

When Mom & Dad Break Up

Church Annulment Explained for Children

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Milwaukee
Office of the Metropolitan Tribunal



It had been months. Bobby and Katie Callaghan were still having a hard time getting used to the fact that their parents had gotten divorced. It wasn't really getting any easier; it's just that they were beginning to get used to the idea that things were different now. But, they still missed their dad. They missed talking to him during dinner or before school or whenever they wanted to. They missed having him around. They missed being a family.

Katie missed her father most at bedtime when he used to read stories to her and talk about school. Bobby missed the way his dad explained math problems and he missed watching Packers' games with him.

When their father first moved out, nine-year-old Katie couldn't stop crying. She thought it was her fault he left. She felt he didn't love her anymore. Maybe, she thought, it was because she'd made that scratch on his car when her bike ran into it. Perhaps if she had put it away like he'd told her to so many times it wouldn't have happened and maybe he'd still be there with them. Ten-year-old Bobby had it all figured, too. He reasoned it had to be one of two, or maybe both, things. Either he was too hard to get along with or the bills were too big to pay. Maybe it would have made a difference if he'd found other friends, friends who did not cause quite so much trouble, the way his father had asked him to. Or maybe if he hadn't badgered his father until he gave in and bought him a new skateboard, maybe there would have been a little more money to pay a couple of bills and maybe his parents would have stayed together. Bobby felt helpless. He didn't have any money of his own to contribute to household expenses and it was too late to show his father he could make new friends.

Lately, Katie and Bobby had to admit there were some things they didn't miss. Things like the long and loud fights about money and their mom having to find a job. They didn't miss it when their father would not show up for dinner. They really didn't miss the way he sometimes pretended their mother wasn't in the room, even when she tried so hard to talk to him. They didn't miss all the unhappy times.

They both missed what they had known as a normal family life, but once they weren't afraid to talk about their parents' divorce, they found out they weren't alone. There were other kids at school whose parents were divorced too. Some kids' parents had even died. At least, they said to each other on the way home from school, both their parents were still healthy and living in the same city. They could see or talk to either one pretty much at anytime. Separation and divorce means an end of a life together in one home, not an end to the love parents have for their children.

The Callaghan kids usually spent weekdays with their mom and weekends with their dad. They usually had a good time with him and looked forward to it, even though it was sometimes inconvenient for playing with friends. One Sunday afternoon their Uncle Mike stopped over to visit their father when Katie and Bob were there. He was usually so much fun and made lots of jokes that they were glad to see him - at first.

"So, Tom (that's Katie and Bobby's dad) I hear that the whole marriage, the kids, the family, everything was just a dream. It was just a figment of your imagination," he said while laughing. Katie and Bobby kept looking back and forth between their dad and their uncle trying to understand what he meant. Bobby, being the older and bolder of the two kids, asked what that meant. Hadn't they been a family before? What did their uncle mean when he said that he and Katie were just a dream?

Before dad could say anything, Uncle Mike tried to answer. "Hey kiddo, your mom wants to say that the marriage never happened and that means you and Katie...well, I guess you're just part of my imagination too." Bobby was angry and Katie was scared, and both were confused. But neither knew for sure why they felt that way. The kids' father glared at Uncle Mike and then told them that their mother had gone to the Church and asked for something called an "annulment," and that means she's asked the Church to say that we were never even married.

Katie ran from the room as warm tears began to roll down her cheeks. Bobby went to find her. Their dad didn't follow, but they could hear him telling Uncle Mike to mind his own business. Bobby told Katie that, "When we get home for dinner Mom will tell us that none of this is true."

When they told their mother what their uncle had said, she carefully and explained what a church annulment is. "A church annulment of a marriage means the Church recognizes that your father and I tried our very best but just couldn't make a marriage work in the way that Jesus meant it to be," she said. "We couldn't make our marriage an experience of faith and religion, as hard as we tried. The Church wants to help people know happiness, trust and love again, if possible. Sometimes, people don't understand the Church's position on these things. Uncle Mike just doesn't understand. He said those things to your dad because he's angry. He thinks I'm just trying to hurt your father and that's not true."

She went on to explain to her children that a church annulment doesn't mean that the Church thinks she and their father are bad people, or that the marriage never existed.

While the Church teaches that marriage should last one's lifetime, some married couples can't achieve that goal. "If we're granted the annulment, it will have less of an effect on you two than our divorce did," she reassured them. "Our divorce means your father and I are no longer responsible to each other, but we are both still responsible for the two of you. You will always be the most important thing in our lives. We'll always protect and take care of you. And you'll always be important to the Church because when you were baptized, you became a child of God. And," she added looking them each in the eye, "you'll never be a dream or figment of our imagination! Your father and I love you both very much. Our divorce has nothing to do with anything you two did or did not do."

Bobby and Katie's mom said the annulment would, however, affect her own life and that of their father.

"Dad and I are in a lot of pain, just like the two of you," she said. "Our life together just fell short of everything we wanted it to be. Now we have asked the Church to help us start over again. A church annulment will allow both of us to rest easy about some important and difficult decisions we've had to make. And, if the occasion would ever arise for either me or your Dad to marry someone else in the Church, the church annulment would make it possible for us to go to communion with you whenever we go to Mass together."

Katie and Bob began to understand. Like their parents' divorce, the Church annulment wasn't happening because of them. An annulment would not affect their relationship with their mom and dad, and wouldn't mean any change for them as young Catholics. They also began to understand that this was something important to their parents and their desire to participate at Church.

IMPORTANT!

The Church believes that marriage should be a permanent and lasting experience of the fullness that couples can offer each other in love and happiness. Some married couples, even parents, for whatever reason, cannot meet this expectation. But the Church does not believe that your parents are bad because of their faults and failings. The Church wants to help people keep their faith and then to find new life after pain and sorrow. This is what the Church wishes for your mom and dad.

This booklet is meant to help you understand something very complicated but very important to at least one of your parents. Should you have any further questions you can take this pamphlet to a priest or religion teacher at your parish and ask them some questions.

A possible church annulment of marriage will ask your father and mother to speak to Church officials about their memories and feelings about their marriage. Other people (relatives, friends, maybe even an older sister or brother) will also be asked to tell their memories and feelings about your parents' marriage. The study will usually last a number of months because the Church wants to handle each marriage story very carefully and sensitively, out of respect for your parents and everyone they know and love.

The reasons why one of your parents might ask the Church for a decision on their marriage are usually one or more of several:

- (1) A parent may be in pain and wants the Church to help them heal again;
- (2) A parent might wish, in the future, to get married again and would want the Church to celebrate that new marriage with them;
- (3) One parent might already be married again while the other parent is still living, and therefore, the parent remarried cannot receive the sacraments of the Church. But now, this parent wishes to be a part of the Church again and to be able to receive Holy Communion with you as well as the other sacraments; or
- (4) A parent comes to the Church in this difficult time in their life with, perhaps, confused feelings about the importance of the Church in their lives; or your mother or father just might be rediscovering how important their faith and religion is for them in this difficult time.

Because we are Christians, there is a special way we get married. We always want to start our married lives together in a Church with other Christian family and friends gathered around us. If our marriages and families have problems, the Church has ways to help us. When a marriage, unfortunately, breaks up, sometimes one of the parents asks the Church for counseling and help for themselves or their children, or they ask for this important decision about the Christian quality of their marriage.

The Church asks certain trained men and women to study a broken marriage using the teachings of Jesus from the Bible and the best of our Church experience as believers in Jesus over the centuries, to see if both husband and wife were able to make their own marriage an experience of faith and religion.

If the wisdom of the Church sees that a marriage fell short of our belief and laws, that marriage may receive a decision for annulment and then both mom or dad, if they wish to, can enter another marriage in the Church at some future time. A church annulment, if granted, says that your parents tried their best but could not make a marriage union that copies Jesus' love for us, his Church. This is what we call the "sacrament" of marriage. The Church's decision about your parents' marriage does not affect you, their child. Your important place in your parents' lives is protected and guarded.

On the contrary, the Church is very concerned for you after experiencing the difficulties of your parents' divorce. The Church expects parents who do get divorced to still do everything that they can to take care of and teach positive lessons to their children. Even if when your parents might live far apart, both are expected to contribute to helping you to grow up happy, healthy, and hopeful.

It is never easy seeing our parents break up. It may seem that our whole world is coming to an end. The Church understands what you are feeling. You feel helpless to help your mom and dad with their grown-up problems. We wish this would never happen to any child, but sometimes painful things happen to all of us. There are people at your parish or among your relatives who can help you in these times.

The most important thing, of course, as emphasized earlier in our story of Bobby and Katie Callaghan, is that you, as a child of your parents, and as a son or daughter of God and the Church, remain preciously important to them and to us.

© Copyright 1994, Office of the Metropolitan Tribunal
Updated and Revised, 2007

Archdiocese of Milwaukee
3501 South Lake Drive - P.O. Box 070912
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53207-0912
Telephone (414) 769-3300
www.archmil.org