

COHABITATION GUIDELINES

Marriage is an intimate, permanent and exclusive partnership of the whole of life, a partnership which comes into existence at the moment a man and a woman declare publicly their marital commitment to one another. For Catholics the exchange of marital consent takes place in the presence of a duly authorized church minister and two witnessed. When consent is exchanged between two baptized persons, the marriage becomes a sacrament. The Church teaches that it is only in the context of marriage that the total giving and receiving of persons, as symbolically manifested in sexual relations, is truly right and just. To underline the exclusive and permanent dimensions of marriage the Church turns to the Epistle to the Ephesians in which St. Paul encourages spouses to love each other as Christ loves the Church. Christ's love for the Church is faithful and forever.

Living together without the benefit of marriage contradicts these fundamental Church teachings. It becomes particularly problematic when one considers the permanent dimension of marriage. By its very nature cohabitation does not infer permanency. Couples living together prior to or outside of marriage is of tremendous pastoral concern for the Church. Special attention may need to be given to these couples when they seek a church marriage.

Pastoral ministers who prepare couples for marriage need to articulate clearly the Church teaching regarding the sanctity of marriage. They need to address issues surrounding cohabitation in a non-judgmental way. They need to create an environment of trust where engaged cohabiting couples can discuss their situations freely and with an openness to the spirit of God moving in their lives. Pastoral ministers need to view these moments not as a time to condemn but rather as an opportunity for evangelization and formation in Christian values. The Church also realizes that for this formation to be really effective it needs to begin long before one is sharing a home with someone other than a spouse. Those charged with the responsibility of preaching at the Sunday Eucharist need to use appropriate occasions to preach on the values underlying Christian marriage.

Cohabitation is not an impediment to marriage. Therefore, marriage preparation should never begin with or be based upon a decision about the kind or size of the wedding ceremony to be allowed. The celebration of marriage, even for a cohabiting couple, is an act of the Church's public worship. The same liturgical principles and norms apply for a cohabiting couple as for any other couple.

While the Church sees it as desirable for cohabitating couples to separate prior to marriage in the Church, this may not be possible in some cases. All Catholics preparing for marriage need to be given the opportunity to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation at an appropriate time. Thus the Church takes on the role of the loving parent welcoming home and celebrating with the son or daughter who once was lost but now is found.