

### **Parenting; Cohabitation; Humanae vitae**

**Q** *Because I'm divorced, my teenager now thinks it's better in his future life if he lives with a girl first before deciding to marry her, in case it does not work out. I don't agree with this but I can't seem to convince him. I just wonder if you have any tips on what I could say to him? From a Concerned Parent.*

**A** Dear Concerned Parent,

Before I can make any suggestions or give you any tips as to what you can say, allow me to discuss some preliminary matters and give you some background information. Your son is not alone in his thoughts. Not to mitigate your sons personal experience and concerns, he is also echoing the sentiments of the majority of his generation. According to Trent Horn and Leila Miller's excellent resource (Available to borrow from the Eparchial Family and Life Office) *Made This Way: How to Prepare Kids to Face Today's Tough Moral Questions* (2018: Catholic Answers Press), 27, "Thirty years ago, less than half of high school seniors supported cohabiting before marriage, to today two-thirds of them agree with this statement: 'It is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along'". I would suggest that it is an even greater proportion of youth that would agree with the statement today (as that statistic is based on a study done in the early 2000's) as the usual paradigm youth tend to see as normative regarding finding a mate goes something along the lines of...first you date, then you have sex (although not necessarily in that order), then you live together and if things really go well you may decide to get married. We are told that a recent Angus Reid Poll has shown that more than half of all Canadians think there is no need to marry at all. (<https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/couples-who-spend-their-lives-together-dont-need-to-legally-marry-say-more-than-50-of-canadians-in-new-poll> ) Sadly, it does not seem that Catholics are immune from these world views as the number of marriages in our churches has plummeted in the past 40 years and of those who present themselves for marriage over 80% are sexually active and often living together. I am not suggesting that these views should be normative but rather that they simply are the prevailing world views in 21<sup>st</sup> C. Canada.

So, what is behind this drastic shift in thinking on sex and marriage? It is perhaps simplistic to suggest that it is just the ‘sexual revolution’ but it would naïve to suggest that this is not a factor. This revolution was fueled, we must remember, by the widespread use and commonplace acceptance, even among Catholics, of contraception leading to the view that sex is completely separate from having babies, bonding and building a family (the very purposes which the Catholic Church has always held fast to as being inseparable and when separated leading not only to sin but disorder in our lives—ie. real problems which occur both on a personal level but also on a societal level an analysis of which require more study—one book on the topic is sociologist Mark Regnerus’s work *Cheap Sex* available on Amazon <https://www.amazon.com/Cheap-Sex-Transformation-Marriage-Monogamy/dp/0190673613> .

However, an even deeper shift is the widespread acceptance that what I do with my body is inconsequential to my soul or my person, which is an extension of Descartes’ philosophy of “I think therefore I am”. It is interesting that this would be the unspoken assumption of so many when the body-soul-spirit connection is often spoken of by health advocates. In fact, it is really the Church that holds fast to this connection with our belief that, as they say, ‘matter matters’—especially when it comes to the human person, how we live our life in and through our body.

This belief about the significance of the biological realities of our bodies and how we live in as ‘embodied spirits’ created in the ‘image and likeness of God’ is the topic of Pope St. John Paul’s massive reflection entitled the *Theology of the Body* and is succinctly summarized in our Catechism *Christ our Pascha*, 129 as follows:

The image of God defines the dignity of the human being—already in the bodily state—as being good. The goodness of the body especially consists in the fact that in our relationships, through the body, we are able to express ourselves as persons. We receive this ability as a gift from God. The human body is able to receive into itself the Spirit of God; as so, the apostle Paul refers to the human body as the “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:19). Here lies the mystery of the body and fullness of its destiny. This is why Christianity regards the human body as a temple, consecrated for the service of God and neighbor.

It is this understanding of the significance and importance of the body which is the foundation for both our acts of charity towards our fellow humans and all of Christian moral teaching—including the Church’s teaching on sexual morality.

However, as Pope Francis states in the opening of his Apostolic Exhortation on the Family *Amoris Laetitia*,<sup>1</sup>, **most young people still aspire towards a marriage relationship that can last a lifetime.** That is what appears to motivate your son, and others, to take the position they do on living together. What they fail to apprehend however, is that our bodies, including our creation as men and women, have both a natural purpose or end as well as a supernatural purpose or end and both these purposes have to do with marriage and our ultimate destiny of eternal life.

**You may be saying to yourself—oh my that is a lot, how will I ever explain that to my son?** It is explicable if we understand and accept that God is creator of our sexuality and He did so with some very specific things in mind:

1. First and most obviously is that men and women are privileged to become co-creators with him of new human beings. Human beings were created by God with free will and the capacity to know and love, each other and God. They were also created with an ‘eternal’ destiny. One might be tempted to think that contraception changes this purpose of sex but it cannot and does not—it merely alters how we might be tempted to think about sex. Just because we might think it, does not make it a reality.
2. Secondly, the only completely certain method of preventing an unplanned pregnancy is abstinence. While there are many methods of family planning that are very effective (and incidentally while the pill is one of those methods, Natural Family Planning, a method which does not deny the purposes of the conjugal act, rivals the pill in statistical effectiveness-- <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/what-is-nfp/science/effectiveness-of-nfp-methods.cfm> ) there are no methods of family planning that are 100% certain. Thus, for many abortion becomes the only way to ensure that a child will not be born of the union of a man and woman. Thus, while contraception is often touted as preventing abortion the reality is that it actually increases it.

3. Bonding or building of a life-long familial relationship is the other purposes of sexual union. (Please consider reading Humanae Vitae if you have never done so to see the beauty and brilliance of this Church Teaching [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_25071968\\_humanae-vitae.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html).) It is often forgotten as we think we have the life creating aspect “under control”. This might be one of the most convincing arguments against premarital sex and living together for those who wish to avoid the potential for a broken heart after a break up. This is as much an issue for guys as it is for women. **One cannot seriously think that breaking up after living together for a period of time is any easier than it would be if you were married.** (Also, one cannot forget that legally, in most places after a year of cohabitation, there are ramifications such as property and other rights that are ascribed to the common law spouses. Everyone who has gone through the divorce know that it is these things that are usually the contentious issues, not the divorce itself.) I think Catholic speaker and writer Jason Evert says it best when he says that it is silly for couples to think that they can actually ‘test drive’ for compatibility. Assume you are not compatible and are very different but rather look for someone who is trying to live a virtuous life and who treats you well (sometimes we need to work on our own stuff to actually believe we deserve to be treated well—self-esteem is a huge issue). That person should also challenge and support you to become the best version of yourself you can be. Ideally, it is best if you share deeply held values and even better if you share a world view, faith or belief system that also challenges you to become a better person.

I hope this at least provides some jumping off points for discussion with your son. We as parents never give up on our kids, and we will love them even if they choose not to follow Christ or they fall in to one sin or another. As long as there is life there is hope, as the saying goes and God’s mercy is always available. But we must not be presumptuous that just because God is merciful it does not matter what we do. The fact that our actions do have both temporal and eternal consequences makes it all the more important for us to pray fervently for our kids, as well as to live and learn our faith so we can give them the answers to the questions they have—or at least point them in the right direction. So, it sounds to

me like you are on the right track in having these discussions with your son. Thanks for asking this question—keep asking and we will try to our best to give you the info you need. If this does not fully answer your concern please call me—Deborah Larmour, Eparchial Family and Life Office Director, 306-653-0138 Ext 228. Also feel free to call if you or anyone would like more resources, to discuss the matter further or even to have me come to speak to parents at your parish on the topic.