

April 3, 2011

Pastoral Care of Couples Who are Cohabiting

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We are all painfully aware that there are many Catholics today who are living in cohabitation. The Church must make it clear to the faithful that these unions are not in accord with the Gospel, and to help Catholics who find themselves in these situations to do whatever they must do to make their lives pleasing to God.

First of all, we ourselves must be firmly rooted in the Gospel teaching that, when it comes to sexual union, there are only two lifestyles acceptable to Jesus Christ for His disciples: a single life of chastity, or the union of man and woman in the Sacrament of Matrimony. There is no “third way” possible for a Christian. The Bible and the Church teaches that marriage is between one man and one woman and opposes same sex unions.

We have three groups of people who are living contrary to the Gospel teaching on marriage: those who cohabit; those who have a merely civil union with no previous marriage; and those who have a civil union who were married before. These people are objectively living in a state of mortal sin and may not receive Holy Communion. They are in great spiritual danger. At the best - and this is, sadly, often the case - they are ignorant of God’s plan for man and woman. At the worst, they are contemptuous of God’s commandments and His sacraments.

Of these three groups, the first two have no real excuse. They should marry in the Church or separate. Often their plea is that they “cannot afford a church wedding” i.e. the external trappings, or that “what difference does a piece of paper make?” - as if a sacramental covenant is nothing more than a piece of paper! Such statements show religious ignorance, or a lack of faith and awareness of the evil of sin.

The third group, those who were married before and married again outside the Church, can seek a marriage annulment and have their marriage blest in the Church. Please remember that divorce still is no reason to refrain from Holy Communion as long as they have not entered into another marriage or sinful relationship. Many Catholics are confused on this point.

Christ our Lord loves all these people and wishes to save them - not by ignoring their sin, or calling evil good, but by repentance and helping them to change their lives in accordance with His teaching. We, as His Church, must do the same. In accord with this, I would remind you of the following:

1. People in the above three situations cannot receive the Sacraments, with the important exception of those who agree to live chastely (“as brother and sister”) until their situation is regularized. Of course, those in danger of death are presumed to be repentant.

2. These people may not be commissioned as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, not only because of scandal, but even more because one commits the sin of sacrilege by administering a Sacrament in the state of mortal sin.
3. Nor are such people to be admitted to the role of sponsor for Baptism or Confirmation, as is clearly stated on the Archdiocesan Affidavit for a Sponsor. It is critical for the sponsor to be a practicing Catholic - and can anyone be seriously called a practicing Catholic who is not able to receive the sacraments because they are living in sin?
4. When it comes to other parish ministries and organizations, I feel it best to leave these situations to the judgment of the pastor. Prudence is needed, avoiding all occasions of scandal. We must see their involvement in the parish as an opportunity to work urgently to bring such people to repentance and the regularization of their lifestyle.
5. Many of these sins are committed out of ignorance. I ask that our pastors preach on the gravity of sin and its evil consequences, the 6th and 9th Commandments of God, and the sacramental nature and meaning of Christian marriage. Our catechetical programs in our parishes - children, youth, and adult – must clearly and repeatedly teach these truths.

A Church wedding does not require some lavish spectacle and entertainment costing vast sums of money (Indeed, how often we have seen the most costly weddings end in divorce in but a few months or years!). While beauty and joy should surround a Christian wedding, we must remind everyone that it is a sacrament, not a show.

6. Those who are married outside the Church because of a previous union are urged to seek an annulment through our Marriage Tribunal. If it can be found that the first marriage lacked some essential quality for a valid marriage, the Tribunal can grant an annulment. Your pastor can help someone start a marriage case for this purpose. It is important for such couples to continue to pray and get to Mass even though they may not receive Communion, until their marriage can be blest in the Church.

Our popular American culture is often in conflict with the teachings of Jesus and His Church. I urge especially young people to not cohabit which is sinful, but to marry in the Church and prepare well for it.

I congratulate and thank those thousands of Catholic married couples who role model the Sacrament of Marriage according to the teachings of Jesus and his Church.

Sincerely yours in the Risen Lord,

Most Rev. Michael J. Sheehan
Archbishop of Santa Fe