

# First comes love — then cohabitation?

What comes first among most young adult couples — marriage or cohabitation?

That question used to be a no-brainer. Only 11 percent of nonmarried couples in the United States cohabitated in 1965. Today more than half of all first marriages are preceded by cohabitation. Across all age groups, cohabitation increased by 45 percent from 1970 to 1990. Somewhere between 60 percent to 80 percent of couples preparing for marriage are cohabiting.

The institution of marriage has been eroding for some time, especially in First-World countries that value individualization over interdependency. Marriage is delayed by many young-adult couples, while sexual relationships are beginning earlier. In rich countries like America, people rely less on religious and social institutions for guidance. A dangerous secularization has infiltrated family life, leaving couples with little confidence in long-term commitments and religious ideals.

Almost every wedding that my husband and I attend involves an already-cohabiting bride and groom. As a generation, we have bought into the sales pitch, "Try before you buy." But that comes with some scary risks — like divorce and further family erosion.

In a paper published by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops titled "Marriage Preparations and Cohabiting Couples," the bishops' Committee for



Therese J. Borchard

## Our Turn

Marriage and Family Life reported that the risk of divorce is 50 percent higher in the United States for cohabitators than noncohabitators, and is as high as 80 percent higher in some European countries.

Why is a trial session so bad for prospective marriage partners?

Significant studies on this topic suggest two overriding sources of risk: predisposing attitudes and characteristics that cohabitators carry into marriage; and experiences from the cohabitation itself that cause problems.

For example, cohabitators have been found to be less committed to the institution and sacrament of marriage, and far more likely to seek divorce as a solution to marital problems. They value their individualism more than do noncohabitators.

Moreover, they often hold unrealistic expectations of marriage and are easily disillusioned with the ordinary challenges of married life.

All of that doesn't even bring into consideration the experience of cohabitation, which can often exercise a

deteriorating influence on values over time.

According to several studies, the experience of cohabitation can change attitudes toward permanence, undermining the notion of commitment and popularizing divorce as an acceptable alternative.

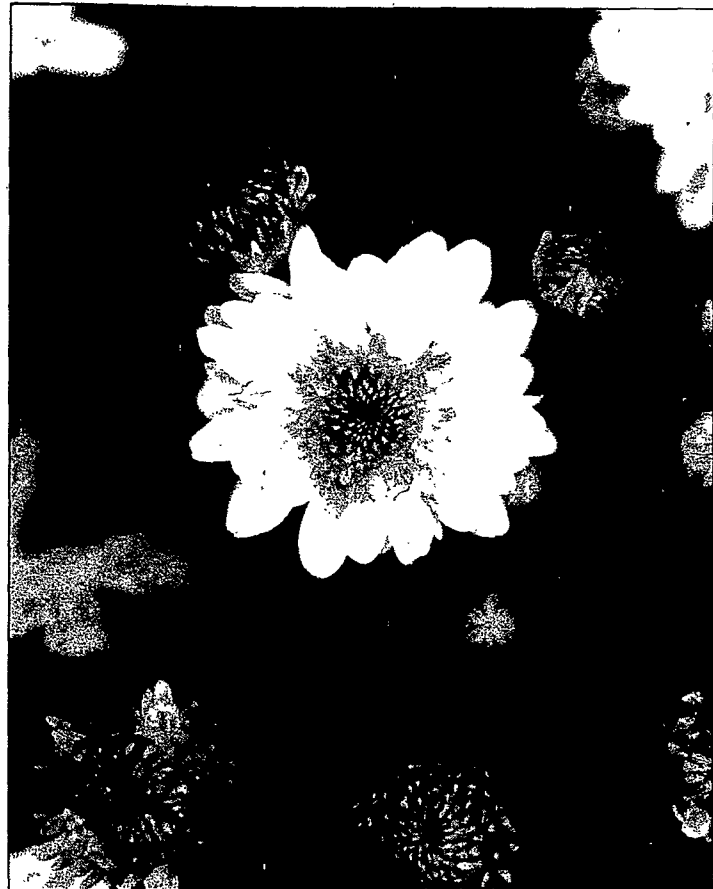
A cohabiting couple with two separate checking accounts and defined patterns of fiscal management can also struggle when the time comes to discuss budgets and financial planning.

Related to this, cohabiting couples can be poor communicators, less effective at conflict resolution. Some dysfunctional habits of problem-solving already have snuck into their relationship while these couples shared one roof.

The church's disapproval of cohabitation is precisely the reason so many Catholic young adults shy away from marriage-preparation programs and have their packets of information sent to their friends' addresses (in order to provide two different addresses).

Living together before — or with no intention of — tying the knot has become fine and dandy in our culture. However, to preserve the sanctity of marriage and to give a relationship its best chance for survival, why not consider the benefits of staying put until the rings are blessed?

Therese J. Borchard is a columnist for Catholic News Service.



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

## MORE LETTERS

"It's a process, dear friends, and the taste that we have of God can continue to develop into ever deeper levels of intimacy that are absolutely inconceivable to us in the beginning — beyond anything, as Paul says, we could imagine or dream of is the closeness of God's presence."

So, do we argue about a word in the presence of an all-loving, all embracing God? No. Peace to you, Father Shamon. You will be missed.

Tom Agness  
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## Column made him feel good

To the editor:

I was sorry to read that Father Albert Shamon will not be writing his column, "A Word for Sunday." It was my favorite part of the *Catholic Courier*.

Father Shamon really made the Scriptures come alive. I loved how he mixed history, culture and stories

to make the Sunday readings relevant to our times.

I especially enjoyed his tales of how individual people made great impacts on the world despite personal problems. Several articles I clipped to read when I need a lift. In one column Father Shamon described how a crippled black girl, Wilma Rudolph, eventually won three Olympic gold medals in world-record times. About a year ago he wrote about Azie Taylor Morton who became the Treasurer of the United States, even though she once worked in a cotton field and her mother was deaf and could not speak.

Often when I watch the evening news or read a newspaper, I feel disgusted with what people do to one another. I feel helpless. At times I wonder, there must be someone, somewhere doing some good for the world. Why can't these high-paid reporters find any good news? Well, Father Shamon always did. After reading his column, one always felt better.

Jim Secosky  
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Manchester

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The *Catholic Courier* provides space for readers to express opinions on all sides of the issues. We welcome original, signed letters about current issues affecting church life.

Although we cannot publish every letter we receive, we seek to provide a balanced representation of expressed opinions and a variety of reflections on life in the church. We will choose letters based on likely reader interest, timeliness and a sense of fair play. Our discerning readers may determine whether to agree or disagree with the opinions expressed.

Letters must not exceed 300 words. Anonymous letters and the use of pseudonyms are unacceptable. We reserve the right to edit letters for legal and other concerns. With respect to errors in submitted text, we will correct spelling only.

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