



Co-habiting not good prep for marriage

Published February 12, 2011

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Valentine's Day is upon us again, so it's a good time to reflect on the current state of relationships. There are now three main ways for men and women to live together, representing various degrees of commitment in descending order: sacramental marriage, civil marriage, and co-habitation, commonly called "living together."

Sacramental marriage usually takes place in a church, with the couple vowing before God and the assembled that they will love each other unconditionally, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, for better or worse, until death parts them. Civil marriage usually takes place before a justice of the peace and a few witnesses at City Hall, with the couples vowing fidelity to each other. God is not included. Living together involves no vows at all.

In December 2010, the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada released a report that noted the state of relationships is rapidly changing. In the 1970s, 85% of women's first unions were marriage, and only 15% co-habitation. In the 1990s, it was 50:50. My own observation, having been married since 1976, and having conducted marriage-preparation courses with more than 2,500 couples since 1988, is that these statistics are accurate. In 2010, at least 75% of the couples I saw who were getting married in a church were already living together.

Co-habitation goes against long-standing religious teachings on marriage, not just in Christianity but in every major religion. Fifty years ago in western culture it was called "living in sin." How antiquated that notion seems now.

I understand why couples co-habit. It is certainly not because they are bad people. If you and your partner are paying \$700 a month each for your separate apartments, it makes financial sense to live together. If two men share an apartment, some people will assume they are gay. Many couples have divorced parents, and so they understandably want to try co-habiting before making a commitment. Many women see co-habitation as a stepping stone to marriage, and some men like the sexual convenience without having to make a commitment.

Research shows the majority of co-habiting couples split up in the first three years. Statistics Canada states, "Starting conjugal life in a common-law relationship, as opposed to a marriage, sharply increases the probability of this first union ending in separation." Currently, the divorce rates for second marriages are even higher than first marriages.

If co-habitation, on a day-to-day basis, is virtually the same as being married, but with no commitment, it is much easier to split up. But this is like a first divorce. If a person co-habits again, their chances of splitting up are higher than the first time. If someone has lived with and left several different partners before getting married, their marriage will most likely not last.

This sharply contradicts the popular notion that living together increases the chances of having a happy marriage. In fact, co-habiting couples report less relationship satisfaction and more conflict than married couples.

I worry about our society's future. Is marriage disappearing? There are now more co-habiting than married couples. Research shows that chaotic home life marked by revolving-door partners results in higher rates of poverty and health, educational and emotional problems for children.

Churches don't condemn couples for living together, and neither do I. Rather, when they come to us, we celebrate that they now want to get married. I don't have any solutions to growing co-habitation, but I believe young couples should be made aware that co-habitation, contrary to popular logic, may not be good preparation for marriage.

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