

Why Isn't It Good to Live Together Before Marriage?

Making a Case for Marriage

The Situation

In 2004 more than 5 million Americans were cohabiting, that is, living together in a sexual relationship without marriage. This compares to 500,000 in 1970. ("The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America 2005," David Popenoe and Barbara Whitehead, National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, <http://marriage.rutgers.edu>, p.21, 22)

Currently, 60% of all marriages are preceded by cohabitation. (Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, "Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts in the U.S.," *Population Studies* 54, 2000)

Fewer than half of cohabiting unions end in marriage. (Popenoe and Whitehead, "Should We Live Together?" 2002, p.6, <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/publicat.htm>)

Many couples believe-mistakenly-that cohabitation will lower their risk of divorce. Since many are the children of divorce, or have other family members or friends who have divorced, this is a widespread and understandable misconception.

Other reasons for living together include convenience, financial savings, companionship and security, and a desire to move away from the family of origin.

What social science says about cohabitation

On average, marriage preceded by cohabitation is 46% more likely to end in divorce. (Popenoe and Whitehead, "Should We Live Together?" 2002, p. 4, citing 1992 study by Alfred DeMaris & K.

Vaninadha Rao, "Premarital Cohabitation & Subsequent Marital Stability in the U.S.: A Reassessment," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54)

The risk is greatest for "serial" cohabitators who have had multiple relationships. Some studies indicate that those who live together with definite plans for marriage are at minimal risk; however, there are no positive effects from cohabiting. (Popenoe and Whitehead, "Should We Live Together?" p. 5-6)

Social scientists have tried to determine whether some of the risk is due to the selection effect, i.e., that people who cohabit are already those who are more likely to divorce. While research shows the selection influence, most social scientists emphasize the causal effect, that is, cohabitation itself increases the chance of future marital problems and divorce. (Anne-Marie Ambert, "Cohabitation & Marriage: How are they related," 2005, p.18-19, www.vifamily.ca/library/cft/cohabitation.pdf; Stanley, Kline, & Markman, "The Inertia Hypothesis: Sliding vs. Deciding in the Development of Risk for Couples in Marriage," p. 6-8,

www.bgsu.edu/organizations/cfdr/cohabitation/lead_papers/inertia_hypothesis.pdf)

Cohabitation usually favors one partner over the other. Studies find that cohabitators are unequally committed. Often, the more committed partner is willing to put up with poor communication, unequal treatment, insecurity and abuse. Typically, women are more vulnerable, since they tend to be more committed. (Anne-Marie Ambert, "Cohabitation & Marriage: How are they related," 2005, p.13-15)

Cohabitation puts children at risk. Forty percent of cohabiting households include children. After five years, one-half of these couples will have broken up, compared to 15% of married parents. (Whitehead, "Patterns & Predictors of Success & Failure in Marriage," p.7, from the 2005 colloquium "Promoting & Sustaining Marriage as a Community of Life & Love")

Church teaching/pastoral response

Church teaching on cohabitation reflects its belief about the dignity of marriage. Marital love is an image of God's love for humanity (Catechism of the Catholic Church #1604) and Christian marriage is

a sign of Christ's union with the Church (Catechism #1617). This union can never be temporary or a "trial"; it is permanently faithful.

Every act of sexual intercourse is intended by God to express love, commitment and openness to life in the total, unreserved gift of the spouses to each other. Premarital sexual intercourse is sinful because it violates the dignity of persons and the nuptial meaning and purpose of sexuality (United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, p. 406). It cannot express what God intended. Rather, it says something false--a total commitment that the couple does not yet have. This total commitment is possible only in marriage, "the covenant of conjugal love freely and consciously chosen, whereby a man and woman accept the intimate community of life and love willed by God himself" (Familiaris Consortio #11).

This mutual self-giving enables the couple to become co-creators with God to bring new life into the world. The gift of sexual intercourse has two purposes: to express and strengthen marital love (unitive) and to share that love with children (procreative). Only in marriage can this total self-giving take place, and only in marriage can children be raised with the secure, committed love of a mother and father.

Pope John Paul II recognized that couples can enter into cohabitation ("free unions") for various reasons. He urged pastors and the church community to become familiar with these situations on a case-by-case basis. "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).

Following Familiaris Consortio, diocesan marriage policies that address cohabitation mostly favor an approach that integrates correction with understanding and compassion. This is an opportunity for evangelization and a teachable moment. "While couples need to be welcomed with the gospel values of love, understanding, and acceptance, they also need to be challenged by the gospel message of commitment and faithfulness." (Marriage Preparation and Cohabiting Couples, a report by the Bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family Life, <http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/cohabiting.shtml>).

Conclusion

Many young people are searching for a soulmate in a marriage partner. They want an intimate and enduring relationship where they can share their deepest dreams and desires. In a misguided effort to achieve this intimacy, they often enter into a cohabiting relationship. In so doing, they undermine their chances of attaining the very thing they most want. The Catholic Church understands this quest for intimacy, which God himself has placed within the human heart. Sexual expression is a means of achieving marital intimacy, where the spouses are committed to each other and to the marital relationship. The Catholic Church has consistently taught this truth, and social science research now confirms it.

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