

Ministering to Couples Who Are Living Together

Note: The following information is drawn from two main sources: a resource paper prepared for the United States Catholic Conference in 1999, “Marriage Preparation and Cohabiting Couples,” (<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/marriage-preparation/cohabiting.cfm>) and a report published by the National Marriage Project in 2008, authored by David Popenoe, “Cohabitation, Marriage and Child Wellbeing.”

Introduction

Perhaps as many as 60 percent of the couples that come for marriage preparation in the Catholic Church are already living together. Cohabitation is generally understood as living together in a sexual relationship without marriage. Over the past thirty to forty years cohabitation has become a major social phenomenon affecting the institution of marriage and family life. It is also an extremely perplexing issue for priests, deacons, and lay pastoral ministers who help couples prepare for marriage in the Church.

What Social Scientists Are Finding

In this section we provide highlights of what social science research has discovered about cohabitation in general and with specific reference to cohabiting couples who eventually marry.

1. What Young People Think

The National Marriage Project paper prepared by David Popenoe states that in the twenty-five years leading up to report, the percentage of high school seniors who “agreed” or “mostly agreed” with the statement: “It is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along” climbed from 45 percent to 64 percent for boys and from 32 percent to 57 percent for girls. A 2007 survey conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) found that among the not yet married Catholics who belong to the Millennial generation 43 percent believed that living with a partner before marriage decreases the risk of divorce.

2. Why Do People Cohabit?

Popenoe states that cohabitation is an offshoot of the sexual revolution that gave premarital sex a social stamp of approval, accompanied with the introduction of birth control. The divorce revolution that followed and the fear of marital failure gave rise to the practice of cohabitation. Why face the possibility of divorce when there is the opportunity to just live together? Why not try it out first, if you are not sure? When researchers ask cohabiters why they decided to live together, they find

partners have different reasons, writes Meg Jay in a 2012 article in the *New York Times*, “The Downside of Cohabiting before Marriage.” The clinical psychologist at the University of Virginia and author of “The Defining Decade” writes that women are more likely to view cohabitation as a step toward marriage while men view cohabitation as a way to test the relationship or postpone commitment. She adds that what men and women agree on is that the standards for a live-in partner are lower than they are for a spouse. Popenoe believes that the practice of cohabitation is not going to go away anytime soon; however, we need to be concerned about its impact on marriage and on the children born from these relationships.

3. The Effects of Cohabitation on Commitment

Cohabitation differs from marriage because of the low level of commitment it requires. The author points out that cohabiting partners tend to have a weaker sense of couple identity, less willingness to sacrifice for the other, and a lower desire to see the relationship go long term. A telling measure of low commitment expected of cohabiting partners is their break-up rate, which in the United States is five times higher than the divorce rates of married couples.

4. Divorce Rates of Couples Who Cohabit Before Marriage

Many studies in the United States have shown that couples who live together before marriage have a higher risk of divorce when they marry, especially if they started living together before being engaged. Popenoe gives three reasons for this. The first is the possibility of selectivity. That is, those who choose to cohabit are likely to be the people who are also more prone to divorce. Another reason is the attitudes and behaviors partners develop during cohabitation. These attitudes may be counterproductive in a marriage. A third reason is the fact that cohabiting couples often find it difficult to break up and therefore may easily slide into marriage and then divorce later.

Recent studies have found that there is a definite difference in the rate of divorce between couples who lived together without any intention of marrying and only later decide to marry, and the couples who decide to marry and then moved in together while waiting to marry. The second group has the same divorce risk level as couples that have never lived together.

Pastoral Issues in Marriage Preparation with Cohabiting Couples

The following are pastoral suggestions gleaned from the 1999 USCCB resource paper. They are intended to provide general guidance only, since each couple’s pastoral needs and circumstances are unique. In developing these suggestions we turn to *Familiaris Consortio* for inspiration.

In section 81 of *Familiaris Consortio* Saint John Paul II wrote of the pastoral concerns of the Church for couples living together without any publically recognized institutional bond. He calls these “*de facto* free unions.” He recognizes that various factors can lead a couple into a free union. These include difficult economic, cultural, or religious situations, extreme ignorance or poverty, and a certain psychological immaturity that makes couples afraid to enter into a permanent union.

Each of these elements presents the Church with arduous pastoral problems, by reason of the serious consequences deriving from them, both religious and moral . . . and also social consequences. The pastors and the ecclesial community should take care to become acquainted with such situations and their actual causes, case by case. They should make tactful and respectful contact with the couples concerned and enlighten them patiently, correct them charitably and show them the witness of Christian family life in such a way as to smooth the path for them to regularize their situation (*Familiaris Consortio*, #81).

In the discussion below, we attempt to take the Holy Father's advice and apply it to concrete questions that arise during marriage preparation. Our goal is to work through the challenges—"smooth the path"—so that couples living together will better understand what it means to make a marriage commitment in the Church.

1. Where do we begin?

Faithful to Each Other Forever: A Catholic Handbook of Pastoral Help for Marriage Preparation, a 1988 document of the NCCB Committee on Pastoral Practices, notes that two extremes are to be avoided: (1) Immediately confronting the couple and condemning their behavior and (2) Ignoring the cohabitation aspect of their relationship. In the decades following the document's publication, pastoral experience and diocesan policies have borne out the wisdom of this approach. The majority of policies and practices follow a middle way between the two extremes, one that integrates general correction with understanding and compassion.

Increasingly, pastoral ministers have chosen the approach of addressing the cohabitation gently but directly. The Church has consistently taught that human love "demands a total and definitive gift of persons to one another" that can only be made in marriage (CCC, 2391). Since cohabitation violates the Church's teaching about sexual love and marriage, church ministers must speak and teach about it. Doing so is an act of love for the couple.

How can pastoral ministers know if a couple is cohabiting? This can be a delicate situation. Very few diocesan policies offer suggestions for surfacing this issue during marriage preparation. Given the potentially harmful effects of cohabitation on marital stability, however, many pastoral ministers recognize a responsibility to raise the issue. Certain tip-offs (e.g., giving the same address and/or telephone number) can alert the pastoral minister that the couple may be cohabiting. Some couples are quite open about their living arrangements. A pastoral minister who is sensitive but straightforward can encourage a candid attitude and honest conversation with engaged couples. Some pastoral ministers discuss cohabitation in general terms, noting the issues it raises and the potentially harmful effects on the marriage. However it surfaces, cohabitation should be discussed early in the marriage preparation process. If it is not possible or advisable to discuss it immediately, it should be flagged as an issue to be addressed at a subsequent face-to-face meeting. Some marriage preparation programs use pre-marital inventories as a way to address such issues as low commitment and immaturity.

2. What are specific objectives in doing marriage preparation with cohabiting couples?

The general goal of marriage preparation with all couples is the same: To create a clear awareness of the essential characteristics of Christian marriage: unity, fidelity, indissolubility, fruitfulness; the priority of the sacramental grace that unites the couple to the love of Christ; and the willingness to carry out the mission proper to families in the educational, social and ecclesial areas (see Pontifical Council for the Family, *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, #45).

For cohabiting couples, a specific goal may be added: To encourage the couple to reflect on their situation and why they decided to cohabit and to provide insights into possible consequences and factors that may present special challenges to them or put them at risk for later marital disruption. To accomplish this second goal, the pastoral minister can invite the couple to reflect on their experience of living together and its implications for sacramental marriage. The following questions (or appropriate variations), drawn from FOCCUS: The Pre-Marriage Inventory, can be discussed:

1. Why did you originally choose to live together? How does the commitment you wish to make now differ from the commitment you made when you decided to cohabit?
2. How does your family and community feel about your living together? How do these feelings affect you?
3. What are your reasons for wanting to marry at this time? Is there any reluctance to marry? Is pressure from family or from children a major reason for marriage now?
4. What have you learned from your experience of living together? How do you expect your relationship to grow and change in the future? Do you expect marriage to be free from times of discontent? How well do you deal with conflict? Have you agreed on any changes in the way you will handle money after you are married?
5. Why do you want to marry in the Catholic Church at this time? Do you understand the concerns the Church has had about your cohabiting situation?
6. What does marriage as a sacrament mean to you?
7. What do you think will be the largest barriers to a lifelong marriage for you? How do you think you will be challenged by the vow of faithfulness?

After these discussions, the pastoral minister may ask the couple if the information gained from the preparation process has raised their understanding of Church teaching and cohabitation, and what else they might be able to address to help clarify the teachings. Mentors might also ask in what ways their attitudes and behaviors might change in response to any new information presented or clarified.

3. What distinctions are made among cohabiting couples?

Each of the following has distinct pastoral implications.

1. For couples who have seriously planned for marriage, and who decided to live together for practical reasons such as finance or convenience, the pastoral minister can focus on strengthening the engaged couple's understanding of sacrament and the commitment to permanence and stability in marriage.
2. For couples whose cohabitation seems more casual, and for whom no previous commitment seems to have been made, in addition to the treatment of commitment and sacrament, special attention ought to be given to overall readiness for marriage and for a permanent lifetime commitment.
3. For couples whose reasons for seeking marriage are more for the sake of appearance, or to accommodate social or family needs, and little evidence is presented to indicate either spiritual or psychosocial maturity for marriage, a postponement of further marriage preparation, at least at this time, should be considered.

4. Should cohabiting couples be encouraged to separate prior to the wedding?

Many diocesan marriage preparation policies suggest that pastoral ministers encourage cohabiting couples to separate. They recognize that this is a desirable goal to propose and to achieve—not because the Church is so concerned with the fact of separate addresses but because it declares that conjugal love needs to be definitive; “it cannot be an arrangement ‘until further notice’” (CCC, 1646).

Even if the couple chooses not to separate, they can be encouraged to live chastely before marriage. “They should see in this time of testing a discovery of mutual respect, an apprenticeship in fidelity, and the hope of receiving one another from God” (CCC, 2350). The challenge to separate or, if continuing to live together, to live chastely, can be fruitfully posed at the end of a process in which the church's teaching on marriage and sexuality is carefully explained.

Priests and pastoral ministers point out the many good reasons not to cohabit, and invite couples to follow the teachings of the Church. Priests and pastoral ministers report that couples who separate often benefit from the experience. Priests say that many couples express amazement at new insights gained through living separately. Separation can give the couple new perspectives on their relationship; it is also a tangible sign of the couple's free, loving decision to accept the Church's vision of marriage and sexuality.

Some couples are not normally asked to separate, for example, those with children. Ideally, before challenging a couple to separate the minister knows their particular circumstances and why they decided to live together. A couple may have what seem to them good reasons (e.g., finances, safety) for living together. A change in living arrangements can pose practical problems.

5. If a couple is cohabiting, can marriage be denied or delayed?

Denial of marriage—Since cohabitation is not in itself a canonical impediment to marriage, the couple may not be refused marriage solely on the basis of cohabitation. Marriage preparation may continue even if

the couple refuses to separate. Pastoral ministers can be assured that to assist couples in regularizing their situation is not to approve of cohabitation.

Delay or postponement of the marriage—Some diocesan policies note that in certain circumstances a postponement of the wedding might be in order. In these cases additional time might be needed to address the issues raised by cohabitation. For example, a concern for the impact of cohabitation on the couple's freedom to marry could be a reason to delay the marriage until this issue is sufficiently explored as part of marriage preparation.

6. Should cohabiting couples be encouraged to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation prior to their wedding?

With all couples, celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation is properly encouraged as part of marriage preparation for the Catholic party or parties. The *Catechism* states: "It is therefore appropriate for the bride and groom to prepare themselves for the celebration of their marriage by receiving the sacrament of Penance" (CCC, 1622).

7. Is it possible for cohabitation to scandalize the community?

Scandal is a multifaceted reality. In society as a whole, cohabitation neither carries the stigma nor causes the scandal that it did just two generations ago. As the bishops of Kansas point out, "As society no longer adheres to traditional moral values and norms, scandal becomes less and less a concern to many people" (*A Better Way*, p. 9). The burden of scandal falls not just on the cohabiting couple, but on our sexually permissive society. The cohabiting couple is living contrary to the Church's teaching on marriage and sexual love and by acting as if they are married when they are not, they risk scandalizing the believing community.

It is also possible to cause scandal, however, through a lack of understanding and compassion for couples in irregular situations. Whether and how couples are welcomed can mean the difference between alienation from the Church or renewed involvement. Moreover, parents and pastoral ministers may have a different opinion of how scandal occurs. Parents who were deeply distressed by their children's cohabitation are relieved when the son or daughter approaches the Church for marriage. They believe that the scandal is easing. At this point, however, priests and pastoral ministers may fear that the scandal is about to start. Both viewpoints have some merit and point to the need for understanding different perspectives on scandal and navigating the complex issues involved with grace and dignity toward all involved.

Conclusion

Many pastoral ministers are still learning how to address the issue in marriage preparation. We hope that the notes above, gathered from the USCCB's Committee on Marriage and Family, provide helpful guidance to pastoral ministers working with engaged couples. When cohabiting couples approach the Church for marriage, we encourage pastoral ministers to recognize this as a teachable moment: an occasion for evangelization. Here is a unique opportunity to help couples understand the Catholic vision of marriage. By supporting the couple's plans for the future rather than chastising them for the past or present behavior, the pastoral minister can draw a couple more deeply into the church community and the practice of their faith. Treated with sensitivity and respect, couples can be helped to understand what it means to live the vocation of Christian marriage and begin steady movement toward doing so.