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# Sr. Ethel: On the Marriage Tribunal

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### **Sr. Ethel: On the Marriage Tribunal**

Abstract: I interviewed Sr. Ethel in January of 2019 regarding her life experiences as a woman religious. This paper includes a portion of the interview where she spoke about her work on a marriage tribunal as one of the most significant jobs in her time as a sister.

Speaking to Sr. Ethel on her time serving on a marriage tribunal was fascinating. With 25 years of experience, she has seen and heard a lot of people state their cases as to why they believe their marriage should be annulled. She brings an interesting perspective to the tribunal as a woman religious. She has a comprehensive understanding of Catholic teaching, but she also has an understanding of people and how they are not perfect.

Serving on the marriage tribunal was the most significant job of Sr. Ethel's lifetime. She served on the tribunal for the her Diocese for 25 years and retired in June of 2018. On the tribunal, she would determine if a couple married in the Catholic Church had grounds to declare their marriage invalid. This is the most common point of a marriage tribunal. There are multiple reasons to declare a marriage as null. In the book Divorce and Second Marriage by Kevin Kelly, he says, "For some reason or another the contract was null. It might be because one or another partner lacked the requisite knowledge or freedom to understand the contract of marriage." (Kelly 41). This is the main reason why people get divorced. Sr. Ethel says the same thing. She says people mostly get an annulment based on the fact that people do not understand the permanence of marriage.

Sr. Ethel has an unorthodox view when it comes to divorce after working on the tribunal. The typical way for a Catholic to look at divorce would be like out of the book Catholics and

Carter Pease

Divorce. It says, “We must not envisage civil divorce and remarriage as being wrong because the Church forbids them. Rather the church forbids them because they are wrong,” (O’Mahoney 3). She understands why it is taught that way, but she understands how big of a commitment marriage is and that it does not always work out. She is more forgiving than not on the subject of divorce. This can be credited to her time on the marriage tribunal. She understands that we are human and have our problems. During the interview she talked about how people have opened up in complete honesty to her and detailed how they were abused growing up, and sometimes how they were even abused by their spouse. More often than not it was the husband who was the abuser in the relationship.

She did give another example of a tribunal trial where a wife was attempting to get an annulment from her husband who had been married previously. This raised the question if he had gotten an annulment previously. The catechism quotes the bible when it says, “anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” It also says, “if a woman divorces and marries another she is guilty of adultery too,” (Hardon 357). It turns out that he did have a previous annulment. So the testimonies from that annulment can be used as well. So in that, they found out the husband was a gambler and was committing adultery. The wife did not know at all. Sr. Ethel did say that typically the wife is the last one to find out about affairs and other things of the sort which is very sad but not surprising.

Carter Pease

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Kelly, Kevin T. *Divorce & Second Marriage: Facing the Challenge*. Sheed & Ward, 1997.

O'Mahony, Patrick J. *Catholics and Divorce*. Nelson, 1959.

“Sr. Ethel” Telephone interview by author. January 19, 2019.