

Living Together: Questions and Answers Regarding Cohabitation and the Church's Moral Teaching

(adapted from the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference)

We congratulate you on your engagement and want to offer a word of encouragement to you during this special period of preparation for marriage. While there are many issues which you will discuss over the course of your preparation period, one important area in which many priests and couples have shared their concerns with us is that of engaged couples living together before marriage. While many in our society may see no problem with this arrangement, living together and having sexual relations before marriage can never be reconciled with what God expects of us. In addition, countless studies have shown that couples who live together before marriage have higher rates of divorce and a poorer quality of marital relationship than those who do not.

Your engagement is meant to be a time of grace and growth in preparing for your marriage. In the months ahead, we urge all engaged couples who are living together to separate, and if that is not feasible, to at least cease sexual activity and separate rooms or beds. All Catholics should seek to be reconciled with God and the Church by going to confession and by going to Mass and Holy Communion regularly. Further, living chastely during your remaining months of engagement will teach you many things about one another. It will help you to grow in the virtues of generous love, sacrificial giving, self-restraint and good communication – virtues which are essential for a good and lasting marriage. We pray that as you seek God and his way more deeply, you will be rewarded with an abundance of his grace.

1. What is cohabitation?

“Cohabitation” is commonly referred to as “living together.” It describes the relationship of a man and woman who are sexually active and share a household, though they are not married.

2. Why is cohabitation such a concern for the Church?

As you prepare for marriage, you will speak with him about many issues. But the Church is particularly concerned about cohabitation because the practice is so common today and because, in the long run, it is causing great unhappiness for families in the Church. This is true, above all, because – even though society may approve of the practice – cohabitation simply cannot be squared with God's plan for marriage. This may be why most couples who live together before marriage find married life difficult to sustain for very long.

The Church does not invent laws. It passes on and interprets what God has revealed through the ages. No one in the Church has the right to change what Jesus has taught. To do so would be to deprive people of saving truths that were meant for all time. Our Christian faith teaches that a sexual relationship belongs only in marriage. Sex outside of marriage shows disrespect for the sacrament of marriage, the sacredness of sex, and human dignity.

3. We have good reasons for living together before our wedding. Why can't the Church just accept that?

The Church cares for you as a parent cares for a beloved son or daughter. Knowing that cohabitation increases a couples' chance of marital failure, the Church wants to protect you and preserve your happiness. Besides, most couples don't really evaluate the reasons they give to justify their decision.

Reason 1: “It’s more convenient for us.”

“Convenience” is a good thing, but it’s not the basis for making a decision that will affect your entire life. Married life is sometimes inconvenient and even demanding. Cohabitation for convenience is poor preparation for that kind of commitment. Research bears this out. Studies show that those who live together before marriage tend to prefer “change,” “experimentation” and open-ended lifestyles – all of which could lead to instability in marriage. One study, conducted by researchers at the University of Chicago and the University of Michigan, concluded that couples who cohabit tend to experience superficial communication and uncommitted decision-making once they are married. Cohabitation for convenience does not allow for the careful thought and adequate “space” necessary for making wise life decisions.

Reason 2: “We’re trying to save money for the wedding, so living together is more economical.”

Sure, you might save the price of monthly rent, but you’re sacrificing something more valuable. Engagement is more than just time to plan the party. It is a time for deeper discussion and more thorough reflection, which are best carried out in a detached way. Couples who are living together do not have the luxury of such detachment. So whatever expenses you save, you’ll likely pay more in the end. Dr. Joyce Brothers said it well in an article on cohabitation: “short-term savings are less important than investing in a lifetime relationship.”

Reason 3: “Because of the high divorce rate, we want to see if things work out first.”

Studies consistently show that couples who live together score significantly lower in both marital communications and overall satisfaction. On the surface, a trial run at marriage may seem to make sense, allowing one to screen out less compatible mates. But it doesn’t work out that way. Couples who live together before marriage actually have a 50% greater chance of divorce than those who don’t. And about 60% of couples who cohabit break up without marrying. Living together before marriage is different from living together in marriage, because there is no binding commitment to support the relationship.

Reason 4: “We need to get to know one another first. Later we’ll start having kids.”

Cohabitation is actually the worst way to get to know another person, because it shortcuts the true development of lasting friendship. Those who live together before marriage often report an over-reliance on sexual expression and less emphasis on conversation and other ways of communication – ways that ultimately lead to a more fulfilling sexual union after marriage. Traditionally, the process of dating or “courtship” has led couples to a deeper appreciation of one another through conversation, shared ideals and dreams, and a mutual understanding of one another’s values.

4. Why does the Church interfere in the sex lives of couples?

Sex is intensely private and personal, but it also has deep moral and social dimensions. Sex works as a primary bonding agent in families and the family is the building block of society. Sexual rights and wrongs influence the health and happiness of individuals, families and neighborhoods. That’s why sexual behavior has always been the subject of many civil laws. The Church, of course, wishes to safeguard the family and society. But, more than that, the Church wishes to safeguard your relationship with your future spouse and with God. Sex is the act that seals and renews the couple’s marriage covenant before God. Sexual sins, then, are not just between a man and a woman, but between the couple and God. And that’s the Church’s responsibility. Sex is not simply a private

matter. If it's between you and God, it's between you and the Church. You need to ask yourself: "When do I stop being a Christian? When I close the bedroom door? When does my relationship with God cease to matter?"

5. But, really, how does what we do with our own bodies affect our relationship with each other and our spiritual relationship with God?

The gift of your body in sexual intercourse is a profound symbol of the giving of your whole self. In making love, the husband and wife are saying to one another in "body language" what they said to each other at the altar on their wedding day: "I am yours, for life!" God created sex to be physically pleasurable and emotionally fulfilling. But it is even greater than all that. It is, above all, the deepest sign of the complete gift of self that a husband and wife pledge to each other. This mutual gift empowers the couple to become co-creators with God in giving life to a new person, a baby.

According to God's design, the gift of sexual union has two primary purposes: strengthening married love and sharing that love with children. The only "place" where this total self-giving between a man and a woman is to take place is in marriage. It is the only "place" where children can be raised with the secure, committed love of a mother and a father. So sexual intimacy belongs only in marriage. Outside of marriage, sex is a lie. The action says: "I give you my whole self" – but the man and woman are really holding back their commitment, their fertility, and their relationship with God. Before giving your body to another person, you need to give your whole life, and you need to receive your spouse's whole life in return – and that can only happen in marriage.

6. Why can't I just follow my conscience if I believe living together is okay?

People can be wrong in matters of conscience, and people often are. Where our self-interest is concerned, our capacity for self-deception is huge. Here, as in everything we do, we need an objective standard to tell us if our conscience is properly formed and able to make right judgments. Morality is not a matter of opinion or "gut feeling." Conscience is God's voice, speaking the truth deep within your heart. It's unlikely – if not impossible – that God would contradict His own commandments just for your convenience or desires. You are acting in good conscience when you choose to do what God intends. The choice to live together outside a marriage is always wrong and sinful.

7. Why does the Church claim that living together is a scandal to others?

Many couples are cohabiting, but just because everyone does something doesn't make it right or any less serious. A couple's choice to live together is not simply made in isolation. It affects everyone in relationship with these two people – parents, brothers, sisters, friends, and even other members of the parish. A cohabiting couple implicitly communicates that there is nothing wrong breaking God's law. This can be especially misleading to young children – nieces, nephews, and children of friends – who are impressionable and whose moral reasoning is still developing.

8. Why should we need to separate now? It's just an arbitrary rule of the Church.

The Church's teaching on cohabitation is not an "arbitrary" rule. Living together before marriage is a sin because it violates God's commandments and the law of the Church. St. Paul lists this sin – technically called "fornication" among the sins (whether within or outside cohabitation) that can keep a person from reaching heaven (see 1 Corinthians 6:9). Cohabitation works against the heart's deepest desires and greatly increases the chances of a failed marriage. If you are honest with

yourself, every practical consideration will tell you that separating before marriage is the right thing to do. It is a decision to turn away from sin and to follow Christ and His teaching. That is always the right decision. But it's a good decision for other important reasons, too: it will strengthen your marriage, it will deepen your friendship, it will foster deeper intimacy and communion, it will build up your problem-solving and communication skills, and it will give your marriage a greater chance for success.

You may think you are unique and that your passion for each other will never wane. But that's what most couples think. No one goes into marriage planning for a breakup; yet a majority of couples today do break up. You want to be one of the exceptional couples who not only succeed in marriage, but also live together in happiness and fulfillment. Some couples who are living together think that separation before marriage is artificial or meaningless. Some fear that halting sexual activity will be harmful to the relationship. But this is rarely the case. Sometimes in marriage, too, a sexual relationship will have to be suspended for a time due to illness, military service, business travel, or the good of a spouse. Relationships not only survive this, but actually grow stronger. God rewards such sacrifices with graces for a good relationship. Abstaining from sex will also enable you to rely on other means of communication, which ultimately will empower you to get to know each other in a deeper, lasting way.

10. What good will following the Church's teachings do for us anyway?

Catholic teaching in this matter brings rich blessings to those couples who willingly accept it. The Good News of Jesus frees you to enjoy intimacy even more:

- by appreciating your spouse as a person, not an object
- by living in a stable, secure, permanent, and faithful relationship
- by expressing true, committed love rather than simply satisfying a physical urge
- by living in a state of graces as a child of God, and avoiding mortal sin.

Married life has a special place in God's plan. Like everything good, it requires sacrifices. But they're small compared to the rewards. Seek first the Kingdom of God; everything else you desire will be given to you – and more!

Questions for Reflection and Prayer:

1. As an engaged couple, why did you choose to cohabit before marriage?
2. What have the two of you learned from your experience of living together? What have you learned about yourselves as a couple and as individuals?
3. What is the driving force behind your decision to marry at this time? What has changed in the relationship and made you wish to marry and have your marriage blessed in this Church?
4. Was there a previous reluctance or hesitation to marry? If so, why? Have those issues been completely resolved?
5. Why are you seeking marriage in the Catholic Church?
6. What does marriage as a sacrament mean to the two of you?
7. How do you see your faith and love for each other as an intimate part of your marriage?
8. How do you want your marriage to be open to life?