

The Catholic Bishops of the United States issued a report last month on marriage preparation and cohabiting couples (or couples living together). It shares some research and some ideas about how a Catholic parish can best offer pastoral care to couples who cohabit prior to marriage.

The empirical information is sobering. Between 1965 and 1974 11% of couples in the United States cohabited. Today over half of all first marriages are preceded by cohabitation. 40% of cohabiting households include children. The median duration of cohabitation is about one year and four months. Fewer persons choose marriage today. All this has led to a decline in the centrality of marriage for the family structure of our country.

The types of people who cohabit are those with low levels of religious participation and who have experienced disruption in their parents' marriages or a previous marriage of their own. Those not completing high school are almost twice as likely to cohabit as those who complete college. And 40% of college graduates do cohabit at some time. Women are likely to cohabit once; men are more likely to cohabit with a series of partners. In general these couples are more independent, more liberal and more risk oriented than noncohabiters.

Couples choose to live together for different reasons. Some do not value marriage as other generations or countries. Some have fear or disbelief in long-term commitment. Some want to avoid divorce. They desire economic security. They want to escape from home. They desire stability for children. Some couples want to test the relationship. Society tells them that cohabiting indicates social success, personal desirability, or adult transition.

With regard to marriage, less than half of cohabiting couples ever marry even though  $\frac{3}{4}$  say that they will. The divorce rate of married couples who cohabited is 50% higher than for those who did not.

All this indicates several risk factors. People who cohabit are less committed to marriage and more accepting of divorce. A woman who cohabited before marriage is 3 times more likely to be unfaithful to her spouse than a woman who did not cohabit. The desire for a trial period indicates the partners may lack the ability for long term commitment. They prize individualism in marriage more than non-cohabiters do. They may marry because of pressure from other people. Cohabiters also carry inappropriately high expectations of marriage and then become disillusioned with the ordinary problems it brings.

Pastors, faced with this issue, try to confront couples with meaningful questions. "Why did you choose to live together? Why are you now choosing marriage? What have you learned? What are your expectations?" This helps us make distinctions among the couples. Pastors often ask if the couple can separate prior to the wedding. In general we try not to deny marriage; the sacrament may bring spiritual benefit. But we encourage the sacrament of reconciliation and a simple wedding (for example without multiple attendants) in order not to give scandal to the community of believers. The bishops' report shows that as a church, we don't want to push cohabiters away; we believe they have

special needs which require special pastoral care.

St. Paul tells the Philippians today to think about whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. He says if Christians keep on doing the things they have learned, the peace of God will be with them. That applies to couples preparing for marriage as well as to those of us who help them. If we hold onto the Christian ideal, even in the face of the temptations of society, we will discover more profoundly the peace of God.