

McManus: Ethics & Religion column

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A Valentine's Day Warning: Don't Cohabit

By Mike McManus

This Valentine's Day, a chill wind from Rutgers University is blowing away a dangerous illusion of modern romance that living with someone is the way to decide whether to get married and to avoid a future divorce. Actually, neither is correct.

"Living together before marriage increases the risk of breaking up after marriage," says the landmark report, "Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know About Cohabitation Before Marriage."

It cites a study that cohabitators who marry "are estimated to have a hazard of dissolution that is about 46 percent higher" than those who live apart before marriage. "Living together outside of marriage increases the risk of domestic violence for women and the risk of physical and sexual abuse for children." Cohabiting women are twice as likely as married women to be physically abused and are three times as likely to be depressed. Why? Women agree to live together in hopes that it is a step toward marriage, while men do so for the easy access to sex. My Valentine's Day advice to such women is to move out. Remember your mother's advice, "He's never going to buy the cow if he gets free milk."

Paul put it succinctly in his letter to the Corinthians: "Flee fornication."

Americans are moving in the opposite direction. In 1960, only 430,000 couples lived together. That figure has soared ten-fold to 4,236,000 by 1998. Young people see no harm in that trend. Indeed, the report says nearly 60 percent of high school seniors think it is a good idea to live together before getting married. Yet as more cohabit, fewer get married. The marriage rate has plunged 41 percent in the same time.

Thus, cohabitation is a double cancer of marriage. It has diverted tens of millions from getting married. The number of never-married Americans has doubled from 21 million in 1970 to 46 million by 1997. And by increasing the odds of divorce of those who do marry after living together, cohabitation is one reason divorces tripled from 390,000 in 1960 to 1,163,000 in 1997.

The report by Dr. David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead summarizes academic research for The National Marriage Project of Rutgers. It says that while marriages are held together by "a strong ethic of commitment, cohabiting relationships by their very nature tend to undermine this ethic." They differ in their levels of commitment and autonomy. "Once this low-commitment, high-autonomy pattern of relating becomes learned, it becomes hard to unlearn." It cites a Penn State study that "the more months of exposure to cohabitation that young people experienced, the less enthusiastic they were toward marriage and childbearing."

"Particularly problematic is serial cohabitation....The experience of dissolving one cohabiting relationship generates a greater willingness to dissolve later relationships. People's tolerance for unhappiness is diminished and they will scrap a marriage that might be salvaged."

Thus, cohabitation fosters selfishness, not the selflessness needed for marital stability.

Indeed, the report notes that a sad byproduct of shacking up is that the number of unmarried couples with children has grown from 21 percent in 1987 to 36 percent a decade later: "Half of all children will spend some time in a cohabiting family before age 16."

A British study found that children living with cohabiting but unmarried biological parents are 20 times more likely to be victims of child abuse as those of married parents. And children of a mother living with a man who is not the father are 33 times more vulnerable to abuse.

Therefore, the report recommends that couples "Consider not living together at all before marriage. Do not make a habit of cohabiting." Finally, "Do not cohabit if children are involved" because its effects are devastating to children and long-lasting.

I would add that churches should stop aiding this trend by their silence. Pastors should cite this sociological evidence that Scripture is right in calling for chastity, and preach on it from the pulpit, as a warning to the young and to help middle-aged parents know what to tell their adult children who are cohabiting.

Second, churches should offer young adults an alternative way to test their relationship by taking a premarital inventory. They can predict with 80 percent accuracy which couples will divorce, and a tenth who take them decide not to marry that person. Studies show they are avoiding a bad marriage before it has begun.

St. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "Test everything. Hold onto the good. Avoid every kind of evil." Cohabitation is an embracing of evil. Premarital testing avoids it, while holding on to the good.