

# Fall Marriage

## Cohabiting couples pose pastoral ministry problems

By Michael Cox  
Catholic News Service

WORCESTER, Mass. — Couples living together before marriage is a tough issue for Catholic pastoral ministers, but they need to focus more on a couple's attitudes than on their cohabitation, according to a workshop speaker in Worcester.

"Canon law indicates that we should not impede the sacrament of marriage based solely on the grounds of cohabitation," said James Healy, the main speaker at a Sept. 6 program for 300 pastoral leaders in the Worcester diocese.

"The Catholic Church has to help people move from irregular to regular situations," he said. "We need to help in the transition from living together to marriage."

The workshop — "Cohabitation: Issues in Marriage Preparation" — was held at Blessed Sacrament Parish, with Bishop Daniel P. Reilly participating.

Healy, director of the Center for Family Ministry for the Diocese of Joliet, Ill., is recognized nationally on the subject of family relationships. He is an adviser to the U.S. bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family Life.

"Cohabitation is a difficult subject to deal with," he said. "We need to focus more on the attitudes to commitment and lifestyles of cohabitants than we do cohabitation."

"Faith readiness" is the biggest problem he encounters. He said people who live together "tend not to be in the core of Catholicism but (are) marginal Catholics."

Healy answered questions

about who cohabits and why, about how sexual activity relates to a decision to cohabit, and about how to handle a such couples in couple-to-couple ministry.

Healy said there have been dramatic changes in cohabitation over the past 25 years. Couples living together outside marriage tripled in the 1970s, and by 1990 5 percent of all couples were cohabiting.

Couples who live together before marriage tend to be less religious, generally more liberal and risk-oriented, and sexually liberal. They have more financial problems and less regard for social norms, Healy said.

Reasons he cited for cohabitation include: fear of commitment, economics, insecurity, sexual freedom, a desire to get to know one another better, a prior bad experience, lack of a

solid religious foundation, and viewing it as a rite of passage or playing house.

The one relationship that breaks up more than marriage is cohabitation, he said. Healy advised pastoral leaders to be aware that people who cohabit today view their situation as a moral step forward.

Studies done in the mid-1980s showed that couples who cohabited were 50 percent more likely to divorce and 33 percent more likely to divorce in the first year.

"Healy quoted Pope John Paul II in a 1981 document: "To work with these couples we need to do it in a welcoming, prudent and respectful way and smooth the path for them to regularize their situation."

Healy's own surveys have shown that one-third of priests choose to ignore the situation

of cohabitation. Others have tried the ultimatum approach. Neither of these approaches is helpful, he believes.

His recommendations were:


— Get to know the couple; try to find out where they are and where they are going, case by case.

— Focus on their secular and psychological readiness for marriage; don't set higher standards for cohabiting couples than for other couples.

— Find out what they have learned from living together.

"If we are going to invite a couple into the sacrament of marriage, we must celebrate it and do it openly and not grudgingly," he said. "We need to strengthen their possibility for success and maximize their experience. Our ultimate purpose is to save souls."

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