

## SEVEN STEPS TO THE CONVALIDATION OF YOUR MARRIAGE

**Being married** in the eyes of the Church involves more than just paperwork. The government sees marriage as a legal contract that can be easily broken. In contrast, the Church views marriage as a sacrament instituted by God, a permanent covenant between husband and wife.

Catholics who want their marriage recognized as this permanent and sacramental covenant should begin the convalidation process by making an appointment with their parish priest.

Although convalidations are handled differently from diocese to diocese, the Church's Code of Canon Law governs the main guidelines. **There are basically seven steps involved.**

**1. First,** all Catholic spouses must produce new copies of their certificates of baptism. These can be obtained by requesting a copy of the baptismal record from the parish where the person was baptized, indicating the name of the individual (as well as the names of the parents), date of birth and approximate baptismal date. This usually takes a few days.

**2. It may be necessary** to seek an annulment (or declaration of nullity) from any previous marriages, if the former spouse is not deceased. A favorable decision is needed before a convalidation ceremony can be scheduled. The priest, or a delegate, will help the petitioner with this process.

There is a shorter form for any Catholic who was **not married** by a Catholic Priest/Deacon or with the Bishop's permission his Delegate (usually a Minister of another church). A formal annulment is usually not required in this case. The diocesan tribunal ordinarily processes that application in a few days and returns to the petitioner a declaration of nullity based on what is called a "lack of canonical form." After obtaining an annulment, the Catholic is now free to have the Church convalidate a legal marriage which has already taken place.

**3. This next step** is a difficult one. Couples who approach the Church for convalidation are requested to abstain from sexual union until after the official convalidation ceremony. Until a marriage is deemed sacramentally valid, Catholics who marry outside the Church are considered to be living in a sinful condition and the Church wishes to shield her members from further sin. The couple may remain together but should refrain from conjugal acts, relying on their faith to strengthen their resolve in this discipline. Why does the Church insist on such stringency? Paul states in the latter part of Ephesians 5, "The two shall become one flesh. This is a profound mystery, but I am talking about Christ and the Church." Paul reiterates this truth in I Corinthians 6:16b-17: "The two will become one flesh. And he who unites himself to the Lord is one with Him in spirit." From these passages of scripture, it is clear that God intended Christian marriage to mirror the relationship of faithful love which believers share with Christ. According to the Church, then, marriage is much more than just mutual consent.

It is a grace-filled union that parallels the kinship of love between God and His people, but only within the confines of a truly sacramental marriage.

**4. Canon law** also requires some kind of preparation for entering the sacrament of marriage. Our diocese has established the guidelines for this preparation. This can range from attending a short convalidation workshop and/or a pre-marriage day or private counseling sessions. This is in addition to completing all the necessary paperwork such as marriage investigation, inquiry form, or premarital documents.

**5. The next step** is to attend the sacrament of reconciliation to confess and repent. Many Catholics who married outside the Church may be hesitant because of their long absence from this sacrament. A sympathetic priest will be able to assist the penitents in confessing to God what is in their hearts. Absolved and forgiven, they leave the confessional with lighter spirits and a clean conscience.

**6. Next,** determine the date, time and most suitable type of Convalidation service. Most couples opt for a simple ceremony where they renew their consent to the marriage, reaffirming their continued love and commitment before God and the Church. To many, it feels like a renewal of wedding promises. Many couples select the date of their previous wedding ceremony for convenience sake and as a reminder that this is the start of their sacramental union in the eyes of the Church. Often their children take part in the celebration, making it especially memorable.

**Occasionally** it happens that one spouse does not wish to participate in a convalidation ceremony, considering in his or her own mind that the marriage is already valid because the two have publicly exchanged their mutual consent previously. In such cases, the Church can recognize the marriage on paper in what is known as *sanatio in radice*, which means “healing in the root.” The necessary documents are assembled and the diocesan bishop proclaims in writing that the union is indeed valid.

**And,** if you're sending invitations to your friends and family so they can witness this event the invitations can be worded almost like vow renewal invitations:

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| Mr. and Mrs. Michael Smith<br>request the honour of your presence<br>at their Convalidation Ceremony<br>Location<br>Date<br>Time |
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**7. Finally, celebrate!** The convalidation may take place at the main altar during mass or in a shorter ceremony afterwards. The priest or deacon who presides uses the Rite of Marriage to lead the couple in taking the original vows and renewing them in the context of a Catholic ceremony, thus making it a valid marriage in the eyes of the

Church. Even in the shorter form, it is still a true wedding ceremony, including the readings of scripture and an appropriate homily. Depending on what the couple desires, they can exchange rings or have the original rings blessed as they wear them. The vows and readings for a convalidation are the same as the wedding ceremony. At least two other people, whose marriage is valid in the Church, need to be present to serve as witnesses. Family and friends may also be invited to share the joy of the ceremony.

**The bride and groom** were legally married according to the provincial government, but not under the requirements of a Catholic wedding ceremony according to canon law, which all Catholics are bound to obey.

The convalidation ceremony is not a time for the big church wedding with bridesmaids and a huge reception bulging with expensive gifts. But, because celebrating the Church's official recognition of the marriage is still a joyous occasion, a get-together can be planned to follow the liturgical blessing.

**For whatever reasons** couples choose to marry outside the Church and later seek to have their marriages blessed, the spiritual benefits of convalidation are obvious. Catholics approach the altar with peace of heart and mind, knowing they are coming back into full communion and are once again welcome to partake in the rich sacramental life of the Church, especially the reception of the Eucharist, with the Church's assurance of God's special blessing upon their marriage.

Convalidation fulfills the need to get closer to the Church and to God and to build a strong foundation for the family.