



United States  
Conference of  
Catholic Bishops

# NEIGHBORS

A Quarterly Newsletter from Mission America

Sr. Joanna Hoang, MTG, visits the Canon Law Library at The Catholic University of America during the 2025 Institute on Matrimonial Tribunal Practice.



Diocesan and eparchial tribunals carry out a special ministry for persons who have experienced the civil dissolution of a marriage. Recognizing the importance of this ministry for all dioceses and eparchies, the Catholic Home Missions Appeal afforded tribunal staff from home mission dioceses the opportunity to attend the annual Institute on Matrimonial Tribunal Practice in June 2025, where they acquired skills to serve their dioceses better.

## Catholic Home Missions Scholarships Help Diocesan Tribunal Staff Prepare for Their Mission of Mercy

*By Rhina Guidos*

At the diocese where she previously worked, Sr. Joanna Hoang, MTG, had heard of and wanted to attend the Institute on Matrimonial Tribunal Practice—a summer program where she could learn about the Church's marriage law. But because of her tight budget and the \$3,000 price tag, attending did not seem like a practical proposition.

"I did not have the opportunity because we didn't have enough financial support," said Sr. Joanna, a tribunal administrative assistant and notary at the Diocese of Stockton in California.

But this year an opportunity she was not expecting arrived.

"The bishop received an email and he was very happy," she said.

Catholic Home Missions (CHM) announced it would fund the participation of eight staff from CHM-funded dioceses like Stockton that did not have the resources. The institute takes place each summer at The Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, DC.

Since 1967, the institute has welcomed participants like Sr. Joanna, who have not

had formal training in canon law related to the marriage nullity process and the work of the marriage tribunal. Marriage tribunals are courts that spouses can ask to determine whether the marriage they entered into was valid under canon, or church, law.

Support from CHM allowed those eight participants to attend the 2025 institute from June 16 to 27. Attendees from mission dioceses joined others from larger dioceses, such as the Archdiocese of New York, in learning about the history of the Catholic Church's teachings on marriage, an introduction to marriage and canon law, its relationship to the pastoral life of the Church, and the tribunal process for determining the validity of a marriage.

"Attending the institute was a truly transformative experience," Sr. Joanna said. "It not only deepened my understanding of how to better serve our diocesan tribunal but also provided meaningful opportunities to connect with and learn from others working in tribunals across various dioceses."

The institute is open to women religious like Sr. Joanna, as well as to men religious, priests, deacons, and lay persons like Cynthia Salinas, who is the executive assistant at the tribunal office in the Diocese of Amarillo in Texas.

# FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

For Catholics, marriage between those who are baptized is a sacrament. We believe that marriage is an indissoluble, faithful, and lifelong union. Even if a married couple

divorces, the spouses remain married in the eyes of the Church, unless the marriage is determined to be invalid because the conditions necessary for a valid marriage were not present at the time the couple exchanged consent at their wedding.

Diocesan and eparchial tribunals are ecclesiastical courts that assist the local bishop by examining the validity of a marriage that has ended in divorce. A divorced spouse may request the examination by filing a petition with the tribunal. Tribunal judges and those who assist them must have knowledge of and specialized training in canon law and pastoral ministry to serve the spouses with justice and compassion. Educational programs like the Institute on Matrimonial Tribunal Practice, conducted annually at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, provide opportunities for persons who assist local tribunals to deepen their knowledge of the process and carry out their duties more effectively.

In home mission dioceses, diocesan tribunal offices often lack financial resources to allow their staff to participate in programs like the institute. Inside this issue of *Neighbors*, you will see how funding provided by the Catholic Home Missions Appeal enabled eight diocesan tribunal staff to attend and participate in the institute held in June 2025. By participating in this program, participants gained knowledge and built connections with peers that equipped them to better serve the people of their dioceses. Your continued support of the Catholic Home Missions Appeal makes professional education and development programs accessible to diocesan personnel who otherwise would miss out on these opportunities.

With gratitude for your ongoing commitment to the Catholic Home Missions Appeal that enables us to support such initiatives, I remain

Yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Chad W. Zielinski  
Bishop of New Ulm  
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions



Sr. Joanna Hoang, MTG, stands outside the School of Canon Law at The Catholic University of America, which hosts the annual Institute on Matrimonial Tribunal Practice.

Cynthia was unexpectedly immersed in the world of marriage law and the Church two years ago after the previous executive assistant departed.

“It was really confusing,” Cynthia said about the new terms and processes she had to learn.

Cynthia’s position involves setting up appointments with petitioners seeking the tribunal’s determination of their marriage’s validity. In that role, she also interacts with case managers and with petitioners’ advocates—sometimes priests who also have parish work—who are only available a few times a month. “In a small diocese, everybody has to wear two or three different hats,” she said, “but they do so with love for the Church.”

For Cynthia, dealing with the ins and outs of the Church’s marriage law has been like learning a new, complex language.

“I did not know anything that they were talking about. Now, going here [to the institute], it just made sense,” she said. “They gave us that opportunity to really learn and to be here to help others because the only way that you can help others is if you actually know what’s going on yourself. I’m just thankful for getting the opportunity to learn a little bit more to be able to help others.”

Another participant who attended with CHM support, Esther Lam, is the case manager and auditor at the Office of Canonical Affairs and Marriage Tribunal for the Diocese of Boise in Idaho. She observed that the institute program was beneficial even for those who have some knowledge of how the process works, because it covers new developments and practices that have helped larger dioceses—content that is invaluable to those with fewer resources.

“From the professors, I did learn things or tips that made me say, ‘Okay, if I do this, it could be easier,’ or ‘This best practice could be more effective.’ And so I do learn a lot of different best practices that hopefully can help streamline the process or maybe help us better document [our work],” Esther said.

Mission dioceses like Esther’s greatly benefit from the institute’s “one-stop shop” of experts, information, and new colleagues and its discussions of new developments, including the potential use of artificial intelligence (AI).

“There was discussion regarding the help of AI. Our diocese is not fully adopting it yet because we are still very concerned with confidentiality,” Esther said, “but it

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just helped open up options that we can discuss and possibly move into. So there were a lot of ideas and different things that the Church is integrating with current technology, the current world. That will be helpful as a mission diocese, for sure.”

In addition to learning about new developments and practices during the institute, home mission diocese participants also were able to offer different expertise to their larger diocesan counterparts.

For example, some asked Sr. Joanna for her expertise in understanding Vietnamese culture as well as language that may help some of their local cases.

“Even though canon law is universal, you have a different culture,” she said. Sometimes that has included arranged marriages of couples who married in Vietnam. “In [the United States] we don’t have that and we don’t understand why . . . that’s something that might be very helpful for the tribunal, for the Church, or for those who assist in the tribunal” to know.

Similarly, others shared information that helped them obtain copies of marriage documents from border dioceses or other countries and offered their assistance to participants in the future.

“Being able to help each other was awesome,” said Cynthia. “All of us who were there, we exchanged emails, notes, whatever we could. We would sit down and look at different cases.”

Others offered their expertise in interviewing petitioners.

“Hearing the way each one of them interviewed . . . this is all new to me. I’m still learning,” Cynthia said. “Thank you. Thank you very much [to CHM], it’s just a blessing to be able to have this opportunity to go and learn, and to really understand the law, to be able to serve our Church as much as we can. It’s just made it easier for us to understand what we’re doing.”

Cynthia appreciated the atmosphere of prayer that framed the work they were there to do at the institute. Part of the program included a Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception adjacent to CUA’s campus. Her sense of compassion for those she encounters increased after hearing from those with years of experience, theological training, and practice with persons who come to a tribunal seeking help, she said.

“Everybody’s hurt. But coming in and trying to heal that part of their past, to be able to move on and to be able to accept it, to be able to stay in the Church, it’s a lot,” she said. “But it makes you realize that it’s beautiful and nice to be able to take part in that. They’re coming in for that healing, and it’s just awesome to be a part of that and having that opportunity

to learn and to be able to help one another. I mean, that’s what we’re called to [do].”

Sr. Joanna said she sees the work of those guiding petitioners through the tribunals “like a mercy, a compassion ministry for us.”

“I firmly believe that if more people had access to this kind of training and support, our tribunals would be even better equipped to serve the faithful with compassion, clarity, and professionalism,” she said. “I strongly encourage continued—and even expanded—support for opportunities like this.”

CHM plans to fund 10 more participants from mission dioceses to attend the institute next summer.

The community formed by the more than two dozen participants in Washington has been invaluable, Esther said.

“To be able to get to know other tribunal members from the US is really beneficial and helpful, just to know that you’re not alone doing this. There’s somebody else out there and it’s a sense of community,” she said.

“So it becomes a really helpful resource base now that we’re all back in our little diocese. Whenever we have issues or we have problems, we can just shoot a quick message to the 30 or so of us [who participated in the institute], and then we can brainstorm and we can solve problems together.”

Cynthia, too, said she feels as if she has a broader community to turn to for help or for answers to her questions. While some large urban dioceses have tribunal offices with as many as 30 staffers, some mission dioceses operate with three or four—and not all those workers are available full-time.

“We’re still asking questions. We have WhatsApp groups and we’re still trying to help each other out,” she said.

For Sr. Joanna, the experience has awakened a new desire to learn more about the Church’s laws.

“I’m really interested in continuing in this education, about the tribunal and canon law, if I could,” she said. ☕

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Sr. Joanna Hoang, MTG, holds her certificate from the Institute on Matrimonial Tribunal Practice.





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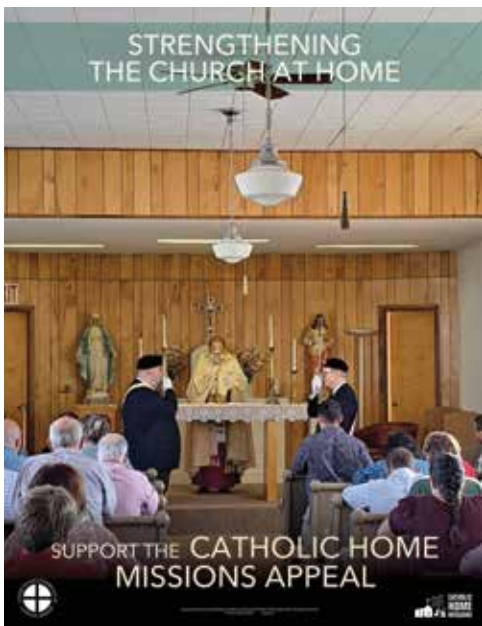
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### Did you know?

- The Catholic Church has its own laws, called canon law. Many canon laws are contained in the *Code of Canon Law*, which was last promulgated in 1983 by St. John Paul II for the Latin Church. St. John Paul II also promulgated a *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* in 1990.
- Dioceses and eparchies have access to a court of justice called a tribunal, which serves the bishop and helps him carry out his ministry. While canon law presumes the validity of a marriage, the tribunal will issue a decree of nullity should it determine the marriage was not valid.
- Support from Catholic Home Missions (CHM) allowed eight employees from home mission dioceses to participate in the most recent institute, which took place June 16-27, 2025. CHM plans to continue funding attendance for up to 20 additional participants over the next two years.



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