

Living Together Before Marriage

During the marriage preparation process couples are asked to affirm their decision to marry in the Church. To enter into a valid marriage in the Catholic Church the bride and groom need to be free to marry and consciously choose each other as lifetime partners.

Assessing your freedom to enter marriage and your readiness to make a lifetime commitment is especially important if you are living together. Many people today, because they are afraid of divorce, believe that living together prior to marriage will lower their odds of marital problems and divorce. Researchers, however, are finding that this is not true, especially if the couple started living together before they decided to marry, or if one of the partners has cohabited with someone else before.

Social scientists have learned that some cohabitating couples slide into marriage by default rather than consciously choosing marriage. When this happens the couple has a lower level of commitment. We can all understand how this can happen. A couple falls in love and they decide to move-in together. Gradually they build a life together that includes sharing a home, acquiring possession, making friends, and maybe even having children together. As months and years pass, this couple feels bound by all that they have in common and are likely to feel pressure to stay together even if they are not sure about the future of their relationship. If the couple decides to marry we have convincing evidence that there is a good chance the couple has done so primarily because they do not want to lose the life they have. Lasting marriages will require something more. They require the couple to make a deep and fully conscious decision to give themselves totally and completely to the other for the rest of life. When couples slide into marriage, simply because it is comfortable and easier than ending a relationship, the marriage may be held together by a weakened commitment, which often does not last. As you reaffirm your decision to marry, ask yourselves these crucial questions.

- 1. What was your reason for moving in together?**
- 2. What is your reason for wanting to marry at this time?**
- 3. Are you ready to make a lifetime commitment to your fiancé? Or does getting married simply seem more convenient than not?**
- 4. Are either of you pressuring the other into marriage? Is someone else?**

5. Are you hoping marriage will resolve problems you are experiencing in your relationship?
6. Have you considered living apart during this time to better prepare for marriage? It might be a good test of your deepest desires for your relationship.
7. What is prompting you to marry in the Catholic Church?
8. Have you told the priest/deacon who is preparing you that you are living together? Make a plan to do so soon.

Entering into marriage in the Church is a sacred act for which couples prepare through prayer, learning, and reflection. This is a time for discernment. The discernment process may be hindered by the life style created by living together. Many cohabitating couples shy away from dealing with problems for fear of a break up, which seems easier than the specter of a marriage breaking up. At times, problems can be glossed over or buried with excessive use of alcohol or other drugs, working too much, fixations on outside friendships, and escaping into sexual activity. Avoiding problems with these and other behaviors can be harmful and in the end destroy relationships. We encourage you to pay special attention to the areas in your life where conflicts seem to arise and to take care not to bury or avoid dealing with conflicts. Ensure that you understand each other's points of view and that you are comfortable with how you accommodate each other and make compromises to get along.

To help you stay focused on assessing your willingness to enter a lifelong commitment to your fiancé we encourage you to abstain from sexual intercourse until after the wedding. One reason for this is that sex creates a bond that can interfere with your decision-making processes. It's easy to lose one's objectivity in the pleasurable experiences sexual intimacy brings. Another reason for abstaining from sexual intercourse is a moral one: Catholics believe that sexual intercourse is the total gift of oneself to the other and so belongs properly only within the committed relationship of life-long marriage. When two people enter into marriage, they promise to give themselves to one another wholly and completely, including the gift of fertility and the potential creation of a new person. This amazing act of self-giving binds the couple as together and forms a union suitable for the welcoming of a child. The Catholic Church asks all couples to wait until they are married to exchange the fullness of self-gift that is sexual intimacy.