population. In 2018, 1,000 were married with a total of 2,132,853 marriages which is a rate of 6.5 people.⁹⁶ In 2018 the CDC reported the national divorce rate was 2.9 per 1,000 total population with a total of 782,038 divorces in 2018.⁹⁷ In 2017, the national divorce rate was 2.9 and 787,251 divorces were reported. In 2017, approximately 50% of adults ages 18 and older were married; this was a decrease of 8

⁹⁴ “Provisional Number of Marriages and Marriage Rate United States, 2000-2018.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

⁹⁵ “Marriage and Divorce,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

⁹⁶ A. W. Geiger and Gretchen Livingston, “Eight Facts About Love and Marriage in America.”

⁹⁷ Kim Parker and Renee Stepler, “As U.S. Marriage Rate Hovers at 50%, Education Gap in Marital Status Widens,” Pew Research Center, September 14, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/14/as-u-s-marriage-rate-hovers-at-50-education-gap-in-marital-status-widens/>.

percentage points since 1990⁹⁸ and a 28% decrease from an all-time high of 72% in 1960.⁹⁹ See Appendix I.

In 2018, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported the national divorce rate to be 2.9 per 1,000 of the total population. This was more than a 50% decrease from the 2000 average.¹⁰⁰ While overall divorce rates in the U.S. have declined, divorce rates among older Americans have increased. Baby Boomers aged 60 and older divorce at a much higher rate than any other group. Data in 2015 revealed that for every 1,000 adults aged 50 and older, 10 obtained a divorce; this figure doubled from the 1990 data which showed every 5 in 1,000 obtained a divorce in 1990. For those aged 65 and older, the divorce rate has almost tripled since 1990.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2018, 7.7 of every 1,000 women (over the age of 15) divorced. This meant the rate of divorce was more than 5 percent higher for women than the national average.¹⁰¹ Recent studies reveal women file for divorce two times more often than men. In the U.S., approximately 69% of women initiate divorce. The divorce rate for women in the U.S. in 2022 is 16.9 per 1,000 married women.¹⁰² While the marriage rate is decreasing faster than divorce rates, experts predict that approximately 40-50% of all marriages that exist today will eventually end in divorce.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ "Marriage and Divorce," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

⁹⁹ "U.S. Marriage and Divorce Rates by State 2008 & 2018," United States Census Bureau, January 15, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/marriage-divorce-rates-by-state.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Virginia Pelley, "What is the Divorce Rate in America?" Fatherly, July 4, 2022, <https://www.fatherly.com/love-money/what-is-divorce-rate-america/>.

¹⁰¹ "Marriage and Divorce," American Psychological Association, 2022, <https://www.apa.org/topics/divorce-child-custody>.

¹⁰² "48 Divorce Statistics in the U.S. Including Divorce Rate, Race, & Marriage Length," *Divorce.com*, January 3, 2023, <https://divorce.com/blog/divorce-statistics/>.

¹⁰³ "Divorce statistics: Over 115 Studies, Facts and Rates for 2022," Wilkinson and Finkbeiner, accessed September 10, 2022. <https://www.wf-lawyers.com/divorce-statistics-and-facts/>.

Reasons for Marriage and Divorce

Why do people marry and stay married? What is the motivation? According to a Pew Research Center survey in 2013, the top reason Americans marry is love. Almost 9 in 10 Americans (88%) cite love as the most important reason to marry followed by lifelong companionship (81%) and companionship (76%). Other reasons include desire to have children (49%), religious ceremony (30%), financial stability (28%) and legal rights and benefits (23%). Another study completed in 2017, revealed a good financial provider as a key reason to marry with 7 in 10 adults reporting. In this study, 71% of the participants focused on a male to support a family financially vs. 32% for a woman.¹⁰⁴ The reasons cited why individuals stay married include: having shared interests (64%), a satisfying sexual relationship (61%) and more than half (56%) expressed the desire to share household chores as a reason.¹⁰⁵ Studies reveal the most common reasons people report why a marriage ends is lack of commitment (73%). Other reasons include excessive arguing, married too young, and infidelity. Studies reveal that the average marriage, ending in divorce, lasts approximately 8 years. Overall, the period in which a couple is most likely to pursue a divorce is the first two years of marriage or in years 5-8. However, marriage and divorce data in relation to duration reveal a difference between

¹⁰⁴ Wilkinson and Finkbeiner “Divorce statistics: Over 115 Studies, Facts and Rates for 2022.”

¹⁰⁵ Christopher Ingraham, “Divorce is Actually on the Rise and It’s the Baby Boomers’ Fault,” *Washington Post*, March 27, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/03/27/divorce-is-actually-on-the-rise-and-its-the-baby-boomers-fault/>.

male and female. Women tend to remain in their first marriage longer than men and men are more likely to stay in subsequent marriages longer than women.¹⁰⁶

The Impact of Age on Divorce

Studies reveal divorce trends in age cohorts such as the Baby Boomers and Generation X cohorts are increasing yet there is a decrease in divorce rates for the Millennial population. Because Millennials represent the largest demographics in terms of population numbers, the reduction in this age category decreased the overall rate of divorce. However, trends in divorce among Baby Boomers are dramatic. Boomers who came of age in the late 70s and early 80s began to divorce at a rate not experienced prior to 1970.¹⁰⁷ In 2015, the divorce rate for Baby Boomers (age 50 and older) was 10 per 1,000 married couples. This is double the amount of divorces reported the U.S. Census Bureau in 1990 at 5 divorces per 1,000.¹⁰⁸ Baby Boomers are now the most likely age group to divorce with studies showing more than 40% of couples age 60 and over divorced as of 2010.¹⁰⁹ Generation X (age 40-49) averaged 21 divorces per 1,000 married couples compared to 1990 rates of 18 divorces per 1,000.¹¹⁰ The population of

¹⁰⁶ Renee Stepler, "Led by Baby Boomers, Divorce Rates Climb for America's 50+ Population," Pew Research Center, March 9, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/09/led-by-baby-boomers-divorce-rates-climb-for-americas-50-population/>.

¹⁰⁷ Christopher Ingraham. "Divorce is Actually on the Rise and It's the Baby Boomers' Fault."

¹⁰⁸ Renee Stepler, "Led by Baby Boomers, Divorce Rates Climb for America's 50+ Population."

¹⁰⁹ "48 Divorce Statistics Including Divorce Rate, Race, & Marriage Length," It's Over Easy, April 19, 2021, <https://www.itsovereasy.com/insights/divorce-statistics>.

¹¹⁰ "The Trends Redefining Romance Today," Barna. February 9, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/trends-redefining-romance-today/>.

Millennials (age 25 to 29) averaged 24 divorces per 1,000 married couples. In 1990, the rate of this population was 30 per 1,000.¹¹¹

Barna is another reliable source of data on marriage and divorce. In decades long research, Barna has collected data on the American demographic culture providing insights on the nationwide generational shifts related to the single life, marriage, and divorce. They review and study demographic data to understand the changing dynamics of marriage, singleness, and trends on premarital cohabitation. One of the most significant recent findings relates to the growth in the number of single people. The percentage of single people never married increased from 27% in 2000 to 30% in 2016. From 2000 to 2106, the number of single people increased by 9% in 25-29 age range (50% to 59%) and by 10% in the 30-39 age range. During the same time, there were decreases in the number of people married within those age ranges. There was a decrease of 7 % in the 25-29 age range from 43% to 36% and in the 30-39 age range, the percentage points decreased by 8% from 65% to 57%. This showed an enormous shift and delay in marriage among younger Americans especially considering the short time in which they occurred. According to the Barna group, census bureau statistics support these broader shifts. The average age for first marriages in America increased from age 23 to 27 for women from 20 to 26 for men in 1990. Further data indicates in 2016 the percentage of adults ages 18 and older was 52%, down from 1960 percentage of 72%.

See Appendix II.

¹¹¹ Michael Lipka, “Relatively Few U.S. Catholics Skipped Annulment Because of Cost or Complications,” Pew Research Center, September 9, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/09/relatively-few-u-s-catholics-skipped-annulment-because-of-cost-or-complications/>.

The Barna data compiled revealed both differences and likenesses among the faithful. The data reveals that practicing Christians and evangelicals are more likely to be married than the other Americans. Approximately 6 in 10 practicing U.S. Christians are married (59%) which is a consistent percentage since 2000 compared to 52% of the general population. The data also revealed 67% of evangelicals were married; this is 15% higher than the general population. However, Christians and evangelicals share in the equal rate of divorce in the broader general population. Twenty-five percent among both groups have been divorced in comparison to the same number of all adults. Therefore, while people with strong religious beliefs are more likely to be married, they are also likely to divorce. Recent studies also reveal that most adults (65%) believe it's a good idea to cohabitate before marriage. Almost 6 in 10 American adults (57%) either live or have lived with their significant other. For those who disagree on cohabitation, the most significant reasons include religion (34 %), practicality (16%), valuing family and tradition (12%), and other reasons (10%).¹¹²

Annulment Data

According to a Pew Research Center survey, a quarter of U.S. Catholic adults report they have experienced a divorce.¹¹³ This figure is somewhat less than the U.S. population overall. In a 2020 article in the *National Catholic Reporter* (NCR) focusing on the progress toward tribunal reform, statistics reported from the Vatican revealed

¹¹² Cindy Wooden, "By the Numbers: Statistics Illustrate Progress in Tribunal Reforms," *National Catholic Reporter*, September 28, 2020, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/numbers-statistics-illustrate-progress-tribunal-reforms>.

¹¹³ "U.S. Catholics Open to Non-Traditional Families," Pew Research Center, September 2, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/09/02/u-s-catholics-open-to-non-traditional-families/>.

that in 2018 there were a total of 56,780 annulments globally.¹¹⁴ Among those U.S. Catholics who have experienced a divorce, approximately a quarter (26%) or 6% of all Catholic adults indicate they (or their spouse) sought an annulment from the Catholic Church. In addition, 44% of Catholics say they have cohabited with a romantic partner at some point in their lives.¹¹⁵ Survey participants who did not pursue an annulment provided a variety of reasons. They viewed an annulment as unnecessary or simply did not wish to have one (42%). Some participants were not married in the Catholic Church (21%). Others revealed it was too expensive (7%) or too complicated (4%). The results of the survey affirmed further education is required as 34% of the Catholic respondents indicated they receive Communion every time they attend Mass. Only 29% of Catholics without an annulment, who were cohabitating or divorced and remarried, revealed they were not receiving Communion. An additional 5% indicated they do not attend Mass. The survey also revealed 35% of the respondents indicated remarrying after a divorce without an annulment is a sin while 49% responded it was not a sin. More than fifty percent of Catholic respondents (62%) specified the church should allow divorced Catholics who remarry without an annulment to receive Communion. Moreover, 54% of the respondents expect this change to occur in the next few decades.¹¹⁶

While the statistics are dated, a 2007 survey by CARA, revealed that 85% of U.S. Catholics who were divorced did not seek an annulment. Yet 80% percent of

¹¹⁴ Lipka, "Relatively Few U.S. Catholics Skipped Annulment Because of Cost or Complications."

¹¹⁵ Emma Green, "The Vatican's New Policy on Annulments: The First Hint of Shake Ups to Come," *The Atlantic*, September 8, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/the-vaticans-new-policy-on-annulments-the-first-hint-of-shake-ups-to-come/404182/>.

¹¹⁶ Laurie Goodstein, "So the Marriage Was Never Actually Valid," *Washington Post*, April 20, 1997, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1997/04/20/so-the-marriage-was-never-actually-valid/05227626-2a18-4ae8-a1d7-76fd0f00675c/>.

those who sought an annulment at that time were declined. As a result, many divorced Catholics remarried without an annulment. This led to suggestions from prominent bishops and cardinals during the Synod on the Family in 2015. The suggestions included the need for the Catholic Church to establish mechanisms for divorced and remarried Catholics – who are asked to abstain from the Eucharist – to return to the sacrament and to “the life of the Christian community.” In addition, in 2015 Pope Francis began to address this population of Catholics and announced sweeping changes to the annulment process. During this time, on a global level, annulments remained rare as reported by the Crux with approximately 60,000 issued per year. The majority of those were issued in the United States. It was further acknowledged only 6% of the world’s population of Catholics live in the United States yet account for approximately 55 to 70 percent of the annulment cases.¹¹⁷

Further history of the annulment data revealed that in 1997 as reported in a Washington Post article, approximately fifty percent of Catholic marriages ended in divorce; this was the same rate for all other Americans at that time. In 1992, the Vatican reported 83 percent of those who applied for annulment were granted, 2% were denied, and 15% were abandoned by applicants. Yet 90% of divorced Catholics at that time did not apply for an annulment. As a result, The Canon Law Society reports there are "several million baptized and remarried Catholics" estranged from the church due to their marital status. It is reported that these Catholics either attend non-Catholic churches or they refrain from going to church. In addition, there remains an uncountable number of

¹¹⁷ “Frequently Requested Church Statistics,” Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, accessed January 20, 2021, <https://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>.

remarried Catholics who remain in the church and receive the Eucharist despite the fact they are remarried and do not have an annulment.¹¹⁸

The most recent data collected and reported by CARA provides comparative statistics on annulments compiled from *The Official Catholic Directory (OCD)*, the Vatican's *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae (ASE)*, and CARA databases. While the U.S. data includes only those figures for the 195 dioceses who belong to the USCCB (includes all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Island, and all U.S. military personnel stationed overseas). CARA data for annulments dates back to 1985; this data is compiled and reported every 5 years.¹¹⁹ In general, the data compiled for Catholic marriages and annulments mirrors the trends and data for the larger population of non-Catholics. The first data reported in 1985 reveals approximately 61,000 annulment cases. The number of annulments reported peaked in 1990 data with more than 72,000 annulments. In 1995, the reported number of annulments decreased to approximately 57,018 with steady decreases. In 2000, there were 49,973 cases, followed by 23,302 annulments in 2015 (last reported cases). The 2021 data is not yet available.

Trends in Marriage, Singleness, and Cohabitation

Other trends reflected in the Barna studies on marriage, singleness, and cohabitation include the following perspective: “While once viewed as the primary end goal for romantic relationships, the institution of marriage now seems to be under great scrutiny. People marry later and later in life; they are dating and ending relationships with

¹¹⁸ “The Trends Redefining Romance Today,” Barna.

¹¹⁹ Gretchen Livingston, “They’re Waiting Longer, but U.S. Women Today More Likely to Have Children Than a Decade Ago,” Pew Research Center, January 18, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/01/18/theyre-waiting-longer-but-u-s-women-today-more-likely-to-have-children-than-a-decade-ago/>.

more people before they commit to a life-long relationship.” Cohabitation is now viewed as an assumption and final hurdle before marriage. There are some generational differences as 82% of Millennials (born between 1984 and 2002) wish to marry yet want to wait until they feel more fully developed as a person (70%), financially established (69%), and have lived together (60%). Yet 30% of Millennials are unsure about marriage and express doubt in the belief of any conventional form of marriage. This attitude is believed to be formed from the nearly 40 percent of Millennials who grew up in a single parent household. Both Millennials and Generation X (born between 1965 and 1983) grew up during a time when divorce rates were at an all-time high. Therefore, they are cautious and reluctant when it comes to marriage. These relational shifts have significant impact on churches and faith communities as most of these communities have historically been built on a family model focusing on ministering to families and an infrastructure that supports couples and children. As a result, pastoral and spiritual leaders must meet these individuals where they are and support the fundamental needs of this age group such as career building, personal formation, social activities, friendship and the complexities of singleness and dating.”¹²⁰

In 2018, the Pew Research Center, focusing on social trends in family and relationships, cited U.S. Census data regarding the trend of never-married women having children. The report revealed women are now more likely to become mothers and to have more children. On the average, women are having 2.07 children compared an average of

¹²⁰ Wendy Wang and Kim Parker, “Chapter 1: Public Views on Marriage,” Pew Research Center, September 24, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2014/09/24/chapter-1-public-views-on-marriage/>.

1.86 in 2006; this was the lowest number on record. In 2016, mothers who were at the end of childbearing years, had about 2.42 children, compared to a low of 2.31 in 2008. The report revealed during the period from 1994 to 2014, the number of women who gave birth rose from 48 to 70 percent among those with a high school education or less. In the same period, the number of births rose from 27 to 63 percent among women with some college education. Lastly, it increased from 12 to 32 percent with college graduates and from 5 to 25 percent among those with postgraduate education. There has been a significant increase in women giving birth who have never been married. The number of women toward the end of their child rearing age has risen from 9% in 1994 to 15% in 2014. Within this category of women, a majority (55%) has had one child; this revealed a dramatic change from two decades earlier in which 31% of never-married women in their 40s gave birth.¹²¹

Another study, commissioned by the USCCB Committee on Marriage and Family Life sought to study American Catholics' understanding of Church teaching on marriage, general attitudes about marriage, and personal experiences of marriage preparation, the sacrament of marriage, and daily married life. CARA completed the study on their behalf in June of 2007. In this study on marital status and family, the results showed that two-thirds of Catholics married at that time were married in Church. An additional 13 percent had their marriage convalidated by the Church. Further data revealed the following demographics: the Pre-Vatican Generation (born before 1943) were likely to have been

¹²¹ Amanda Barroso, Kim Parker and Jesse Bennett, "As Millennials Near 40, They're Approaching Family Life Differently than Previous Generations," Pew Research Center, May 27, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/27/as-millennials-near-40-theyre-approaching-family-life-differently-than-previous-generations/>.

married in church (84%), the Vatican II Generation reported at 58%, and 60% of Post-Vatican II and the Millennial Generation were likely to have been married in Church. The Millennial Generation represented 60 percent of the participants.

Shifts in Thoughts About Marriage and Divorce

In The Pew Center study conducted in 2014 regarding public views on marriage, results revealed the public is divided on the role of marriage in society. In the survey, participants were asked to reflect on the statements similar to their own views such as: “*society is better off if people make marriage and having children a priority or society is just as well off if people have priorities other than marriage and children.*”¹²² The results showed 46% of adults chose that *society is better off with marriage and children as a priority* while 50% chose the second statement. Despite what appears to be ambivalence about the role of marriage in society, most Americans also believe the importance of marriage if they intend to spend the rest of their lives together. Almost half of all adults (47%) state marriage is important with an additional 21% stating is it somewhat important. The percent of Americans who indicate it is not important is 14% and not important at all is 15%. The study further disclosed that married adults are more likely to state the *society is better off if people prioritize marriage and children* (54%) than non-married people (32%). This data reports that perspectives on this issue are vastly different by age as young adults report that *society is just as well off if people have priorities other than marriage and children*. Age groups of 18-29 and 30-39 expressed this point of view with 2/3 of the 18-29 age group and 53% of the 30-39 age group. In the case of those

¹²² Wendy Wang and Kim Parker, “Chapter 1: Public Views on Marriage.”

individuals aged 50 or above, the majority (55%) express that *society is better off if people make marriage and having children a priority*.¹²³

More recent data in 2020 reveals that as Millennials reach forty years of age, they approach family life in a different way than previous generations. The Millennial population now surpasses the Baby Boomers as the largest population, and they also have a larger racial and ethnic diversity as well as higher rates of educational attainment. This research also reveals Millennials have been slower than previous generations to establish their own households. The Pew Research Center recently completed an analysis of government data that showed, “Millennials trail previous generations at the same age across three traditional measures of family life: living in a family unit, marriage rates, and birth rates... Millennials are less likely to live with a family of their own as did previous generations at the same stage of life. Most Millennials are not currently married, marking a significant change from past generations. Of those married, they married later in life; 44% of Millennials were married in 2019, compared to 53% of Generation X, 61% of Boomers and 81% of Silents at a comparable age.”¹²⁴ Not only are Millennials getting married later in life than previous generations but many of them choose to live with a romantic partner. The Pew Center research revealed that in 2019, 12% of Millennials were living with an unmarried partner. This was higher than the Generation X (8%) who were cohabiting in 2003.

¹²³ Barroso, Parker and Bennett, “As Millennials Near 40, They’re Approaching Family Life Differently than Previous Generations.”

¹²⁴ Barroso, Parker and Bennett, “As Millennials Near 40, They’re Approaching Family Life Differently than Previous Generations.”

Cohabitation is more common among Millennials than Generation X across most racial and ethnic categories, as well as educational attainment. In addition, 13% of Millennial marriages reflect spouses of differing racial or ethnic backgrounds. This is notably higher than Generation X marriages which were 9% in 2003. Millennials who are married to a college graduate represent 75% of the population compared to Generation X (68%), Boomers (63%) or Silents (52%).¹²⁵ A third of Millennial men live in a household with their own children. Millennial men are less likely to live in a household with their own children than was the case for previous generations of men at a comparable age. In 2019, 32% of Millennial men reported living in a household with their own children, compared with 41% of Generation X men in 2003, 44% of Boomer men in 1987 and 66% of Silent men in 1968.¹²⁶ About one-in-five Millennial men residing with their own child or children are unmarried. This is significantly higher than previous generations: 15% of Generation X fathers, 4% of Boomer fathers and 1% of fathers in the Silent Generation were unmarried at a comparable age.¹²⁷ This historical data provides a lens into the evolving nature of relationships and the decreasing rates of marriage and divorce.

More recent research and updated data provide additional information on the adjusted marriage and divorce rates. This information aligns and supports previous data and supporting narratives. The National Center for Family and Marriage Research

¹²⁵ Barroso, Parker and Bennett, “As Millennials Near 40, They’re Approaching Family Life Differently than Previous Generations.”

¹²⁶ Barroso, Parker and Bennett, “As Millennials Near 40, They’re Approaching Family Life Differently than Previous Generations.”

¹²⁷ Barroso, Parker and Bennett, “As Millennials Near 40, They’re Approaching Family Life Differently than Previous Generations.”

(NCFMR) recently confirmed the U.S. divorce rate peaked in 1979.¹²⁸ Yet since then, there has been a steady decline in the number of divorces. The American Community Survey (ACS) conducted a study to analyze divorce trends starting with data from 2008. The study revealed a consecutive decline in the annual divorce rate since 2012. In addition, recent studies disclose the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the U.S. divorce rates which reveals a 12% reduction in administrative counts of divorce (with 35 states reporting). The study also showed a decline in the adjusted divorce rate from 2019 (15.5%) to 2020 (14%); this represents a 10% decline. In 2021, the number of women reporting divorce decreased from 960,014 in 2020 to 948,862 in 2021. While the overall divorce rate remained the same at 14% in 2020 and 2021, this is the lowest divorce rate reported since 1970 which was 14.9%.¹²⁹

Additional data compiled from the National Center for Health Statistics, the U.S. Census Bureau and IPUMS-USA regarding marriage and divorce in the years preceding and following the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic show the adjusted marriage rates from 2010 to 2016 were somewhat stable. The adjusted rate in the U.S. during this time ranged from 32.7 marriages per 1,000 unmarried women in 2010 to a low of 31.0 per 1,000 in 2013.¹³⁰ However, starting in 2017, the adjusted marriage rate fell every year through 2019. In 2019, the adjusted marriage rate was 28.5 marriages per 1,000 unmarried women. The adjusted divorce rate in the U.S. declined from 2011 through

¹²⁸ Francesca A. Marino, "Divorce rate in the U.S.: Geographic Variation, 2021," *Family Profiles*, FP-22-26 (January 23, 2022): 22-26, <https://doi.org/10.25035/ncfmr/fp-22-26>.

¹²⁹ "Divorce rate in the U.S.: Geographic variation, 2021," National Center for Family & Marriage Research.

¹³⁰ K. K. Westrick-Payne and W.D. Manning, "Marriage, divorce, and the COVID-19 Pandemic in the U.S.," *Family Profiles*, FP-22-12, (2022): 22-12, <https://doi.org/10.25035/ncfmr/fp-22-12>.

2019. During that time, the divorce rate declined from 17.4 divorces per 1,000 married women to 13.5 divorces per 1,000 in 2019. In addition, marriages exceeded divorces every year. In 2010, the data revealed there were 2.4 marriages per one divorce in the U.S. In 2016, there were 2.9 marriages per one divorce. In 2019, it leveled at approximately 2.7.¹³¹

Based on the number of marriages and the percentage change from 2018 and 2019, the estimates for the number of marriages in 2020 were 1.9 million. Yet the actual data revealed there were 1.6 million marriages which signified a 12% decline or 231,265 less than expected. There were variations by states, for example, Hawaii had 43.6% less marriages, California had 41.5% less and New York had 39% less marriages. Yet nine states had no decline with Texas and Montana recording increases of 38% and 29%. The anticipated number of divorces for 2020 were 714,997 yet the actual number of divorces were 630,505. This represented a decline of 12%. Both Louisiana and Maryland had the most significant percentage declines at 56% and 43.3%. By the end of 2020, not all states reported fewer divorces yet eight states had more than anticipated. The two most significant increases in divorce were in Illinois at 41.9% and Mississippi at 30.1%.¹³²

This study collected administrative data only; it did not address the reasons for the declines in marriage and divorce rates. Yet additional studies have been conducted on the ongoing decline in the number of marriages and divorces in the U.S. including recent

¹³¹ “Marriage, divorce, and the COVID-19 Pandemic in the U.S.,” National Center for Family & Marriage Research.

¹³² “Marriage, divorce, and the COVID-19 Pandemic in the U.S.,” National Center for Family & Marriage Research.

studies that address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on marriage and divorce rates.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, marriage and divorce were in decline and well documented in the U.S. As more data became available, initial evidence shows these declines have continued and even worsened during the pandemic.¹³³ Marriage and divorce data in the U.S. continues to reveal a decline in marriage and divorce rates. The declines have been consistent since the mid-1980s as unmarried cohabitation increased in popularity. The Pew Research Center reports cultural attitudes toward cohabitation have contributed to the decline in the number of marriages. Cohabitation has become an acceptable social norm. In 2018, 15% of adults between the ages of 25 to 34 lived with an unmarried partner.¹³⁴ In addition, current data reveals that society's views on marriage have significantly changed highlighting two primary trends. The first trend is tied to increased wages for women which has impacted their perceived need to marry. Secondly, opinions on the necessity of marriage and changing demographics have also influenced the decline. Marriage trends related to shifting demographics show the number of never-married Caucasians doubled from 1960 to 2012. In addition, never-married African Americans aged 25 and older increased to 36%. Studies show younger generations are less likely to view marriage the same way as prior generations. The Pew Center reports a record high of 20% of adults aged 25 to 34 who have never married. This compares with 9% in this same

¹³³ "Marriage, divorce, and the COVID-19 Pandemic in the U.S.," National Center for Family & Marriage Research.

¹³⁴ Belinda Luscombe, "The Divorce Rate Is Dropping: That May Not Actually Be Good News," *Time Magazine*, November 26, 2018, <https://time.com/5434949/divorce-rate-children-marriage-benefits/>.

category in 1960. Pew also reports the current marriage rate is declining due to fewer participants and a greater rate of exit from the data set. Adding to these long-term trends, adults surveyed share economic uncertainty also impacts decisions regarding marriage. It is expected the COVID-19 pandemic and endemic will continue to impact marriages with expected declines as high as 16% in part due to social distancing, travel restrictions, business closures, unemployment, and change in job status.¹³⁵

Updated and adjusted data show divorce rates continue to decline. As previously stated, newer data reveals younger generations view marriage differently impacting divorce rates. When it comes to marriage, Generation X and Millennial populations are generally more particular, marry older, and view education, careers, and finances as priorities above marriage. From 2008 to 2016, the divorce rate declined by 18% and continues to consistently decline. Many state that the decline in divorce is significantly impacted by the Millennials who are committed to making their marriage work; data reveals they are 18% less likely to divorce.

Susan Brown, a sociology professor at Bowling Green State University, states, “The characteristics of young married couples today signal a sustained decline (in divorce rates) in the coming years...The younger generation is not following the same path as prior generations such as Baby Boomers who have unusually high divorce rates with divorces doubling for adults aged 55 to 64, and even tripled for Americans

¹³⁵ IBISWorld: Where Knowledge is Power, “Business Environment Profiles-United States: Marriage Rate,” May 10, 2022. <https://www.ibisworld.com/us/bed/marriage-rate/29/>.

65 and older. This is higher than any other generation.”¹³⁶ Others state reasons for the decline relates to the fact that the married population is aging and is a more highly educated population. Further, fewer adults are entering marriage and if they do, they are less likely to divorce. “Marriage is more and more an achievement of status, rather than something that people do regardless of how they’re doing.”¹³⁷ Studies also reveal poor and less educated adults in the U.S. are dividing to cohabite and raise children together yet chose not to marry. Many believe that marriage is evolving to a more durable yet more exclusive institution.¹³⁸

While narratives have been a fundamental way to connect the human and divine story, data also reveals a story. Recent data shows that U.S. marriage rates continue to steadily decrease as Americans decide to remain single. Divorce rates mirror marriage rates in their steady decline in the past twenty years. Research confirms trends in marriage, singleness, and cohabitation that demonstrate a shift in the nature of relationships. While U.S. marriage rates are decreasing, marriage continues to remain a norm with 1,676,911 marriages recorded in 2020 (45 states and D.C.) with 9 out of 10 people citing the primary reason as love. There were 630,505 divorces reported in 2020 (45 states and D.C.). Studies reveal while love is the primary motivation for marriage, a lack of commitment is the primary reason for divorce. Yet some of the most compelling data relates to the impact of age on divorce. Research continues to show a significant

¹³⁶ Susan Brown, “Generations X, Y, Z and Gray Divorce,” *Beyond the First Dance*, October 19, 2022, <https://beyondthefirstdance.com/blog/f/generations-x-y-z-and-gray-divorce>.

¹³⁷ Ryan W. Miller, “Add Divorce to the List of Things the Millennials Are Killing,” *USA Today*, September 26, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2018/09/26/millennials-blame-lower-us-divorce-rate-study/1429494002/>.

¹³⁸ Susan Brown, “Generations X, Y, Z and Gray Divorce.”

decrease in divorce rates for Millennials who represent the largest demographic population, and therefore impacts the overall decrease in divorce rate. Yet divorce rates and trends among Baby Boomers continue to be high and this group is the most likely to divorce. The number of divorces for Catholics continue to be slightly less than the general population with approximately one quarter experiencing a divorce.

Approximately 6% of all Catholics report seeking an annulment and the reason most often cited is re-marriage. Yet those who chose not to pursue an annulment continue to report it as unnecessary and re-marry outside the Catholic Church. Data regarding marriage, divorce and annulments within the Catholic Church appear to lag behind more mainstream data sources such as The U.S. Census Bureau, The Centers for Disease and Control and The Pew Center which track and trend marriage, divorce, and annulments in the United States.

Chapter 5: The Annulment Process

What Is an Annulment?

An annulment is defined as an examination of a marriage. It is not a Catholic divorce; it is more complex. It's complexity results from the Church's view that a Catholic marriage is a life-long sacramental covenant established between the couple and God. It is not simply a contract. Therefore, it cannot be broken in the same way as a legal contract. However, a Catholic marriage can be annulled if a tribunal investigation decides the marriage lacked at least one of the five necessary elements before vows were established. According to the USCCB, the five elements of a valid marriage are: the

individuals were free to marry; the individuals freely exchanged their consent; the individuals intended to marry for life, be faithful and be open to children; the individuals intended “good of each other,” and their consent was given in the presence of witnesses before an authorized church official. If a marriage is nullified, the Church will issue an annulment and both parties will be free to remarry in the Church.

The typical annulment process includes the following steps:

- A written request is submitted for a declaration of nullity.
- Written testimony is provided about the marriage and a list of at least two people willing to answer questions about the marriage.
- The ex-spouse must co-sign the petition or the Church tribunal will extend the opportunity to participate.
- Either or both parties may appoint a Church advocate to represent them with the Church tribunal.

The Church tribunal reviews information about the relationship and the marriage to determine which process is needed. These processes include: the standard judicial process, a process involving the bishop, a documentary process, or a process that requires review by a Roman court. The annulment process is similar to presenting a legal case. During the process, both parties can review the testimony submitted (with the exception of material protected by civil law such as counseling records). The Church tribunal

investigates and examines the evidence to make a decision; the entire process may take from weeks to months, or even more than a year.¹³⁹

The History and Origins

Throughout history, marriages have taken place and at times, disagreements within relationships have led to the dissolution of marriages. As Jesus began to teach about the sacredness of marriage and Christianity began to address marriage, a sacramental view emerged with resulting traditions, rituals, and celebrations. Over time as marriages continue to dissolve, divorce and annulments emerged. An annulment is a formal process within the Catholic Church that determines whether a marriage is valid. Historically, the intended purpose has been to allow individuals to re-marry within the Catholic Church. A Catholic annulment examines the beginning of a marriage to determine and understand if there were elements missing that caused the marriage to be invalid. A divorce, however, is a civil process which dissolves a marriage from the perspective of the government at a federal and state level. Some biblical scholars claim that divorces began during Jesus' time referencing Matthew 5:32: "Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to be an adulteress." Other references include the introduction of strict marriage and divorce laws by Charlemagne throughout the Holy Roman Empire during the 9th century in return for the Papal blessing for his right to rule.

The word divorce, *divortium*, derived from *divertere*, which means "to separate" was identified in pagan Rome to address the reciprocal separation of married people. The

¹³⁹ "Annulment," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed January 23, 2023, <https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/annulment#tab--what-is-an-annulment>.

reference to pagan Rome or paganism denotes the use of the term outside of Christianity. “Paganism, in the broadest sense, includes all religions other than the true one revealed by God, and, in a narrower sense, all except Christianity, Judaism, and Mohammedanism.”¹⁴⁰ It is not known whether the origin of the word included the end of the marriage bond. However, the word is used in the Church and in ecclesiastical law with a neutral signification. Therefore, the Catholic tradition distinguishes between the absolute divorce *divortium plenum* or *perfectum* which implies the dissolution of the marriage bond and the limited divorce *divortium imperfectum* that leaves the “marriage bond intact and implies only the cessation of common life (separation from bed and board, or in addition separation of dwelling-place).”¹⁴¹ As far civil law is concerned, the meaning of divorce includes the dissolution of the marriage bond. Hence some of the difficulty and confusion. The following summarizes the highlights of the Catholic doctrine on divorce described in the Catholic Encyclopedia under divorce and moral theology:

- In Christian marriage, which implies the restoration, by Christ Himself, of marriage to its original indissolubility, there can never be an absolute divorce, at least after the marriage has been consummated;
- Non-Christian marriage can be dissolved by absolute divorce under certain circumstances in favor of the Faith.
- Christian marriage before consummation can be dissolved by solemn profession in a religious order, or by an act of papal authority;

¹⁴⁰ “Divorce,” New Advent, accessed August 17, 2022, <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05054c.htm>.

¹⁴¹ “Divorce,” New Advent.

- Separation from bed and board (*divortium imperfectum*) is allowed for various causes, especially in the case of adultery or lapse into infidelity or heresy on the part of husband or wife.¹⁴²

From the beginning, Catholic annulments and the process has been fraught with controversy and difficulty. Catholic annulments were rare in ancient times, and if granted, they were not made public due to fear of ostracism. While no documentation exists referencing the first official Catholic annulment, there are a few early historical references. One of these references include King Lothair II of Lotharingia who requested an annulment in the middle of the 9th century. The purpose of this request was so that he could marry his mistress Waldrada. It was denied by Pope Nicholas I (858-867), yet a Council approved the request. The Pope disbanded the Council. Regardless of the outcome for the King, it reveals that Church annulments were an established process, at least for certain classes. Another historical reference often cited is the annulment granted to Louis XII in 1498 by Pope Alexander VI so he could marry Anne of Brittany. Most are aware of King Henry VIII's divorces and his desire to obtain an annulment with Pope Clement VII prior to his divorce. This disagreement eventually led to the broken relationship between Henry VIII and the Catholic Church. He formed the Church of England in 1533 ending 1,000 years of unity with the Church including ancient rites, passages, and an entire social structure.

Prior to 1910, Catholic scholars report that about 100 annulment cases had been considered worldwide. As time went on, the number of annulments steadily increased. In

¹⁴² "Marriage and Family Life Ministries: Annulments," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed January 20, 2022, <https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/annulment>.

1968, 450 annulments were granted and, rumors prevailed they were reserved for the “well-known and well-healed.” Annulments are now an accepted part of Catholic life in the United States for the working class and the wealthy. In 1994, 54,463 annulments were granted in the United States and 72,744 worldwide. The increasing annulments in the United States have caused criticisms over the years with more conservative traditionalists referring to the process as too lenient while liberal reformers voice their concerns some marriages simply fail, and the Catholics Church needs to recognize civil divorce.

Until recent decades, divorce was stigmatized in the Catholic community. Even before 1977, U.S. Catholics who divorced and remarried without an annulment were automatically excommunicated from the Church. While this has changed and Catholics are no longer excommunicated, they must obtain an annulment if they wish to remarry in the Catholic Church. Until 30 years ago, annulments were usually granted in specific circumstances such as a refusal to have children, failure to consummate the marriage, mental illness, or bigamy. In 1964, the then-Rev. John Richard Keating delivered a doctoral dissertation in Rome laying the groundwork that “unleashed the liberalization of the process.” Keating introduced the idea that psychological factors may cause individuals to be incapable of undertaking the responsibility required in marriage.¹⁴³ The Church began to realize: “There may be a basic incompatibility in the beginning and the couple didn’t realize it.” The courts in Rome began to incorporate the findings of behavioral sciences that related to the qualities required to exchange consent in marriage.

¹⁴³ Goodstein, “So the Marriage Was Never Actually Valid.”

Up to 1997, 75% of American annulments were granted due to “lack of due discretion of judgement” such as emotional immaturity or incapable of commitment and/or fidelity.

The Pew Center and Barna studies reveal there are a significant number of divorced Catholics who are re-married, remain in the Church, and receive Communion. One of the most difficult and controversial aspects for Catholics is the Church’s position regarding the inability to receive Communion without an annulment. Clergy report anecdotally that people change parishes to find a sympathetic priest or to enter a parish where their background is not known. Priests hear confessions from parishioners who refuse to seek annulments and grant them absolution. This informal “good conscience solution” referred to as the “internal forum” was formally proposed by German bishops in 1993 yet rejected by the Vatican. Despite this formal rejection, divorced Catholics report receiving Communion even without an annulment.

The Connection to Tradition, Theology, and Scripture

From a theological perspective, marriage is a gift from God as the human person was created to function and thrive in relationship. Scripture provides a witness to God’s intention for companionship, joy and strengthening of the family. Ray Ortlund Jr. states: Marriage is not a human intervention; it is a divine revelation.¹⁴⁴ In his reflection on the biblical perspective of marriage, he shares: “Only the Bible imparts to us a vision of marriage so transcendent and glorious, far beyond human variation and even human failure. Marriage is of God and reveals a wonderful truth about God.” He begins with his perspective on the biblical love story in Genesis on a grand scale: “In the beginning, God

¹⁴⁴ Ray Ortlund, *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*. (Wheaton, IL, Crossway, 2016), 10.

created the heavens and the earth”¹⁴⁵ with the story ending on a grander scale: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...”¹⁴⁶

The value and permanence of marriage is highly regarded in the Catholic Church. Marriage is not only a sign of love between Christ and the Church, but it is also a participation in that love. The permanence of “till death do us part” and “So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder” are written in Scripture (Mt. 5:31-32 NIV; Mt. 19: 3-9 NIV; Mk. 10:2-12 NIV; Lk. 16:18 NIV). Paul refers to it as a “great mystery” (Eph. 5:32 NIV). Catholic marriage vows reflect the promises of fidelity, permanence, and an openness to children. Yet no individual or relationship is perfect and valid marriages can and do fail despite these promises. The path leading to the end of a relationship is painful and there are many unintended consequences that emerge from divorce. Many understand marriage as a simple and loving agreement that two individuals enter with hope. Yet it is not that simple.

Western culture’s view of the nature marriage continues to evolve and change. Many Americans have shifted from a “divorce culture” to a “cohabiting culture” as individuals choose to enter relationships that are “looser, more provisional bonds that have some shadowy resemblances to the goods of marriage, such as the hope, rather than

¹⁴⁵ Gen. 1:1 NIV

¹⁴⁶ Rev. 21:1 NIV

promise, of lifelong fidelity and openness to life.”¹⁴⁷ This cultural confusion regarding marriage affects everyone, Catholics included. Marriage requires what philosophers refer to as a speech-act. When individuals freely say and intend the marital words: “I do,” a man and a woman become husband and wife. This free consent is central to creating the marital bond. Despite reflection and preparation, individuals rarely understand the full concept of consent when entering marriage. While many feel apprehension prior to marriage, the consent to marriage ensues from trust, love, and hope. Few enter marriage viewing it as a short-term non-exclusive contract that does not bring about new life or somehow care for the next generation. Therefore, as everyone says, “I do,” they are married.¹⁴⁸ This is key to the understanding of valid Catholic marriage.

In order for a Catholic marriage to be valid, it requires that: “(1) the spouses are free to marry; (2) they are capable of giving their consent to marry; (3) they freely exchange their consent; (4) in consenting to marry, they have the intention to marry for life, to be faithful to one another, and be open to children; (5) they intend the good of each other; and (6) their consent is given in the presence of two witnesses and before a properly authorized Church minister. Exceptions to the last requirement must be approved by Church authority.”¹⁴⁹ In fidelity to Jesus’s teaching, the Church sees marriage as a lifelong bond (Mt. 19: 1-10 NIV). The reference to a marriage annulment in the Church is really a declaration by a Church tribunal that a marriage thought to be

¹⁴⁷ C.C. Pecknold. “Defending the Pope, Defending Marriage.

¹⁴⁸ C.C. Pecknold. “Defending the Pope, Defending Marriage.

¹⁴⁹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Four your Marriage: Annulments (Declarations of Nullity),” accessed August 14, 2022, <https://www.foryourmarriage.org/annulments/>.

valid according to Church law fell short of at least one of the vital elements required for the binding union.

Recent Changes to the Process

As previously stated, annulments have continued to take place throughout history. Yet annulments were initially developed for the elite and royalty. The average individual did not have access to annulments due to several prohibitions including the cost. As time went on, Catholics who wish to end a marriage and obtain an annulment had access yet believed the process was too costly, complex, and lengthy. In 2015, Pope Francis made sweeping reforms to the process to make it easier for Catholics to receive annulments by reducing the complexity, time and addressing the issue of cost. These changes were hailed as the most significant changes made to the process in centuries. At the time the Pope made these changes, the process took approximately 12-18 months according to the USCCB.

A significant change initiated by Pope Francis' removes the second instance of judgment of the tribunal which means couples pursuing an annulment will be required to attain only one sentence from a single tribunal. The Pope stated, "The moral certainty reached by the first judge according to law should be sufficient."¹⁵⁰ This change to the process also places the responsibility of the first instance in the tribunal on a single judge who must be a member of the clergy. This reflects a significant change from the past process in which the tribunal consisted of at least two priests and one canon lawyer who

¹⁵⁰ Abby Ohlheiser, Michelle Boorstein, and Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Pope Francis is Reforming the Catholic Church's Marriage Annulment Process," *The Washington Post*, September 8, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/09/08/pope-francis-is-reforming-the-catholic-churchs-marriage-annulment-process/>.

could be a layperson or cleric. Another substantial change is that the Pope granted bishops the authority to nullify a marriage; this authority was previously held by the church courts. Bishops will have the authority to expediate the annulment process for those cases that are deemed particularly straightforward. This process is intended to apply to Catholic couples who face specific conditions such as abortion, children from a previous relationship or imprisonment. Austen Ivereigh, a papal biographer, and commentator on the Vatican, called these changes revolutionary.

In turn, bishops are also allowed to delegate the authority to priests which will allow annulments to be more accessible especially in much of the developing world in which many places have no Church courts. As a result, Ivereigh stated these changes were the "... most far-reaching reform to the Church's nullity process in 300 years."¹⁵¹ These changes progressed from the 18th century safeguards established by the church to ensure the annulment process was not abused including mandatory appeals from the first court decisions. While these changes were procedural in nature and did not result in changes to the church's view on marriage and its permanent nature, the changes reveal the Pope has been listening to Catholics. The Pope stated: "the reason for this change is that society has changed. This speeded-up procedure recognizes and reflects a new reality."¹⁵² The changes reflect Pope Francis pastoral approach as evidenced by the way the revisions were announced in two Apostolic Letters titled: "The Gentle Judge, The Lord Jesus" and "The Meek and Merciful Jesus." The Pope issued these letters by his

¹⁵¹Ohlheiser, Boorstein, and Bailey, "Pope Francis is Reforming the Catholic Church's Marriage Annulment Process."

¹⁵² Ohlheiser, Boorstein, and Bailey, "Pope Francis is Reforming the Catholic Church's Marriage Annulment Process."

own initiative (*motu proprio*) to address the pastoral care of God's people who have become separated from the Church, and therefore, require charity and mercy.

Highlights of 2015 changes include:

- Eliminated the requirement that all annulment decisions require a second judgment.
- Local bishops have the authority to expediate the annulment process for some cases.
- Local bishop's role has expanded in judging nullification proceedings.
- Recommendation that the process be free of administrative fees.

While Vatican experts agree the changes were dramatic, they did not change the Catholic Church's teaching on the permanency of marriage.¹⁵³ Also, at the time the Pope made these changes, a Pew Center poll indicated that 62 percent of American Catholics believed the Church should allow divorced Catholics who remarry without an annulment to receive the Eucharist.¹⁵⁴ Catholics who are granted a civil divorce and choose to remarry are not eligible to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist which is a key part of an active Catholic life.

The Annulment Process Today

Simcha Fisher, author, blogger, podcaster, and recipient of the Best Column award from the Catholic Press Association in 2018, 2019 and third place in 2020, states

¹⁵³ Ohlheiser, Boorstein, and Bailey, "Pope Francis is Reforming the Catholic Church's Marriage Annulment Process."

¹⁵⁴ Abby Ohlheiser, "The Vast Majority of U.S. Catholics Who Have Left the Church Can't Imagine Returning," *The Washington Post*, September 2, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/09/02/the-vast-majority-of-u-s-catholics-who-have-left-the-church-cant-imagine-returning-study-says/>.

that “for such a theologically dense topic, annulments are a perennially popular topic of discussion and debate among Catholics.”¹⁵⁵ Despite being a topic of perpetual conversation, they continue to be perpetually misunderstood, even today. American Catholics continue to refer to an annulment as a Catholic divorce. Many Catholics leave the church due to this requirement. Stories of rich and famous Catholics perceived as buying their way out of undesirable marriages continue. Theologians and laypeople quickly offer their opinions on the validity of a stranger’s marriage based on limited information. Yet these and other problems related to petitioning for decrees of nullity go beyond gossip and dispute. Even Pope Francis reforms directed at accelerating the process and lowering the cost of annulments proved to be less than effective. In a recent article, Fisher asks the important questions: “What does the church really teach about this widely misunderstood process, and how does it play out in the lives of ordinary Catholics? What does it do to their emotional and spiritual lives to encounter a doctrine that works in the space where law meets love?”¹⁵⁶

While many understand the annulment process involves a private sharing of intimate details of the couple’s life, it can also be challenging to evaluate how decisions are made. There is an opportunity for the Church to educate Catholics as it remains a mystery to most. More transparency around the process and the petition to be granted a declaration of nullity is needed. Catholics must understand it is not a Catholic divorce, it

¹⁵⁵ Simcha Fisher, “The Painful, Grace-filled and Hopefully Healing Process of Seeking an Annulment,” *America Magazine*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/12/16/catholic-annulment-process-241995>.

¹⁵⁶ Fisher, “The Painful, Grace-filled and Hopefully Healing Process of Seeking an Annulment.”

is an official pronouncement from the church that a marriage was never valid. While this may appear as semantics to some, it reveals something that is theologically real.

In 2021, Pope Francis shared that since 2015, he's received much resistance in his attempts at annulment reform to streamline the process and make it less costly. Some of the resistance relates to finances. The Pope intended to make the annulment process a faster, less expensive, pastoral ministry. He advised diocese to waive fees, funding diocesan tribunals presiding over annulment processes, and shortened the process allowing bishops more authority. The Pope reiterated his view that many divorced Catholics were intimidated by the complex annulment process and the cost and as a result, did not seek out an annulment. The cost for annulments varies among dioceses and in many places within the United States the cost remains high. Some dioceses have increased the cost including the Archdiocese of New York which added an additional \$100 fee for the annulment petition in February of 2021 and an additional \$650 in administrative fees. The Archdiocese of Los Angeles charges \$500. Both dioceses have a policy regarding the ability to pay and waiving fees related to affordability. The Archdiocese of Philadelphia charges \$800 to those living outside the archdiocese who seek an annulment.¹⁵⁷

Despite attempts at reform; it remains a human process that is often inconsistent within and among dioceses. Notwithstanding well-trained church staff and tribunals, their understanding and perspectives often vary in the examinations and

¹⁵⁷ James T. Keane, "Explainer: What is an Annulment? (And Why Does Pope Francis Want to Make it Easier to Get One?)," *America Magazine*, February 7, 2021, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/05/13/explainer-annulment-pope-francis-marriage-239936>.

investigations. Some tribunals are rigid and inflexible while others embrace a broader interpretation of the evidence. While some emphasize healing, others focus on the facts and the evidence of the case. Jacqui Rapp, a canon lawyer in Kentucky who has worked in tribunals for more than 20 years notes that: “Divorce looks at the end game, when everything has fallen apart. Annulment looks at the beginning, at the moment of creation... “We’re trying to determine whether there was a marriage to begin with... Ideally, the process should be rigorous but not burdensome, illuminating but not exploitative, just but not harsh, merciful but not meaningless.”¹⁵⁸ Rapp views the law as theology in action.

Since the beginning of human history, people have entered into relationships. Throughout time, marriage became a way to demonstrate the value and permanence of these relationships. From a theological and ecclesiological perspective, a Catholic marriage is viewed as a gift from God in which people are called to flourish and grow together. Within the Church, the sacredness of marriage evolved into a sacramental view as a vocation and a call to a permanent, exclusive, life-long relationship open to new life. The Church views the covenant established in the sacrament of marriage as a bond that cannot be dissolved by any human power for any reason other than death. This view of marriage has been described as a divine revelation vs. a human intervention. Yet humans are flawed and our expectations and experiences in marriage may not unfold as anticipated. In fact, unhealthy relationships often emerge as opposed to the sacred relationship intended or a divine revelation. While marriage is both a natural institution

¹⁵⁸ Fisher, “The Painful, Grace-filled and Hopefully Healing Process of Seeking an Annulment.”

and a sacred union, the covenantal bond must demonstrate to the world, in human terms, the “faithful, creative abundant and self-emptying love of Christ.”¹⁵⁹ However, this may not occur. While a Catholic divorce is not possible, the annulment process is a way for Catholics to reflect on their marriage and determine if a covenantal bond was established. Despite controversy regarding the process, it can be a path toward a deeper understanding of the sacramental nature of marriage and the aspects of a healthy relationship despite human fragility and brokenness.

Chapter 6: Healing and Compassion

Why It’s Necessary

While an annulment is one of the most misunderstood aspects of Church life, the process can be life-giving and a path toward healing, restoration, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It can lead to new beginnings and the gift of an even stronger faith and community. The Church is motivated by justice and mercy in offering this path to closure

¹⁵⁹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Promotion & Defense of Marriage,” accessed March 7, 2023, <https://www.usccb.org/topics/promotion-defense-marriage/between-man-and-woman-questions-and-answers-about-marriage-and>.

and healing. The annulment process can bring individuals back to wholeness and to the Eucharistic table. It can become a gateway for individuals to reintegrate into parish life again and embrace the support of the parish community. Not all experiences are the same, a petitioner notes: “Whereas, the civil divorce was so tense and negative and painful, the annulment, for me, was healing and spiritual and affirming.”¹⁶⁰ Done well, effective tribunals will assist petitioners by focusing the questions in a way they can reflect and evaluate their past points of view, perspective, actions, and choices. Shannon Fossett, a canonist in the Diocese of Portland, Maine shares: “In a civil divorce, you don’t need to go back and look at what happened in the marriage; you can just check off irreconcilable differences, but that doesn’t really offer any healing or reflection.”¹⁶¹ She further states: “Sometimes, people are shouldering blame or guilt that, really, they shouldn’t be. We can help them see what the other person was going through or, maybe, circumstances from their own past that contributed to their own behaviors that they didn’t see.”¹⁶² It can be a door to healing as petitioners reveal the story of their relationship that opens the door to awareness.

While critics claim annulments conflict with the Church’s teaching on marriage, Monsignor Paul Stefanko, judicial vicar for the Diocese of Portland, Maine responds this is not the case. His perspective is that the annulment process reflects the value the Church holds for the marriage bond. Monsignor Stefanko notes: “It is a reminder of how serious

¹⁶⁰ “Annulments: A Door to Healing,” Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland, accessed August 3, 2021. <https://portlanddiocese.org/content/annulments-door-healing>.

¹⁶¹ “Annulments: A Door to Healing,” Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland.

¹⁶² “Annulments: A Door to Healing,” Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland.

we take this sacred obligation.”¹⁶³ The annulment process does not focus on whether a marriage existed, it tries to determine if something was lacking from the start that prevented it from being a valid bond. This is often the misconception that gets in the way. The dialogue reflects on the wedding ceremony, vows and whether they were expressed freely and if the individuals were choosing life partners. Further reflections on whether individuals were able to fulfill their obligations and commitment such as fidelity, an openness to children or if fraud occurred and whether the person truly presented themselves to their future spouse, and in situations in which the individual withheld information that may have changed the decision to marry.¹⁶⁴

The process also reflects on the couple’s family of origin and whether it reflected a true model of marriage. A lack of competence regarding the ability to fulfill their partnership often emerges as the story is revealed. This may include some type of addictive personality or an emotional or psychological disorder that prevented individuals from fulfilling their obligations. The support of a priest and a parish community is an important part of the process that can help petitioners move through the healing process. The support of an advocate is provided throughout the process to guide both the petitioner and the ex-spouse. This provides the opportunity to guide and defend each position with mercy and justice ensuring compassion and healing for a new beginning.¹⁶⁵

Transformed Suffering in the Catholic Tradition

¹⁶³ “Annulments: A Door to Healing,” Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland.

¹⁶⁴ “Annulments: A Door to Healing,” Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland.

¹⁶⁵ “Annulments: A Door to Healing,” Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland.

One of the most difficult questions posed by the human person, which is often a question posed to God is: why must we suffer? It's a question that conveys the anguish humans experience within themselves and with those they love when they meet tragedy and suffering. Humans seek to understand and to be understood as they ponder the meaning of suffering and God's purpose in allowing suffering. Many believe the question of suffering is unanswerable, yet Christians find a model of suffering in Jesus. In the Passion of Jesus, He not only embraced human suffering, Jesus made suffering redemptive. He suffered voluntarily and innocently to attain human salvation from sin and death. This suffering, which overcame evil with good, provides meaning to the question of suffering. The sin and death of humanity was transformed by the power of love; this is salvific love. Jesus embraced all human suffering offering it new meaning and transformed suffering to accomplish the work of salvation. In the Catholic and broader Christian tradition, suffering became a saving power.

In Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter on the Christian meaning of human suffering, he writes: "Human suffering has reached its culmination in the passion of Christ. And at the same time, it has entered a completely new dimension and a new order: it has been linked to love ... to that love which creates good, drawing it out by means of suffering, just as the supreme good of the Redemption of the world was drawn from the cross of Christ, and from that cross constantly takes its beginning. The cross of Christ has become a source from which flow rivers of living water."¹⁶⁶ The salvific meaning of

¹⁶⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, Apostolic Letter on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, The Holy See, 1984, sec. 18, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.html.

suffering is revealed not simply in an abstract answer to the question of why God allows suffering, the answer is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and in the Passion of His suffering and resurrection. Pope John Paul II wrote: “Christ does not explain in the abstract the reasons for suffering, but before all else He says: Through my Cross.

Gradually, as the individual takes up his cross, spiritually uniting himself to the Cross of Christ, the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed before him. He does not discover this meaning at his own human level, but at the level of the suffering of Christ. At the same time, however, from this level of Christ the salvific meaning of suffering descends to man’s level and becomes, in a sense, the individual’s personal response. It is then that man finds in his suffering interior peace and even spiritual joy.”¹⁶⁷ Suffering, if not understood or transformed, may prevent forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing. This transformation is an important step in the reflection of the original marriage vows and at the end of a relationship.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Psychologists and behavioral health specialists generally define forgiveness as a conscious, intentional decision to let go of feelings of resentment or vengeance toward an individual or group of people who have harmed them, regardless of whether they deserve forgiveness. While there is some debate over whether true forgiveness requires positive feelings toward an individual or a group, experts agree that at a minimum, forgiveness includes letting go of a deeply held negative feeling. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, condoning, or excusing the offenses. It empowers the individual to recognize

¹⁶⁷ Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades, “The Meaning and Value of Suffering,” *Today’s Catholic*, November 8, 2017, <https://todayscatholic.org/meaning-value-suffering/>.

their pain and suffering without letting it define them; forgiveness helps to enable individuals to heal and move forward. Individuals often confuse forgiveness with reconciliation or view them as the same. Reconciliation is viewed as the final step in the process of forgiveness; it provides a place for forgiveness and mercy to meet and acknowledge what's happened in the past, to forgive, and to let go.

Catholics are called to forgive. Yet forgiveness does not dismiss or accept the harm caused nor make excuses for a person's wrongdoing. It starts with acknowledgement and recognition of the wrong and the damaged caused. Once forgiveness takes place, the person releases the other from any debt. In other words, they release the person from their own demand to receive what was deserved, such as respect. When someone experiences harm, it is a natural human response to wish the other to suffer as well. When forgiveness takes place, it can be a gateway to healing and wholeness. Yet there is a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation; it takes only one to forgive yet two to reconcile. According to Jim Schuster, when an individual forgives, it frees the offender from condemnation, yet it does not involve "opening the door to relationship with that person."¹⁶⁸ Reconciliation is usually viewed as a process in which trust is re-established and the relationship is mended.¹⁶⁹ It is important to realize and understand that forgiveness can take place without reconciliation, especially in the end of a marital relationship.

The Sacrament of Penance in the Roman Catholic Church

¹⁶⁸ Shuster, Jim, "Why Forgiveness is Not the Same as Reconciliation," Catholic Revival Ministries, October 21, 2016, <https://www.catholicrevivalministries.com/blog/forgivenessandreconciliation>.

¹⁶⁹ Shuster, "Why Forgiveness is Not the Same as Reconciliation."

The pain and suffering that results from the end of a relationship or marriage requires considerable self-reflection to understand the reason(s) why the marriage dissolved, and the harm caused in the relationships to self, others, and God. The path to healing and restoration must first confront the brokenness followed by the layers of grief. This thesis proposes that individuals can find joy in a new beginning through the Catholic annulment process. In the Pastoral Letter: Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan issued in 2009, the USCCB states:

*We [bishops] understand the pain of those for whom divorce seemed the only recourse... We urge them to make frequent use of the sacraments, especially the Sacraments of Holy Eucharist and Reconciliation... We encourage divorced persons who wish to marry in the Catholic Church to seek counsel about the options that exist to remedy their situation, including the suitability of a declaration of nullity when there is no longer any hope of reconciliation of the spouses.*¹⁷⁰

The Sacrament of Penance (sometimes referred to as the sacrament of Reconciliation) calls Catholics to reconcile to right relationships with God, self, Church, and the human family. Through penance, individuals heal, restore, and return to right relationships. (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 20). Catholicism teaches that new life begins in the Sacrament of Baptism, is nourished through the Eucharist, supported by the sacrament of penance, and carried to the call of a sacramental marriage. The right relationships created with God, self, Church, and the human community are strengthened through the grace delivered in these sacraments. They can also be weakened or lost through sin which is a turning away from God and right relationships. The Sacrament of Penance leads

¹⁷⁰ “Marriage and Family Life Ministries: Annulments,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed February 3, 2022, <https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/annulment>.

individuals to examine their conscience to reflect and understand the ways they are not in right relationships. It also challenges individuals to recognize their own role in the “structures of sin” that harm the life and dignity of lives. It is through this sacrament that God offers mercy and forgiveness. God’s expectations are for humans to make amends, restore justice and the bonds which have been broken. In the process of amends, forgiveness, and reconciliation, humans are asked to work for peace, justice, and love in all their relationships.¹⁷¹

Self-forgiveness can be complicated especially as it relates to the brokenness of a failed relationship and a covenantal bond. There is little conceptual, empirical research or scholarship on self-forgiveness. While there are limited definitions of self-forgiveness in the social sciences, importance is placed on self-love and respect in light of one’s offense. Most research identifies the concept of self-forgiveness as exhibiting kindness toward the self while attempting to free the mind of self-hate and self-contempt that results from hurting one another.¹⁷² In psychology literature, self-forgiveness has been defined as “a willingness to abandon self-resentment in the face of one’s own acknowledged objective wrong, while fostering compassion, generosity, and love toward oneself.”¹⁷³

The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides a variety of words to describe what is commonly referred to as Confession; these words include conversion, penance, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Currently, the reference to the Sacrament of

¹⁷¹ “Penance: Reconciled to Right Relationship, Called to Heal and Restore,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed August 20, 2022, <https://wearesaltandlight.org/pray-together/penance-reconciled-right-relationship-called-heal-and-restore>.

¹⁷² Julie H Hall and Frank Fincham, “Self-forgiveness: The Stepchild of Forgiveness Research,” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 24, No. 5, (2005): 621-637, <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.452.7231&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

¹⁷³ Hall and Fincham, “Self-forgiveness: The Stepchild of Forgiveness Research.”

Reconciliation is most often used in teachings and writings of the Church (vs. Sacrament of Penance). When viewed through the lens of the human experience of forgiveness and reconciliation, it is a sacrament of special significance with a gift of grace. On a human level, forgiveness only requires the participation of one person who is the offended. This is true with God; God acknowledges sin and no longer holds the debt over the human community. God's will is to be primarily "for us, not against us." However, as in the human relationship, to be forgiven by God is not the same as being reconciled with God. Reconciliation with God requires participation. This is accomplished through the process of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Through this process, we become capable of receiving God's forgiveness. In Catholicism, the human person worships a forgiving God yet reconciles through this sacrament. In the words of St Paul, God's forgiveness is radically available, yet reconciliation is only possible through participation of the individual and God: "We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God!" (2 Cor. 5:20 NIV).

Healing and Restoration

Healing and restoration begin with the process of forgiveness and reconciliation. The process of grief and suffering are transformed through the model of Jesus Christ and by the grace of God. The Sacrament of Reconciliation supports humans in mending the break in communion with God. Catholicism defines sin as a turning away from God, a rupture in communion. It damages not only the relationship with God but with self, the

Church, and the human community. God’s forgiveness and reconciliation are expressed and accomplished liturgically through the sacrament. Since only God forgives sin by virtue of His divine authority, humans are the recipients of divine grace and compassion. During His public life, Jesus repeatedly forgave sins and re-established those who were forgiven into the communities that alienated them. Jesus frequently joined sinners at the table to express God’s forgiveness, compassion, and acceptance in the community.

The sacrament of reconciliation offers the possibility to heal, restore and recover the grace of justification. While this sacrament has undergone several changes to its discipline and celebration throughout the centuries, the fundamental structure remains with two equal elements: the individual comes to the table with contrition and confession and God’s action of forgiveness takes place through the intervention of the Church. Through mercy and compassion, the individual is healed and re-established in the Church.¹⁷⁴ When a marriage ends, there is a break in communion with self, the human community, Church, and God. The annulment process can serve to process and restore communion through reflection, forgiveness, and reconciliation that move individuals to healing and restoration. Father Joseph Arsenault, SSA, the archdiocesan judicial vicar and a 20-year veteran of tribunal work at the Archdiocese of Kansas City, states: “The annulment process can be a very healing process for those who participate in it...I think when marriages end, the parties’ sense that ‘something wasn’t right’ . . . or was ‘not the

¹⁷⁴ “Catechism of the Catholic Church: VI. The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation,” Catholic Culture, accessed August 29, 2022, https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/catechism/cat_view.cfm?recnum=4663.

way it was supposed to be.”¹⁷⁵ Many couples report the annulment process helps to validate what they already knew helping to give them closure.

New Beginnings and Relationships

In the January 2022 issue of *America: the Jesuit Review* an article titled: *The painful, grace-filled, and hopefully healing process of seeking an annulment* by Simcha Fisher outlines a couple’s experience “...it is a story about mistakes, pride, fear and hope, growth and grace, and love and canon law. It is a story, in short, about what makes a valid marriage in the eyes of the church, and how church leaders and structures respond when a marriage is not valid.”¹⁷⁶ While in 2015, Pope Francis called for reform to support an expedited and less costly process, many believe a different kind of reform is necessary. This reform is one that requires a more personal focus to allow couples to gain a deeper understanding of the church’s definition of marriage and ways to support couples during times of struggle. While many individuals pursue an annulment so they can re-marry in the Catholic Church, others live happy and full lives choosing to remain single post-divorce and annulment. However, creating a new life and relationships can be difficult.

While the data is critically important, stories provide the best examples of the pain and suffering experienced. These stories reveal that women are harder on themselves after a divorce. They experience feelings of grief, shame, and humiliation as they move through the cycle of grief. In an article titled: *Seven Things Catholics Should Know about*

¹⁷⁵ Marc and Julie Anderson, “Annulment Process Provides Healing, Hope and Restoration,” *The Leaven*, July 17, 2020, <http://theleaven.org/annulment-process-provides-healing-hope-and-restoration/>.

¹⁷⁶ Fisher, “The Painful, Grace-filled (and Hopefully) Healing Process of Seeking an Annulment.”

Divorce, Susan K. Rowland shares that as a divorced Catholic, she takes great comfort in scripture noting the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman of Samaria at Jacob's well (Jn. 4:4-42 NIV). The woman had several marriages and was living with another man. Her failed relationships were many yet Jesus' mercy and tenderness toward her are clear. Jesus did not disgrace the woman, instead he offered the divorced woman "living water," which she was seeking in her relationships. Rowland states this mercy and tenderness serves as a model for our Church and the faithful. To create a new beginning, we must seek to understand and be understood within the context of our faith and Jesus' approach to mercy, tenderness, forgiveness, and justice. Women must learn to apply these to themselves and feel worthy of them.¹⁷⁷

While the annulment process can be a process for healing and new beginnings, several studies show that Catholic females experience male clergy as an obstacle during the process. In an article by Joseph C. Buckley, he shares the kind of pastoral care offered by the clergy depends very much on the fundamental mindset of the priest in each situation. The priest may come from a legalist position and seek ways in which the individual can be enabled to fulfill the law and fit into the system. Yet a priest whose fundamental position is that of personalism, will seek to discern how far he can lead that individual toward the ideal expressed in the law. Inevitably the position of the priest will

¹⁷⁷ Susan K. Rowland, "Seven Things Catholics Should Know About Divorce," St. Anthony Messenger, June 2017, <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/st-anthony-messenger/seven-things-catholics-should-know-about-divorce>.

convey itself to the person from the very beginning and many of the difficulties expressed by women can be attributed to clergy who have been trained in the legal mindset.¹⁷⁸

In other words, the character and approach of the priest often sets the tone for the process. Therefore, divorced Catholic women may not always find the kind of support from the priest or parishioners they desire. Studies show that divorced Catholic women experience feelings of isolation and failure when their marriage dissolves and those feelings can be compounded by the treatment and negativity expressed from fellow parishioners.¹⁷⁹ Research shows many Catholic women who participate in the annulment process or those who received an annulment found the experience unpleasant. Women participants cited the lack of sensitivity associated with personal and intimate questions distressing. The interviews revealed that women found the process unfair creating feelings of rejection, failure, fear and feeling like an outsider.

While critics assert that annulments are simply an unnecessary transactional process that leave people, especially women, feeling like outsiders, proponents share that offering an annulment process demonstrates the Church's commitment to justice and mercy. The Church has an opportunity through the annulment process to provide a path to justice and mercy that brings forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration often absent in the civil divorce process. The end of a relationship brings unexpected layers of complex grief that give rise to suffering. The question of why suffering must occur is

¹⁷⁸ Joseph C. Buckley cited in William Naylor, "Female Perception of the Annulment of Marriage in the Catholic Church." (PhD diss., University of Derby, United Kingdom, 2010), 119, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2507258156/fulltextPDF/802C73A32E3440D9PQ/1?accountid=9676>.

¹⁷⁹ William Naylor, "Female Perception of the Annulment of Marriage in the Catholic Church."(PhD diss., University of Derby, United Kingdom, 2010), 130, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2507258156/fulltextPDF/802C73A32E3440D9PQ/1?accountid=9676>.

often posed in the human experience of grief. While this remains an unanswered question, the Church provides a larger context and model of suffering in Jesus. When we connect the human and divine story, we can discover meaning beyond our individual experience. This begins the process to transform our suffering as we are called to reflect and forgive amid our suffering and grief. Once again, we are called to the sacraments to receive the grace to live a Catholic life. The Sacrament of Reconciliation calls for reconciliation to right relationships with self, the human community, Church, and God while offering mercy and forgiveness. The Church can educate Catholics to use the annulment process as a model to the Catholic way of life to weave together a story of a grace-filled sacramental journey to reconciliation and restoration through transformative suffering. This will continue to transform not only the annulment process but the Catholic community and the Church to move forward toward right relationships and new beginnings.

Chapter 7: Reimagining the Annulment Process

What happens when love meets law or when love meets theology? What happens when faith seeks understanding? Is there a way to re-imagine the annulment process? What does scripture tell us? Many local priests intend to be instruments of healing and to dispel common myths and misinterpretations regarding annulments and the process. Yet this is sometimes met with resistance by the local community. The broader hierarchy of the Catholic Church places emphasis on the permanence and

indissoluble nature of Catholic marriage.¹⁸⁰ The bond created in a Catholic marriage is believed to mirror the relationship Christ has with the Catholic Church which is one of fidelity and commitment. This is communicated to the broader church and the local parishes. Yet the faithful also believe that some Catholic marriages simply fail even if the circumstances and preparation leading up to the marriage are perfect. The Church has not wavered from its position on marriage. Many ask why the Church is so obstinate.¹⁸¹

The Church's response continues to uphold that to diminish the permanence of marriage in any way is to diminish the permanence of God's love. As a sacrament, marriage is a participation in the love of Christ for His bride the Church. Therefore, it cannot be diminished in any way.¹⁸² Yet many believe while God can easily maintain His side of the bargain, it remains a tall order of perfection for a human. Even some in the Church who recognize and acknowledge annulments, insist they exist "not necessarily to effect closure on a broken relationship or to invite the person back to a sacramental life in the Church but to reinforce the Church's teaching on the sanctity and indissolubility of marriage."¹⁸³ There are many in the Church who believe: "Careful, prayerful, honest and chaste preparation for the reception of the sacrament of Matrimony helpsto minimize

¹⁸⁰ Castle, Rice, and West cited in William Naylor, "Female Perception of the Annulment of Marriage in the Catholic Church." (PhD diss., University of Derby, United Kingdom, 2010), 130, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2507258156/fulltextPDF/802C73A32E3440D9PQ/1?accountid=9676>.

¹⁸¹ Castle, Rice and West cited in Naylor, "Female Perception of the Annulment of Marriage in the Catholic Church."

¹⁸² Castle, Rice and West cited in Naylor, "Female Perception of the Annulment of Marriage in the Catholic Church."

¹⁸³ Rice cited in William Naylor, "Female Perception of the Annulment of Marriage in the Catholic Church."

the need for future annulments."¹⁸⁴ While this may be true, the Church presents a view of the ideal Catholic marriage yet rarely presents any type of practical pastoral advice to those who fail to live up to this ideal state of marriage. There is literature that defends and upholds the sanctity of sacramental marriage yet acknowledges the need for pastoral support and intervention if a marriage ends in divorce.¹⁸⁵ There is a need to acknowledge and offer pastoral support and spiritual encouragement in varying degrees for those who have experienced difficult and destructive marriages. Authors and theologians have a diverse way of thinking and interpreting Catholic marriage and the annulment process. Some view the annulment process as a tool to reinforce the Church teaching on the sanctity of marriage and as a sign of the Church's compassion and concern for those who experience a divorce. They believe the process can be a valuable way to facilitate healing and restoration toward the creation of a new life and relationships.¹⁸⁶

There is an acknowledgement that the annulment process is viewed differently by everyone as each situation and marriage has different circumstances. Therefore, the annulment process can "either be spiritually healing or spiritually crippling." Catholic Marriage Tribunals function as a judicial body and consequently, can be formal, legal and may lack spiritual reflections. Some time ago, John T. Catoir began to identify the pastoral needs of divorced Catholics, especially those having difficulty applying for an annulment and in cases in which a petition had been rejected. His first work, published in

¹⁸⁴ Rice cited in William Naylor, "Female Perception of the Annulment of Marriage in the Catholic Church."

¹⁸⁵ Bedard, Rabior, Flowers, and Catoir cited in William Naylor, "Female Perception of the Annulment of Marriage in the Catholic Church."

¹⁸⁶ Wells, Bedard, and Rabior cited in William Naylor, "Female Perception of the Annulment of Marriage in the Catholic Church."

1979, was titled: *Where do you stand with the Church? The dilemma of divorced Catholics*. Catoir was a Catholic priest and one of the first to acknowledge the potentially negative role some of the clergy played in assisting individuals in the annulment process. This ranged from a lack of knowledge or experience to those who assisted by simply providing the paperwork for the process. Catoir positively encouraged divorced Catholics to seek help with their dilemma yet acknowledged it takes courage to seek out a caring priest to help remove the barriers that separate the individual from God and the Church. He advised the faithful if they encounter a priest who is unkind, seek to find another priest.¹⁸⁷ Catoir and others within the Church who express a similar voice and approach are necessary to validate women's experiences within the Church and the annulment process.

Catoir also examined literature and research related to Catholic marriage, divorce and annulments that calls for improved pastoral care of widows, separated, and re-married Catholics. He identifies authors who respect the importance of the Church's teaching and position on Catholic marriage yet, also respect the need for enhanced pastoral care for those who failed in the ideal state of marriage.¹⁸⁸ In his study, Catoir addressed how Catholic women experience the annulment process from a pastoral perspective. He referenced other studies that reveal while some women found the process palatable, many found it traumatic and distressing. Therefore, those providing guidance within the Church require ongoing training and reflection to support and reduce the

¹⁸⁷ Catoir cited in William Naylor, "Female Perception of the Annulment of Marriage in the Catholic Church."

¹⁸⁸ Jenks, McTaggart, Haring, Hegy, Martos, Coriden and Buckley cited in William Naylor, "Female Perception of the Annulment of Marriage in the Catholic Church."

distress and emotional harm that emerges in the process. Catoir and others provide a reminder that God's grace remains present in marriages that end in divorce. He calls for reform in Marriage Tribunals to ensure individuals can seek re-entry into the sacramental life by people who are competent, compassionate, and understanding. Catoir believes one of minimal reforms required is training in Canon law and in the understanding of the human sciences.

It is important to recognize that tribunals do not exist to remind the human person of their failures. One of Catoir's peers, Jenks, states that: "In the final analysis, marriage tribunals are dealing with human beings; human beings who have suffered the pain of divorce; human beings who have sought to understand why their marriages failed; human beings who act, think, and feel."¹⁸⁹ In *Catholic Divorce - The Deception of Annulments*, by Hegy & Martos, written in 2002, the authors focus on the emotional pain and suffering experienced by Catholics in response to the Church's reaction to their divorce, re-marriage, or the Catholic annulment process. There is an opportunity for the Church to provide a more progressive perspective on remarriage as a "second chance." Based on research, study, and observation, these authors and researchers believe the type of pastoral care offered by priests is linked to mindset. Oftentimes, it is situational in tone and experience, yet it can also be the general mindset of the priest and others involved in the process.¹⁹⁰ Current literature supports these opportunities still exist today.

Support and Advocacy for Catholic Women

¹⁸⁹ Rice cited in William Naylor, "Female Perception of the Annulment of Marriage in the Catholic Church."

¹⁹⁰ Naylor, "Female Perception of the Annulment of Marriage in the Catholic Church."

Since the divorce rate for first marriages is approximately 50 per cent and subsequent marriages are 80 per cent, there is a need for support and advocacy when a relationship ends. A grieving process accompanies the loss of a relationship that continues beyond the civil divorce or annulment process. Even if an annulment is granted, the grief and loss of relationship with self, spouse, human community, Church, and God is significant. While the annulment process can be a path toward healing, the survivors of divorce require a healthier dialogue within the Catholic Church. While the Church supports couples in their path toward marriage, they must also love and support those individuals whose marriages fail. For Catholic women to move toward healing and wholeness and become more involved in parish life, they must be welcomed and re-established in the parish community. Unfortunately, women often report that non-divorced Catholics come across as judgmental. While this mindset may be unconscious and unintentional, the expressed perception of divorced women is they are less spiritual, less committed to marriage, and less forgiving than long-term married couples. Some of these non-divorced Catholics struggle in their own relationships yet remain married. They may not have created a marital bond, or they may not have come freely to the table without reservations.

Many studies reveal the top three reasons individuals choose to divorce are adultery, addiction, and abuse, yet the bigger picture reveals there is often indifference usually on the part of one spouse. This is extremely painful to the individual, couple, and the human community to accept. Yet some divorced Catholics also experience and report feelings of release and freedom spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically to become

the person they know God wants them to be. They move on to a life filled with joy, fulfillment, happiness, and wholeness. They cite their relationship with God as improved and fuller due to the reflection and healing experienced in the annulment process, including psychological counseling and spiritual direction. As a result, women report their overall health and well-being are improved as they have addressed the problem.

Susan Rowland identified three gifts the annulment process provides to divorced Catholics: clarity, healing, and time. The gift of clarity helps women to see their failed marriage in a new light as they explore why and how their relationship evolved. The gift of healing is expressed as women work through their anger, guilt, and shame moving to an improved emotional state and spiritual place. The gift of time allows individuals to take time to reflect, understand, and pause before making any major life decisions. People who end relationships are especially vulnerable to accepting companionship, support, and sympathy yet relationships must be approached in an intentional and healthy way. The divorce data for second and third marriages reveal many people simply don't pause or wait long enough to recover. The annulment process can be an intentional path and spiritual place for women to pause, reflect and recover while understanding the why and how their marriage failed. During this process, women can begin to cultivate new authentic relationships as they advocate for themselves while supporting other women in the Church.¹⁹¹

The Gift of Faith and Community

¹⁹¹ Rowland, Susan K. "Seven Things Catholics Should Know about Divorce."

The gift of faith and community can be instrumental in the healing and restoration process for the individual and the community. Research shows there are religious variables that can facilitate personal growth and healing, this can be true in the annulment process. Collaborative spiritual coping has been used to offer motivation and peace to individuals experiencing a divorce while drawing on strength and support in partnership with God. Spirituality can enable individuals to overcome feelings of fear, hurt, and anger related to divorce. Studies reveal that individuals can benefit from reducing guilt when seeking spiritual purification. Susan K. Rowland emphasizes it is important for all Catholics, not simply those who experience divorce, to know that divorce is not a sin. Some believe that divorced or separated people are excommunicated from the Catholic Church. While others are unaware that divorced Catholics can remarry in the Church if an annulment is granted. An annulment does not mean the marriage itself never took place; in simple terms, it states that a sacramental marriage did not take place.

Therefore, misunderstandings such as children are illegitimate, and the couple lived in sin, are simply not true. In basic terms, it means the marrying couple was not fully aware of the nature of a Catholic marriage and/or there were difficulties from the start of the marriage. As a result, the Church may determine, through the annulment process, the couple could not fully enter into a true Catholic marriage, even though it was their intent. Participation in the annulment process is a way to ensure the beginning of a healing process. If divorced Catholics want to re-marry, they will have better tools to discern the relationships as well as the Church's approval for a second marriage. As

previously stated, the divorce statistics for second and third marriages prove that many divorced individuals do not wait long enough to recover completely from a divorce.¹⁹²

Chapter 8: Vision, Clarity, and Opportunity

Understanding Church Documents and Authority

¹⁹² Rowland, Susan K. “Seven Things Catholics Should Know About Divorce.”

Many Catholics search for guidance to understand the Church's contemporary teachings on love, marriage, divorce, relationships, and family life. While resources exist, most Catholic's understanding comes from early catechesis on the sacraments, marriage preparation, workshops, retreats, and parish priests addressing content in homilies. While all of these are well-intended efforts, they often lose sight of the broader vision due to the fragmented and inconsistent delivery of the content and the absence of dialogue. Pope Francis continues to address these topics at a high level, yet it may not resonate or cascade on the local level to parish communities. As a result, Catholics are often left confused or in disagreement on the Church's authority and vision. Therefore, Catholics are simply not sure what is allowed by whose authority and why.

There are many documents that provide guidance to clarify the Catholic Church's position on marriage, divorce, and annulments. When searching for clarity, direction or simply understanding Church's teaching on a particular topic, it can be difficult to sort through the multitude of documents, commentaries, and interpretations. Many of the documents are issued by the Holy See. The Holy See is considered the government of the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope in his role as Bishop of Rome, leads the Holy See. The term "see" is derived from the Latin *sedes* which means seat. This seat denotes the episcopal chair inhabited by the bishop and the area of accountability. It is the distinguished authority of the Roman Catholic Church. The Holy See establishes the Church's central government that reviews and decides matters of faith and morality. There are approximately 1.3 billion Catholics worldwide. The Holy See resides in the

independent state of the Vatican City-state which was established in 1929 to allow the pope to exercise his universal authority.¹⁹³

The documents issued and approved by the Holy See intend to provide clarity, direction, and education. While the level of authority for these documents are defined within the Church, theologians debate the authority associated with these documents including intent and implementation. Catholic documents are broadly categorized into the following: legislative, doctrinal (teaching) and pastoral. There is a hierarchy to these documents. The apostolic constitutions and decrees originated by popes are at the top level of authority which includes the Second Vatican Council documents. There are other documents such as the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Code of Canon Law which have binding authority on the entire Church. These legislative documents contain dogmatic or doctrinal elements.¹⁹⁴ Papal doctrinal documents which are considered teaching documents are created to explain or clarify existing law. These documents include encyclicals, apostolic letters, apostolic exhortations, and “*motu proprio*” documents. Supplementary teaching and direction are delivered by congregations to illuminate Council documents or decrees. There are other documents created to translate regulations in Canon Law or other legislative Church documents. Lastly, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ issue official documents called pastoral letters to clarify the implementation of a Church teaching. All these documents must be aligned and consistent with the teaching and law of the universal Church

¹⁹³ “Holy See: Roman Catholic Government,” Britannica, accessed, September 25, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Holy-See>.

¹⁹⁴ Helen Hull Hitchcock, “The Authority of Church Documents,” *Ardoremus*, September 15, 2002, <https://ardoremus.org/2002/09/the-authority-of-church-documents/>.

approval by the Pope. Pastoral committee statements or guidelines of the national conference are issued but must have approval of the conference, otherwise, they have no binding authority. In addition, a diocesan bishop is free to adopt or adapt these pastoral guidelines as policies for a particular diocese. However, at times, they become problematic as they result in a perceived authority that is not held. An appendix with an abbreviated glossary of the most common documents issued by the Holy See and the associated terms is included. See Appendix III.

Church Documents Addressing Marriage and Family Life

A review of seven Catholic documents follows. These are examples of the documents relevant to the Church's position on love, marriage, divorce, and annulments. They have a variety of authority levels within the Church. These examples are provided to present foundational information that demonstrates the Church's position and how it is communicated. These documents include: 1. Pastoral Letter issued by the U.S. Catholic Bishops on Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan, 2009. 2. Post-synodal apostolic exhortation issued by Pope Francis on *Amoris laetitia* (The Joy of Love), 2016. 3. Apostolic Letter issued *Motu Proprio* by Pope Francis on *Summa Familiae*, 2017. 4. Apostolic Exhortation issued by Pope John Paul II on *Familiaris Consortio*, 1981. 5. Pastoral Letter issued by The Kansas Catholic Conference on Addressing Cohabitation before Marriage, 1998. 6. Pastoral Letter issued by the Most Rev. Harry J. Flynn on Marriage and the Family, 1998 and 7. Pastoral Letter issued by the Most Reverend Joseph Sullivan, S.T.D on Widowed, Separated, and Divorced, 1980.

1. Pastoral Letter, Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan issued by the U.S. Catholic Bishops

The U.S. Catholic Bishops approved a pastoral letter in November of 2009 entitled “Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan.”¹⁹⁵ This pastoral letter is a good example of providing clarity, direction, and teaching as it relates to the Church’s position on marriage. The intent of the letter was to provide fundamental teaching on marriage including: the sacramental nature of marriage, the gift of marriage, and the community promise between a man and a woman. The letter also addressed several contemporary pastoral challenges to marriage and the Church’s response to those challenges. The definition and teachings on marriage in the Catholic Church continue to remain critically important as couples enter committed relationships and contemplate marriage in the Catholic Church. The Pastoral Letter addresses marriage as a natural institution formed by God. The Church teaches God’s intent for marriage is a permanent partnership and union between a man and a woman who enter with free and mutual consent. It is well established in the history and teachings of the Church that marriage has two distinct purposes: 1. the good of the spouses or unitive purpose and 2. the procreation and education of children. While an intimate relationship, marriage is not viewed as a private institution, it becomes the basis of the family. It is the place in which each generation learns the values and virtues that make them good Christians and good citizens. Therefore, in the eyes of the Church, marriage is important for society.

¹⁹⁵ “Marriage and Family Life Ministries: Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 2009, accessed September 9, 2021, <https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/marriage-love-and-life-divine-plan>.

The Church emphasizes the importance of the male/female union and the belief of the complimentary nature and “different ways of being human” in this relationship. This union is viewed in a complete and complementary way. In addition, this “communion of persons has the potential to bring forth human life” in the form of a family. The Church views this as a unique relationship in which the purpose of marriage allows individuals to participate in God’s own self-giving love. The Pastoral Letter identifies marriage as a Christian Sacrament and a blessing from God. The Church teaches that in marriage, a male and female become one flesh and their love becomes complete. This union is viewed as “image of Christ’s love for his Church.” Couples are expected to commit to each other as fully as Christ committed to His Church. The sacrament of marriage is considered a vocation and therefore, individuals and the couple must discern this vocation prior to the marriage commitment. In a marriage, couples are called to “grow in holiness” and to live out the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. The Pastoral Letter instructs couples they are expected to grow in the moral virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

The inter-relationship of the sacraments is stated with specific emphasis to the sacrament of marriage and the Eucharist. The Eucharist becomes a source for the couple’s marriage in which they meet Christ. This encounter “nourishes the virtue of marital hospitality and helps the couple to recognize God’s image in others.”¹⁹⁶ As a result, this becomes a model and witness for the couple. However, the Pastoral Letter identifies four contemporary challenges facing the Church related to marriage. While

¹⁹⁶ “Marriage and Family Life Ministries: Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

these are not new challenges, they continue to test the Catholic community today and pose challenges to the Catholic meaning and purpose of marriage. The four challenges presented in the Pastoral Letter include: 1. Contraception, 2. Same-sex unions, 3. Divorce, and 4. Cohabitation.

1. Contraception: While most Catholic couples report the use of contraception at some point in their relationship, the Church states a married Catholic couple must view each act of intercourse as open to procreation. If contraception is used, it restricts the possibility of procreation and as a result, it divides the unitive and procreative meanings of marriage. The separation of these two meanings is viewed by the Church as being in opposition to God's plan for marriage and human development. While the Church offers support with the option of family planning methods, contraception continues to be widely used and viewed as a better option by Catholics. Since the data reveals there is such a wide variance on the views of marriage and relationships within today's society and across generations, the pastoral implications regarding the use of contraception have increased in complexity since this pastoral letter was written in 2009.

2. Same-sex unions. This challenge continues to create debate and harm within and outside the Catholic community as the number of same sex marriages and unions continue to increase. The Church's position relative to the necessity of a male/female harmony in marriage continues to be challenged resulting in a significant number of Catholics leaving the Church. While the foundation of this belief and position stems from the idea of an authentic union that allows for the creation of new life, many challenge the position stating it can be accomplished in same sex marriages in a variety of ways including the adoption of unwanted children which benefits the children, the family, and

society. Yet the Church does not view adoption by same sex couples as an option to procreation. The Church remains strong in their belief that same sex marriage disregards the nature of marriage. Since 2009, society's acceptance and embracing of same sex and non-traditional marriages has increased dramatically, thereby continuing to pose pastoral challenges to the faithful in living out their faith in a Catholic community. 3. Divorce. While more than fifty percent of Catholics experience at least one divorce, Church teachings remain strong in their position on marriage as a "lifelong covenantal union." Couples who experience marital problems are expected to ask for God's help and Church resources to support and heal their struggles. While the Pastoral Letter identifies annulments as a possibility for some divorced couples, it affirms it is not a Catholic divorce. Studies reveal that Catholics remain confused and resistant to the Church's position on divorce and remarriage. Catholics report they continue to receive the Sacrament of Eucharist despite remarriage without an annulment. Catholics also report efforts to navigate ways to live their Catholic faith by finding sympathetic priests and/or moving to new parishes to establish themselves a community in which they are unknown. This allows them to bypass resistance from the community and, in their view, allows them to pursue the sacramental life by receiving the Eucharist. 4. Cohabitation. While a significant number of Catholics report cohabitating at some point in their relationship, the Church's has stated: "This is always wrong and objectively sinful because the complete gift of self can only take place within the public, permanent commitment of marriage."¹⁹⁷ Since the inception of the letter in 2009, the number of couples, including Catholics, who

¹⁹⁷ "Marriage and Family Life Ministries: Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

cohabitation continues to increase dramatically especially among the Millennial generation and Generation X. Since these populations have historically been a large part of the engagement in Church life with a focus on marriage and children, the Church must adapt, in some way, to ensure the engagement of these young families. While the letter states cohabitation has negative effects on couples and children, many believe it is an opportunity to determine if a life-long commitment can be made before the next step of marriage. These couples point to the divorce and remarriage rates and the experience within their own family of origin and their parent's broken relationships and divorce. This remains a pastoral challenge as the Church looks to engage and educate younger children relative to their faith and determine sacramental implications to individuals and the family.

Many of these contemporary challenges continue to be a source of contention for the Catholic community and remain a source of controversy and difficulty. While more recently, the Pope has "softened" on his point of view on some of these topics such as cohabitation, they remain the official position of the Church. As with many contemporary challenges, the pastoral challenges associated with the day-to-day Catholic community and the faithful to live into these positions continue to pose challenges.

2. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris laetitia* (The Joy of Love) issued by Pope Francis

The Joy of Love was written in 2016 following the 2014 and 2015 Synods of Bishops focused on the Family. It is an apostolic exhortation which is a specific kind of papal teaching by the Pope intended to communicate his thoughts and reflections on a

particular topic. It is also used, as in this exhortation, to share conclusions reached by the Pope after his reflection on recommendations of a Synod of Bishops. Lastly, it is intended for the Pope to exhort or encourage the faithful into a more profound life of Christian discipleship.¹⁹⁸ This document is referred to as Pope Francis' love letter to families as he invites everyone to grow as members of God's family by embracing the "beauty of marriage." This document was written to offer guidance to families encouraging them to grow in faith and to support them in rising challenges. The teachings focus on an appreciation and understanding of the role of the family in sacramental marriage. While the exhortation addresses similar issues and topics as the U.S. Bishop's Pastoral Letter on Marriage: Love and the Divine Plan, it does not contain dogmatic definitions or policy directives.

It is an extensive document regarding family life and marriage that includes nine chapters. It is intended to be reviewed carefully and intentionally. The titles of the nine chapters provide a lens into the tone and composition of what has been referred to as the Pope's "love letter." In this document, Pope Francis calls on the Catholic Church and families to embrace the meaning and purpose of marriage more deeply emphasizing scripture as a point of reference and reflection.¹⁹⁹ The Pope once again emphasizes marriage as a vocation and a call to reflect Christ's love for the Church which is His bride. The document also highlights the crisis in the vocation of marriage and the need for pastoral care of those who are living together, married civilly, or divorced and

¹⁹⁸ "Marriage and Family Life Ministries: Amoris laetitia Archives," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2022, accessed August 22, 2021, <https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/amoris-laetitia-archives#tab--what-is-an-apostolic-exhortation>.

¹⁹⁹ "All About Mary: Magisterial Documents Amoris laetitia," University of Dayton, March 19, 2106, <https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/m/magisterial-documents-amoris-laetitia.php>.

remarried. The Pope lovingly shares: "There is no perfect family. We have no perfect parents, we are not perfect, do not get married to a perfect person, neither do we have perfect children. We have complaints about each other."²⁰⁰

The document references a variety of scripture passages which address the human family as a living reflection of the trinity and a communion of love. Pope Francis compares the human couple as a visible sign of God's creative act and symbol of God's inner life. He addresses sexual union as self-giving and voluntary, "both physically and in the union of their hearts and lives, and eventually, in a child, who will share not only genetically but also spiritually in the 'flesh' of both parents."²⁰¹ The pope is direct about the brokenness families face such as pain, evil and violence, and his intention to create a Church that is a place of comfort, companionship, tenderness, and mercy. The document addresses the uncertainty and ambiguity related to the impact of the anthropological-cultural changes at the time. This has considerably increased in an endemic world which has created a fear of commitment and a self-orientation limiting the ability for humans to give generously in a variety of ways. This affects family life as individuals become more isolated, abandoned, stressed, and lonely. As a result, the reluctance to have children increases due to life-style related concerns. Yet the Pope views the strength of families in 2016 and today as a source of hope, support, and answer to these threats.

The Church's teachings on marriage and family are documented with a variety of references to scripture, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Second Vatican

²⁰⁰ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia: On Love in the Family*, (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2016), 13.

²⁰¹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia: On Love in the Family*.

Council, prior popes, and Church elders. Pope Francis continues to identify the family as the “domestic church:”

Within the family ‘which could be called a domestic church’ (Lumen Gentium. 11), individuals enter upon an ecclesial experience of communion among persons, which reflects, through grace, the mystery of the Holy Trinity. ‘Here one learns endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, generous – even repeated – forgiveness, and above all divine worship in prayer and offering of one’s life’ (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1657).²⁰²

Clearly the focus of this document is love within a marriage. It has more than forty-two pages dedicated to this topic with references to “what love is and what love is not.” The Pope is not reluctant to state the importance of conjugal love, which he states is fortified through grace and marked by fidelity, respect, and care. He speaks directly about Church teachings on the openness to new life and the love of parents as a way that God displays love. The Pope addresses the feminine “genius” of motherhood and the presence of a strong father as essential to a healthy family and society. The issue of marriage preparation for engaged couples is highlighted as a way to ensure a healthy marriage that can grow in fidelity and love. The Pope addresses and names concerns that couples and families face including former wounds, separation, divorce, mixed-faith, and death. The care and education of children is emphasized with a focus on acceptance, love, and care for their ethical formation and a balanced discipline. It is clearly stated that responsibility for faith formation rests with family.

The eighth chapter of the document titled “Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating Weakness” contains a controversial section regarding irregular situations. The

²⁰² John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (November 22, 1981), 34, 9: AAS 74 (1982), 123, 90 quoted in Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 295.

Pope attempted to position this topic from a place of balance: “Although (the Church) constantly holds up the call to perfection and asks for a fuller response to God,” she must also be a place of mercy and refuge for those who are lost or in need of healing. While this may seem uninspiring to those outside the Church, it provides insight into the Pope’s call for mercy and demonstrates that he understands the need for pastoral care. The approach for pastoral care is highlighted and referenced by Pope John Paul II’s “law of gradualness:”

... in the knowledge that the human being ‘knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth.’ This is not a “gradualness of law” but rather a gradualness in the prudential exercise of free acts on the part of subjects who are not in a position to understand, appreciate or fully carry out the objective demands of the law. For the law is itself a gift of God which points out the way, a gift for everyone without exception; it can be followed with the help of grace, even though each human being ‘advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God and the demands of God’s definitive and absolute love in his or her entire personal and social life.’²⁰³

In his pastoral approach, Pope Francis addresses a variety of ways and opens the possibilities to embrace baptized divorced Catholics who have been civilly remarried to be “more fully integrated into Christian communities... while avoiding any occasion of scandal.”²⁰⁴ This language is important as it recognizes the faithful have been excluded from Christian communities and acknowledges the desire to avoid gossip, humiliation, rumor, and disgrace among this large population of Catholics. The pope shares the Church’s intention is for this population to feel welcomed and loved, not excluded. His call encourages everyone to less rigidity in their thinking and not to approach things in black and white terms. The pope shared this type of approach limits charity and

²⁰³ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*.

²⁰⁴ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia: On Love in the Family* 299.

sanctifying grace. He expressly stated that: “without detracting from the evangelical ideal, there is a need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively appear.”²⁰⁵ The Pope calls everyone to support the faithful to live better lives open to grace and charity that is supported by love and acceptance as they continue to seek God’s will. In this process, the couple and the family become an expression and sign of grace and witness for themselves and the broader domestic family. This supports the larger and more conceptual issue of the spirituality of marriage and family addressed at the synods.

3. Apostolic Letter, *Summa Familiae Cura* Issued *Motu Proprio* issued by Pope Francis

A Motu proprio (literally, by one’s own initiative) is a legislative document or decree issued by the Pope on his own initiative, not in response to a request. The *Summa Familiae Cura* was issued by Pope Francis in September of 2017 instituting the Pontifical John Paul II Theological Institute for Matrimonial and Family Science.²⁰⁶ It was the sixteenth *Motu Proprio* of his pontificate. In 2017, Pope Francis re-founded the institute through this apostolic letter. He decreed that the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family would be known as the Pontifical John Paul II Theological Institute for Marriage and Family Sciences.

²⁰⁵ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia: On Love in the Family* 308.

²⁰⁶ Pope Francis, *Summa Familiae Cura, Instituting the Pontifical John Paul II Theological Institute for Matrimonial and Family Science*, Apostolic Letter Issued *Motu Proprio*, Vatican Website, accessed August 21, 2022. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio_20170908_summa-familiae-cura.html.

The decision and letter resulted in a controversy with Church officials and the faithful. In the letter, the Pope shares the synods of 2014 and 2015 led to the creation of *Amoris Laetitia* focusing on a renewed and increased awareness of the family gospel and emerging pastoral challenges. The Pope referenced his own exhortation, stating, “The welfare of the family is decisive for the future of the world and that of the Church.” The Pope further pointed to paragraph 32 of *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love, his Post-synodal apostolic exhortation):

The anthropological-cultural change, which today affects all aspects of life and requires an analytical and diversified approach, does not allow us to limit ourselves to pastoral and missionary practices that reflect forms and models of the past. We must be conscious and passionate interpreters of the wisdom of faith in a context in which individuals are less sustained than in the past by social structures, in their affective and family life. In the clear purpose of remaining faithful to the teaching of Christ, we must look with the intellect of love and with wisdom of realism to the reality of the family today, in all its complexity, in its lights and in its shadows.²⁰⁷

Pope Francis is said to have suppressed the old institute and established a new one; this radically changed the focus toward a social-scientific study of the family. Some say he simply founded a new institute with a similar name while others view it as a step toward the broader reform of the Roman Curia and affiliated Roman institutions.²⁰⁸ When Pope Francis approved the new statutes for the institute, he was criticized by students, alumni, and staff regarding the “loss of the formational approach...and identity” of the institute.

Msgr. Philippe Bordeyne, the newly appointed President of the John Paul II Pontifical

²⁰⁷ Steve Skojec, “A Legacy Co-opted: What Really Lies Behind Changes to John Paul II Institute?” *Catholic Culture*, September 19, 2017, <https://onepeterfive.com/a-legacy-co-opted-what-really-lies-behind-changes-to-john-paul-ii-institute/>.

²⁰⁸ Christopher R. Altieri, “The JP II Institute Has Been Plunged into an Identity Crisis,” *The Catholic Herald*, August 1, 2019, <https://catholicherald.co.uk/the-jpii-institute-has-been-plunged-into-an-identity-crisis/>.

Theological Institute for Marriage and Family Sciences, stated the Pope wished to broaden the institute’s scope relative to the new “dimensions of the pastoral task and of the ecclesial mission, and with reference to developments in the human sciences and in anthropological culture in a field so fundamental for the culture of life.”²⁰⁹ The Pope believed it was necessary to preserve the original inspiration of the institute while evolving the broader activities and aligning with the current call for the pastoral mission of the Church.

The Pope and Msgr. Bordeyne believe that consideration must be given to present-day issues relative to economic and cultural change. The Church must meet people in their “successive apprenticeships” especially in family life. Msgr. Bordeyne’s point of view is that the current crisis of marriage and family life is more about the diminished support from society and less about the loss of belief in the sacredness of marriage.²¹⁰ The Msgr. believes the Church must express the necessary humility and openness to acknowledge there are different ways to start a family. He states that the Pope has repeated this message again and again especially in the exhortation *Amoris laetitia* which followed the Synod on the family. The absence of humility can lead to the over-simplification of questions and issues concerning the family. The pope is cautious regarding theologians implying certainties relative to the family when there are significant transformations underway in society. The Pope continues to pose the question about how to balance both humility and ambition at same time while remaining hope

²⁰⁹ Christopher R. Altieri, “The JP II Institute Has Been Plunged into an Identity Crisis.

²¹⁰ Dorcas Funmi, “New JP II Institute President My Stance on *Humanae Vitae* was Misinterpreted,” *TD Pel Media*, October 11, 2021, <https://tdpelmedia.com/new-jpii-institute-president-my-stance-on-humanae-vitae-was-misinterpreted>.

filled. The Pope shares there is a model in Jesus and how he would view these complex situations related to the cultural and economic transformations taking place in society that impact family and marriage. The institute must ensure the Church is well-founded and acknowledges societal transformation while balancing the mission of the Church. Msgr. Bordeyne shares while the Church must be ambitious, it also must be well-founded and not bury its head in the sand as we witness societal transformation.²¹¹

4. Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio* issued by Pope John Paul II

An apostolic exhortation is a magisterial document written by the Pope. It is ranked third in importance after constitutions and encyclicals. It is a pastoral message to Catholics that highlights key points on a particular issue. Often the apostolic exhortation follows a relevant Synod of Bishops, and the pope consults with the bishops following the synod. An apostolic exhortation creates a clear direction for Catholics to critically address issues being discussed with the Church and contemporary society. *Familiaris Consortio*, The Fellowship of the Family, subtitled: On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World is an Apostolic Exhortation promulgated on November 22, 1981, by John Paul II.²¹² It is a post-synodal apostolic exhortation addressed to the episcopate, the clergy and the faithful regarding the role of the Christian family in the modern world. The introduction is followed by four parts and a conclusion, focusing on the Church in service

²¹¹ Giovanni Paolo II, “Philippe Bordeyne. the Church Must be More Humble in the Face of the Mystery of the Family,” *Pontificio Istituto Teologico Matrimonio e Famiglia*, 2022, accessed September 20, 2022, <https://www.istitutogp2.it/wp/2021/09/23/philippe-bordeyne-the-church-must-be-more-humble-in-the-face-of-the-mystery-of-the-family/>.

²¹² Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, Apostolic Exhortation to the Episcopate, to the Clergy, and to the Faithful of the Whole Catholic Church on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, Vatican Website, accessed August 21, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html.

of the family in the modern world recognizing the profound changes in society and culture that effect family and marriage. The pope is clear there is a tie between the good of society and the good of the family.²¹³

Part One: Bright Spots and Shadows for the Family Today speaks to the “realities of daily existence” and the responsibility of the Church to listen and respond to the challenges facing married couples and families. The Pope highlights the Gospel as a source of truth to support these challenges and specifically calls out the following challenges: contraception, sterilization, abortion, divorce, the decline of parental authority, and a weakening of the marriage bond. In Part Two: The Plan of God for Marriage and the Family, focuses on love. Love is recognized as sacrificial and life-giving noting God’s love for the human person, love as a calling, and the special love created in the vocation of marriage and the family. The comparison of the love between a husband and wife and how it mirrors the love between Christ and the Church is emphasized. In Part Three: The Role of the Christian Family: Become What you Are, the pope speaks of the family as more than an “economic, biological, and sociological entity. The pope is clear the family is part of “God’s plan for creation and salvation.”²¹⁴ While family love is a special love, the pope addresses four callings within this love and vocation: “forming a community of persons; sharing a love which serves life; participating in the development of society; and sharing in the life and mission of the Church.”²¹⁵ These callings and responses demonstrate the family as a living declaration

²¹³ Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*.

²¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*.

²¹⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*.

and celebration of the Gospel. Part Four, titled: Pastoral Care of the Family, addresses the call for the family to grow through continuous conversion. This conversion is in response to the will of God and supported by the Church. The Church's responsibility is to support the family in their challenges while celebrating their growth through the sacraments, pastoral care, programs, education, and day-to-day interactions. The pope specifically addresses those Catholics who are in difficult marital and family situations such as "mixed marriages, trial marriages, divorce, separation, and domestic violence."²¹⁶ He states these Catholics require special attention and pastoral care as they are broken-hearted, rejected, and suffering. The Conclusion follows with a personal message from John Paul II to married couples and families committing the services of the Church to support marriage and families. The Pope provides the role model of marriage and family life as the Holy Family: "St. Joseph is the upright guardian of the family; Mary is the one entrusted with the Word made flesh; and Jesus is the child who perfectly does the will of the Father."²¹⁷ This letter is about love.

5. Pastoral Letter on Cohabitation Before Marriage

A pastoral letter is defined as an Official document created by a bishop addressed to either the clergy or to the diocese. A group of bishops may also generate pastoral letters for a territory under their domain. Pastoral letters address topics that impact the faith, practice, or worship of the faithful. These letters are often published during seasons within the Church such as Lent or Advent. Throughout the centuries, pastoral letters have served to represent the ordinary teaching authority of the Church. Pastoral letters are

²¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*.

²¹⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*.

often published in the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*.²¹⁸ The pastoral letter titled: *A Better Way: A Pastoral Letter to the People of God in the Province of Kansas Addressing Cohabitation before Marriage* by the Kansas Catholic Conference was written on June 4, 1998. This letter is intended to educate and influence a particular population. It acknowledges couple's cohabite before marriage and addresses perspectives on why couples make this choice and offers a "better way." It is largely educational and instructional noting couples often attempt to prepare for married life by cohabiting before they marry. A commonly held view by Catholics is that if they cohabite, they are in a better position to determine if they can commit to a lifetime together. While at one time, cohabitation was considered scandalous, a large portion of couples seeking marriage live together. In 1998, when this pastoral letter was written, between 30 and 40 per cent of couples seeking marriage in the U.S. were living together. While many couples view this as necessary to decrease the possibility of divorce, the Church does not agree it is moral or acceptable preparation for the sacred bond of marriage. In fact, the Church views it as a threat to a successful and happy marriage.

The intent of the pastoral letter was to encourage couples to reflect further on the meaning of a Christian marriage as a vocation, one that seeks a commitment of love expressed in the vows and the sacred bond established in the Sacrament of Marriage. It asked couples contemplating marriage not to live together before their marriage. It called all Catholics to support engaged couples and model a better way. The pastoral letter emphasized marriage and preparation as an investment in the future of the individual, the

²¹⁸ "Catholic Dictionary: Pastoral Letters," Catholic Culture, accessed August 20, 2022. <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=35448>.

couple and future children resulting from the union. Some of the reasons the Church believed couples cohabitate: 1. Testing period, 2. Financial benefits, 3. Convenience, 4. Sexual need, 5. Insecurity, 6. Fear of Commitment, 7. Escape, 8. Playing house, and 9. No fear of pregnancy. This data and information are balanced with their perspective of a “better way” which includes: 1. The vocation to love, 2. The gift of sexuality and the body, 3. Freedom and the virtue of chastity, 4. Secondary virginity, and 5. God’s way is the better way.²¹⁹

6. Pastoral Letter on Marriage and the Family

This pastoral letter on marriage and the family was written by the Most Reverend Harry J. Flynn, Archbishop Emeritus of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul, Minneapolis in February of 1998. As previously stated, pastoral letters are defined as: “official documents sent by a bishop to the clergy only or to all the faithful of a diocese. A group of bishops, of a region or of a whole country, may also issue pastoral letters for the entire territory under their jurisdiction.”²²⁰ Pastoral letters may deal with any subject affecting the faith, practice, or worship of the people. During the centuries they have become expressions of the ordinary teaching authority of the Church. The purpose of this pastoral letter, addressed to the Catholic faithful of the archdiocese, was intended to share ways to help women and men entering marriage: “to do so with knowledge, commitment, maturity, confidence, and joy.” The archbishop expressed a call for the faithful to “fulfill their baptismal vocation to transform the world according to the pattern of Christ”

²¹⁹ “A Better Way: A Pastoral Letter on Cohabitation Before Marriage,” Kansas Catholic Conference, June 4, 1998, <https://www.kofc.org/un/en/resources/cis/cis308.pdf>.

²²⁰ Catholic Dictionary: Pastoral Letters,” Catholic Culture.

through marriage and eventually family. The vocation of marriage provides a model and living out of “the love and fidelity of Jesus Christ for His people.” The crucial role that marriages plays in God’s plan for human happiness is emphasized. The Church has been consistent in their teaching that family is the “foundation of all human society and the irreplaceable institution for the education and formation of children.”²²¹

While the letter addresses some of the misunderstandings and contemporary points of view that are inconsistent with Church teachings such as broken vows, absence of fidelity, rejection of the gift of life, and divorce, it is not the purpose of the letter. Yet the archbishop takes the opportunity to address Catholic couples experiencing difficult marriages and the stress of a broken martial relationship. He provides words of comfort regarding pain and suffering while attempting to ensure they do not feel separated from the Church community if they are divorced. It’s intent and emphasis are to reflect how the Church can offer an effective marriage preparation process including processes and programs to help couples distinguish the call to holiness, the dignity of the sacrament of marriage and the life-long commitment. The letter clearly addresses the need for preparation which begins early in life as parents model behavior toward each other and the family. These early childhood experiences impact their attitudes and beliefs toward marriage and family. There is an expectation as children mature, they will be provided catechesis on marriage, human sexuality, the practice of virtue and the value of human life. This early foundation within the family is enhanced by Church teachings that

²²¹ Most Rev. Harry J. Flynn, “A Pastoral Letter on Marriage and the Family,” Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, February 8, 1998, <https://www.archspm.org/a-pastoral-letter-on-marriage-and-the-family/>.

eventually leads to more focused preparation as couples prepare for the sacrament of marriage.

7. Pastoral Letter for the Widowed, Separated and Divorced

The pastoral letter on widowed, separated, and divorced Catholics was written by the Most Reverend Joseph V. Sullivan, S.T.D., the Bishop of Baton Rouge in 1980.²²² A pastoral letter is defined as “Official documents sent by a bishop to the clergy only or to all the faithful of a diocese. A group of bishops, of a region or of a whole country, may also issue pastoral letters for the entire territory under their jurisdiction. Pastoral letters may deal with any subject affecting the faith, practice, or worship of the people.”²²³ This pastoral letter calls the Church to give witness and to embody the mercy of God in the lives of the faithful. The bishop shared mercy is necessary for a life embedded in faith. The Church is required to apply God’s mercy to the suffering of the human family. The letter addresses those members of the Church experiencing loneliness and abandonment, specifically, the widowed, the separated, the divorced and remarried. The bishop references Pope John Paul II’s encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*, calling it a "magna charta" on the mercy of God.²²⁴ He instructs the faithful to review the encyclical as a reminder they must always apply God's mercy to the sufferings of the human family, especially to those who suffer most: the widowed, the separated, the divorced and remarried. While he refers to these individuals as sinners, to which some may take

²²² Bishop Joseph V. Sullivan, “Pastoral Letter on Widowed, Separated and Divorced,” *Catholic Culture*. 2022, accessed August 10, 2022, <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=3042>.

²²³ Catholic Dictionary: Pastoral Letters,” Catholic Culture.

²²⁴ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical, *Dives In Misericordia*, Vatican Website, November 13, 1980, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html.

offense, he asks them to reflect on the image of the crucified Christ when ministering among them. He addresses his view on the commonalities among these groups yet recognizes each group has a different set of circumstances requiring effective ministries to represent their needs.

This pastoral letter is a good example of a bishop addressing a specific topic and expressing a “call” to the faithful. It is both a teaching moment and a call to reconcile justice and mercy. Faith is not intended as a stumbling block, yet there is often a need to hold more than one truth up at the same time. For example, for some of the faithful, the cross and Christ crucified are signs of contradiction. The individuals whose life experiences as widowed, separated, or those who are divorced and remarried must witness the mercy of God in this truth. It is not the Church’s intent for them to feel abandoned by God or the Church. Yet many feel this way and have disagreed with the bishop’s comment on the perception of ecclesiastical punishment vs. the application of basic law in these circumstances. Once again, the faithful are asked to hold up points of view that do not appear to reconcile. For example, this is a pastoral letter with a specific intent to address, welcome, and minister to those who are suffering yet the use of language and rules continue to create obstacles in the effective ministry of these groups.

What This Means and Why It’s Important

Despite decreases in the number of marriages, it remains a societal norm often connected to a spiritual dimension or a religious ceremony. While marriage remains popular with couples, despite variances by generation, the meaning of marriage and relationships has changed considerably during the past few decades. Yet the Catholic

Church has remained committed to their views on marriage holding it in such high regard that once a marital bond is created in the sacrament of marriage, it can never be broken and therefore, divorce is not recognized. Since no relationship or marriage is perfect and some may even become harmful to the spouse and family, the Church's rigidity continues to cause challenges in contemporary society and within the Church. Although Church documents attempt to educate, affirm, advocate, and support the Church's position on marriage and family, the written and verbal communication is primarily one-sided. It advises the faithful; it is not a dialogue. Despite well-intended marriage preparation facilitated by the Church, it typically takes place after a couple is engaged and while wedding plans are well underway. While data is not accessible on how many couples fail marriage preparation, it appears that most couples pass the test and proceed to their wedding day.

While some of the pastoral letters and recent communication by Pope Francis attempt to approach communication with more love and acceptance, it remains one-sided. The Church can benefit from conversation and dialogue with the faithful to understand both the joy marriage can bring and the grief that emerges when a relationship ends. The Church and the faithful need each other in the journey to find the joy in any new beginning and in the journey of healing where transformative suffering occurs. Catholics are a people of faith who fall in love with the human and with the divine. Catholics choose to be married in Church, even if they don't regularly attend Mass. They are called and led to be married in community with a divine presence. Catholics begin relationships with commitment and enter a life-long bond supported by not only by family and friends

but by a faith community and God. There is an acknowledgement of human flaws and even though there may be full commitment to the marital bond with pure intentions, the marriage may fail. Since so much love exists in a new relationship, it becomes extremely painful if the marriage fails. It's corresponding loss and the cycle of grief is experienced in the death of a relationship and the death of a way of life. We are not turning away from God; we are turning toward God in this process. This process allows us to reflect, embrace, and transform our experience. It is an opportunity for the individual, the Church, and the community to embrace each other in their best and worst moments. Catholics are a people of faith who look to each other to express and live a life that serves each other with mercy, forgiveness, and justice. This is what living the Catholic faith is all about. This is what makes us Catholic.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

And Now, What?

And now, what? At the beginning of my journey, I shared this question has always served to ground me in reality. In the past, it has typically been posed to me in response to a newly found resolution or revelation regarding a long-held belief or previously unanswered question. Yet as I journeyed through this process, I was reminded of a teaching by one of my mentors, Pema Chodron: “the truth is that things don’t really get resolved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It’s just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.”²²⁵ Finding joy in a new beginning doesn’t necessarily mean that all things will be resolved yet they can come together, come together in love, come together in understanding, come together in dialogue, and come together in support. They can also fall apart; they can fall apart in pain, fall apart in suffering, and fall apart in grief. Yet if we can create room for all of this to happen, room in the annulment process, together, there can also be healing and restoration.

Proposed Action Plan: Connecting Vision and Context

The Catholic annulment process can help participants connect the human and divine story by connecting the vision and context of the Catholic faith with the Catholic way of life. It will allow participants to re-enter their faith story by bringing to life an

²²⁵ Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997).

ancient transactional process and transforming it as a way to foster and engage in healing and restoration. This initiative will seek to transform the suffering experienced by Catholic women when a marriage covenant ends. It will be accomplished through a research-based project to re-imagine the Catholic annulment process moving it from a transactional process to a human process addressing the needs of the faithful who suffer from the pain and grief of a broken relationship.

This project will seek out a group of 8-10 women to build trust, develop authentic relationships and support each other as they journey together through the process of healing, forgiveness, closure and a new beginning. These small groups will consist of 8-10 Catholic women who were married in the Catholic Church yet are now divorced. A goal of the small group will be to provide support to practicing Catholic women who are members of a parish community yet also provide the opportunity to invite women who no longer actively practice Catholicism, women who are no longer members of a parish community or who no longer attend Mass. There will be an open invitation to join the group. Tribunal staff, clergy, parish members, family and friends will extend personal invitations. Curated social media and parish and diocesan print media will also be used to invite women to participate and create an awareness to join the small group.

The groups will be structured using the approach defined in the Bridges Transition Model created by William Bridges, published in his 1991 book: *Managing Transitions*.²²⁶ This simple yet powerful model has been used extensively for the past 30

²²⁶ William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003).

years to lead people through change and transition. The approach highlights three stages of transition people experience when change occurs: 1) endings; 2) the neutral zone; and 3) new beginnings. This three-part structure will help shape the process to engage women in the context of what has happened, where they are in the process and how they can move forward. The small group journey through the annulment process will take twelve months, with participants meeting weekly for approximately one hour. The first meeting will be scheduled for 2-3 hours so that members can meet each other, share their stories, and share why they are considering the annulment process. The small group work will follow the structure of the stages of transition from the Bridges Model aligned with the annulment process. Much like the stages of death and dying, these stages are not simply sequential or linear.

Three Stages: Endings, Neutral Zone, and New Beginnings

Stage 1: Endings. The first stage is about letting go. This includes a reflection on what's been lost and how to manage the loss. Individuals will decide what will be left behind and what will be kept. The first three months of weekly meetings will be dedicated to endings and the following topics:

1. What it means to be Catholic: the Catholic way of life
2. What it means when a marriage ends: acknowledge and begin to process
3. The cycle of grief: understand and acknowledge various stages
4. The current narrative: identify and share
5. What is an annulment: connection to tradition, theology, scripture, and experience
6. New perspective on annulment: transaction to spiritual journey

7. Prepare to file for an annulment (if individual chooses)

Stage 2: Neutral Zone. The second stage focuses on endings and letting go. This is the in-between time and space when the old is gone yet the new is not fully realized. It is a time of confusion and distress yet the foundation for new beginnings. The next three months of weekly meetings focus on these topics:

1. Individual sessions: time to process individually
2. The cycle of grief: continue to share experiences and stages
3. Biblical and theological imagery: identify and share to support the healing process
4. What is transformative suffering: understanding the model of Jesus
5. Emerging narratives: reflect and share changes in stories and experience
6. Connection to Community: why it's important
7. Support and advocacy for next steps in annulment process (if applicable)

Individuals may require more time to reflect on endings and letting go before moving to new beginnings. 1:1 individual check ins will explore where the individual is in the process.

Stage 3: New Beginnings. The third stage is marked by a renewed sense of purpose and relationships with self, others, and God. New narratives beget an expression of fresh identity and a release of energy in a new direction. This stage will occur during the next six-month period and will be aligned with the final stages of the annulment process. Individuals may require more time and space in the neutral zone before moving forward to new beginnings. Stage 3 will be devoted to:

1. New narratives: how to create them

2. Biblical and theological imagery: further reflection and exploration to support new narratives
3. Forgiveness and reconciliation: what does it mean to forgive and reconcile
4. Support of community and connection: parish life and ministry
5. Prayer life and spiritual practices: align with sacraments
6. Self-Care: why its important, session facilitated by community experts
7. Final day-long retreat, new beginnings
8. Continue individual sessions to support those seeking annulment

As a leader in my community, my intention is to be the spark for transformative change in my tradition by reimagining and bringing to life existing rituals and processes with a new perspective. It is both a privilege and responsibility to hold true to the tradition while ensuring relevance in today's world. I envision the opportunity to re-imagine the Roman Catholic Annulment process to lead a ministry that will serve women and the larger community. This project will provide women with the opportunity for deeper reflection, awareness, and reconciliation. This orientation and grounding will provide women with a deeper understanding of a process within their tradition that helps support movement through the cycles of grief by deep reflection, awareness, reconciliation, and new beginnings. Ultimately, it is intended to help women view and experience the annulment process as a journey toward wholeness in which healing and restoration lead to new relationships with self, the human community, and God.

Evaluation

This project will take place during a one-year period. My evaluation of this project: *Finding Joy in a New Beginning: A Journey of Healing and Restoration in the Catholic Annulment Process* will be based primarily on information gathered during individual and group sessions with members at the beginning of the project as they enter the journey and at the end of the project as they complete the annulment process. I have developed a series of questions to ask during both sessions to compare the data and determine if change and transition has occurred. I will initiate self-assessments with group members that include topics that will assist me in assessing whether the gap between suffering and healing has been reduced.

Questions for individual sessions with group members at 1st month and 12th month:

1. What is your understanding of the Catholic way of life?
2. How have you lived out your tradition?
3. What is important to you to in your relationship with self, others, and God?
4. What are your perceptions of the annulment process?
5. Has your narrative changed? If so, how has it changed and what is the impact? If not, why?
6. How are you experiencing grief and transition?
7. Are you suffering? How is it demonstrated and lived out?
8. Do you actively participate in your parish community?
9. Do you experience joy? How is this demonstrated?

Topics for self-assessments by small group members:

1. Covenantal bond
2. Narratives
3. Suffering
4. Forgiveness and reconciliation
5. Healing and restoration
6. Wholeness
7. Joy

This information gained in the in-person sessions and self-assessments will be combined with the following data:

- a. Decrease in number of participants in the small group. Did members complete the entire 12 months?
- b. Waiting list for the program.
- c. Increase in active participation in parish community – by small group members?
- d. Referrals from Tribunal office.
- e. Referrals from attorneys.
- f. The number of members who participated in the retreats.
- g. The number of members who wish to continue with the small group and/or lead future groups?

The following is an outline of the components of the program.

Outline

- I. Introduction

II. The Problem and Context: Catholic Women Enter into a Different Cycle of Grief

When a Marriage Ends

- a. History and origins of marriage in Catholic tradition
- b. Covenantal relationship established in Catholic marriage
- c. Impact of divorce and broken covenant
- d. Multiple layers of grief: separation from individual, community, and God
- e. Cycle of grief and suffering
- f. Biblical meaning of suffering
- g. Stages of transition

III. The Ideal:

- a. Transformed suffering in the Catholic tradition
- b. Create new narratives through use of biblical imagery and stories
- c. Forgiveness and reconciliation
- d. Healing and restoration
- e. New beginnings and relationships with individuals, community, and God

IV. Catholic Annulment Process as a way to experience healing and restoration.

- a. History of Catholic annulment and connection to tradition, theology, scripture, and experience
- b. Reimagining the annulment process as a journey of healing and restoration.
- c. Support and advocacy for Catholic women
- d. The gift of faith and community

V. Evaluation

We move through the cycle of grief by the grace of God while reimagining the narratives and images to support us in the healing process. The evaluation of the project will include a summary of the process and learnings, the limitations of the project, and what's next.

Final Insights and Future Opportunities

During the course of study, areas of exploration emerged beyond the original focus and intent of this project and ministry. These areas are worthy of further consideration regarding the future growth and expansion of this project. These areas of concentration include:

- Cultural diversity: Explore the differences, similarities, opportunities, and challenges within diverse cultures as it relates to the female experience of marriage and divorce.
- Ecumenical: Explore opportunities for interpretation in ecumenical settings and application beyond Catholicism with a specific intent to apply in non-Catholic settings.
- Social death: Deeper exploration into the social death aspect of divorce experienced as a death of a way of life. The end of a marriage is often experienced as a cycle of grief similar to the cycle of grief at end-of-life.
- Dialogue with the Church: Opportunity to open a two-way conversation focused on healing and reconciliation by increasing awareness, alleviating tension, and gaining clarity in the broader faith community through use of scripture, experience, and tradition.

Finding joy in a new beginning in the Roman Catholic annulment process is an experience of faith. The Catholic faith and a Catholic way of life includes a journey as an individual, in community with others and in relationship with God. It is a particular way of being human, and as a people, our history and sacramental perspective makes life and reality sacred. This sacramental perspective sees God in all things; everything is capable of embodying and expressing the divine. All seven sacraments are signs of grace, and the sacrament of marriage supports the life and mission of the Church. While an annulment is not a sacrament, the process can provide an opening and space for signs of grace and the saving presence of God. Despite the fact that marriages fail, we can remain true to our faith tradition and way of life. Although the ending of a marriage is often met with grief and loss, it can also be met with hope and joy through transformed suffering. We can find God's saving presence in an ancient process while honoring our tradition, remaining faithful, and moving toward a new beginning.

Appendices

Appendix I: Provisional Number of Marriages and Marriage rates:

United States, 2000-2020

Marriages Population Rate per 1,000 total population

Year	Marriages	Population	Rate per 1,000 Total Population
2020	1,676,911	329,484,123	5.1
2019	2,015,603	328,239,523	6.1
2018	2,132,853	327,167,434	6.5
2017	2,236,496	325,719,178	6.9
2016	2,251,411	323,127,513	7.0
2015	2,221,579	321,418,820	6.9
2014 ²²⁷	2,140,272	308,759,713	6.9
2013 ²²⁸	2,081,301	306,136,672	6.8
2012	2,131,000	313,914,040	6.8
2011	2,118,000	311,591,917	6.8
2010	2,096,000	308,745,538	6.8
2009	2,080,000	306,771,529	6.8
2008	2,157,000	304,093,966	7.1
2007	2,197,000	301,231,207	7.3
2006 ²²⁹	2,193,000	294,077,247	7.5
2005	2,249,000	295,516,599	7.6
2004	2,279,000	292,805,298	7.8
2003	2,245,000	290,107,933	7.7
2002	2,290,000	287,625,193	8.0
2001	2,326,000	284,968,955	8.2
2000	2,315,000	281,421,906	8.2

Note: Number and rate for 2016 has been revised due to revised figures for Illinois. Rates for 2001-2009 have been intercensal population estimates from 2000 and 2010 censuses.

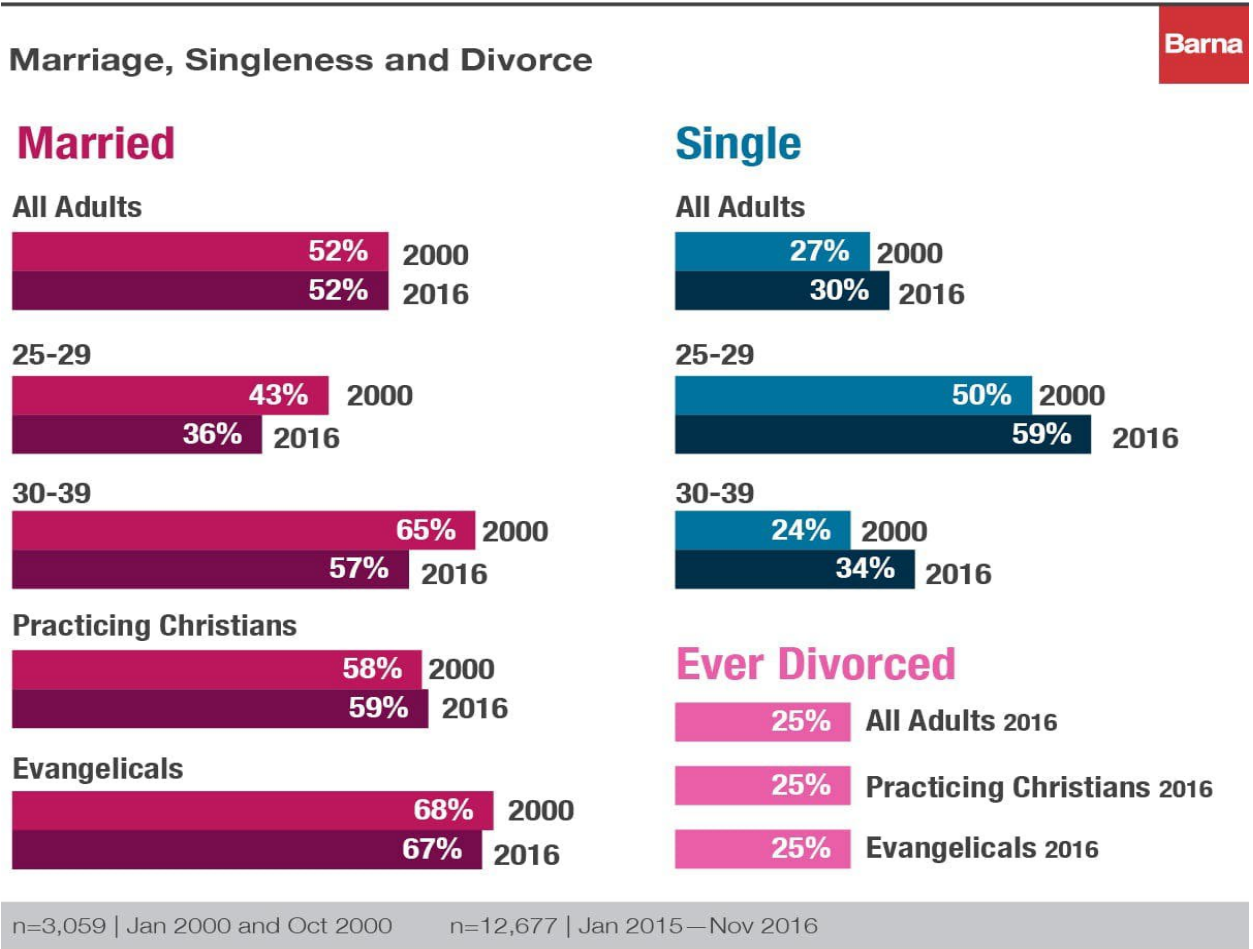
Source: CDC/NCHS National Vital Statistics System.

²²⁷ Excludes data for Georgia.

²²⁸ Excludes data for Georgia.

²²⁹ Excludes data for Louisiana.

Appendix II: Marriage, Singleness and Divorce²³⁰



²³⁰ “The Trends Defining Romance Today,” Barna. February, 9, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/trends-redefining-romance-today/>.

Appendix III: The Authority of the Church Documents

The following is an abbreviated glossary of the most common types of documents issued by the Holy See and the terms associated with them.²³¹

Apostolic constitutions (*apostolicae constitutiones*): solemn, formal documents on matters of the highest consequence concerning doctrinal or disciplinary matters, issued by the pope in his own name. They are published as either universal or a particular law of the Church. Examples include Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*; and the Constitution on the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Apostolic exhortation (*apostolica exhortatio*): a papal reflection on a particular topic that does not contain dogmatic definitions or policy directives, addressed to bishops, clergy and all the faithful of the entire Catholic Church. Apostolic exhortations are not legislative documents. Examples include: *Familiaris Consortio*, on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World.

Apostolic letter (*apostolica epistola*): a formal papal teaching document, not used for dogmatic definitions of doctrine, but to give counsel to the Church on points of doctrine that require deeper explanation in the light of particular circumstances or situations in various parts of the world.

Declaration (*declamatio*): may be a simple statement of the law, which must be interpreted according to the existing law; or an authoritative declaration that is retroactive and does not require further promulgation; or an extensive declaration,

²³¹ Helen Hull Hitchcock, "The Authority of Church Documents," *Ardoremus*, September 15, 2002, <https://ardoremus.org/2002/09/the-authority-of-church-documents/>.

which modifies the law, is not retroactive and must be promulgated according to the law.

Decree (*decretum*): a statement involving Church law, precepts, or judicial decisions on a specific matter. It is an ordinance given by one having the power of jurisdiction (such as a bishop within his particular diocese, the head of an office of the Roman Curia, or the pope), acting administratively to promote compliance with the law. A decree announces that a given document or legislative text is in effect.

Encyclical (*encyclica epistola*, literally, “circular letter”): a formal apostolic letter issued by the pope usually addressed to the bishops, clergy and faithful of the entire Church. An example includes: *Humanae vitae*, concerning the Church’s teaching on birth control issued in 1968 by Pope Paul VI.

Instruction (*instructio*): explains or amplifies a document that has legislative force, such as apostolic constitutions, and states how its precepts are to be applied. Examples include: *Liturgiam authenticam*, on liturgical translation, an Instruction on the correct implementation of the Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

Institutio: instituted arrangement or regular method, rules (as in *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani*).

Motu proprio (literally, by one’s own initiative): a legislative document or decree issued by the pope on his own initiative, not in response to a request.

Examples include: *Apostolos Suos* and *Misericordia Dei*.

Promulgation (*promulgatio*): the process whereby the lawmaker communicates the law to those to whom the law has been given. The official effective date on which a document is promulgated may or may not coincide with the date in which a document is actually published.

Recognitio: confirms the review of documents that are submitted by a conference of bishops to the relevant office (dicastery) of the Holy See. *Recognitio* is required before the provisions of documents that modify universal law may come into effect. *Recognitio* thus signals acceptance of a document that may have legislative force.

Bibliography

- Altieri, Christopher R. "The JP II Institute Has Been Plunged into an Identity Crisis." *Catholic Herald*, August 1, 2019. <https://catholicherald.co.uk/the-jpii-institute-has-been-plunged-into-an-identity-crisis/>.
- American Psychological Association. "Marriage and Divorce." Accessed November 1, 2020. <https://www.apa.org/topics/divorce>.
- Anderson, Marc and Julie. "Annulment Process Provides Healing, Hope and Restoration." *The Leaven*, July 17, 2020. <http://theleaven.org/annulment-process-provides-healing-hope-and-restoration/>.
- "Annulments: A Door to Healing." *Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland*, 2015. <https://old.portlanddiocese.org/content/annulments-door-healing>.
- Barna. "The Trends Redefining Romance Today." Accessed September 20, 2022. <https://www.barna.com/research/trends-redefining-romance-today/>.
- Barroso, Amanda, Kim Parker and Jesse Bennett. "As Millennials Near 40, They're Approaching Family Life Differently than Previous Generations." Pew Research Center, May 27, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/27/as-millennials-near-40-theyre-approaching-family-life-differently-than-previous-generations/>.
- BeginningCatholic.com. "Catholic Annulment, Was a Marriage Valid?" Accessed March 2, 2021. <http://www.beginningcatholic.com/catholic-annulment>.
- Bridges, William, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003.
- Bridges, William, *The Way of Transitions*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2001.
- Britannica. "Holy See: Roman Catholic Government." Accessed September 2, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Holy-See>.
- Britannica. "Gratian Italian Scholar." Accessed January 2, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gratian-Italian-scholar>.
- Brown, Susan. "Generations X, Y, Z and Gray Divorce." *Beyond the First Dance*, October 19, 2022. <https://beyondthefirstdance.com/blog/f/generations-x-y-z-and-gray-divorce>.

Burke, L. J. “7 Stages of Grief During and After Divorce.” *DivorceMag.com*, August 19, 2020. <https://www.divorcemag.com/articles/stages-of-grief-during-and-after-divorce>.

Catechism of the Catholic Church. 2nd ed. Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2012.

Catholic Culture. “Catechism of the Catholic Church. VI. The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.” Accessed August 29, 2022. https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/catechism/cat_view.cfm?recnum=4663.

Catholic Culture. “Catholic Dictionary: Pastoral Letters.” <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=35448>.

Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. “Frequently Requested Church Statistics. US Data Over Time: Sacraments and Rites.” Accessed September 10, 2022. <https://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Divorce Rates by State: 1990, 1995, and 1999-2018. August 19, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/state-divorce-rates-90-95-99-18.pdf>.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Provisional Number of Marriages and Marriage Rates in the United States, 2000-2018, 2002-2020.” Accessed August 22, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/national-marriage-divorce-rates-00-20.pdf>.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: National Center for Health Statistics. “Marriage and Divorce.” Accessed August 22, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/marriage-divorce.htm>.

Chodron, Pema. *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997.

Choosing Therapy. “The Stages of Grief in a Divorce.” Last Modified January 30, 2023. <https://www.choosingtherapy.com/stages-of-grief-divorce/>.

Coontz, Marriage, *A History, How Love Conquered Marriage*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005.

Daw, Emily. “What is Sacramental Theology?” *Practical Adult Insights*, August 25, 2022. <https://www.practicaladultinsights.com/what-is-sacramental-theology.htm>.

- Duba, Jill and Richard Ponton. "Catholic Annulment, an Opportunity for Healing and Growing: Providing Support in Counseling." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 31.3 (2012): 242-52.
- Duffy, Lisa and Vince Frese. *Divorced. Catholic. Now What?* Alpharetta: Journey of Hope Publications, 2011.
- Duffy, Lisa. *Mending the Heart: A Catholic Annulment Companion*. Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2018.
- Encyclopedia.com. "Sacramental Theology." Accessed August 21, 2021.
<https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/sacramental-theology>.
- Everitt, Lauren. "Ten Key Moments in the History of Marriage." *BBC News Magazine*, March 14, 2012. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17351133>.
- Fisher, Simcha. "The Painful, Grace-filled and Hopefully Healing Process of Seeking an Annulment." *America Magazine*, December 16, 2021.
<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/12/16/catholic-annulment-process-241995>.
- Flynn, Rev. Harry J. "A Pastoral Letter on Marriage and the Family." *The Catholic Spirit*, February 8, 1998. <https://www.archspm.org/a-pastoral-letter-on-marriage-and-the-family/>.
- Funmi, Dorcas. "New JPPII Institute President My Stance on Humanae Vitae was Misinterpreted." *TD Pel Media*, October 11, 2021. <https://tdpelmedia.com/new-jpii-institute-president-my-stance-on-humanae-vitae-was-misinterpreted>.
- Geiger, A. W. and Gretchen Livingston. "Eight Facts About Love and Marriage in America." *Pew Research Center*, February 13, 2019.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/13/8-facts-about-love-and-marriage/>.
- Giovanni, Paolo II. "Philippe Bordeyne. the Church Must Be More Humble in the Face of the Mystery of the Family." *Pontificio Istituto Teologico Matrimonio e Famiglia*, August 21, 2022. <https://www.istitutogp2.it/wp/2021/09/23/philippe-bordeyne-the-church-must-be-more-humble-in-the-face-of-the-mystery-of-the-family/>.
- Goodstein, Laurie. "So the Marriage Was Never Actually Valid." *The Washington Post*, April 20, 1997. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1997/04/20/so-the-marriage-was-never-actually-valid/05227626-2a18-4ae8-a1d7-76fd0f00675c/>.

Green, Emma. "The Vatican's New Policy on Annulments: The First Hint of Shake Ups to Come." *The Atlantic*, September 8, 2015.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/the-vaticans-new-policy-on-annulments-the-first-hint-of-shake-ups-to-come/404182/>.

Hall, Julie H. and Frank Fincham. "Self-forgiveness: The Stepchild of Forgiveness Research." *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 24, No. 5, (2005).

<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.452.7231&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

Harris, Darcy L., ed. *Counting Our Losses: Reflecting on Change, Loss, and Transition in Everyday Life*. New York: Taylor and Francis Group LLC, 2011.

Hitchcock, Helen Hull. "The Authority of Church Documents." *Ardoremus*, September 15, 2002. <https://adoremus.org/2002/09/the-authority-of-church-documents/>.

Ingraham, Christopher. "Divorce is Actually on the Rise and It's the Baby Boomers' Fault." *Washington Post*, March 27, 2014.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/03/27/divorce-is-actually-on-the-rise-and-its-the-baby-boomers-fault/>.

IBISWorld: Where Knowledge is Power. "Business Environment Profiles-United States: Marriage Rate." May 10, 2022. <https://www.ibisworld.com/us/bed/marriage-rate/29/>.

Kansas Catholic Conference. "A Better Way: A Pastoral Letter on Cohabitation Before Marriage." June 4, 1998. <https://www.kofc.org/un/en/resources/cis/cis308.pdf>.

Keane James T. "Explainer: What is an Annulment? (And Why Does Pope Francis Want to Make it Easier to Get One?)." *America Magazine*, February 7, 2021.

<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/05/13/explainer-annulment-pope-francis-marriage-239936>.

Kołodziej-Zaleska, Anna and Hanna Przybyła-Basista. "Psychological well-being of individuals after divorce: the role of social support." *Personality Psychology*. (2016) nr 4, s. 206-216, doi 10.5114/CIPP.2016.62940.

Krumrei-Mancuso, Annette Mahoney, and Kenneth I. Pargament. "Divorce and the Divine: The Role of Spirituality in Adjustment to Divorce" (2009). Pepperdine University. Faculty Open Access Publications, Paper 162.

https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/faculty_pubs/162.

Kubler-Ross M.D., Elisabeth. *On Death and Dying*. New York: Scribner, 1969.

- Lawler, Mary K. "Transitioning Through Divorce: Grieving the Lost Marriage," *OSU Extension*, March 17, 2017. <https://extension.okstate.edu/fact-sheets/transitioning-through-divorce-grieving-the-lost-marriage.html>.
- Lipka, Michael. "Most Catholic Hope for Change in Church Rule on Divorce, Communion." *Pew Research Center*, September 20, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/26/most-u-s-catholics-hope-for-change-in-church-rule-on-divorce-communion/>.
- Lipka, Michael. "Relatively Few U.S. Catholics Skipped Annulment Because of Cost or Complications." *Pew Research Center*, September 9, 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/09/relatively-few-u-s-catholics-skipped-annulment-because-of-cost-or-complications/>.
- Livingston, Gretchen. "They're Waiting Longer, but U.S. Women Today More Likely to Have children Than a Decade Ago." *Pew Research Center*, January 18, 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/01/18/theyre-waiting-longer-but-u-s-women-today-more-likely-to-have-children-than-a-decade-ago/>.
- Luscombe, Brenda, "The Divorce Rate Is Dropping: That May Not Actually Be Good News." *Time Magazine*, November 26, 2018. <https://time.com/5434949/divorce-rate-children-marriage-benefits/>.
- Marino, Francesca A. "Divorce rate in the U.S.: Geographic variation, 2021." *Family Profiles, FP-22-26*, Bowling Green, OH: National Center for Family & Marriage Research, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.25035/ncfmr/fp-22-26>.
- McBrien, Richard P. *Catholicism*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994.
- Miller, Leila. "Eight Things You Have to Know About the Church's teaching on Divorce." *Catholic Answers*, March 24, 2017. <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/eight-things-you-have-to-know-about-the-churchs-teaching-on-divorce>.
- Morin, Rich. "Is Divorce Contagious?" *Pew Center Research*. September 20, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/10/21/is-divorce-contagious/>.
- Naylor, William. "Female Perception of the Annulment of Marriage in the Catholic Church." Doctorate, University of Derby (United Kingdom), 2010. Ann Arbor: ProQuest.
- New Advent. "Divorce." Accessed August 17, 2022. <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05054c.htm>.

- Ohlheiser, Abby. "The Vast Majority of U.S. Catholics who have Left the Church Can't Imagine Returning." *The Washington Post*, September 2, 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/09/02/the-vast-majority-of-u-s-catholics-who-have-left-the-church-cant-imagine-returning-study-says/>.
- Ohlheiser, Abby, Michelle Boorstein, and Sarah Pulliam Bailey. "Pope Francis is Reforming the Catholic Church's Marriage Annulment Process." *The Washington Post*, September 8, 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/09/08/pope-francis-is-reforming-the-catholic-churchs-marriage-annulment-process/>.
- Ortlund, Ray. *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2016.
- Parker, Kim and Renee Stepler. "As U.S. Marriage Rate Hovers at 50%, Education Gap in Marital Status Widens." *Pew Research Center*. September 17, 2017. , <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/14/as-u-s-marriage-rate-hovers-at-50-education-gap-in-marital-status-widens/>.
- Pecknold, C.C. "Defending the Pope, Defending Marriage." *The National Review*, June 6, 2016. <https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/06/pope-francis-marriage-comments-are-great-majority-sacramental-marriages-invalid/>.
- Pelley, Virginia. "What is the Divorce Rate in America?" *Fatherly*, July 4, 2022. <https://www.fatherly.com/love-money/what-is-divorce-rate-america/>.
- Pew Research Center. "U.S. Catholics Open to Non-Traditional Families." September 2, 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/09/02/u-s-catholics-open-to-non-traditional-families/>.
- Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia: On Love in the Family*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2016.
- Pope Francis. Summa Familiae Cura, Instituting the Pontifical John Paul II Theological Institute for Matrimonial and Family Science (Apostolic Letter Issued Motu Proprio). The Holy See. Accessed August 21, 2022. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio_20170908_summa-familiae-cura.html.
- Pope John Paul II. Summa Familiae Cura (Apostolic Letter). The Holy See. Accessed August 21, 2022. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio_20170908_summa-familiae-cura.html.

Pope John Paul II. *Familiaris Consortio* (Apostolic Exhortation to the Episcopate, to the Clergy, and to the Faithful of the Whole Catholic Church on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World). The Holy See. Accessed August 21, 2022. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html.

Pope John Paul II. *Dives In Misericordia* (Encyclical). The Holy See. November 13, 1980. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html.

Porrey LPC, NCC, Melissa. “Working Through Grief after Divorce.” *Verywell Health*, November 29, 2021. <https://www.verywellhealth.com/divorce-grief-5208157#citation-4>.

Rhoades, Bishop Kevin C. “The Meaning and Value of Suffering.” *Today’s Catholic*, November 8, 2017. <https://todayscatholic.org/meaning-value-suffering/>.

Rowland, Susan K. “Seven Things Catholics Should Know About Divorce.” *St. Anthony Messenger*, June, 2017. <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/st-anthony-messenger/seven-things-catholics-should-know-about-divorce>.

Rupp, Joyce. *Boundless Compassion: Creating a Way of Life*. Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2018.

Second Vatican Council. “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, October 4, 1963.” In *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1975.

Shuster, Jim. “Why Forgiveness is Not the Same as Reconciliation.” *Catholic Revival Ministries*, October 21, 2016. <https://www.catholicrevivalministries.com/blog/forgivenessandreconciliation>.

Skojec, Steve. “A Legacy Co-opted: What Really Lies Behind Changes to John Paul II Institute?” *One Peter Five: Rebuilding Catholic Culture. Restoring Catholic Tradition*, September 19, 2017. <https://onepeterfive.com/a-legacy-co-opted-what-really-lies-behind-changes-to-john-paul-ii-institute/>.

Stepler, Renee. “Let by Baby Boomers, Divorce Rates Climb for America’s 50+ Population.” *Pew Research Center*, March 9, 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/09/led-by-baby-boomers-divorce-rates-climb-for-americas-50-population/>.

- Sullivan, Bishop Joseph V. "Pastoral Letter on Widowed, Separated and Divorced," *Catholic Culture*, 2022.
<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=3042>.
- Tesler, Pauline H. and Peggy Thompsom, Ph.D. *Collaborative Divorce: The Revolutionary New Way to Restructure Your Family, Resolve Legal Issues, and Move on with Your Life*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006.
- "The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp. Chapter 5. The Duties of Husbands and Wives." New Advent. Accessed November 24, 2022.
<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0110.htm>.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. "Annulment." Accessed January 23, 2023.
<https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/annulment#tab--what-is-an-annulment>.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. "Four your Marriage: Annulments (Declarations of Nullity)." Accessed August 14, 2022.
<https://www.foryourmarriage.org/annulments/>.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. "Between Man and Woman: Questions and Answers About Marriage and Same-Sex Unions." August 28, 2022.
<http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/matrimony/index>.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. "Marriage and Family Life Ministries: Amoris laetitia Archives." Accessed August 22, 2021.
<https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/amoris-laetitia-archives#tab--what-is-an-apostolic-exhortation>.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. "Marriage and Family Life Ministries: Annulments." Accessed August 19, 2022. <https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/annulment>.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. "Marriage and Family Life Ministries: Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan." November 2009.
<https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/marriage-love-and-life-divine-plan>.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. "Matrimony." August 28, 2020.
<http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/matrimony/index>.

- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. "Penance: Called to Right Relationship, Called to Heal and Restore." *We are Salt and Light*, 2019.
<https://wearesaltandlight.org/pray-together/penance-reconciled-right-relationship-called-heal-and-restore>.
- United States Census Bureau. "U.S. Marriage and Divorce Rates by State 2008 & 2018." Accessed September 22, 2022.
<https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/marriage-divorce-rates-by-state.html>.
- University of Dayton. "All About Mary: Magisterial Documents Amoris Laetitia." March 19, 2106. <https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/m/magisterial-documents-amoris-laetitia.php>.
- Vanier, Jean. *Jean Vanier: Essential Writings*, edited by Carolyn Whitney-Brown. New York: Orbis Books, 2008.
- Vitelli, PhD, Romeo. "Life After Divorce: Is Divorce Always Going to Have a Negative Impact on the People Involved?" *Psychology Today*, July 13, 2015.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/media-spotlight/201507/life-after-divorce>.
- Wang, Wendy and Kim Parker. "Chapter 1: Public Views on Marriage." Pew Research Center, September 24, 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2014/09/24/chapter-1-public-views-on-marriage/>.
- Westrick-Payne, K. K., Manning, W. D. "Marriage, divorce, and the COVID-19 Pandemic in the U.S.," *Family Profiles, FP-22-12*. Bowling Green, OH: National Center for Family & Marriage Research, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.25035/ncfmr/fp-22-12>.
- Wilkinson and Finkbeiner, "Divorce statistics: Over 115 Studies, Facts and Rates for 2022." Accessed September 10, 2022. <https://www.wf-lawyers.com/divorce-statistics-and-facts/>.
- Wooden, Cindy. "By the Numbers: Statistics Illustrate Progress in Tribunal Reforms." *National Catholic Reporter*, September 28, 2020.
<https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/numbers-statistics-illustrate-progress-tribunal-reforms>.
- "48 Divorce Statistics Including Divorce Rate, Race, & Marriage Length" *It's Over Easy*, April 19, 2021. <https://www.itsovereasy.com/insights/divorce-statistics>.

