

HOMILY ON COHABITATION

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This is a homily that is long overdue. It deals with a problem that is all too prevalent among Catholic young couples today, and that is the problem of cohabitation. It is estimated nationwide that 80 percent of young couples who ask to be married within the Church are already living together. There are still others cohabitating who never ask to be married.

This is not God's plan for young couple; far from it. Young couples feel strong pressures from their peers and from the dominant culture to begin their sex lives early. Some say they did not intend for this to happen, but they were caught in the current that pulled them in this direction. That is where they drifted.

There is a vast difference between God's plan for marriage, spousal love and family and what our contemporary culture thinks. We all know that morality is not determined by opinion polls, trendsetters, or cultural elites. Wrong is wrong, even if everyone is doing it. Right is right, even if nobody is doing it. One, on the side of the right, is a majority. God alone determines the moral order, what is right and what is wrong. God alone designs such basic human realities as human nature, marriage, spousal love and family.

If our young people think that cohabitation is morally acceptable because everyone is doing it, and they have not heard anything to the contrary from the pulpit, then I want to correct that. As an ordained priest, God demands that I teach His plan for marriage, spousal love and family. As my parishioners, you have a right to hear clear and unconfused teaching from this pulpit about God's plan for us. And I hope that you will help bring this message to cohabitating couples.

What is wrong with cohabitation, and why save sex for marriage? The best way to answer this is to explain what marriage is, because that is what most young people are preparing themselves for. Marriage is God's plan for the vast majority of people.

Marriage is a lifetime commitment. When a man and a woman fall in love, and want to share their lives completely with one another, then they begin to move towards an engagement and then to the sacrament of marriage. Marriage requires total commitment, total offering of self to the other, and a willingness to share together whatever the future holds for them. It is "until death do us part." And marriage demands total fidelity. Jesus' love for his bride, the Church, and the Church's love for her spouse, is the model for all Christian marriage.

If you are not married, then you are not ready for the great act of marriage, called the marital act, or the spousal act. Outside of marriage you can have a sexual act, but you cannot have a marital act. Outside of marriage we call sex fornication or adultery. These are serious violations of God's plan for sex. They are serious sins against the Sixth Commandment that must be repented of and confessed.

Why is the marital act reserved only to husbands and wives in marriage? What I say here about a man can be said equally of a woman. Because marriage transforms, or changes, the man from being a single and unattached bachelor to become a husband who is totally committed to the woman who has become his wife. A husband is a man who has vowed to love his wife all the days of his life, in good times and bad times, in health and in sickness, for better or

for worse. This marriage vow is irrevocable. It is a bond upon which God has placed his blessing. This is God's plan for marriage.

The husband and wife begin a new life together, which is their marriage. Their relationship is uniquely theirs. They share themselves, their love, their hopes for the future, and their disappointments at a depth they cannot share with anyone else. They enter into what are called the goods of marriage: 1) total fidelity in their relationship as a married couple throughout their lives; 2) the gift of the child; and 3) a special access to God's grace, called their sacrament of marriage.

Only a man and a woman who have capacitated themselves, who have made themselves suitable, by their conscious choice of making an irrevocable commitment to marriage, are capable of entering into the marital act. Only spouses can share fully in the various goods of marriage: fidelity, children and the sacrament. Unless and until you have become a spouse, you cannot act as a spouse. If you are not married, it is wrong to pretend that you are married.

The marital act, as God designed it, has a predetermined meaning. In the spousal act the couple open themselves totally to the goodness of love and to the goodness of life. This is what the marital act expresses and what it accomplishes, as God designed it. Each spouse makes the total personal gift of self to the other. This is a total personal gift of self: no conditions, no reservations, and nothing held back. This, of course, includes their fertility. The marital act is a renewal of their love for each other, a renewal of their marriage covenant and an affirmation of their family.

The marital act is always open to the goodness of life, to the great gift of the child. Love and life always go together. Love is never sterile. Love is always open to the goodness of life. In their marital love, the couple reflects something of the Love of God, something of our God who is both the Author of all love and of all life. A married couple must never deliberately choose to turn against the goodness of life, to consider their fertility to be a curse instead of a blessing. That is the great evil of contraception and sterilization.

If a married couple does not have children within a couple of years, they begin to feel that something very important in their relationship is missing. They are missing the precious gift of a uniquely new human being, their son or daughter, who is the fruit of their love. But every child has a right to be conceived by an act of love between his father and his mother, to be called into existence by dedicated parents who will love him or her, and be committed to provide a secure home for the next twenty years. Children rely upon committed parents. The well being of children rests upon the strong marriage of their parents, and the strength of their loving relationship.

In simple language, sex and babies go together. If you are not ready for babies, then you are not ready for sex. And today it takes at least 18 to 20 years to bring a baby to his or her adult life.

This is God's plan for marriage, spousal love and family. It is a magnificent plan, and it is within the grasp of everyone who chooses to accept that plan and draw upon all the helps God provides to make it possible.

Save sex for marriage. That is its only proper home. Outside of marriage, having sex is pretending to be someone you are not. Fornication does not build a strong relationship. There is so much missing from a relationship built upon cohabitation. Cohabitation is a very flimsy construct. Many of them fall apart. Many cohabiters who marry fall into divorce. Their sense of commitment has been crippled. Women deserve men who are deeply committed to them. Children deserve parents who are deeply committed to them.

There are many natural reasons why cohabitation does not work, does not bring lasting happiness. You should already know these. I am concentrating upon the most important reason why cohabitation is wrong. It is wrong because it directly violates God's plan for marriage, spousal love and family.

Now, if you are caught in the trap of cohabitation, what can be done to correct the situation and repair the damage? Let me briefly set out some sound recommendations.

- 1) Start learning about God's plan for marriage, spousal love and family. Ask your pastor for some good literature on this. Read what the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches about marriage. Strengthen your prayer life, and use the Sacraments regularly, especially the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Holy Eucharist.
- 2) Begin to acquire the virtue of self-possession, of self-control, the virtue of chastity. This is a task that everyone must master, and there are no exceptions. Even in marriage you will need to draw upon this virtue. Periodic abstinence is part of natural family planning, which is the only morally acceptable way of spacing pregnancies.
- 3) Make separate living arrangements with you partner. Since you are not married, it is wrong to pretend that you are married.
- 4) If you plan to marry each other, then go through the normal steps that lead to making a permanent commitment in marriage. This means taking a full marriage preparation course. It means learning the basic dynamics that go into building a strong relationship between two imperfect, and very complex, persons of complementary sexuality.
- 5) I strongly recommend that you take the full course in Natural Family Planning. More and more dioceses are mandating this for all couples taking marriage preparation.

When you have done all these things, then you will be ready for marriage, ready to enjoy all the various goods of marriage, and ready to shoulder the serious responsibilities that accompany this vocation in life.

God wants all couples, including cohabitating couples, to discover his wonderful plan for marriage, spousal love and family. He wants them to enjoy the greatly rewarding goods that are to be found in authentic marriage and spousal love. That is also what I, your pastor, want for you. And that is what this worshipping community, your families and friends want for you.