

I. Appendix

1. Marriage Preparation and Cohabiting Couples

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Introduction

Today almost half the couples who come for marriage preparation in the Catholic Church are in a cohabiting relationship. Such a relationship contradicts the meaning of a sexual relationship in marriage as the total gift of oneself in fidelity, exclusivity, and permanency. Over the past twenty-five years, cohabitation has become a major social phenomenon affecting the institution of marriage and family life. In this present resource paper, the NCCB Committee on Marriage and Family builds upon the foundation provided by the 1988 handbook, *Faithful to Each Other Forever: A Catholic Handbook of Pastoral Help for Marriage Preparation*. This paper adopts the same two-part structure: empirical data and pastoral approaches. Its purpose is to impart information that is current and relevant to all who participate in the Church's ministry with engaged couples, including those in diocesan leadership who might be in the process of revising their marriage preparation policies. Its purpose is to also offer a descriptive overview of common pastoral approaches now being taken in U.S. dioceses to the various situations and issues connected with the phenomenon of cohabiting couples. It is a resource intended to help: 1) bishops and diocesan staff who are reviewing and possibly revising their marriage preparation policies; 2) priests, deacons, pastoral ministers, lay volunteers who want to become more informed and effective in working with cohabiting couples who come to marriage preparation programs; and 3) those who are responsible for in-service and continuing education of clergy and laity who carry out the Church's ministry of marriage preparation.¹

Part One: Empirical Information about Cohabitation and Marriage

Those couples who are in a cohabiting relationship and who come to the Church for marriage preparation represent only a percentage of the total cohabiting population. This section provides highlights of what social science has discovered about cohabitation in general and with specific reference to cohabiting couples who eventually marry:

¹ United States Catholic Conference, Inc. "An Information Report on New Realities and Pastoral Practices." 1999. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Web. www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/marriage-preparation/cohabiting.cfm 27. Accessed 21 November 2017.

- 11% of couples in the United States cohabited in 1965--74; today, a little over half of all first marriages are preceded by cohabitation.
- Across all age groups there has been a 45% increase in cohabitation from 1970 to 1990. It is estimated that 60% to 80% of the couples coming to be married are cohabiting.
- Overall, fewer persons are choosing to be married today; the decision to cohabit as a permanent or temporary alternative to marriage is a primary reason.
- Only 53% of first cohabiting unions result in marriage. The percentage of couples marrying from second and third cohabitations is even lower.
- All first-world countries are experiencing the phenomenon of cohabitation and the corrosive impact it has on marriage as the center of family.

The profile of the average cohabiting household is both expected and somewhat surprising. Persons with low levels of religious participation, and those who have experienced disruption in their parents' marriages or a previous marriage of their own are likely candidates for cohabitation. Persons with lower levels of education and earning power cohabit more often and marry less often than those with higher education. The average cohabiting household stays together just over one year and children are part of two-fifths of these households. Men are more often serial or repeat cohabiters, moving from woman to woman, while women tend to cohabit only one time.

The declining significance of marriage as the center of family is in large part a result of growing secularization and individualization in first-world cultures. Aversion to long term commitments is one of the identifying characteristics of these trends and a major reason for cohabitation. Key milestones previously associated with marriage, such as sexual relationships, child bearing and establishing couple households, now occur without marriage. Individuals choose to cohabit under the influence of these cultural values but also for very individual reasons. Some are seeking to ensure a good future marriage and believe that a "trial marriage" will accomplish this; many are simply living together because it seems more economically feasible or because it has become the social norm. In general, cohabiters are not a homogenous or monolithic group, however fully their general characteristics can be described. The reasons for choosing cohabitation are usually mixed: cohabitation may be in equal parts an alternative to marriage and an attempt to prepare for marriage. There are both broad cultural reasons and a range of individual reasons for cohabitation which include changing values on family and decline in the importance of marriage and declining

confidence in religious and social institutions to provide guidance as well as fear of or disbelief in long-term commitment and desire to test the relationship.²

Overall, less than half of cohabiting couples ever marry. Those who do choose to marry are in some part counter-culture to the growing view that it is certainly not necessary and perhaps not good to marry. Those who choose to marry instead of continuing to cohabit are the "good news" in a culture that is increasingly anti-marriage. Those cohabiting couples who move to marriage seem to be the "best risk" of a high risk group: they have fewer risk factors than those cohabiters who choose not to marry. Even so, they still divorce at a rate 50% higher than couples who have never cohabited. They are a high risk group for divorce and their special risk factors need to be identified and addressed, especially at the time of marriage preparation, if the couples are to build solid marriages. Only 50% to 60% of cohabiters marry the persons with whom they cohabit at a given time. 76% report plans to marry their partner but only about half do. The percentage of couples marrying after second and third cohabitation is even lower.

Individuals who choose to cohabit have certain attitudes, issues and patterns that lead them to make the decision to cohabit. These same attitudes, issues and patterns often become the predisposing factors to put them at high risk for divorce when they do choose to move from cohabitation to marriage. The cohabitation experience itself creates risk factors or bad habits that can sabotage the subsequent marriage. These attitudes and patterns can be identified and brought to the couple preparing for marriage for examination, decision-making, skill-building, change. Without creating "self-fulfilling prophecies," those preparing cohabiting couples for marriage can help them identify and work with issues around commitment, fidelity, individualism, pressure, appropriate expectations.

Part Two

Pastoral Issues with Cohabiting Couples in Marriage Preparation

Preparation for marriage begins long before the couple approaches the priest or pastoral minister. In his Apostolic Exhortation *On the Family (Familiaris Consortio, #81)*, Saint John Paul II strongly urges that young people be educated about chastity, fidelity, and the meaning of marriage as a sacrament. Religious education, parish based catechetical programs, and chastity curricula in elementary schools are all part of this effort.

² For a complete listing, reference "Part One: Empirical Information About Cohabitation and Marriage."

In the high school years, adolescents can be given the spiritual foundation that helps them to make informed, faith-filled and life-giving choices throughout their lives. With this foundation, it can be hoped that couples will choose not to cohabit before marriage. The following pastoral suggestions are intended to provide general guidance only to priests, deacons, and pastoral ministers who prepare couples for marriage.

In section 81 of *Familiaris Consortio*, Saint John Paul II points out that de facto free unions (those unions without any publicly recognized institutional bond) are an increasing concern. He recognizes that various factors can lead a couple into a free union which includes 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. The Pope continues: "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).

Working with cohabiting couples who approach the church for marriage preparation, two extremes are to be avoided: 1) Immediately confronting the couple and condemning their behavior and 2) Ignoring the cohabitation aspect of their relationship. During marriage preparation, the Church connects with more young adults than at any other time outside Sunday Mass. "For some, this may be their first step back into church life." Marriage preparation is an opportunity for evangelization and catechesis. 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 (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2391).

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 (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 or 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 invites the couple to reflect on their experience of living together and its implications for sacramental marriage.

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 because the Church declares that conjugal love needs to be definitive; "it cannot be an arrangement 'until further notice'" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #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" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #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.

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. However, some couples are not normally asked to separate, e.g., 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.

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" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1622). It should be noted that absolute moral rectitude is not demanded for sacraments to be celebrated. *Familiaris Consortio* offers this guidance: "The faith of the person asking the church for marriage can exist in different degrees, and it is the primary duty of pastors to bring about a rediscovery of this faith and to nourish it and bring it to maturity. But pastors must also understand the reasons that lead the church also to admit to the celebration of marriage those who are imperfectly disposed" (#68). The document further points out that the baptized couple, by their right intention, have already accepted God's plan regarding marriage and, at least implicitly, consent to what the church intends to do when it celebrates marriage. It cautions: "As for wishing to lay down further criteria for admission to the ecclesial celebration of marriage, criteria that would concern the level of faith for those to be married, this would above all involve grave risks" (#68).

The cohabiting couple is living contrary to the Church's teaching on marriage and sexual love. 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.

The Code of Canon Law gives no special consideration for marriages of cohabiting couples. The general norm states that the pastor and the ecclesial community are to see that the couple has a "fruitful liturgical celebration of marriage clarifying that the spouses signify and share in the mystery of unity and of fruitful love that exists between Christ and the Church" (c. 1063, 3). The *Catechism* states: "Since marriage establishes the couple in a public state of life in the Church, it is fitting that its celebration be public, in the framework of a liturgical celebration, before the priest (or a witness authorized by the Church), the witnesses, and the assembly of the faithful" (1663).

Conclusion

Since widespread cohabitation is a fairly recent phenomenon, many pastoral ministers are still learning how to address the issue in marriage preparation. The Committee on Marriage and Family hopes that this paper provides helpful guidance, but it acknowledges that more can be done. One challenge is to provide additional formation for those who prepare couples for marriage so that they can more effectively handle the issues raised by cohabitation. Another challenge is learning how to discuss cohabitation in the various settings in which marriage preparation takes place.

Above all, when cohabiting couples approach the church for marriage, we encourage pastoral ministers to recognize this as a teachable moment. Here is a unique opportunity to help couples understand the Catholic vision of marriage. Here, too, is an opportunity for evangelization. By supporting the couple's plans for the future rather than chastising them for the past, 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 and live the vocation of Christian marriage.