

Statement Concerning the OCIA and Marriage Cases

I. Policy of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati

In *National Statutes for the Christian Initiation of Adults* (2024), there are two norms concerning the irregular marriages of those who wish to become Catholic:

Norm 2 Early in the Period of Evangelization and Precatechumenate, a parochial minister will meet inquirers individually to hear of their “first faith” (see *The Order of Christian Initiation of Adults* [OCIA] 42), discern the continuing impact of their encounter with the Lord, and discuss any issues (e.g., an irregular marriage) that could affect their eventual celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation.

Norm 7 While unbaptized persons in irregular marriages can enter the catechumenate, they are not to celebrate the Rite of Election until they are free to enter a canonical marriage.

In light of these new Norms, **it is now the policy of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati that:**

- **the initial interview described in Norm 2 will be conducted with inquirers, and**
- **those inquirers in irregular marriages will be permitted to celebrate the Rite for Entrance into the Catechumenate, thus becoming catechumens, and participate in the Catechumenate period of the OCIA process, but they cannot celebrate the Rite of Election or continue to the celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation until they are free to enter a canonical marriage.**

Note that Norm 2 and Norm 7 from the National Statutes pertain to *unbaptized inquirers* who desire to become Catholic. Since *baptized* Christians who desire to become Catholic (called “candidates” in the OCIA process) do not celebrate the Rite for Entrance or the Rite of Election, Norm 7 does not technically apply to them. But, a candidate in an irregular marriage also cannot become Catholic because his irregular marital situation prevents him from receiving the Eucharist. Therefore, in order to ensure that candidates can become practicing Catholics, **it is the policy of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati that:**

- **an interview like that described in Norm 2 that uncovers any obstacles to becoming Catholic (e.g., an irregular marriage) will be conducted with candidates as well, and**
- **a candidate cannot celebrate the *Order of Reception Into the Full Communion of the Catholic Church* until he/she is free to enter a canonical marriage.**

II. Establishing the Facts – Initial Interview

In justice to a person seeking to enter the Church and out of respect for the integrity of both the OCIA and the marriage nullity processes, it is imperative to balance a pastoral

approach with fidelity to the law. Besides getting to know an inquirer or candidate, the initial interview should address the person's call to conversion, pastoral needs, spiritual formation, and marital status.

The Church regards any marriage as a sacred, natural bond and a permanent commitment – whether or not the persons are baptized. It is pastorally sensitive and prudent to establish the marital history of each person who seeks to become Catholic in this initial interview. Note that this marital history should also include that of the inquirer's or candidate's present spouse or fiancé.

The interview process provides an opportunity to offer a brief summary of the Church's teaching on marriage, and to explain that the Church does not accept civil divorce as an end to marriage. Furthermore, one should be sure to communicate to the inquirer or candidate that not every marriage can be declared invalid. If it is established that the inquirer or candidate is in an irregular marital union, that person should immediately be referred to the pastor (or associate pastor, or procurator/advocate, as the pastor directs) to determine what kind(s) of marriage case(s) may be required.

III. Deciding What to Do Next

It can be alarming for someone desiring to becoming Catholic to discover that resolution of a marital issue must first be achieved. The parish should consider how it can continue to respond to the pastoral needs of an inquirer or candidate by doing, for example, one or more of the following:

- 1. Discern the Rite for Entrance:** An inquirer in an irregular marriage may become a catechumen, but the inquirer may also decide not to become a catechumen. This is a decision you have to help the inquirer to discern. There are certain privileges and obligations attached to the state of being a catechumen (see National Statutes, nos. 3, 8, 9) that may make this state desirable for some people. At the same time, “catechumen” was never meant to be a permanent state, but only a transitional one on the way to becoming Catholic. And so, if the inquirer has reason to believe that the irregular marital situation may not be resolved, then he or she may decide to forgo celebrating the Rite for Entrance. That is okay, too.
- 2. Present Time as a Gift:** There is no predetermined length to the Precatechumenate period. It can take as long as it needs to. According to National Statutes, no. 4, the Catechumenate period should take at least a year, but it can also be much longer, if it needs to be. The period of formation for a candidate can be as long or as short as it needs to be as well. What this means is that we should help the people we serve to resist the temptation to rush the formation process. The process should be allowed to last as long as it needs to last. By staying connected with them, nurturing the bonds of friendship and fellowship, and providing multiple opportunities for them to encounter Christ, hear the Gospel, and be formed in the Catholic faith, we can help

those waiting on the resolution of a marriage case to view this potentially extended period of time as a gift and a privilege, instead of a burden.

3. **Parish Companion or Sponsor:** The parish could provide a companion or sponsor who would assist the inquirer or candidate by getting to know him/her, answering questions about being Catholic, inviting him/her to parish functions, praying together, etc. By maintaining contact with the companion and the inquirer or candidate, ministry leaders could ensure that this relationship continues to be nurturing and beneficial.
4. **Small Christian Communities:** The inquirer or candidate could be invited to participate in one of the parish small groups in order to maintain contact with the parish. The OCIA coordinator or team member would facilitate this process and be in contact with the small group leader and the inquirer or candidate.

IV. Convalidation

After an inquirer or candidate's previous marriage has received a declaration of nullity, he/she may participate in the celebration of the Rite of Election (in the case of the inquirer, provided there is no marriage case still needed for the intended spouse). When a catechumen or candidate's current civil spouse is Catholic, then a convalidation of marriage will be necessary. This should be accomplished as soon as possible after receiving notification of the declaration of nullity or canonical dissolution. A convalidation is very simple and only requires the consent of the couple found in the *Rite of Marriage* and received by a priest or deacon and two witnesses. (See *Rite of Marriage*, nos. 60-61; 161-163.)

V. Conclusion

A person takes a significant step when deciding to contact a parish about becoming Catholic. Our hope is that initiation ministry leaders will be equipped to address this moment with pastoral sensitivity, respect, discernment, and faithfulness.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Tribunal (513-263-3393) regarding marriage cases, the Chancery (513-263-3344) regarding the proper reception of the sacraments, or the Center for the New Evangelization (513-263-6620) regarding pastoral, catechetical, and evangelistic approaches to initiation ministry.