

Pope says church courts too lax with annulments: U.S. church worst culprit

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Pope Benedict XVI has called for greater consistency in the granting of annulments, suggesting that Catholic church authorities in some countries have been too lax in declaring marriages void. The pope apparently did not cite U.S. dioceses, though they handle more than half of all annulments worldwide.

Benedict made his remarks January 26 to members of the Roman Rota, the highest church panel with authority in marriage cases, at a ceremony marking the start of the judicial year.

Warning against “subjective and arbitrary interpretations” of church law governing marriage, the pope insisted that the “same general principles and norms of justice must be applied” in all cases.

Under canon law, a marriage can be declared null and void for a variety of reasons, including impotence, a previous marriage, or a lack of psychological maturity at the time of the union. A Catholic who divorces and remarries must obtain an annulment of the first marriage in order to continue receiving Communion.

Most decisions on annulments are made at the diocesan level, and degrees of strictness vary. In 2002, according to the Italian Catholic magazine *30 Giorni*, church courts in Europe granted annulments in 85 percent of cases, compared with 97 percent in the United States. The U.S. generated 57 percent of the requests for annulments that year, despite having only 6 percent of the world’s Catholic population.

In a widely noted case, the Archdiocese of Boston annulled the marriage of former representative Joseph P. Kennedy II (D., Mass.) to Sheila Rauch, who then appealed that decision to Rome. In 2005, the Rota declared the Kennedy-Rauch marriage still valid. –*Religion News Service*