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Cohabitation: Living in Sin or Occasion of Grace?

Kevin T. Kelly

What I am about as both parish priest and moral theologian is 'trying to make faith-sense of experience and experience-sense of faith' (cf. Jack Mahoney, *Bioethics and Belief*, London: Sheed & Ward, 1984, p. 112). That is why, when couples who have been living together for some time, many with children of their own, come to me to arrange their wedding, I cannot bring myself to tell them that they are 'living in sin'. I do not believe they are! They are coming to me because they want to make a more formal commitment before God to a living and growing relationship which they have already experienced as a grace from God. I was nearly going to insert the phrase 'despite its rough patches' after the word relationship above. However, that would not reflect what these couples are saying to me. Many are encouraged and inspired by the fact that their love for each other has grown through their being able to overcome the difficult problems they have faced together, including problems in relating to each other. They have caught a glimpse of God in the midst of the storms and struggles they have been through. To describe their experience as 'living in sin' would scandalize them and would be a denigration of something they had experienced as sacred and from God. Such language would be tantamount to blasphemy. In my experience, most of these couples seem blissfully ignorant that the Church disapproves of the way they have been living. In fact, they are simply grateful that they can come to the church to celebrate the gift of their love for each other and to give it a new permanence through the solemn commitment of their marriage vows to each other and to God.

To make 'faith-sense' of this new phenomenon of living together before marriage, we need to listen to how such living together affects the lives of those involved. Is it a good thing for them?

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Does it help them to grow together in love and mutual support? Could it be compared to a kind of novitiate in the religious life, gradually preparing them to make a full and unconditional commitment to each other? If, in fact, it seems to be a 'good' experience in terms of human growth and fulfilment, does the Church need to find a more positive and appropriate way of describing it?

In his book, *Living Together and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), the Anglican theologian, Adrian Thatcher, lists twenty-five 'probably true' propositions about cohabitation. Some carry a kind of health warning. For instance:

- 'trial marriages' are unlikely to work
- men are less committed to their female partners and much less committed to children
- cohabitators with no plans to marry report poorer relationship quality than married people
- cohabitators with children are very likely to split up
- their children are more likely to be poorer and victims of abuse
- cohabitation leads to an increase in the number of single-parent children.

That paints a rather bleak picture, especially if the increase in cohabitation is interpreted as one of the signs of creeping individualism and weakening religious belief.

However, Thatcher also offers some 'good news':

- people who live together with their partner before they marry value fidelity almost as much as married people do
- the stability of cohabitation and marriage may be measured by the beliefs and attitudes partners bring to each
- cohabitators with plans to marry report no significant difference in relationship quality to married people.

Another Anglican theologian, Duncan Dormor, has written an equally interesting book on cohabitation, *Just Cohabiting? The Church, Sex and Getting Married* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2004). The way he presents some of the data is more hopeful than Thatcher's. For instance, he is able to report:

More recent research, conducted when a majority of those marrying have cohabited first, has shown that it is no longer the case that those who cohabit in preparation for marriage are more likely to get divorced after the event (p. 10).

Hence, to maintain that 'the experience of pre-marital cohabitation has a destabilizing effect on subsequent marriage' is simply 'incorrect' even though it is 'the simplest and most popular interpretation' (p. 10). However, Dormor does accept that 'whilst it is clear that marital stability *per se* is not affected by premarital cohabitation, children born to cohabiting parents are twice as likely to experience parental separation as those born within marriage' (p. 88).

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A GROWTH PROCESS

A post-Vatican II understanding of marriage recognizes that it involves a growth process which neither begins nor ends with the marriage promises. At the heart of this process is the couple's growing together into a communion of life and love. The sexual expression of their love in intercourse is such an intimate part of this growth process that the consummation of their marriage lies in the achievement of an integrity between their making love and their living together rather than in any single post-wedding act of intercourse. Even their consent, which the Church has always put centre stage, is subject to the demands of growth. Time is needed for them gradually to grow in an appreciation of what they are undertaking together and in their mutual capacity for and commitment to this life-long creative task. All of this cannot be contained in a specific moment on their 'wedding day'.

Both Thatcher and Dormor agree that prenuptial cohabitation, that is, cohabiting prior to getting married, is a totally different reality from cohabiting without any intention of getting married. In prenuptial cohabitation the couple accept the values of marriage as their norm and have every hope and intention at some future date to make a solemn commitment to their relationship through the exchange of their nuptial vows in some kind of public wedding ceremony. Whereas couples who cohabit without any intention of getting married are simply living together for as long as suits them. The thought of lifelong commitment is not on their agenda. Their relationship is a kind of consumer commodity, to be discarded when no longer needed by one or other partner. It is this form of cohabitation to which Thatcher's health warnings mentioned above apply.

Dormor reports that less than 1% of couples getting married today actively adhere to the Church's teaching on the undesirability of sexual intercourse before marriage. Certainly, for most couples today, at least in Britain, cohabitation is part of the process of getting married. They do not seem to be rejecting marriage or seeing cohabitation as a desirable alternative. Rather they seem so aware that the health of a marriage is dependent on the potentiality for growth in their relationship that they are keen to get that growth process established on a solid foundation. Not until that foundation is laid, will they have the confidence to commit themselves for the rest of their lives. They do not see this as denying that marriage is for life. In fact, they would claim that this is their way of trying ensure that their marriage actually will be for life. In their minds, to commit themselves before experiencing this initial part of the growth process and discovering whether as a couple they are up to it, would be foolhardy and irresponsible. It would

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be like teaching a person to swim by throwing them into the deep end rather than helping them gradually to feel confident in the water before risking themselves out of their depth. For many years Jack Dominian has argued that trial marriages are a recipe for disaster. Commitment cannot be experimental. Nevertheless, according to Dormor (p. 10), many young people today do not see cohabitation as a kind of 'trial marriage'. Rather, they see it as 'a "trailer" for the absolute commitment which marriage entails'. Is this just a clever use of words or is there something more substantial to it?

A WARNING NOTE

Of course, making faith-sense of experience cannot ignore the negative aspects of cohabitation, however sensitively it is handled in pastoral practice. After all, it contains no built-in expression of commitment or binding framework of rights and responsibilities. Although in theory that can sound liberating and in keeping with the modern emphasis on individual freedom and internalized commitments, in practice when things do not work out, the partner in the weaker economic, social or legal position can be left in a desperate situation. Remember Thatcher's second health warning, 'men are less committed to their female partners and much less committed to children'. It is not by accident that many young mothers are left literally 'holding the baby'! Moreover, if, as Christians and most people believe, marriage has a social dimension to it, with or without children, it is hardly doing justice to it to leave it as a purely private arrangement between consenting adults. Perhaps the warning note sounded in this paragraph applies less to prenuptial cohabitation than to cohabitation with no intention of marrying.

Thinking back over the weddings I have been involved with in recent years, I get the impression that the main reasons why many couples live together before their marriage are economic and social. They see the public celebration of their marriage as demanding a 'big do'. It is all part of a key 'rite of passage' for them. If they are Christians, the wedding in church is an essential part of this – but only a part, not the whole. If they had only the church wedding, they would probably feel something lacking – shades of the wedding feast at Cana! But weddings are expensive though the church celebration is probably the least expensive item! In our contemporary culture of self-sufficiency and independence, many couples feel that they should pay for their own wedding.

Nevertheless, in terms of their embarking on the process of their life-long sharing of life and love together, it is not the wedding which is first on their list of priorities. Before that, they

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want to set up home together – ideally in their own house, though, tragically, this is becoming more and more an impossibility for many young couples. Some are keen to start a family before they marry – though they would do well to heed Thatcher's second health warning. I sometimes wonder whether, at least for some cohabiting couples, the baptism of their first child is an important public statement about their growing into marriage together. That would explain the increasing trend to invite family and numerous friends to the baptism and the celebration afterwards. It would also put their cohabitation firmly in the pre-nuptial category!

FREEDOM

A very important document, *On the Way to Life*, written principally by James Hanvey of the Heythrop Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life, has been published very recently by the Catholic Education Service. It was commissioned by the Department for Education and Formation of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. Hence, at least implicitly it has the support of the Bishops' Conference. It tries to analyze the present-day culture which is in the air we breathe and which, inevitably, has an influence on the way we live and the decisions we make. It also offers an interpretation of our own post-Vatican II Catholic culture and tries to discern how we can translate and interpret our Christian vision into language (not just words, but also life and action) which is enriched by the deepest and truest insights of contemporary culture, while refraining from being colonized and taken over by its less desirable elements. *On the Way to Life* sees freedom as one of the dominant values in present-day culture (cf. pp. 13-14). It points out that freedom and its associated values 'are not just static concepts but are subtly embedded in our ways of understanding both ourselves and the cultural dynamics in which we are engaged.' In struggling to see if it is possible to make faith-sense of cohabitation, perhaps one important question that needs to be faced is this. Is today's social trend of cohabitation no more than an expression of the kind of freedom which claims that we humans are the sole arbiters of the truth of our actions and that the only criterion to follow is self-authentication, 'Be true to yourself – do your own thing.' In terms of giving meaning to marriage, Dormor would interpret such an approach as equivalent to Anthony Giddens's notion of 'pure relationship' (cf. Dormor, pp. 91-104). In other words, all that matters is the relationship between consenting adults, to last only as long as their consent lasts (and presumably that means, as long as they find each other attractive or their relationship satisfying their needs), with children having no say in it, since it is an 'adults only' relationship.

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I must confess that the cohabiting couples who come to me to be married would be horrified by the Giddens approach. It might be in tune with some of what they see on television but it is certainly not how they would interpret their own relationship. They would see the Giddens scenario as failing to do justice to how they see themselves as human persons and to the kind of relationship they have struggled to build up as a couple. Love, tenderness and stability are the values they seem to believe in and which they would want to be hallmarks of their own marriage. They would also see these values as offering the right environment for the upbringing of their children, whether already born or hoped for in the future. They believe in freedom, certainly. Perhaps unthinkingly it is their freedom of spirit which has empowered them to leave home and cohabit together. I have even met couples who have seen their cohabitation as a very deliberate way of entering into the marriage process on their own terms and under their own free volition. For them, to start the marriage process with their wedding would be to let their parents and family take over this important stage in their life together.

One of the key insights of *On the Way to Life* is its focus on 'the ordinary' as the realm of God's grace:

The 'ordinary' is only a problem in a desacralized world in which the secular refuses to be graced. The theology of grace that informs Vatican II recovers 'the ordinary' as the realm of grace, God's 'better beauty'; hence the aesthetic of holiness is something exceptional but something that is shaped in the realm of the domestic, giving it the weight of glory; the Alchemist's stone is Christ.

In making faith-sense of cohabitation, I am left wondering whether some cohabiting couples might, at least implicitly and maybe even unconsciously, be laying claim to the holiness of 'the ordinary' of their relationship. They are holding back from celebrating that in the solemnity of their marriage until they have sufficient appreciation of the wonder and beauty ('the weight of glory') of this 'ordinary' reality of which they are the co-creators.

In recent years I have also noticed that some couples – admittedly very few at present – are wanting to mark much earlier wedding anniversaries than their Silver or Golden with a religious blessing or renewal of vows, either in church or as an intimate family celebration. Could this be an indication that they are becoming more conscious of the power of symbols both to consolidate and celebrate key moments in the growth of their marriage and to reveal the sacredness of their 'ordinary' life together?

In this little piece I have tried to make some kind of 'faith-sense' of the fact that many couples living together before

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marriage find this a ‘good’ experience and want to thank God for its goodness when they eventually celebrate their wedding. If there is any truth in what I have written – and I believe there is – maybe it is also a challenge to those of us who are theologians. Does our Christian theology of sexuality need to develop imaginatively and creatively so that what it says about cohabitation actually makes ‘experience-sense’ for the many Christians who are actually living this reality? If our theology can move in that direction, perhaps such a move could be reflected in some imaginative and innovative moves in the fields of liturgy – and even canon law. After all, the best liturgy emerges out of life – and custom often gives rise to the best laws.

Advent hope. There are times – and this may be such a time – when the words of priests and politicians seem threadbare as they repeat worn-out mantras and mouth clichés. There are times – and this may be such a time – to lay aside the scrolls and missals, the manifestos and mission statements, and discover and uncover with Hannah the language of our deepest desires, the language of our soul. Our barrenness may be of the soul rather than of the flesh but it is nonetheless painful as we long to be nourished and to bring something new to birth. Hannah is truly the prophet of Advent hope. She is caught between the place her husband has given her and the place the priest has ordained for her, the place the culture has designated for her and the language of limitation she has learnt. And yet she seeks out her own place and shapes it to fit that hope.

—ANNE THURSTON, *A Time of Waiting* (Dublin: The Columba Press) p. 32