

Cohabiting Couples

Controversial topics. In public, and frequently in private, as Christians we are often unwilling and ill equipped to engage in discussions regarding controversial issues, particularly when it concerns sex. So, we simply allow our culture to have all the words, while we remain silent – in our families, schools, friendships, and even in our churches. This weekend, several teens from our parish are on a Theology of the Body retreat – learning about sex. That is, learning about the beautiful and rich deposit of teachings from sacred scripture and the traditions of our faith concerning the dignity and identity of the human person as male and female and God’s design for human sexuality. For my homily at the retreat Mass, I was asked to address Cohabitation. However, I think this topic should not be limited to only our teens. Therefore, I would like to give a slightly modified version of the homily to you now.

Cohabitation is living together in an intimate manner, as a man and a woman, outside of marriage or prior to marriage. In researching recent sociological studies for this homily, I was shocked to discover that 8 out of 10 couples who live together today outside of marriage end their relationships. 75% of couples who live together prior to marriage (such as during their engagement period) end up divorcing. 75% divorce rate for couples who cohabit prior to marriage! As a priest, I knew that cohabitation was not good marriage preparation. Unfortunately, I have seen its ill effects upon far too many lives: the couple, the individuals involved, and the children of these relationships. However, I was surprised to find out that 3 of every 4 couples who cohabitated before marriage end up divorcing!

Why? Why such a high divorce rate and why is cohabitation not good preparation for marriage? Recent studies offer many factors: some psychological, some social, some financial, and so forth. I would like to offer a few observations from a spiritual perspective. However, I have posted on the parish website a summary of some of the studies from the books I reviewed for this homily, along with some other helpful information and a copy of this homily. Please take the time to dig a little deeper for yourselves and your loved ones.

Sin. The effects of sin can damage our lives and our relationships. I think we can all acknowledge this truth. Regardless of the practice of many people in our culture today, sex outside of marriage is and always has been

understood as a grave sin from a biblical and Christian position. Look at just one passage from the bible: St. Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians 6:18-20: "Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside of one's body; whoever sins sexually sins against their body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body."

Just because we pretend something is not a sin, doesn't mean that the sin simply goes away and doesn't have a negative effect upon our lives. One of the negative effects of sin is that it distances us from God, from one another, and even from ourselves. Thing is, we may not "feel" the distance. In fact, we may "feel" close to God and each other, even while we are living in sin. However, sin even damages our ability to discern correctly the state of our own relationship with God and one another. And when we are engaged in a pattern or lifestyle of sin, as is presumed to be the case in cohabitating situations, this distance from God can also damage our minds' and hearts' ability to properly discern if the person before us is the right person for our lives.

The right person. Isn't the whole purpose of dating another person before marriage, to discover if this individual is the right person? The right person for what? Not just for marriage, but to help us get to heaven. As Christians, we have always understood that the ultimate purpose for marriage is about two individuals helping one another get to heaven. That is, God brings two people together, in freedom, so they can help each other, with Christ's grace, to get through the ups and downs of this life, into the life of heaven. Along these lines, then, in making such a critical life choice - finding the person who God intends for us - shouldn't a couple avoid behaviors and a lifestyle prior to marriage that could seriously damage their ability to find the right person, not only for marriage, but for their eternal life in heaven and the eternal lives of their children?

For instance, faith versus other values. Many couples report that one of the main reasons they decide to cohabit is because of finances. They are under the assumption that combining their household expenses will save them money, as they prepare for marriage and for purchasing a home together. Regardless of whether this is true or not, isn't this essentially choosing finances over one's faith? Granted, the couple may have rationalized between themselves why cohabitation is acceptable for them.

Nevertheless, objectively, it is still taught and believed from the bible and by the Christian community to be sinful and not good for marriage. Thus, finances become more important than one's faith and values. This decision and action sets a very bad precedent for the married life. If a couple can choose the goals of money over the goals of religion prior to marriage, what will keep them from choosing other things over the practice of their faith during their married life? What is to keep them from choosing not to go to church on Sunday mornings, over sleeping in or playing golf? What is to keep them from working excessive hours during the week in order to support a certain desired lifestyle, over spending more time with each other and their family? What is to keep them from choosing another person instead of their spouse?

In fact, on this last point, married couples who cohabitated prior to their wedding have a much higher rate of infidelity than married couples who did not cohabit prior to their wedding. And this makes sense. If the underpinning of fidelity to a spouse are one's faith and values, and a couple has been "unfaithful" to their religious beliefs prior to marriage due to cohabitation, then it isn't much of a leap for one of them to be unfaithful to their spouse with another person. In this scenario, why spend a year or two saving on finances by cohabitating, when it sets a precedent that could put the entire married life at greater risks of infidelity and divorce? Put succinctly, if you cross a line once in your ethics and values, it not only becomes easier to cross this line again, but also to cross other lines, even lines much farther away from one's core values.

But usually, lines have already been crossed long before the decision for cohabitation. The process goes something like this: Individuals meet, start to date, over a series of dates they cross a series of lines in regard to pre-marital activity until they cross over all the way, then they find themselves staying over night with each other more and more often, until one of them says, "Hey, you know...I am over here all the time anyways, we should move in together." In this scenario, there is a slow digression away from one's Christian's principles and values, accompanied by a gradual desensitizing of one's conscience regarding not only the effects of these sins but also the very nature of the sins – until the very reality of the sins become all together doubtful or even seen as a good.

Look at this way: A couple wants to build a good sturdy front porch. They go to the hardware store and ask for 10 pillars to support their porch. But,

since they don't have enough money they buy only two good pillars of high quality, and purchase 8 pillars of lesser quality, some of which are even rotting. The store carpenter tries to convince them otherwise, telling them that if they want the porch to last they should wait until they have enough money to get good quality. However, in their haste, they decide to buy now, thinking the clerk really doesn't know what he is talking about. This couple puts the integrity of their new porch at risks of collapse, due to things such as money, patience, and pride - trusting their own opinions and preferences over the knowledge and experience of an expert.

The bottom line when it comes to cohabitation: do we trust in the expert? Do we trust in God, his Word for our lives, and his design for our sexuality and marriages? And...are we willing to be obedient to his words, even when it appears to be much easier and convenient and better to follow other ways?

So...what to do? Live your faith, and live it out loud. Be very clear to everyone one you date, what you value and believe, what you will do and will not do, then avoid the occasions and opportunities where you know you might be weakened and compromise the ways of your faith. From the very first date, this will send a very clear message to any potential future spouse. And you will, indeed, have a much greater chance of finding the right person – the one who will help you and your children get to heaven...because all those who do not share your values and religious beliefs or are not willing to practice them with you...they will move on and away from you. The only one who will stay, and not only cherish what you cherish, but honor and protect your values and you, this person is the right one sent to you by God.

But what to do if you should find yourself in a situation where you are cohabitating? Never give up hope, and don't walk away from the opportunities that good marriage preparation can offer you. Studies have shown that engaged couples who are mentored by trained married mentor couples, using an objective pre-marital inventory, have a much higher rate of marital success and fulfillment than couples who get no or very little marriage preparation. Here at St. John Neumann we have a solid marriage preparation process. Engaged couples meet one on one with married mentor couples over the course of several meetings, using FOCCUS – a pre-marital inventory geared toward helping engaged couples learn and discuss a variety of skills critical to a life-long union of love, such as: life-style expectations, careers, friends and interests, personal issues, personality differences,

compatibility issues, communication, problem solving, values & beliefs, religion, in-laws and extended family issues, sexuality, and finances.

As your pastor, I try to take engaged couples where they are, when they contact me inquiring about marriage. And with God's grace, I pray that I am able to help them arrive at their wedding day much better prepared for a life-long union of love, and capable of helping one another, with God's grace and the strength of their faith, to get to heaven.

But what to do if you are married but cohabitated prior to marriage... and after hearing this homily, you are thinking to yourselves: "Oh God...what have we done!" Again, never lose hope. Indeed, we are all sinners in need of God's grace. The good news is Christ makes his grace available to all. So, no matter your past, use the grace that God wants to give to all married couples. Again, we are blessed here at St. John Neumann to be able to facilitate and benefit from God's graces in so many ways: go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, join a men's or women's faith sharing group – gather with other men and women and grow with them, through scripture and the traditions of our faith, in your roles as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. Join as a couple, one of our Growing In Faith Together groups. Attend bible study together. Of course, attend Mass together and receive the Eucharist together, support each other in raising your children in the ways of our faith. Read together good spiritual books – particularly books on marriage, such as the Theology of The Body and Natural Family Planning. Learn and practice good communication and conflict-resolution skills. Go regularly on date nights – just the two of you. Surround yourself with friends who model solid & healthy marriage. And...Pray together as a couple, as a family and as a community of believers.

On this last point...let us bow our heads and make these prayers our own – pray them either for yourselves as married couples, for your future spouse, or for married couples you know need this prayer:

“Thank you Lord for teaching me how to make You the center of our marriage. Humble us to grow beyond our ego, pride and past hurts. Help us to establish and grow the love of Christ in us, to show each other kindness, trust, patience, forgiveness and divine love. Help me Lord to honor the good qualities of my spouse. Teach me how to pray for my spouse.

Empower us with courage to speak up for anything out of order in our relationship. Soften my tongue and heart where it has become like stone. Strengthen my flesh and self-esteem where it has become weak.

Whenever we lose gratitude and passion for each other, guide us in ways to relight the candle of love that can burn out from stress and time. Bless us to not only see, but honor one another and you. Help us to not only listen, but hear each other and you. Bless us to not only cherish one another, but nourish each other's dreams and spiritual gifts, and your dreams for us.

We surrender our marriage and our personal power struggles to you. Teach us to be less controlling and more collaborative in our decisions and problem solving skills. Quicken our minds so we may know how to please, protect and provide for each other. Bless our union to grow stronger, wiser, peaceful and more committed to one another and you. Bring into our lives a circle of friends who can be examples of healthy committed marriages. Let our children, family and friends see Christ through our example.

Lord cover our home with your grace, mercy and favor. Today is a new day that I choose to love, respect and serve my spouse and you. Give us both the faith, hope and love to not give up on each other or you and your ways. Amen.” (written by Jewel Diamond Taylor)