



**SHEPHERDS WITH THE
SMELL OF THE SHEEP:
Pastoral ministers in the
annulment process**

“Ignorance or error about a law...is not presumed” (canon 15). Canon law presumes that everyone who has reached the age of reason knows and understands the law. I will pause while you calm down from the uncontrollable laughter that just burst from your mouth after reading that statement...

Like all presumptions, the legal presumption against ignorance of the law can be overturned by facts, and the fact is that hardly anyone knows and understands all of canon law. This fact is certainly true of the laws governing the annulment process, especially when the person involved is not Catholic. People need someone with at least a working knowledge of the law to help them navigate what can be a confusing and emotional experience, someone who is on their side

and can support them through the process. That is role of the pastoral minister.

People have rather strange ideas regarding the annulment process. That includes priests, who often think they have no role in the process beyond referring people to the tribunal. Perhaps they think they are too busy, or perhaps they don't understand the process themselves. For whatever reason, priests and pastoral ministers too often abdicate their responsibility to assist their people through the annulment process, simply handing them a packet of papers and telling them to contact the tribunal.

There are two problems with that approach. The first is that people do not know the law and do not understand the annulment process. They inevitably fail to complete the paperwork correctly, resulting in unnecessary delays and frustration that could easily be avoided if the pastoral minister filled the paperwork out with the person and helped him or her understand the need to fill it out truthfully and completely.

The second problem is that, by the very nature of the process, the tribunal staff must remain neutral. That means that we do not take

sides. The tribunal staff is here to interpret and apply the law. The law applies to both parties in the process impartially and equally, so the tribunal staff must relate to both parties impartially and equally. When pastoral ministers fail to support people through the process, taking their side and helping them make their case, the tribunal staff is forced to assume that role, compromising our necessary neutrality. The outcome of the process is not a foregone conclusion. The process is not merely a formality. The petitioner must make his or her case. We are not here to help the Petitioner do that. That is the role of the pastoral minister.

The annulment process can be a confusing, daunting, painful experience. People need their pastoral ministers to help them through it. Please answer that call and be there for your people who need annulments. That's it for now. Until next time, keep the faith, love God's people, and always honor the code!

