

Living Together – Living Apart

Catholic couples – or couples where one partner is Catholic – seem to be living together without being married in about the same proportion as in society in general. It wouldn't be honest of me to say that, as a priest, the situation doesn't bother me but that doesn't mean I'm going to be critical or judgmental. I'm not even going to say they are "living in sin" because, as I'll explain in a moment, that may not necessarily be the case. It's not an easy subject to address, and I certainly don't want to offend anyone. Rather what I hope to do is to offer a pastoral invitation to such couples to consider a more spiritually positive alternative for the future.

So, let's get the bad news out of the way first (there is also good news - later). We can't ignore either God's law or the Church's teaching on the subject of a physical relationship outside of marriage. Unfortunately the Church seems to prefer a low-key pastoral approach rather than a moral teaching approach to the situation of so many couples living together with the result that little seems to be said publicly on the subject. That's all very well except that people begin to interpret the apparent silence as approval and, little by little, the impression is given that the standards that are increasingly acceptable in our society are also acceptable to the Church, whereas that isn't in fact the case. Regardless of what everyone else says is OK, as followers of Christ our bottom line is God's law and what he says is right and wrong.

On the other hand it may not always be correct to label couples living together as "living in sin". In order to commit sin we have to know that what we are doing is morally wrong and therefore sinful. If we don't in fact know, then our choice can't be sinful. The question is, though: *should* we know? Have we failed to find out? - a point I'll come back to in a moment. I'm not at all convinced that Catholic young people these days are as informed as they should be on the moral teachings of the Church - either because we priests have avoided the subject afraid that we might drive them away, or because their religious education in school (if they even attended Catholic schools) has been woefully lacking in those areas compared to the message they receive from their peers and from society. At the same time, if they only experience token practice of the faith at home - the primary source of their spiritual education - how can they possibly know!

There is also a question of whether, on a spiritual and sacramental level, couples realise that by living together, and presumably therefore being in a physical relationship, they exclude themselves from receiving holy communion. I'm not convinced that they do given the answer of many of those who are asked the question, and how often priests (who don't know) are asked by people (who do)

why certain individuals in such relationships are still going up to receive the sacrament. Again this may simply be because they are not aware that their domestic situation is morally wrong in the eyes of the Church, or it may be because they have decided “in conscience” that it isn’t in fact wrong. We are obliged to inform our conscience but that is a much more involved process than doing something because we personally feel it is right or that it feels good. We have to consider God’s law and the Church’s moral teaching, and possibly also seek guidance from our priest, so that we can be sure that the decision we then make before God is truly made in conscience.

Call me old fashioned, but whatever happened to engagements and abstinence? An engagement used to be an often lengthy period of time during which two people got to know each other socially, emotionally and every other “-ally” except physically. People didn’t have to be living together in order to establish the foundations of a lasting relationship. These days, for all the living together that people do, the coming apart rate would suggest that particular choice doesn’t seem to offer any firm guarantees. Why, then, are people choosing to live together, even to start a family together, without getting married? Why does marriage seem to be a “bridge too far”?

Possibly it’s because it doesn’t involve any long-term commitment in the way that marriage does. If something goes wrong, partners can walk out on the arrangement at any time – and many do. But what does that say about the attitude (not to mention the love) that a person brings with them into the relationship if there isn’t the willingness to make a long-term commitment to the other person? It’s wanting your cake and eating it. And what about any children there may be? Surely they deserve much better in terms of on-going love, security and stability. That’s what marriage is all about after all – family - the building blocks of our society. If couples feel they can provide all of that whether they are married or not, then from a spiritual and pastoral point of view as Catholics, why not get married? Again, why is marriage a “bridge too far”?

As I said earlier, my intention in mentioning all of this isn’t to condemn but to invite. Have couples who are living together thought about the spiritual and pastoral difficulties they are creating for themselves and in bringing up their children in the practice of the faith and being able to accompany them in their sacramental journey? I would want to ask whether there is any way they might consider putting things right – as God sees it and as the Church sees it – meeting with a priest to see what can be done, taking that extra step of commitment (within the sacrament of matrimony) to that other person in their life and to any children they may have? The possibilities are only a phone call away. That’s the good news.

Separated or divorced?

As we know, the Church doesn't accept civil divorce as an end to the vowed commitment of marriage made "'til death (not the courts) do us part". However the Church does, of course, accept the sad reality that sometimes, for whatever reasons, such a relationship can break down irredeemably and irreconcilably and the only practical alternative is separation.

Many Catholics mistakenly believe that because they are separated, or their spouse has obtained a civil divorce, that they are no longer able to receive holy communion. This is not the case. Being separated or "divorced" (as the courts see it) doesn't in itself exclude a person from the sacraments. Whatever brought an end to the marriage may not even have been their fault. They may well have been the victim of circumstances beyond their control and are now living with the consequences of an action taken by their spouse. But if someone does feel responsible for the breakdown of their marriage, that is perhaps something that can be taken care of within the sacrament of confession.

What could exclude someone from receiving holy communion is if they have now entered into a second, and physical, relationship. The Church calls this an "irregular" relationship because it is morally unacceptable given that, in the eyes of the Church, the first marriage still exists. If they are simply living together the solution to the problem is clear, though it may not be a popular one, and that is for the relationship to be ended. But if there are children from that second relationship, or if they have made it legal by marrying again in a registry office or another church, then things are a little more difficult (possibly even impossible) to resolve

Obtaining an annulment of the first marriage may be a possibility – so paving the way to resolving the second – though the annulment process can be complex and lengthy and offers no guarantees. The first step would be to speak to your parish priest; if you don't ask you will never find out.

It may be that, as things stand, there is no immediate or ready answer by which a return to the sacraments is possible – and this is a cause of very real pain to the Church and, no doubt, to the individual concerned. The Church might wish it could simply wave a magic wand that would put things right but it can't anymore than the couple can turn back the clock if they wished. The sad reality is that people make certain choices – perhaps in haste, perhaps under social or economic pressure – and only later do some of the more unfortunate consequences of those choices become apparent. What the Church wants them to know is that they are always welcome whenever their faith community gathers and that they are invited to come forward at communion time to ask a blessing – not a blessing in the sense of an approval of their situation, but a blessing in their woundedness as fellow members of the body

of Christ. Bishop John said: *The only qualification that any of us needs for worshipping at Mass with the rest of our Catholic family is our faith in God and the need to express that faith in praise and adoration. If virtue or sinlessness were necessary requirements, not one of us would qualify!* He went on to urge each of us to ensure that our parish family always provides a welcome for any and all of its members.

The bottom line is that if you are separated or “divorced” but are not in a second (and physical) relationship, then there is nothing (apart from the usual needs that we all have for recourse to the sacrament of confession) to prevent you receiving holy communion. I wonder how many people are unnecessarily excluding themselves from the sacrament simply as a result of past misinformation?

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