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Marriage Preparation with Co-habiting Couples

Reprinted from November 1999 Homiletic and Pastoral Review with permission. Abridged from original with author's permission. The full article describes a pastoral dialogue that allows the cohabitating couple to see the reason based on their own faith why they want to separate during the marriage preparation time.

Marriage preparation is one of the most important functions of any parish. The strength of families, parishes, the Church and society depends on the strength of the marriage. I quickly became troubled because many couples were already living together. ... The question in my mind was this: "Why are couples free to follow whatever truth they want and make whatever decisions they want, even when they contradict the faith and the teaching of the Church, but priests are not free to follow the faith and teaching of the Church and are cast in the role of pastorally insensitive bad guys if we question their decisions?" ... It was not up to me to take responsibility for the maturity of their faith and decisions. If they were coming to the Church for marriage, they had to be able to take responsibility for the maturity of their own faith and decisions. ...

But what precisely was the problem? I had seen various articles that dealt with the issue of couples living together. They seemed to focus on the scandal that is caused by co-habitation and suggested a punitive approach to resolving the problem. The suggested solution was to tell the couples that co-habiting was scandalous and that if they insisted on staying together, they would only be able to have a simple ceremony in the day chapel or the rectory.

I think that this approach is well meaning but it is incomplete because it does not address the main question. The main question is not what kind of a wedding ceremony to have in order to avoid scandal, but whether or not there is reason to believe that the couple is mature enough and free enough to consent to the sacrament of marriage.

At the heart of their relationship, there is an irreconcilable contradiction between their objective lifestyle and the faith they are trying to express in their sacramental marriage. I think this contradiction demonstrates that the couple does not yet have the minimal maturity and due discretion to commit marriage.

How have I arrived at this judgement? Canon 1066 says, "*Before marriage is celebrated, it must be evident that nothing stands in the way of its valid and licit celebration.*"

Co-habitation is a sign that something probably does stand in the way of the valid and licit celebration of the marriage. That something is the "grave lack of discretion of judgement..." that we are warned about in Canon 1095.2. ...

Even if the decision to live together before marriage is made innocently or sincerely, I suggest it demonstrates a lack of this "critical faculty" ["the mature ability to grasp what the marital relationship entails"] that is necessary for valid and licit celebration of the sacrament.

That the decision to live together before marriage is a bad choice is demonstrated again by a 1999 study from the National Marriage Project based at Rutgers University. This study finds that living together increases the risk of breaking up after marriage. It increases the risk of domestic violence for women and the risk of physical and sexual abuse of children. Also, unmarried couples have a lower level of happiness and well being than married couples (Should We Live Together? What Young Adults need to Know About Co-habitation Before Marriage. <marriage@rci.rutgers.edu>).

The actual decision to live together is a symptom of this larger problem. The couple, as well as all the faithful in the Church, have a right to

the treasury of the Church's wisdom and experience. It is unconscionable for the Church's minister to gloss over this wisdom or not challenge the couple to apply it to their situation in order to help them grow and avoid the pain of divorce. This is all the more true at this time and in this society when there are already so many elements working against marriage and family.

The pastoral response is, with all patience, to work with the couple to help them to see the disconnect between their faith and their life and how this may threaten any future marriage.

The Church and her priests and other ministers are free to teach and believe what the Church teaches and believes, indeed they have a formal obligation to do so. Likewise, the couple is free to ignore this faith, or to remain ignorant of it. But if they come to the Church asking for the sacrament of marriage, then they must be ready to learn about and conform themselves to what the Church understands about the Christian life in general and about this sacrament. It is not enough for them to want a marriage ceremony with all the ecclesiastical sights and sounds. When weak marriages end in divorce, the Church is harmed and the institution of marriage weakened. Thus, the Church has a vested interest in making sure they are fully prepared, fully mature and capable of judging themselves ready for the obligations of a marital commitment.

Some will object that this approach is not "pastoral." They will ask does not this approach force the couple to seek an invalid marriage? I would respond no, we do not force the couple to seek an invalid marriage and it is the wrong question. ...

The point of entry for this process of growth is the couple's faith that brings them to the Church to request marriage. It is an evangelical moment. The minister can explain that marriage preparation is an effective and dynamic process that seeks to resolve questions and problems, not merely talk about them. ... The solution is simple. The minister can help them study the gospel and the Church's teaching about marriage and human sexuality, embrace the gift and freedom of chastity and modesty, confess any sin and go back to their single living arrangements just as if they had never made the wrong decision in the first place. Granted, if they are already civilly married or already have children, other arrangements may have to be pursued. But I think that most couples who are living together are not in this category.

Of course, the more bishops and priests preach about and publicize the danger of co-habitation, the more it will help single Catholics avoid making the wrong decision to co-habit in the first place.

On the cover of most bulletins is a sentence about marriage preparation that could be edited to say for example: "Living together before marriage is harmful to future marriage and sinful. Couples who are living together will be asked to live separately during the marriage preparation time." If they know that they will not be considered ready for marriage while still co-habiting, it will give them courage to find other solutions, based on their mature faith, to whatever perceived needs they have that make them want to co-habit in the first place. This is not an additional burden or something heroic. It is basic Christian faith and morality. ♡

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Mary shares our human condition, but in complete openness to the grace of God. Not having known sin, she is able to have compassion on every kind of weakness. She understands sinful man and loves him with a Mother's love. Precisely for this reason she is on the side of truth and shares the Church's burden in recalling always and to everyone the demands of morality...

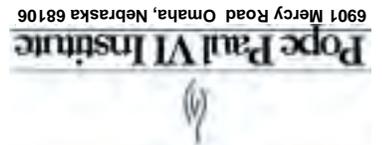
O Mary,
Mother of Mercy
watch over all people,
that the Cross of Christ
may not be emptied of its power,
that man may not stray
from the path of the good
or become blind to sin,
but may put his hope ever more fully in God
who is "rich in mercy" (Eph 2:4).
May he carry out the good works prepared
by God beforehand (cf. Eph 2:10)
and so live completely
"for the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:12)

— John Paul II, Taken from Veritatis Splendor, paragraph 120

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