

## On Cohabitation I

“Training for divorce,” Chuck Colson called it. That sums up the problem neatly. I’m tempted to say that “mortal sin” sums it up even more neatly, but there are distinctions which need to be made. “While premarital sexual activity and cohabitation can not simply be identified, many engaged couples engage in sexual intercourse without living together, and it is possible to share the same residence without a sexually active relationship.” This is from a document of the Archdiocese on marriage. I think it might be better to use biblical language in this matter, and say “fornication” instead of “premarital sexual activity.” So even though it is true that fornication and cohabitation are not necessarily the same, only one out of 162 cohabiting couples surveyed in the Archdiocese were not fornicating. A few thoughts on the sin of cohabitation are important at the outset.

When a pastor is faced with the objective sin of cohabitation of some members of his flock, he must take into account a number of factors: Whether they are living as brother and sister or not, whether there are children involved, whether they are somewhat or wholly trapped and cannot find a way out for a season; whether other family considerations are a part of the problem. In other words, sometimes the pastor can propose a cure which is worse than the disease. For those who would like the Church or its ministers to “kick ‘em out,” or slap interdictions on such couples; they will be inevitably disappointed. Granted, sometimes there is absolutely no excuse for cohabitation and if necessary, applying some corrective sanctions to the couple is warranted. But frequently, couples get themselves into a jam which is not easily solved by sanctions or anything else. Time, much prayer, thought, and much hard work are necessary to get out of such a predicament, and to get out with one’s Faith intact.

But even though it is imperative for those who are not cohabitating to refrain from judging those couples who are, still, there is a scandal given by cohabitation, which is one reason why the pastor must do all in his power to bring couples who cohabit out of such a state. The scandal will not go away until such time as the cohabitation ceases.

The word “scandal” comes from a Latin word meaning “a rock in the path.” In other words, it’s something you trip over. The scandal of cohabitation affects primarily the young, who become easily persuaded that marriage is unnecessary in order to live with someone of the opposite sex. That cohabitation then devalues marriage in our culture is no surprise. So besides the obvious example of placing oneself in an occasion of sin (which might not always be the case, but it would be the real exception if it were not), the harm done to the institution and sacrament of matrimony is significant. The more people cohabit, the more damage is done. So the aspect of scandal is just one reason why cohabitation is to be avoided at all costs, and discontinued as soon as humanly possible. What follows are some other reasons.

Joseph Pearce wrote for *First Things*, “Research as part of a Cornell University study revealed that the average time couples spend ‘living together’ is less than two years and that only 4 per cent of cohabiting couples stay together for more than ten years. Half of all cohabiting ‘unions’ end within a year, and 90 per cent within five years. As ever, it is the children who suffer from this laissez-faire approach to relationships. Within five years of the birth of a child, 52 per cent of cohabitants split up. This compares to 25 per cent of those cohabiting couples who marry after the birth of the child, and only 8 per cent of those couples who were already married when the child was born. Thus the experts have finally come to the earth-shattering (and earth-shatteringly obvious) conclusion that marriage is good for the stability of relationships and crucial to the well-being of children.”

Here is a list of some other facts to take into consideration (I’m not going to give the references

for these, though I have them):

- Relationships are unstable: One-sixth of cohabiting couples stay together for only three years; only one in ten survives five or more years.
- The rate of divorce among those who cohabit prior to marriage is nearly double that of couples who marry without prior cohabitation.
- Women suffer disproportionately; cohabiting women often end up with the responsibilities of marriage – particularly in regard to caring for children – but without any legal protection, while contributing more than 70 per cent of the relationship’s income.
- Men in cohabiting relationships are four times more likely to be unfaithful than husbands. In 1960 there were only three sexually transmitted diseases (STD’s), now there are two dozen which are incurable. Cases of STD have tripled since the year 2000. The rate of STD among cohabiting women is six times higher than among married women.
- A UCLA survey of 130 published studies found that marriages preceded by cohabitation were more prone to drug and alcohol problems.
- Cohabitors who never marry have 78 per cent less wealth than the continuously married; cohabitators who have been divorced or widowed have 68 per cent less wealth.
- The poverty rate among children of cohabiting couples is five fold greater than the rate among children in married-couple households. Compared to children of married biological parents, children age 12-17 with cohabiting parents are six times more likely to exhibit emotional and behavioral problems. Likewise, adolescents from cohabiting households are 122 per cent more likely to be expelled from school and 90 per cent more likely to have a low GPA.
- The USA has the highest incarceration rate in the world. In 1980 the figure was just over 500,000. Today it exceeds 2 million. 70 per cent of all juvenile inmates are from fatherless homes.
- The rates of abuse of children are lowest in intact families; six times higher in stepfamilies; 14 times higher in always-single-mother families; 20 times higher in cohabiting biological-parent families; and 33 per cent higher when the mother is cohabiting with a boyfriend who is not the biological father. Compared to a married woman, a cohabiting woman is three times more likely to experience physical aggression.

We could quibble with some profit in analyzing the statistics. And we should be aware of making too much of a cause-effect with cohabitation; such that just because we find higher rates of drug and alcohol abuse, this does not mean that the cohabitation caused these abuses.

But the conclusion is inescapable; cohabitation is bad for men, worse for women, and horrible for children. It acts like a poison to marriage, family and culture. With great insight Pope Benedict XVI wrote in *Sacramentum Caritatis* (March 13, 2007) that among the four “fundamental values” that are “not negotiable,” second only to respect for human life is “the family built upon marriage between a man and a woman.”