

## Marriage Issues in the Year of Mercy

The Jubilee Year of Mercy concludes Sunday, November 20, on the solemnity of Christ the King. Pope Francis will close the Door of Mercy at St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. Our own Door of Mercy at Notre Dame closes this Sunday evening.

The Year of Mercy has seen blessings flow into the lives of individuals and families. Many received graces of healing, peace, and reconciliation.

Pope Francis frequently shows a special concern for married couples and their families facing challenges. He published a beautiful exhortation called "The Joy of Love," in which he reflects on the joys, struggles, and blessings of marriage and family life. In it, he asks, "who is making an effort to strengthen marriages, to help married couples overcome their problems, to assist them in the work of raising children and, in general, to encourage the stability of the marriage bond?" (*Amoris laetitia*, n. 52).

Catholics who experience the trauma of divorce often feel distant from the Church. In response, Pope Francis reformed procedures to have a second marriage recognized and blessed in the Church. A church tribunal would examine the first marriage to assess its validity. For example, if one party did not enter the marriage freely but was under some constraint, the marriage could be defective.

Other requirements for a true marriage in the Church include that the marriage be exclusive (not open to sexual relations with others), for life (not for a trial period), and open to procreation. If a tribunal establishes that some such exclusion existed and this led to a breakdown, the matrimonial tribunal could issue a declaration that the first marriage was null (sometimes referred to as an "annulment"), which would permit the parties freedom to marry in the Church.

Pope Francis also established that the tribunal where a person resides is competent to handle the case, which is important in our highly mobile world. Now, whether a failed marriage took place in Brazil, Poland, or India, if a person resides in Ottawa, our marriage tribunal can hear the case. Our procedures have been streamlined to make the process more accessible and faster to help couples seeking healing and a new beginning. Pope Francis asked also that fees be abolished, which we have done.

In these last weeks of the Year of Mercy, I encourage Catholics married outside the Church who wish to address their marital situation to speak to their pastor or to call the Diocesan Centre so that we can assist in resolving these situations.

Another difficulty facing couples today is a reluctance to make a formal, public commitment to married life in church. A growing trend is for Catholics to opt out of a church wedding and instead to celebrate their nuptials in a public venue, such as at City Hall, on the beach or in a garden or even to delay or forgo making a public commitment. This deprives them of the graces available to couples who invite Christ to be at the centre of their married lives. This can be rectified in a simple ceremony that establishes the couple's relationship as a true Christian marriage.

The Church yearns to help couples invite Christ into their spousal commitments, allowing Him to energize the bonds of marriage with His grace. The local pastor can help bring the blessings of Christ and His Church into these vital relationships.

The gift of marriage is one of God's greatest blessings. I encourage Catholic Christians to embrace this source of abundant love, mercy, and joy. Our marriages and families will then reflect to the wider world God's goodness and loving care.