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A Better Way

*A Pastoral Letter to the People of God in the Province of Kansas
Addressing Cohabitation before Marriage*

By the Kansas Catholic Conference

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Introduction

“God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them.”¹ From the very first moment of the life of the human race, God has loved his people. God loves us not only as a human race, but he loves each of us as an individual, as his own unique creation.

Whether we be a man or a woman, God has a plan for each of our lives. For many, that plan includes the joining of man and woman in the sacramental bond of marriage. This bond is a sacred covenant of love involving a man, a woman and God. Saint Paul expresses that this bond of marriage between husband and wife symbolizes the bond that exists between Christ and his Church. This sacred covenant cannot be dissolved throughout one’s earthly life.² Therefore, each person entering into that special covenant of marriage needs adequate preparation to be certain that one is ready to marry. Moreover, all entering marriage must be as certain as possible that their spouse is the person to whom they can make a lifetime commitment of love.

Today many couples (those who are engaged and those who are not) prepare for their possible married life together by cohabiting, or “living together,” before marriage. Their reasons for doing so are many and varied. However, a view that is commonly held is that couples who live together before marriage can more adequately determine if their lifetime commitment to one another as husband and wife is possible. Two generations ago living together before marriage was viewed as scandalous by our

¹ Genesis 1:27 (*New American Bible*)

² Mark 10:1-9

society. Young people were strongly discouraged from cohabiting. As a society, that view has been greatly challenged today. Between 30 percent and 40 percent of couples seeking marriage in the United States today are living together. Many people see cohabiting not only as permissible, but even as necessary to attempt to diminish the possibility of divorce or marital unhappiness later in the life of the couple.

The Church does not believe that cohabitation before marriage is a moral or acceptable preparation for this sacred bond. Rather, the Church sees cohabitation as a threat to the marital happiness that engaged couples so desperately seek. Cohabitation as an actual threat to marital happiness has furthermore been borne out in recent research studies done by today's social sciences, as will be quoted in the following section.

This pastoral letter is an attempt to encourage couples contemplating marriage not to live together before their wedding day. Moreover, this pastoral letter is a challenge to all Catholics to support engaged couples as they prepare for a lasting marriage. The letter is intended to stimulate further reflection in the hearts of believers addressing Judeo-Christian marriage as a special vocation to be lived in an increasingly secular world. Perhaps most important, the letter is an invitation to all engaged couples and those contemplating engagement to realize that the Church seeks the same end that the engaged couples seek: a commitment of love expressed in the vows by the bride and groom on their wedding day to be strengthened continually day by day throughout their lives as a married couple.

The marriage preparation offered by the Church is not to be seen as a list of rules and regulations, but rather as an investment into the lives of the engaged couple and the life of the Church.

The Church recognizes that marriage and family are vital components of a society. Thus, good marriage preparation is an investment into the future of the individual, the engaged couple, the future children born of that union and of the entire body of Christ.

I. WHY A COUPLE MAY CHOOSE TO COHABIT³

There are many and varied reasons why a couple might decide to live together before they are married. It is helpful for those who are preparing couples for marriage in the Church to listen and attempt to understand the motives behind such a decision. Pope John Paul II states very pastorally in his apostolic exhortation on the role of the Christian family in the modern world, “The pastors and the ecclesial community should take care to become acquainted with such situations and their actual causes, case by case.”⁴

It is also important for the couple to know and to be able to explain the reasons why they have made the decision to live together before marriage. Even today, in a permissive society which considers itself free from many of the so-called constraints of

³ For our purposes, we will accept the general definition which defines *cobabitation* as a situation where, “a couple has been living together for at least four nights a week for an extended period of time, giving the appearance, at least externally, that they have formed a quasimarrriage relationship.” National Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee for Pastoral Research and Practices, *Faithful to Each Other Forever: A Catholic Handbook of Pastoral Help for Marriage Preparation* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference), p. 71 quoting *Family Communications*, p. 257.

⁴ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), 81.

traditional moral norms, the decision of a man and a woman to live together before they are married should never be taken lightly.

Recent studies have identified some of the major reasons why couples decide to cohabit. This is by no means an exhaustive list of reasons, and couples may discover that their decision is a combination of several of these reasons offered below:

1. Testing Period

“Let’s just try and see how it works out.” Commonly, this reason is referred to as a *trial marriage*. The rationale here is that by living together a couple may discover whether or not they are compatible. This way the individuals believe that they can avoid the mistake of marrying someone with whom they are fundamentally mismatched. Between 1965 and 1985, there was an enormous 400 percent increase in the number of couples cohabiting in the United States.

At the same time period, there was a significant increase in the number of divorces. Just in one decade, between 1980-1990, the U.S. Census Bureau reported an 80 percent increase of couples living together before marriage. A significant and growing body of research, however, points to the fact that the prospect of divorce dramatically increases for those who cohabit. With cohabiting couples, even in the most committed relationships, both the man and the woman know in the back of their minds that if things really become difficult, they can always go their separate ways without the trauma of a legal nightmare.

2. Financial Benefits

“We can save more money by moving in together.” The cost of living is less when two people are sharing the bills. Economically, it

would seem to make good sense. Many of the 2.9 million couples living together before marriage in the United States offer this as one major reason for living together. Considering the fact that 1 million of those 2.9 million couples have children under 15 years of age, there is an added financial stress to provide not only for the couple but also for the children born of previous relationships. Choosing to live together solely for economic reasons reveals a dangerously overly pragmatic and sometimes selfish view of marriage. When a couple lives together, earned income is often easily viewed as “his” or “hers.” After the marriage, however, the income and expenses are shared by both parties.

This can often become a source of frustration and disagreement among the spouses. Marital love and happiness are built upon a much deeper and stronger base than upon future financial security.

3. Convenience

“*We’ve grown so close to each other. Let’s live together.*” This is often a slow, progressive process. The movement from dating to preparing meals together, to sleeping together, to staying over more often to eventual cohabitation is more of a developmental process rather than a conscious decision. Unfortunately, in situations such as this, couples have reflected upon the reasons for their decision to live together, and they have very often developed a strong sexual dependency. Cohabitation is an almost natural result of violating chastity before marriage. It can be stated clearly at this point that there is a difference between premarital sexual intercourse (i.e., *fornication*)⁵ and living together without the benefit of marriage (i.e., *cohabitation*).⁶ Although the two may often be closely related,

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (United States Catholic Conference, Inc. – Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 2353.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2390-2391.

one can exist without the other. Some unmarried couples are sexually active without sharing the same residence.

In both situations we are speaking of the possibility of grave scandal and grave sin.

4. Sexual Need

“Why do we have to wait to physically express our love?” In a relationship where the bond of physical intimacy becomes so strong, the couple finds it next to impossible to live apart. Given the addictive power of sex, this kind of relationship can also become co-dependent on a more physical level and can confuse sex for love. Instead of the sexual act being a life giving act of mutual love, it can often become a life-draining and very selfish abuse of another person. In a relationship which has a strong dependency on sexual intimacy it can be more difficult for the couple who lives together to resolve other problem areas of their lives. A couple can begin to use sex as a way to convince themselves that the relationship is going fine. When sexual intimacy becomes the predominant way of communicating, it even stifles a couple’s discovery of the attitudes, hopes and desires of the other person. A couple must have the freedom and the emotional strength to be able to separate the sexual dimension of their attraction for each other and their true love for one another.

That love contains the element of trust. When one or both persons cannot delay their urge for sexual gratification before the marriage, what guarantee exists that the individuals can trust one another in the fidelity of their marital vows after marriage?

5. Insecurity

“I love you so much, that I cannot live without you.” Oftentimes the need for companionship and the fear of loneliness are so strong that either one or both parties decide they cannot wait for marriage because they feel they need to be with each other all of the time. This kind of relationship often becomes co-dependent on an emotional and psychological level. A 1994 study published in *Christian Society Today*⁷ discovered that couples who do live together before marriage have a 50 percent greater chance of divorce than those couples who did not cohabit before marriage.

The insecurity of not being able to live without one another before the marriage manifests itself after the marriage in a lack of trust between the two parties which is essential for a strong marital relationship.

6. Fear of Commitment

“I’m just afraid of losing you.” A couple may live together because they fear a permanent commitment. By living together, they know that if they do split, it is not quite the same as a divorce. They want to keep their options open, and they want to keep from getting hurt too badly. The result of this thinking is reflected in the fact that 40 percent of couples who live together before marriage break up before marriage.⁸ Other studies indicate the number is closer to 60 percent-70 percent of cohabiting couples who break up and never marry the person with whom they lived. In addition, couples who have married persons with whom they previously lived are more likely to live with another person prior

⁷ Reported in *American Family Association Journal*, July 1993.

⁸ Reported in *Christian Society Today*, January 1994.

to a subsequent marriage. Thus, cohabitation upon cohabitation increases the likelihood of divorce upon divorce.

7. Escape

“Living with you will make me much happier than I am now.” Moving in with someone may allow the person to escape from another difficult living arrangement (e.g., with parents, roommates, friends). Some wish to prove their independence by moving in with their boyfriend or girlfriend.

Instead of focusing upon the two persons contemplating marriage, this relationship all too often becomes simply an escape from other problematic relationships.

8. Playing House

“Hey! This is going to be fun!” In younger and less mature couples, there is a naive romanticism about setting up a home. This idea can become so strong that waiting for marriage seems impossible. For example, college students often live together with this mentality. The average length of such living arrangements among college students is seven months.⁹

Often this mentality returns again later as the person more seriously seeks a potential marriage partner. But any married couple can attest that marriage is more difficult than simply playing house.

⁹ James Healy, PhD, *Living Together and the Christian Commitment*, (Allen, Texas: Tabor Publishing, 1993).

9. No Fear of Pregnancy

“We need to get to know one another first. Later we’ll start having kids.” In the past, a large deterrent to both premarital sex and cohabitation was the fear of pregnancy. With the availability and the social acceptability of artificial contraception, the possibility of an unexpected pregnancy is no longer a strong deterrent. As long as the couple is having “protected sex,” then the prospect of conceiving a child out of wedlock (which even today in our liberated society is still frowned upon) becomes less of a concern.

Because artificial contraception eliminates the openness to the possibility of new life resulting from sexual intercourse, the Church has consistently taught that its use is seriously sinful. It is easy to see how the social acceptability and availability of artificial contraception in the ‘60s and ‘70s, giving a couple the ability to minimize the fear of pregnancy, has coincided with the rise and acceptance of premarital sex and cohabitation in society.

It is important, as we said above, that everyone involved in the preparation process, especially the couples themselves, understand why the decision by the couple to cohabit was made.

II. THE BETTER WAY

Having looked at several reasons why couples choose to live together before marriage, we now address the reasons why the Church teaches that there is “a better way” to prepare for the sacrament of marriage.

1. The Vocation to Love

“God is love,” as sacred Scripture teaches us.¹⁰ God freely gives his love and his life in the act of creation. Created in God’s image and likeness, every human person has been called into existence through love and has been created for love. Everyone, therefore, is created to give love and to receive love, since “human life is a gift received in order to then be given as a gift.”¹¹

The Church teaches that “God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion. Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.”¹² Each person is called to this vocation of love in a spirit of friendship and self-giving.

There are really only two ways of realizing this vocation to love: marriage and virginity or celibacy.¹³ Between a man and a woman, the highest expression of this friendship or mutual gift of self is through the holy bond of marriage. “Since God created them male and female, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves *man*.”¹⁴

2. The Gift of Sexuality and the Body

All of us need to remember that there are things in life which are holy; things are made by God to be beautiful and good. These things reflect God’s own beauty and goodness. We commonly think of the sacraments or of other holy events

¹⁰ 1 John 4:8, 16.

¹¹ John Paul II, Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), 92.

¹² *Familiaris Consortio*, 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1604.

within the Church in this way. Yet we must also understand that one of the absolutely holy, beautiful and sacred things that God has given to us is our sexuality.

Sex is holy. Sex is sacred. We know that sex is holy because God uses it, joining his divine and creative power to the love of a man and a woman to bring forth new life into the world. No two people ever work so closely, hand in hand with God himself, as when they become co-creators with God and bring forth new life into the world. Although many people are probably not thinking about this at the time when they engage in sexual relations, God is very present in that life-giving act, whether a pregnancy results or not.

Because sex is so sacred and beautiful, God has filled it with meaning. Every act of sexual intercourse is intended by God to express love, commitment and an openness to life. If two people are ever uncertain about whether engaging in sexual activity is the right thing to do, they need to ask themselves if love, commitment and an openness to life are present in the relationship. Sexual activity is a gift that we give to another person to whom we have committed our lives. All too frequently sexual activity is seen as the taking from another for one's own pleasure,

Premarital sexual intercourse deprives the conjugal act of the deeper meaning that God created it to contain. There is not a total giving of self in premarital sexual relations as there ought to be in the sexual act of a husband and wife. It is seriously morally wrong for two people to have sex if they are not married, because the sexual act expresses a total commitment which the couple does not yet have. The Church teaches that "the only 'place' in which this self-giving in its whole truth is

made possible is marriage, the covenant of conjugal love freely and consciously chosen, whereby a man and woman accept the intimate community of life and love willed by God himself.”¹⁵ Moreover, within marriage, the Church states that “it is necessary that each conjugal act remain ordained in itself to the procreation of human life.”¹⁶

3. Freedom and the Virtue of Chastity

What do we mean by the word *chastity*? “Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of a human being in his or her bodily and spiritual being.”¹⁷ The person who has acquired the virtue of chastity is a person who is totally free. The chaste person is well ordered from within and is not driven this way and that by spontaneous urges and unruly passions. The chaste person “maintains the integrity of the powers of life and love placed in him. This integrity ensures the unity of the person.”¹⁸ The virtue of chastity ultimately leads to self-mastery, which is ordered to the gift of self.

The best kinds of gifts are the gifts given out of total freedom — no strings attached. The freer persons are from their own selfishness and self-gratifying desires, the more they can give of their true selves. The Church has always taught that the human person is most fully human when acting from an informed conscience and free choice and not by blind impulse. The human person either “governs his passions and finds peace, or he lets

¹⁵ *Familiaris Consortio*, 11.

¹⁶ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (1968), 11.

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2337.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2338

himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy.”¹⁹ One must be quick to add, however, that to follow one’s conscience requires that one has taken the time to properly form one’s conscience. One must not follow a conscience that is in error. To do so does not lead to freedom. In the case of a sexually active couple living together before marriage, the couple is becoming enslaved to sin rather than becoming free to the truth that Christ has taught us. That lack of freedom often impairs the ability of the couple to truthfully address the other important issues that need to be discussed before the decision to marry is made.

Teachers of natural family planning have discovered that those who engage in premarital sex find it difficult to practice the periodic abstinence that natural family planning sometimes requires. In other words, there is a marital chastity that is required of couples; and those who do not practice premarital chastity find it difficult to practice marital chastity. If one is promiscuous before marriage, those habits easily linger with them. There will be times in marriage when self-restraint and sacrifice will be required, and if a person has not learned this before marriage, then it will be all the more difficult during the marriage. This is one reason why artificial contraception used before marriage and during marriage can open the door to the temptation of infidelity.

To summarize, from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read:

Chastity leads him who practices it to become a witness to his neighbor of God’s fidelity and loving kindness. The virtue of chastity blossoms in friendship. It shows the disciple how to follow and

¹⁹ Ibid., 2339.

imitate him who has chosen us as his friends, who has given himself totally to us and allows us to participate in his divine estate. Chastity is the promise of immortality.²⁰

Premarital sexual intercourse and cohabitation open the gift, so to speak, before it has been given. Waiting for one's wedding day in order to give the gift of conjugal love, on the other hand, creates a natural yearning which can help engender a greater sense of totality of the gift of self to the one person whom God has chosen from all eternity to share this gift. To give this gift, which is symbolized by the nuptial language of the body in sexual intercourse, in a context any less than the total commitment of spousal love is an affront to its inherent and God-given dignity.

4. Secondary Virginity

For couples who are contemplating the decision to marry, one of the very best preparations that one can do is to receive the sacrament of reconciliation, so as to be free from the evil effects of sin. For couples who have been sexually active, the decision as a couple to commit themselves to a "secondary virginity" is for one to say to the other, "I love you so much that I wish to wait until the day of our wedding and the beginning of our married life together to express my love to you in the physical intimacy of sexual love." What a great gift of love! What a great way to prepare for that wedding day and for the days and months and years that follow that day! That is the better way. It is Christ's way.

²⁰ Ibid., 2346-2347.

5. God's Way Is the Better Way

As we saw above, Scripture and the Church teach that our sexuality is a gift from God, something very holy and sacred, something very beautiful, something filled with profound meaning. The call to love is the call to give oneself to another as Christ gave himself to us on the cross in an act of unconditional love and self-surrender. When a man and a woman make the decision to give themselves to each other in marriage, they should want to give themselves freely as a gift in the holy covenant of marriage. The couple wants this union blessed by the Church and sanctified by the grace of the sacrament.

The heart of the marital covenant lies in its unity and indissolubility. In marriage, this covenant is publicly affirmed. It is a covenant that is both unique and exclusive to the spouses. Everything that has led to this public exchange of vows has been to help the couple gain the sufficient freedom and the knowledge necessary to make their gift to each other total and unconditional. Anything that would take away from this freedom would be a less than adequate way to prepare for one of the most important days in a person's life.

When a couple approaches the Church to seek a sacramental marriage, they may be coming from any number of situations such as those described earlier in this letter. Therefore, when a couple who lives together expresses a desire to marry in the Church, the Church's main responsibility is to help the couple see the Catholic vision of marriage and why cohabitation is not a moral or acceptable way to prepare for the sacrament of matrimony. Not only does the Church have a responsibility to uphold the vision of marriage and sexuality, but Christian people

have a responsibility to live according to the teaching of Christ in their preparation for marriage.

To abstain from sexual relations before marriage means denying oneself certain pleasures. This notion of self-denial is not popular in today's culture. Who would deny that we live in a culture which exhorts us to always seek immediate pleasure and self gratification? But to deny oneself for the good of another, and ultimately for the good of oneself, is indeed a noble purpose. This is not even to mention the joy that awaits couples who make this sacrifice because of true love.

III. THE DECISION

1. These Questions Need Answers

The following questions have been adapted from the *Guide for Pastoral Counseling With Couples Cohabiting Before Marriage*.²¹ The questions need to be addressed by the engaged couple and with the priest who is preparing the couple for marriage.

1. As an engaged couple, why did you choose to cohabit before marriage?
2. What have the two of you learned from your experience of living together? What have you learned about yourselves as a couple and as individuals?
3. What is the driving force behind your decision to marry at this time? What has changed in the relationship by which

²¹ *Guide for Pastoral Counseling With Couples Cohabiting Before Marriage* (Diocese of Peoria, IL, 1987).

now you wish to marry and have your marriage blessed in the Church?

4. Was there a previous reluctance or hesitation to marry? If so, why? Have those issues been completely addressed so as to now seek marriage?
5. Why are you seeking marriage in the Catholic Church?
6. What does marriage as a sacrament mean to the two of you?
7. How do you see your faith and love for each other as an intimate part of your marriage?

Perhaps these questions may assist the engaged couple and the priest to jointly discern whether the couple is ready for marriage. Again, as was stressed earlier, the Church's main concern is to help prepare the engaged couple for a lifelong commitment of love to one another and to God. Hopefully, this is also the main concern of the engaged couple themselves. If it is not, then there must be a re-evaluation of the reasons for the couple seeking marriage in the Church.

THE CONCLUSION

We began by stating that the decision to love is the basis of the sacrament of matrimony. It is a love involving a man, a woman and God. By choosing the better way, not the path of cohabitation, a couple has chosen God's way, in fact, Jesus' way preached in the New Testament.

The lesson is clear: To follow Jesus, living "his way," will not be understood by those turned secular or worldly in their criteria; they will not applaud us but they cannot deny our witness. But what each of us will do or not do does not depend upon the

approval or applause of others, only upon our commitment to God's original design and Jesus' way in following it. After all, as professed disciples of Jesus we have committed ourselves to true love and its discipline. And he walks with us from Nazareth to Calvary to heaven.

The prayers of the Church are with our couples preparing for marriage to see that God's way is not only the better way, but the right and only way.

APPENDIX

I. Is Scandal Still a Possibility?

1. *For society:* As society no longer adheres to traditional moral values and norms, scandal becomes less and less of a concern to many people. Even so, the Church still teaches clearly and consistently that premarital sexual intercourse objectively is mortally sinful. Couples who live together, even if they are not engaging in premarital sexual relations, give the impression to the community that such an arrangement is totally acceptable. Additionally, should the couple marry and later divorce there is widespread acceptance of such an event. Is it any wonder that the United States has the highest divorce rate in the world?

2. *For the Church:* When a cohabiting or sexually active couple approaches the Church for marriage, how should the priest, or those charged with the duty of giving them the very best preparation, react? This situation places the ministers of the Church in a difficult position. Specifically, how can the priest preach the word of God and uphold the Church's teaching on chastity and premarital sex with any integrity while at the same time allowing an unmarried couple to live together as if there is nothing morally wrong with that arrangement? It is a scandal to the Church, the body of Christ, when her members freely choose to live in a state of grave sin.

3. *For engaged couples:* Imagine two different engaged couples visiting the priest of a local parish, seeking to be married in the Church. One couple has chosen to live according to the teachings of the Church. It is difficult for them to abstain from premarital sexual relations, but they have committed themselves to one another and to God that they are going to try very diligently to

wait until their wedding night to give themselves to one another in that loving sexual act. This couple anxiously awaits their wedding day and the guests who will witness their vows before God and his Church. The other couple, however, comes to the priest, and they inform him that they are living together and that they plan to continue to do so until their wedding day. The couple admits that they are engaging in premarital sexual relations. The couple wants to have a big wedding in the Church, just like the other engaged couple. What will the first couple or even the second couple think if the priest allows this second couple to have a big Church wedding?

How we celebrate marriages of cohabiting couples can cause confusion and scandal. How can the Church be both compassionate and understanding, and at the same time speak with clarity regarding the teachings of the Scriptures?

Because of the awkwardness of dealing with these situations in the concrete, some priests have taken the approach, “Don’t ask. Don’t tell.” Not only does this create even more confusion, as in the cases mentioned above, but it is also being dishonest and unfair to the couple who is trying to follow the Church’s teaching.

Some priests sincerely feel they are acting out of compassion for the cohabiting couple, knowing how difficult it might be to challenge them to live apart. Compromising the full truth of the Bible, however, is really a disservice because Jesus teaches that the truth will set us free no matter how difficult the sacrifice may be.²²

In the end it is this freedom that is finally the goal of marriage preparation. “The whole meaning of freedom, and self-control which follows from it, is thus directed toward self-giving in

²² John 8:32

communion and friendship with God and with others.”²³ A man and a woman freely give themselves to each other as a gift of their love. The more freedom that exists in their relationship, the greater their gift to one another.

True love is self-giving. How can one best prepare to make this gift of freedom to their beloved spouse in marriage? Is there a “better way” to prepare for marriage to ensure that the gift they give on their wedding day is worthy of this vocation to which they have been called by God?

II. The Choice Is Made

In marriage preparation, engaged couples are taught that love is not just a feeling. Love is a decision. One must decide every day to love one’s spouse, even if the feeling of love may not be very strong at a particular moment. Similarly, in marriage preparation the engaged couples must make decisions. One of those decisions concerns living together. The Church extends the invitation to the engaged couple to see that there are many good reasons to not cohabit before their wedding day. As Jesus taught by invitation to follow his teaching and commands, so too the Church teaches by invitation to her sons and daughters to follow the teachings of the Church. Ultimately, the engaged couple must make the decision to follow Christ and his Church, or to turn and follow their own path.

Through prayer and discernment, the couple must make important decisions. For the engaged couple who is living together, the question must be asked, “Are you willing to separate and to attempt to the best of your ability to live a chaste life as a

²³ Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education Within the Family* (December 8, 1995), 8.

single person until your wedding day?” If the answer to that question is yes, then the Church family welcomes that commitment with joy and happiness. It would be of great spiritual benefit to receive the sacrament of reconciliation. The grace of the sacraments will sustain and strengthen that commitment as the very best preparation for the sacrament of matrimony that the engaged couple can undertake.

If the answer to the question asked above is “No, we choose to not separate before marriage,” then further considerations must be made. If the couple has shown that they are living together for the reason of convenience or financial benefit, and the engaged couple is planning a formal marriage, then the priest will explore with the couple on a deeper level the meaning of the sacrament in the marital bond and the commitment to permanence and stability.

For the couple who is living together but has a more casual attitude toward this arrangement by not having moved toward a formal marriage, a greater emphasis needs to be placed upon the readiness of the couple to marry at this time, along with the permanent lifetime commitment that marriage involves. In addition, the sacramentality issue would be discussed as with the case in the preceding paragraph. Professional referral may be in order in these cases.

If an engaged couple is seeking to be married in the Church more for the sake of appearance or to accommodate the desires of others, the priest is to recommend a postponement of any further consideration of marriage preparation. This is especially to be the case if the couple demonstrates a lack of spiritual or psychosocial maturity for marriage.

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