

QUAESTIO DISPUTATA

COHABITATION: PAST AND PRESENT REALITY

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[Social scientific research, here only briefly summarized, discriminates between nuptial cohabitators, who have already made the commitment to marry, and non-nuptial cohabitators, who have not made that commitment. It further shows that for nuptial cohabitators their cohabitation is the first step in their becoming married, that their characteristics are more like the characteristics of married couples than singles, and that the data applicable for the 1970s and 1980s namely that those who cohabit prior to marriage and then marry have a heightened risk of divorce is no longer verified in recent cohorts. The Catholic Church needs to pay attention to this scientific data so as to develop a more discriminating pastoral approach to the phenomenon of cohabitation.]

IN A RECENT SURVEY ARTICLE in this journal, Lisa Sowle Cahill offers a comprehensive look at developments in Catholic theology and ethics with respect to marriage.¹ In that survey, Cahill makes two statements about cohabitation with which I must take issue. The first statement was common wisdom in the social scientific community in the 1980s and early 1990s but is now questioned in that community and, therefore, no longer provides a sound scientific basis for any theological response to cohabitation. The second statement is so unnuanced that it is effectively incorrect. Since the majority of American marriages are now preceded by cohabitation,² and since unmarried heterosexual cohabitation has attained broad

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¹ Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Notes on Moral Theology. Marriage: Developments in Catholic Theology and Ethics," *Theological Studies* 64 (2003) 78–105.

² Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, "Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts," *CDE Working Paper*, No. 98–15 (Madison, Wisc.: Center for Demography, 1998); Center for Marriage and Family, *Time, Sex, and*

social acceptance, it appears that cohabitation is here to stay for the long haul. Because the reality of unmarried heterosexual cohabitation will undoubtedly continue to be part of the Catholic reflection on marriage, the search for a Catholic pastoral response must be serious, and only the surest and most current social scientific data should be permitted to inform that discussion and pastoral response. Pope John Paul II, in his 1981 apostolic exhortation *On the Family (Familiaris consortio)*, insisted that “the Church values sociological and statistical research when it proves helpful in understanding the historical context in which pastoral action has to be developed and when it leads to a better understanding of the truth.”³ Scientific research, John Paul II suggests, can enrich our understanding of truth and inform pastoral action, but it can never do so alone. For any pastoral response to be genuinely Catholic, the discussion about cohabitation cannot be only social scientific; it must also be theological. It is for these reasons that I raise this short, corrective *quaestio*.

The first of Cahill’s statements with which I take issue is “outright endorsement of a practice [cohabitation] that has been shown to increase rather than decrease marital [in]stability should be undertaken with great caution.”⁴ The data on which that statement is based, data from the 1980s and early 1990s, is now seriously challenged by data from more recent cohorts in a society which is now more accepting of pre-marital cohabitation. The greater social acceptance of cohabitation has altered the composition of cohabiting samples. In the 1980s, people who cohabited were generally more unconventional, younger, less religious, and frequently had a history of divorce in their families of origin. That is now no longer always true. The second statement concerns a proposal I have made for the reintroduction of a ritual of betrothal. Cahill writes that “Michael Lawler

Money: The First Five Years of Marriage (Omaha: Creighton University, 2000); David Popenoe and Barbara Defoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions 2001* (Rutgers University: National Marriage Project, 2001); Pamela J. Smock, “Cohabitation in the United States: An Appraisal of Research Themes, Findings, and Implications,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000) 1–20. Kathleen Kiernan, “European Perspectives on Union Formation,” in *The Ties That Bind: Perspectives on Marriage and Cohabitation*, ed. Linda J. Waite (New York: de Gruyter, 2000) 40–58, supplies similar figures for Europe; Michael Murphy does the same for Britain, “The Evolution of Cohabitation in Britain, 1960–1995,” *Population Studies* 54 (2000) 49.

³ *Familiaris consortio* no. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.* 90. I have corrected the phrase as it appears in the published article: “outright endorsement of a practice that has been shown to increase rather than decrease marital stability should be undertaken with great caution.” That assertion is so contrary to the known data that it has to be a typographical error, for the data that is referred to shows that cohabitation increases rather than decreases marital instability.

proposes a formal betrothal ceremony that can legitimize a *cohabiting relationship* and provide an opportunity for marriage preparation.”⁵ I have never proposed the legitimizing of a cohabiting relationship *without distinction* and, given the scientific data, I never would. I have proposed the reintroduction of the ancient ritual of betrothal linked to intensive marriage education for cohabiting couples already committed to marriage, perhaps even engaged to be married, and I have made that theological proposal on the basis of readily available social scientific data. I shall return to that in a moment. Since Cahill’s statement misconstrues my position, any theological conclusion about or pastoral response to cohabitation derived from it would also be misconstrued, and I would share Cahill’s hesitation to endorse any such conclusion. That theological and pastoral conclusions about unmarried heterosexual cohabitation can be drawn from erroneous statements and counter statements underscores the need for a serious, public, Catholic debate about cohabitation and its relationship to marriage.

Two social scientific facts about cohabitation are well known and frequently mentioned by Catholic theologians. The first is that unmarried heterosexual cohabitation increased dramatically in the United States, and elsewhere in the Western world, in the last quarter of the 20th century. For couples marrying in the decade between 1965 and 1974, the percentage of marriages preceded by cohabitation was 10%; for couples marrying between 1990 and 1994, that percentage had dramatically quintupled to 50%.⁶ Between 1987 and 1995, there was an equally striking increase for the number of women reporting that they had cohabited at least once. In 1987, 30% of women in their late 30s reported they had cohabited; in 1995, 48% reported they had cohabited. Those increases did not leave untouched the social climate in which cohabitation flourished. Rather, as I have already noted, as cohabitation cohorts become more and more homogenized, cohabitation will become more and more a conventional and socially endorsed reality. The second fact is that premarital cohabitation tends to be associated with a heightened risk of divorce,⁷ a fact on which there is

⁵ Ibid. Emphasis added. Cahill makes an equally loose statement in her review of my *Marriage in the Catholic Church: Disputed Questions*, in *America* 187 (November 18, 2002) 25.

⁶ Larry L. Bumpass and James A. Sweet, “National Estimates of Cohabitation,” *Demography* 26 (1989) 615–25; Larry L. Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, “Trends in Cohabitation.”

⁷ William G. Axinn and Arland Thornton, “The Relationship Between Cohabitation and Divorce: Selectivity or Causal Influence,” *Demography* 29 (1992) 357–74; Robert Schoen, “First Unions and the Stability of First Marriages,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 54 (1992) 281–84; Elizabeth Thomson and Ugo Colella, “Cohabitation and Marital Stability,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 54 (1992) 259–67; Neil G. Bennett, Ann Klimas Blanc, David E. Bloom, “Commitment and the Modern Union: Assessing the Link between Premarital Cohabitation and Subse

remarkable consensus from a large variety of different researchers, samples, methodologies, and measures. This second fact has become beloved of Catholic commentators on unmarried heterosexual cohabitation and its implications for subsequent marriage,⁸ which leaves both them and their pastoral responses at risk of seeming uninformed and dated. More recent studies on more recent cohorts report more nuanced data about the relationship of cohabitation and marital instability.

Already in 1992, Schoen showed that the inverse relationship between premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital stability was minimal for recent birth cohorts, a result which he linked to the growing prevalence of cohabitation. "As the prevalence of cohabitation rises sharply, the instability of marriages preceded by cohabitation drops markedly."⁹ In 1997, McRae demonstrated the common negative association between premarital cohabitation and marital stability when she analyzed her British sample *in toto*. When, however, she analyzed her sample by age cohort, her findings supported Schoen: "younger generations do not show the same link between pre-marital cohabitation and marriage dissolution." She agreed with Schoen's conclusion that "as cohabitation becomes the majority pattern before marriage, this link will become progressively weaker."¹⁰ That majority pattern, as already noted, has now arrived. When they analyzed their results *in toto*, Woods and Emery uncovered much the same data as McRae: "premarital cohabitation had a small but significant predictive effect on divorce." When they controlled for personal characteristics, however, premarital cohabitation had no predictive effect on divorce.¹¹

In a sophisticated study of an Australian sample that controlled for age at union formation, educational level, importance of religion in the relationship, parental divorce, and having a child before marriage (all strong predictors of divorce), De Vaus and his colleagues found the link between cohabitation and marital instability was apparent only for earlier cohorts.¹²

quent Marital Instability," *American Sociological Review* 53 (1988) 127–38; David R. Hall and John Z. Zhao, "Cohabitation and Divorce in Canada: Testing the Selectivity Hypothesis," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 57 (1997) 421–27.

⁸ See, as an example replicated in diocesan policies across the United States, National Conference of Bishops, Committee on Marriage and Family, *Marriage Preparation and Cohabiting Couples* (Washington: USCC, 1999) 10. See also Pontifical Council for the Family, *Marriage, Family, and De Facto Unions* (Rome: Vatican City Press, 2000) no. 4.

⁹ Schoen, "First Unions and the Stability of First Marriages" 283.

¹⁰ Susan McRae, "Cohabitation: A Trial Run for Marriage?" *Sexual and Marital Therapy* 12 (1997) 259.

¹¹ Lakeisha N. Woods and Robert E. Emery, "The Cohabitation Effect on Divorce: Causation or Selection," *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* 37 (2002) 101–21.

¹² David de Vaus, Lixia Qu, and Ruth Weston, "Does Pre-marital Cohabitation Affect the Chances of Marriage Lasting?" Paper Presented at the Eighth Austra-

When cohabitation alone without any other control variables was considered, the greater risk of marital separation of couples who cohabited prior to marriage than couples who did not cohabit was 11% for those who married in the 1970s and only 2% for those who married in the early 1990s. When control variables were added to the analysis, those who cohabited prior to marriage in the 1970s had a 6% higher risk of divorce than those who did not, and those who cohabited prior to marriage in the early 1990s actually had a 3% *lower* risk of divorce than those who did not, though that difference was not statistically significant. Teachman recently replicated that result, showing that when a woman has cohabited only with her husband cohabitation is not associated with increased likelihood of divorce.¹³

Two of America's most respected marriage researchers, Scott Stanley and Linda Waite, endorse the thesis that all cohabitators and all cohabiting relationships are not equal. Stanley writes that "those who are particularly at risk from premarital cohabitation are most likely those who have not already decided, for sure, this is who they want to marry before cohabitation....While not all couples are at greater risk for cohabiting prior to marriage, it's surely a very great and unwise risk for those who are not sure they have found who they want to marry."¹⁴ Waite states that "couples who live together with no definite plans to marry are making a different bargain than couples who marry or than engaged cohabitators,"¹⁵ and adds that "those on their way to the altar look and act like already-married couples in most ways, and those with no plans to marry look and act very different. For engaged cohabiting couples, living together is a step on the path to marriage, not a different road altogether."¹⁶ Waite's conclusion from her data is of the utmost importance: "Compared to marriage, *uncommitted cohabitation*—cohabitation by couples who are not engaged—is an inferior social arrangement."¹⁷ There are at least two kinds of cohabi-

lian Institute of Family Studies Conference, Melbourne, February 2003. May be accessed at www.aifs.org.au.

¹³ Jay Teachman, "Premarital Sex, Premarital Cohabitation, and the Risk of Subsequent Marital Dissolution Among Women," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 65 (2002) 63.

¹⁴ Scott M. Stanley, Written Communication to the Smart Marriages Website, 4/21/2003, www.smartmarriages.com.

¹⁵ Linda J. Waite, "Cohabitation: A Communitarian Perspective," in Martin King Whyte, ed., *Marriage in America: A Communitarian Perspective* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000) 26.

¹⁶ Ibid. 18. See also Susan L. Brown and Alan Booth, "Cohabitation Versus Marriage: A Comparison of Relationship Quality," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (1996) 668–78; Susan L. Brown, "Relationship Quality Dynamics," *Journal of Family Issues* 24 (2003) 583–601.

¹⁷ Waite, "Cohabitation: A Communitarian Perspective" 26. Emphasis added.

tors,¹⁸ those uncommitted to marriage and those already committed to marriage, perhaps even engaged, and it is only uncommitted cohabitation that is linked to an increased likelihood of divorce after marriage. Empirical research clearly shows that commitment is a distinctive determinant in relationship stability, whether that relationship be cohabitation or marriage.

Recent social scientific research, therefore, suggests that the generalization that cohabitation, without distinction, is linked to subsequent marital instability is far too unnuanced to be accepted uncritically. Careful consideration of this data should precede any pastoral considerations. I align with Stanley and Waite and all the other researchers who demonstrate recently that not all cohabitators are alike, and my proposal to reintroduce a ritual of betrothal and intensive marriage preparation in the Catholic pastoral tradition is founded firmly on that stance. I make a careful distinction between *pre-nuptial cohabitators*, cohabiting couples already committed to marry one another, perhaps even engaged, and *non-nuptial cohabitators*, cohabiting couples who have made no decision about a future marriage.¹⁹ It is an important distinction, and it is also, I wrote, “important for the reader to understand from the outset that everything I say about cohabitation in this chapter is said only of *pre-nuptial cohabitation* and cohabitants, that is, those who are already committed to marry each other.”²⁰ Nothing I have written has any reference whatever to non-nuptial cohabitators. To suggest, as Cahill does, that I endorse *cohabitation* without distinction misconstrues my position and, more importantly, preempts a discussion that is critical for the future of marriage.

I agree with Waite. Cohabiting couples already committed to marriage have made their first step toward marriage; they are more like marrieds than singles.²¹ No wonder they look and act like the already married couples they were considered to be in the Catholic tradition after betrothal (*sponsalia*) prior to the Council of Trent.²² My proposal does not seek to endorse their pre-marital cohabitation; rather, it seeks to respond to it pastorally in a traditional Catholic way. It takes their cohabitation for what

¹⁸ See The National Marriage Project, *The State of Our Unions 2001* (Rutgers: State University of New Jersey, 2001) for the variety of reasons that people cohabit.

¹⁹ See Michael Murphy, “Cohabitation in Britain,” 50–51; also Edward D. Macklin, “Non-Traditional Family Forms,” in *Handbook of Marriage and the Family*, ed. M. Sussman and S. K. Steinmetz (New York: Plenum, 1986) 317–53.

²⁰ Michael G. Lawler, *Marriage and the Catholic Church: Disputed Questions* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002) 166. Emphasis added. See also page 175.

²¹ For some Catholics, the major problem with unmarried heterosexual cohabitation continues to be the sexual activity which it presumes. See my response to them in *Marriage and the Catholic Church* 177–81.

²² See *ibid.* 170–74.

the data show that it is, namely, an intentional part of the process of becoming married, and it endorses and seeks to enhance the relationship and the marriage to which the couple are already committed. It is precisely because the social scientific data show that relationship is not only the core of both long-term spousal and parental success but also may be at risk during the cohabitation-betrothal period that I recommend the pastoral strategy of intensive marriage preparation during that period. That marriage preparation would include all the standard Catholic marriage preparation items, including a sound and realistic theology of marriage, which participants in a recent study into the impact of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church complained was not as well treated as other items,²³ applied psychology, and reflection on problematic issues that couples face in the third millennium.²⁴

I have one final thought about this *quaestio*. Is it merely a storm in a teacup? It is most certainly not. First, there is no storm, only an effort to supplant outdated social scientific data and to generate a theological reflection on cohabitation and marriage rooted in the most current data. Second, neither cohabitation nor marriage should be imaged as a teacup in the present social climate in the Western world. Both are the main course for the majority of men and women, and both are relational unions which are difficult for 21st-century individuals to sustain. If marriage is as important to societies as Catholics say it is, if “families are the nurseries of societies and states,”²⁵ and if the future of societies, both civil and religious, “passes through the family,”²⁶ then the time is past for hand wringing and the time has arrived for action on behalf of families and the stable marriages that found them and make them ultimately successful. For that reason, if for no other, the Catholic Church must pay more careful attention to, at least, pre-nuptial cohabitators, for the scientific research that should inform pastoral action shows that cohabitation is the first step in their process of becoming married and becoming family.

²³ Center for Marriage and Family, *Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church: Getting It Right* (Omaha: Creighton University, 1995).

²⁴ Center for Marriage and Family, *Time, Sex, and Money: The First Five Years of Marriage*.

²⁵ Discos Tantalus, “Parental Government: A Privilege to Youth,” *Churchman’s Magazine* 4 (1807) 478–79.

²⁶ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio* no.75.