



DIOCESE OF GRAND RAPIDS

About the Tribunal

The Tribunal is the court of Canon Law, or Church law, for the diocese. Any matter relating to Church law is handled by the Tribunal. This includes many things, but the most commonly known type of work is processing marriage nullity cases.

Marriage is a “covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of their whole of life, and of which by its own very nature is ordered to the well-being of the spouses and to the procreation and upbringing of the children, has between the baptized, been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.”

A declaration of nullity, or what is commonly referred to as an annulment, is a statement granted by the Catholic Church that at the time two people exchanged marital consent, there was something essential missing that prevented a valid marriage bond from being formed. It must be evident that at the time of consent something essential was lacking even though it was not obvious to the parties at that time. Adultery and other issues taking place into the marriage are not necessarily sufficient proof a marriage was invalid when the parties took the marital consent.

You might be able to use the metaphor of a bridge. A bridge must be sturdy and able to handle lots of traffic and bad weather and possibly even rough seas. In order to do so, it is of utmost importance that a bridge be made of the most stable, strong, trustworthy material. There can be no cracks, leaks, or breaches of any sort in the supports or the bridge itself as it is being built. But bridges are built by humans and as such there will be an occasional crack or breach. This can weaken the bridge. If the trouble is spotted and the damage is small, the bridge can be repaired and even strengthened. If the damage is too severe sometimes even a mighty bridge can crumble. If that happens, there is still repair work to be done if another bridge is to be built.

Anyone getting married in the Catholic Church, whether or not they were previously married in the Catholic Church, will work through a nullity case if they were ever previously married. This is because the Church considers all marriages valid and as such binding until death. So in order for the parties involved to be in a reconciled state with the Church, they have to prove that the marriage was lacking an essential element. And this is where the Tribunal comes in.

A petition for nullity to the Tribunal and prove why exactly this marriage is not the one true marriage intended for your life is necessary when:

- you are Catholic and thinking about remarriage in the Catholic Church, or
- you are not but would like to marry a Catholic and join the Catholic Church but your previous marriage did not take place in a Catholic Church.

There are several reasons why this might be proven and thus there are several different types of nullity processes. Anyone in the Tribunal or your parish priest or one of several appointed field advocates can help determine what type of case you have and what type of paperwork you will



DIOCESE OF GRAND RAPIDS

need to complete. Every case requires a completed application form, updated baptismal certificates and original copies of the marriage license and final civil judgment of divorce for the marriage(s) being looked at.

The most common type of case that we process is called a Formal case and in order to process this case you will need to complete a Preliminary Statement telling us about your background and your former spouse's background, the courtship, and the marriage. You will be required to submit the current contact information for your former spouse and a list of names and addresses for people who knew you and your former spouse growing up, during the courtship, and during the marriage – parents, siblings, relatives, and close friends are usually good witnesses.

Once you have gathered all the documentation and completed the application and questionnaire and taken it to your priest or field advocate for signature, they will submit the packet to us. A Formal case generally takes about 10 to 14 months to complete. For any type of case, we very strongly stress that you should not set a wedding date for a future marriage until you have received word that the case has been completed. Once a case has been completed all civil documents and pertinent paperwork will be returned to the parish from which the case was submitted. Everything else is kept on file permanently at the Tribunal.