

“By its very nature conjugal love requires the inviolable fidelity of the spouses. ... Love seeks to be definitive; it cannot be an arrangement ‘until further notice.’”
Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1646

marriage vs. cohabitation: Is There a Difference?

Can a relationship be like a test-drive? That is what writer and economist Jennifer Roback Morse wonders in a reflection on cohabitation (living in a sexual relationship with someone not your spouse). Many people argue that it is only sensible to “try out” living with someone before committing to marrying them. You wouldn’t buy a car without taking it for a test-drive, right?

But Dr. Morse points out the obvious: “Here’s the problem with the car analogy: the car doesn’t have hurt feelings if the driver dumps it back at the used car lot and decides not to buy it. The analogy works great if you picture yourself as the driver. It stinks if you picture yourself as the car.”¹

Dr. Morse knows what she is talking about. She and her husband lived together before marriage. While their relationship survived, most cohabitators are not so lucky: fewer than half will marry, statistics indicate.² And if they do marry, they are nearly 50% more likely to divorce.³

Cohabitators seem to be setting themselves up for unhappiness. The sad thing is that many people cohabit because they have experienced the tragedy of divorce and are trying to avoid it. But cohabiting doesn’t protect anyone from heartbreak.



The chances of being dumped are far higher among cohabiting couples than among married couples.⁴ The test-drive analogy already indicates the tenuousness of the relationship. What the “driver” is saying to the “car” is, “You act like you’re married; I’ll act like I’m shopping.”⁵

The Cohabitation Risk

In fact, not only does cohabiting increase your chances of break-up, it also decreases your odds of experiencing the personal benefits that come with marriage. Married couples are happier, healthier, wealthier, and have more and better sex than the unmarried.⁶

Both women and children are

more likely to be abused in cohabiting environments than in marriage. “In general, the evidence suggests that the most unsafe of all family environments for children is that in which the mother is living with someone other than the child’s biological father. This is the environment for the majority of children in cohabiting couple households.”⁷

And about 40% of cohabiting households have children. Even when it is the biological parents who are cohabiting with children, the situation is not likely to be stable; 75% of children in cohabiting households experience the trauma of parental separation, compared to around 33% of children in married households.⁸

Cohabiting = A Habit of Not Trusting

The fact is, marriage isn't just a piece of paper. It is a reality that changes those who enter into it whole-heartedly. What is it that makes marriage so different? The answer is easy: commitment.

When a husband and a wife have a lifelong commitment to one another and to the children that God wishes to send them, then they are living a *different relationship* than the cohabiting couple is living. A married couple is living a *committed* relationship. And it turns out that commitment to another makes us happy and fulfilled. We are made for self-giving love.

In reflecting on her own story, Dr. Morse ruefully reports that cohabiting is no way to teach yourself to be generous in love. "No one can simulate self-giving. Half a commitment is no commitment. Cohabiting couples have one foot out the door, **throughout the relationship. They rehearse not trusting.**"⁹ Any habit, especially a habit of the heart, is hard to break. It is unrealistic to expect to stop on a dime and suddenly be able to commit to a life-time of love when the "right person" comes around.

God's Love Energizes Our Love

Fortunately, God understands us better than we understand ourselves. While we are not able to change ourselves, *He* can change us. He has given us the sacraments to inject His strength and love into our lives.

In the sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession), God forgives our sins and gives us grace to persevere in loving well. The sacrament of the Eucharist feeds us with Jesus's own Body and Blood, so that we can be true members of His body, the

“Human freedom finds its deepest realization in the marriage covenant. The world tells us that freedom means avoiding all commitment but the truth is the opposite! True freedom is the ability to unite your whole being in choosing what is good, without any constraint!”

Mary Healy, *Men and Women Are From Eden*¹¹

Church, and embody His love in the world. And the sacrament of Matrimony provides us with the grace to live out the commitments made in the wedding vows.

“Perfect Love Casts Out Fear”

In his first epistle, St. John writes, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 Jn 4:18). Ultimately, most people cohabit out of a fear of the future. What if this relationship does not work out? Living together instead of marrying seems to be the easier way.

But in relationships, as in so many other things, victory goes to the

brave, not the timid. Real love trusts the beloved person and places all hope in the grace of God working through the sacraments.

The bishops of Australia have commented on the fundamental link between sex and trust: “If one or both persons are not yet ready to say ‘I give all that I am, including my body’ and ‘I accept from you the gift of all that you are, including your body,’ then they are not ready for sex. If a couple do not fear becoming a real gift to each other, they should not fear marriage.”¹⁰

Becoming a real gift to another person—sounds a lot better than being the used car returned to the lot. ☹

¹Jennifer Roback Morse, “Why Not Take Her For a Test Drive?” http://www.jennifer-roback-morse.com/articles/cohab_fast_facts.html ²David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know About Cohabitation Before Marriage, A Comprehensive Review of Recent Literature*, 2nd ed., 2002, p.6, <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/publicat.htm> ³Ibid., p. 4, citing Alfred DeMaris & K. Vaninadha Rao, 1999, “Premarital Cohabitation & Subsequent Marital Stability in the U.S.: A Reassessment,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54. ⁴“After 5 to 7 years, 39% of all cohabiting couples have broken their relationship, 40% have married (although the marriage might not have lasted), and only 21% are still cohabiting” (Popenoe and Whitehead, *Should We Live Together?*, pp. 6-7). ⁵See Morse, “Why Not Take Her For a Test Drive?” ⁶Maggie Gallagher and Linda Waite, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000). ⁷Popenoe and Whitehead, *Should We Live Together?*, p. 8. ⁸Ibid. ⁹Morse, “Why Not Take Her For a Test Drive?” ¹⁰Australian Bishops Conference, *Marriage in the Catholic Church: Frequently Asked Questions*, 2006, p. 8, <http://www.acbc.catholic.org.au/documents/20061024972.pdf> ¹¹Mary Healy, *Men and Women Are From Eden* (Cincinnati: Servant Books, 2005), pp. 25-26