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## COHABITATION FAILS AS A TEST FOR MARRIAGE

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by [Andrew R. Baker](#)

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I couldn't believe my ears. While in my car I heard a morning talk show host say something very Judeo-Christian with millions of secular Americans listening.

On her daily radio program Dr. Laura Schlessinger bluntly counseled a caller on living together before marriage, "Intimacy needs to be elevated in a sacred way to make it meaningful."

I almost had an accident as I shifted my car into a lower gear to grab a pen and paper. I fumbled to capture the gem of advice thrown across the radio waves.

In the last few decades we have witnessed an alarming increase in the number of couples cohabiting before marriage<sup>1</sup> in an attempt, some suggest, to remedy the problem of divorce. The Church is gravely concerned about this growing trend. She wishes to help couples see the dangers of not respecting the inherent meaning of human sexuality and to guide them away from mortal sin. The Church is aware that not all couples live together for the convenience of a sexual encounter. Some hope to avoid economic strife, ease loneliness, or escape an annoying home situation. Living together, however, invariably leads to sexual intimacy.

But is cohabitation an intimacy elevated in a sacred way and can it be a preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage? God's plan for marriage and human sexuality as well as data from research suggest that cohabitation not only harms the preparation of a couple for marriage but also it corrodes the sacredness of marriage and the marital act and it corrupts its inherent meaning.

The authors of the recent Rutgers University report on cohabitation put in succinctly, "Living together before marriage may seem like a harmless or even a progressive family trend until one takes a careful look at the evidence."<sup>2</sup> Consider these facts:

- A University of Wisconsin survey found that marriages preceded by living together have a 50% higher disruption rate (divorce or separation) than marriages without premarital cohabitation.<sup>3</sup>
- A 1997 study found that living together before marriage actually increased the couple's acceptance of divorce whereas other independent living situations did not.<sup>4</sup>
- Research done of couples using the PREPARE (Premarital Personal and Relationship Evaluation) inventory found that two-thirds of cohabiting couples had low scores, predictive of divorce, while only one-third of couples living apart scored similarly.<sup>5</sup>
- The British charitable agency CARE discovered that unmarried women living with male partners are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety than married women.<sup>6</sup>
- A 1992 Justice Department study said that cohabiting women are 62 times more likely to suffer

from assault than married women.<sup>7</sup>

- The National Institute for Healthcare Research reported that couples who lived together before marriage have less satisfaction in their marriage than other couples.<sup>8</sup>
- Research indicates that if someone is willing to have sex outside of marriage before marriage then there exists a higher level of probability that they will do the same after marriage.<sup>9</sup>
- "According to recent studies cohabitants tend not to be as committed as married couples in their dedication to the continuation of the relationship and reluctance to terminate it, and they are more oriented toward their own personal autonomy."<sup>10</sup>

Although some may argue that living together before marriage is a way to prepare for marriage, the statistics show it is one of the worst ways. As the authors of the Rutgers University Report conclude, "Despite its widespread acceptance by the young, the remarkable growth of unmarried cohabitation in recent years does not appear to be in children's or the society's best interest. The evidence suggests that it has weakened marriage and the intact, two-parent family and thereby damaged our social well-being, especially that of women and children."<sup>11</sup> What is the theological reality behind the statistical data?

Dr. Laura, the queen of the psychological sound bite, touched upon what has been forgotten by some in our society: sex outside of marriage has no sacred meaning. It is intimacy without exclusivity. Sex needs to be elevated by marriage to be truly intimate, exclusive, and, ultimately, meaningful.

An obvious problem with cohabitation is its temporary nature. A trial period is just that--a trial. A trial is not marriage because marriage is permanent. One cannot test his or her capability to live a permanent relationship by diving into a temporary one.

Psychologist Matti Gershenfeld surveyed 100 couples who cohabited and then divorced within five years. According to the study, few of these couples discussed key topics such as children, careers, and finances. These couples avoided issues that might have been divisive for fear that they might actually divide their temporary relationship.<sup>12</sup> There is no real security in a trial relationship and a trial relationship is certainly no preparation for the indissoluble security of marriage.

Likewise, the conjugal act is more than a biological act with a specific function. It is a personal act with a sacred meaning. The search for meaning among the pages of Scripture,<sup>13</sup> Tradition, and nature itself reveals the sexual act as a powerful sign of a total gift of one person to another in an irrevocable covenant. It brings to life Christ's exhortation that "they're no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together let man not separate." On all levels, physical, emotional, and spiritual, the act of sexual intercourse "speaks." It says something about a relationship. It says, "I'm all yours. All I am is yours. We are no longer two but one. I give you my all including the power to bring a new human being into the world." As Pope John Paul II has said, "For spouses, the moment of conjugal union constitutes a very particular expression" of the sincere gift of self.<sup>14</sup>

Cohabitation renders this meaning meaningless. Before marriage a couple is not in an irrevocable covenant of personal self-giving. They haven't said, "I take you and I give myself to you in good times

and in bad, in sickness and in health" etc. The sexual act among cohabiting couples or any other couple who is not married can at best mean, "I'm sort-of-yours and possibly only for a time." A conjugal act that expresses only a temporary commitment is not conjugal at all.

A meaningful conjugal act must be truly conjugal: it must en flesh the commitment by the couple in the exchange of vows. When Pope John Paul II speaks of re-reading the "language of the body" in truth, he draws attention to the fact that the conjugal act, by which a man and woman unite and become one flesh, "should express, at a determinate level, the truth of the sacrament."<sup>15</sup> In other words, the act in the bedroom has no sacred meaning unless it is an expression of the marital sacrament celebrated and forged at the altar. Cohabiting couples can never elevate their act in a sacred way to make it meaningful because they have not entered their lives into the sacred bond of marriage.

All is not lost, however. Some couples see the pitfalls of cohabitation and are living chastely before marriage. They learn how to integrate their sexuality within their whole person and direct it according to God's loving plan and thereby act according to its divine-given meaning. They grow in the virtues of temperance and free themselves from their own whims and self-gratifying desires. If they have fallen into the sin of pre-marital sex, some couples are turning to the Sacrament of Penance and experiencing the forgiveness of Christ and a new beginning in a life of "secondary virginity." Some cohabiting couples have broken their living arrangements in order to carry on a true courtship with each other which respects the sacred meaning of sexual intimacy and marriage.

The philosopher Paul Tillich has said that while the anxiety of ancient times was death and that of the Middle Ages was condemnation, the chief anxiety of the modern epoch is meaninglessness. The modern's anxiety can be placated with regards to the meaning of sex by following God's plan. When sex is treated as sacred and its meaning is sought within marriage, the couple learns to love by saying, "I love you so much I'm going to wait until we are married. I am going to wait until our intimacy is elevated in a sacred way by marriage before I share this wedding gift with you--the gift of my whole self by way of the conjugal act."

Suddenly cohabitation shows itself to be a failure for marriage and marital sexual intimacy successfully manifests its sacred meaning.

*Reverend Andrew R. Baker is a priest of the Diocese of Allentown, Pa. who was ordained in 1991. In 1997 he received his Ph.D. in moral theology from the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome. At present he is the Catholic chaplain of Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pa. and he teaches theology at Notre Dame High School in Easton, Pa. This is his first article in HPR.*

### Endnotes

1 Between 1960 and 1997 the number of cohabiting couples went from less than 500,000 to 4 million, an 800% increase. (U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1998, Marital Status and Living Arrangement, March, 1997). More than 50% of first marriages are preceded by cohabitation (Bumpass, Larry, and Lu, Hsien-Hen, Trends in Cohabitation and Implication for Children's Family Context, Unpublished manuscript, Madison, WI, Center for Demography, University of Wisconsin, 1998).

2 Popenoe, David and Whitehead, Barbara Dafoe, Should We Live Together?: What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage, The National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, New

Brunswick, NJ, 1999, p. 7. The entire report is available at [www.smartmarriages.com/cohabit.html](http://www.smartmarriages.com/cohabit.html)

3 Bumpass, Larry L., The Role of Cohabitation in the Declining Rates of Marriage, Working Paper No. 5, National Survey of Families and Households, Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin.

4 Axinn, William G. and Barber, Jennifer S., Living Arrangements and Family Formation Attitudes in Early Adulthood, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 59, 1997, pp. 595–611.

5 As reported in McManus, Michael, A Marriage that Lasts, Adrian, MI, the Daily Telegram, February 15, 1997.

6 Cohabitation Damages Marriage, Women, Catholic World News Service, Daily News Briefs, July 13, 1998. CARE found that 13.3 percent of the unmarried women have such problems, as opposed to 8.6 percent of the wives. A National Institute of Mental Health survey found that women who are cohabiting suffer from depression at rates more than three times that of married women (*American Family Association Journal*, September, 1998, p. 9).

7 A study entitled *Female Victims of Violent Crime* as quoted by McManus, Michael J., In Opposition to Cohabitation in the Morning Call, Allentown, PA, November 13, 1993.

8 As reported in *American Family Association Journal*, September 1998, p. 9.

9 Bukstel, L.H., et. al., "Projected Extramarital Sexual Involvement in Unmarried College Students," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 40, 1978, pp. 337–340.

10 Popenoe, David and Whitehead, Barbara Dafoe, *Should We Live Together?: What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage*, The National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, 1999, p. 8. Data taken from Nock, Stephen L., "A Comparison of Marriages and Cohabiting Relationships," *Journal of Family Issues*, 16–1, 1995, pp. 53–76. See also: Schoen, Robert and Weinick, Robin M., "Partner Choice in Marriages and Cohabitations," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 55, 1993, pp. 408–414.

11 Popenoe, David and Whitehead, Barbara Dafoe, *Should We Live Together?: What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage*, The National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, 1999, p. 22.

12 As reported in Dillon, Valerie Vance, "Some Facts of Life on Cohabitation," *Columbia magazine*, March 1988, p. 6.

13 It is helpful to note that fornication is condemned 18 times in Sacred Scripture (Lv. 21:9; Mt. 15: 19; Mk. 7: 21; 1 Cor. 6: 9; 1 Cor. 6: 18; 2 Cor. 12: 21; Eph. 5: 5; Col. 3: 5; 1 Tim. 1: 10; Heb. 12: 16; Heb. 13: 4; Rev. 2: 14; Rev. 9: 21; Rev. 17: 2; Rev. 18: 3; Rev. 18: 9; Rev. 21: 8; Rev. 22: 15).

14 Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, 12.

15 Pope John Paul II, *Reflections on Humanae Vitae*, Boston, MA, St. Paul Book and Media, 1984, p. 31.

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