

Pope Francis announces most radical annulment reforms in centuries

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September 8, 2015

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) The Vatican announced Tuesday the most radical reforms to Roman Catholic marriage annulment procedures in centuries.

In two documents, titled “The Lord Jesus, the Gentile Judge” and “The Meek and Merciful Jesus,” Pope Francis reaffirmed traditional church teaching on “the indissolubility of the sacred bond of marriage” but simplified the process of annulment, which many have for years considered cumbersome, costly, and out of reach for most Catholics.

The pope’s announcement comes about a year after he commissioned a study of the best ways to speed up the annulment process and make it more accessible, so that Catholics who sought annulments could find justice—and about 250 years since the last substantive changes to annulment law were made.

The new rules are also the latest of Pope Francis’ efforts to promote a more pastoral tone on issues that pit conservative Catholic traditions against a shifting global culture. Last week, he authorized Roman Catholic priests worldwide to offer reconciliation and forgiveness to women who have had abortions.

Although Catholic teaching condemns this in the strongest terms, Francis has often emphasized compassion and the need for the church to continue to minister to those Catholics who may not measure up to its moral teachings.

The new rules eliminate a previously mandatory automatic review of an annulment decision by a second diocesan tribunal and cuts the cost of the procedures, which can command thousands of dollars in legal and tribunal fees. The pope also gave bishops sweeping powers to judge the most simple, clear-cut cases themselves, in a measure that aims to provide Catholic couples in poorer parts of the world with paths to annulments.

At the crux of the pope's decision is the changing sentiment, especially among Western Catholics, around controversial issues such as divorce. The 1.2 billion member Catholic church does not recognize divorce, but does allow for a "decree of nullity"—a ruling that a marriage was never valid in the first place according to church law, because preconditions such as free will, psychological maturity, and willingness to have children were not met.

Catholics who chose to separate and remarry outside the church are still considered married to their first spouses, and are thus living in sin and prohibited from receiving sacraments such as communion. In the United States, 62 percent of Catholics said the church should allow divorced Catholics who divorce and remarry without an annulment to receive communion, according to a recent Pew Research Center poll.

The pope has faced criticism from some conservatives for his more permissive position on issues that the church has long opposed.

"This is a typical Francis move in that way," Chad Pecknold, a theologian at Catholic University in Washington, told the *Washington Post* after the pope empowered priests to forgive those who have had abortions but were truly repentant. "This is a dead-serious sin, but I'm not going to emphasize the sin part."

Others, however, feel that the pope is taking current context into consideration when he interprets church teachings and traditions—a stance may resonate for many Catholics struggling to find balance between life and faith. The pontiff's favorability rating among Americans is at about 60 percent, according to Gallup.

"I think Pope Francis is better at stressing forgiveness. And softening the perception of an all-or-nothing attitude towards Catholicism," said Darcy Fargo, who returned to Catholicism a few months ago after years away from her childhood faith.

"Oftentimes it's an either-or world we live in. But I don't believe our God is like that, and I don't believe our faith is like that."

This report uses material from The Associated Press and Reuters.