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Your Marriage

PARTICIPANT WORKBOOK

Deborah Meister

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Cohabitation

Cassandra L. Hough



In this chapter...

- The truth about marriage, sex, and Catholic teaching
- Debunking the myths of cohabitation and compatibility
- Transitioning to marriage and chastity

For Christine and her husband, the first year of marriage was filled with disagreements about how to live together. Having lived separately before getting married, they felt they had missed out on the domestic “practice run” that other couples seem to get by cohabiting. Perhaps, prior to their wedding day, they had ignored each other’s household practices (unfolded clothes, piles of books, and bills), but once they were under a single roof, these habits became the source of everyday annoyances.



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Is the wait to live together worth it? Although faith is an important reason for living separately before marriage, **couples admit that they want their married life to feel new and different** from their prior experiences.

Like Christine and her husband, couples who lived apart until after the wedding discover that the lifelong commitment of the covenant greatly influences how they respond to one another's habits and work through disagreements. Cohabiting couples often question their compatibility, frequently weighing whether they can live with their partner's quirks. Couples who wait to share their domestic lives approach their "incompatibilities" with a pro-relational attitude of finding a system to make living together work for both of them—for a lifetime.

The benefits of living separately before marriage receive little attention or acknowledgment. With cohabitation preceding more than 60 percent of first marriages, compared to almost none a half-century ago*, it is no wonder it is taken as the norm in American culture. Social scientists debate its benefits and risks; pastoral leaders discuss its effect on marriage preparation; and couples face questions about its timing, role, and meaning for their relationship.

*The National Marriage Project and the Institute for American Values, *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2012* (Charlottesville: The National Marriage Project and the Institute for American Values, 2012), 76



Getting Church Teaching Straight

In his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope St. John Paul II writes, “The Church must therefore promote better and more intensive programs of marriage preparation, in order to eliminate as far as possible the difficulties that many married couples find themselves in, and even more in order to favor positively the establishing and maturing of successful marriages” (66). It is in this light that we aim to help couples reflect on the decisions, behaviors, and qualities that best dispose them for a happy marriage. It is important to be clear: *Living together does not itself prohibit a couple from getting married in the Catholic Church.* Title VII of the *Code of Canon Law* (1083–1094) lists those qualities that are considered impediments to a valid marriage, such as impotence, sacred orders, a public perpetual vow of chastity, consanguinity, and being bound by a previous marriage.

However, **while cohabitation does not invalidate or prevent marriage, the Church strongly advises against it.**

Why?

Cohabitation is understood to consist not only of shared living quarters but also of sexual intimacy and intercourse prior to marriage. Although premarital sex, like cohabitation, does not itself impede a marriage, the Church is very clear about the significant meaning and purpose of sex and its proper place within marriage. Sexual intercourse and the intimate behaviors that attend it are reserved for marriage precisely because they give unique and fitting physical expression to the intimate, self-giving, and unitive nature of the marital relationship. **Sex expresses and makes physically present the two-become-one union of marriage.**

To express such unity where it does not exist—in other words, to have sex outside of marriage—is a serious affront to and abuse of the beauty of sex, the significance of marriage, and the dignity of men and women. Saint John Paul II touches upon this in *Familiaris Consortio* when he writes that experimenting through a “trial marriage” (cohabitation) is inconsistent with the dignity of the human person and the type of love this dignity demands (80). Therefore, the Church must advise against cohabitation and encourage all sexually active couples to take advantage of the sacrament of penance to make up for any offenses in this area and to receive the graces needed to live out God’s truth about love and intimacy.

In addition to the moral and spiritual concerns, the Church has some very practical concerns about cohabitation. The *Catechism* states that, unlike true marriage, cohabiting cannot “ensure mutual sincerity and fidelity” nor protect against “inconstancy of desires or whim.” Simply put, “human love does not tolerate ‘trial marriages’” (CCC 2391).

In other words, people cannot simply “try on” marriage for a time. **There is no way to “try on” the complete and lifelong fidelity and commitment** that are inherent and essential to a true and sacramental marriage—whether through cohabitation, premarital relations, or any other means.



True Love

Sometimes partners will make demands by saying, “If you loved me, you would....” While love and intimacy are self-giving, they are never possessive, conditional, diminish one’s identity, or compromise values and the truth.

How can the following express real, Christian love?

How can they distort or feign true love?

“Loving” Act	Is Real When...	Is Fake When...
Paying for meals or bills / Giving gifts		
Sharing pet- or child-care duties		
Staying late or overnight		
Spending time with an adult of the opposite sex		
Engaging in sexual activity with less than full interest or desire		

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Debunking the Myths

Do the Church's concerns have any bearing on whether or not cohabitation is actually harmful to couples? Shouldn't individual couples be able to assess whether cohabitation is a good idea for them? Each couple has its own story and reasons for cohabiting. As unique as these may be, most rationales for living together tend to be based on at least one of three major assumptions:

1. Cohabitation is more convenient than living separately.
2. Cohabitation helps test compatibility.
3. Cohabitation ensures against future divorce.

Let's examine these assumptions and whether human experience reveals them to live up to their promises or not.

Cohabitation is more convenient than living separately.

For many couples, the transition to living together seems to just happen on its own. The couple will spend nights together multiple times a week,

and one person's things gradually find residence at the other person's home. The inconvenience and expense of living separately often prompt couples to perceive moving in together as the better option.

As natural and clear as this transition may appear, it is frequently associated with a great deal of ambiguity surrounding each partner's intentions for cohabiting and underlying understanding of what cohabiting means for the progression of their relationship and their respective levels of commitment. This ambiguity becomes problematic when we consider the constraints that living together puts on a relationship.



The sharing of obligations and possessions—a lease, furniture, pets, perhaps even a child—naturally make it more difficult to break up. Even though couples may think they can easily end the relationship at any time, **the resulting momentum may cause couples to favor staying together despite finding themselves incompatible** and to drift into marriage without a clear, deliberative, mutual understanding of their commitment to each other and whether or not they are truly well-suited to be together.

Additionally, the idea that cohabiting is more convenient financially is misleading. While cohabiting couples may seek out the freedom of shared living expenses, cohabiting often does not result in improved savings. Financial savings are not solely dependent on the pooled resources and energies of the couple. How the couple decides to spend or invest their money is also a key factor, along with the level to which they pool their income. It is here that **the degree of permanence and mutual dependence in the relationship makes a difference**. Cohabiting couples actually combine their resources less than those who are married. As a result, their reported wealth is similar to that of single people and significantly below that of married couples. Not only does the couple see little, if any, improvement to their savings, but they take on greater constraints without the necessary level of commitment and intentionality to withstand their burden.

Cohabitation helps test compatibility.

The growth of cohabitation is linked to two different views of marriage. The “low view” of marriage believes that love is all

that matters and that marriage is nothing more than a legal document. This view of marriage became widespread among young people in the 1970s and 1980s, when cohabitation began rising in American culture. More recently, however, men and women justify cohabitation out of a “high view” of marriage. With the divorce rate hovering between 40 percent and 50 percent,

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many adults have a strong desire to avoid divorce and succeed in marriage, and they believe that “trying on” marriage and testing their compatibility through cohabitation will help ensure future marital stability, happiness, and success.

Unfortunately, cohabitation is not a good test for compatibility. Even viewing relationships in this way habituates each partner to weighing obstacles and tensions on a type of “compatibility” scale—often against personal satisfaction. It habituates each partner to put his or her own comfort and preferences above those of the other, and to be critical of the other person’s shortcomings. If the scale is tipped in the “incompatible” direction, there is always the option of failure and exit.

For those couples who do reach marriage, these habits often remain or reappear, and they prove destructive to a happy, stable marriage. In marriage, a man and woman enter into an indissoluble bond, characterized by mercy and fidelity. The only scale is that of virtue and truth. Their attitude must always be pro-relational, directed at finding a way forward together and not giving up on one another or the relationship. **No matter how committed a cohabiting couple may be, nobody would say that their commitment is indissoluble.**



We Go Together

Rate the statements below on the following scale,
circling the corresponding number:

1. As a couple, our compatibility is...	5	4	3	2	1
2. My love for my fiancé(e) is...	5	4	3	2	1
3. My faith and love for Jesus is...	5	4	3	2	1
4. My interest in marriage is...	5	4	3	2	1
5. My level of commitment to this relationship is...	5	4	3	2	1
6. My willingness to sacrifice is...	5	4	3	2	1

5 - Absolute

4 - Strong

3 - Moderate

2 - Weak

1 - None

Add up your responses. If your total is...

25–30 points	Why aren't you married already?
19–24 points	You're on your way! Use this time of preparation to grow in faith, trust, unity, and understanding.
13–18 points	Your road to marriage may be long and hard. Take some time to discern your true desires and bring your concerns honestly to your fiancé(e). Seek outside help before committing further.
6–12 points	Do you really want to be here? Strongly consider whether you truly belong with your partner or on the road to marriage.

You're not done yet! Share your responses and tally with your fiancé(e). If you're surprised by what you see, don't dismay. God has a plan for you both, and together you can find the truth.

Cohabitation ensures against future divorce.

Within the context of cohabitation, there are many factors and variations: whether a couple drifts into cohabitation or makes a clear decision to prepare for marriage, the respective age(s) of the partners, timing (that is, moving in before vs. after engagement), the number of times an individual has cohabited (that is, serial cohabitation), and other relationship constraints, such as a child. Couples who drift into living together, who move in before making a clear decision to marry, who are young, or who have cohabited with one or more people other than their spouse are at an increased risk for divorce. On the other hand, those who

make a clear decision to marry before deciding to live together and who only cohabit with their spouse fare better in marriage on multiple measures.

This does not mean, however, that once a couple is engaged they should feel free to live together, or that living together is a good idea if there is mutual commitment. Engagements can be, and in some cases are, called off. Furthermore, some studies show that the risk of **divorce is associated with premarital sex itself**. One could therefore argue that cohabitation is risky for those hoping to avoid divorce simply on the basis of its connection to premarital sex and intimacy.



Transitioning to Marriage

The Church wants to help couples enter into marriage with as few risks as possible, overcome any challenges, and transition into sacramental marriage in the best way possible. If you are cohabiting and preparing for marriage, you are already on the right track. Although cohabitation is associated with greater risk in marriage, you can choose to continue on a risky path or begin practicing now the attitudes and behaviors that best prepare you for a healthy and happy marriage.

It is important that you make a sincere, deliberative decision to marry and do not drift into what seems to be the next natural phase. A happy marriage is not sustained by a one-time decision made the day you agree to marry. Marriage begins with a decision to commit to your spouse and is sustained by a daily decision to live out that commitment and to love each other unconditionally.

In marriage, we take on greater responsibility for the well-being of our spouse. Out of love, we make an effort to improve ourselves and accept the privilege of helping each other to seek,

know, follow, and love Christ and his teachings. Most engaged couples already understand that they should act in each other's best interest. However, they may not realize that the spiritual and moral dimensions of our lives often affect the physical and emotional. If we understand how the Church's teachings are compatible with science and human reason and lead to human flourishing, the choice to live separately and chastely before marriage makes sense. **Chastity not only disposes a couple for less risk in marriage but also prepares their souls to receive marital grace** and to express their love with creativity, self-control, and selflessness.

It is easy for sexual intimacy to distract from and overshadow other ways of knowing and loving a person. When a couple lives separately and practices chastity, they have to find other ways to spend time together, gauge their compatibility, and express their affection. They share in each other's lives in a way fitting to any deep and sincere friendship—which is what marital love must be founded on.

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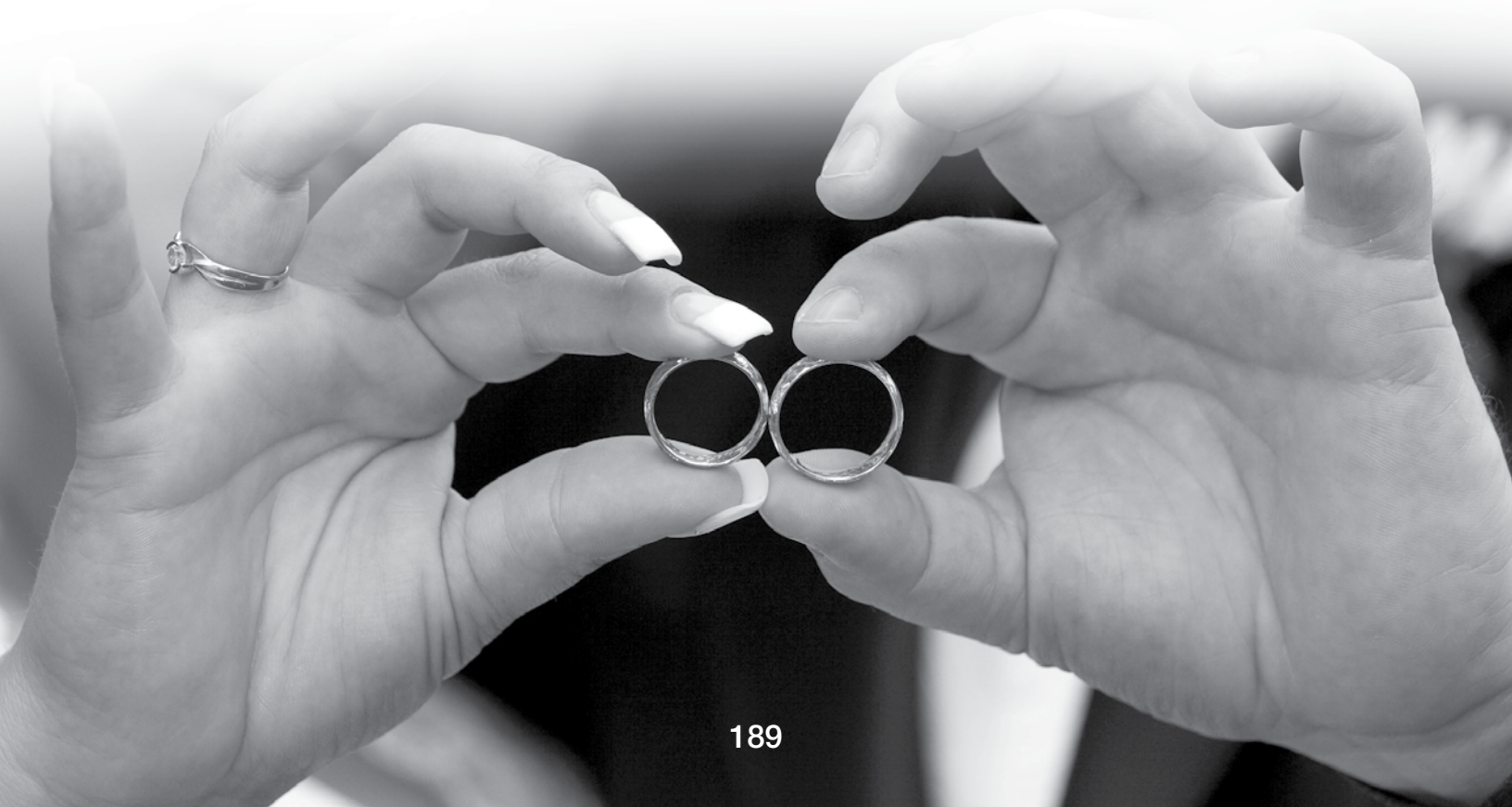
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The chaste lifestyle also creates more opportunities to look beyond the relationship and toward engaging family, friends, and colleagues together. These communities will prove a necessary source of support as you prepare for and enter married life. Mindful of confidentiality, **you will need the perspective of friends and family who know you and your loved one well** as you encounter difficult decisions and obstacles in your relationship.

In addition, allow your relationship to function and develop within a community

of faith, welcoming God and his Church into your activities and decisions. Through the sacraments and your relationships with Jesus, you and your future spouse will find the sustenance and guidance to enter confidently into marriage and to live your marriage well.

Cohabitation offers little by way of actual marriage preparation. But the Church, with its wisdom and grace, offers much. If you have already taken a chance on cohabitation, the riskier road to marriage, why not now take a chance on the joy of lifelong, faithful love?



Your Story of Salvation

The Sexuality chapter describes marital chastity as a “story of salvation,” which begins with “attraction and evolves over time into a deep love born of commitment.” Describe your journey to marital chastity, beginning with first lessons and experiences and ending with a committed and holy sexuality with your spouse.

If you’re currently cohabitating or in a sexual relationship, focus on your progress and describe steps and changes you can make to develop chastity in your lives. How will you overcome your challenges and lead each other to a lifetime of sacramental marriage?

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For Reflection and Discussion

1. Share with one another your initial reasons for cohabiting. What were your intentions for the relationship and future intimacy when you made that decision? Do any of the three myths sound familiar or ring true for you?
2. Discuss how your views about cohabitation have changed since reading this chapter. How can chastity help you prepare for marriage? What would it mean to be chaste from now until after the wedding?
3. What are the pros and cons of living apart vs. together before marriage? If you disagree with living apart or being chaste, share your reasons for that position and discuss the real and potential effects and consequences of that decision.
4. Think about how you begin and end your days, how you prepare to leave your home and to go to sleep. What important activities do you need to accomplish each day? What can be left for later? List the five most important and the five least important parts of your daily routine.

A. Most important

-
-
-
-
-

B. Least important

-
-
-
-
-

5. How much time do you need to spend alone? What time of day do you enjoy being by yourself to get things done or just to relax? Discuss your needs and how these needs can best be met once you are married. Discuss whether you will need to plan any areas of your home for individual time or for any separate hobbies you have.

My Thoughts

