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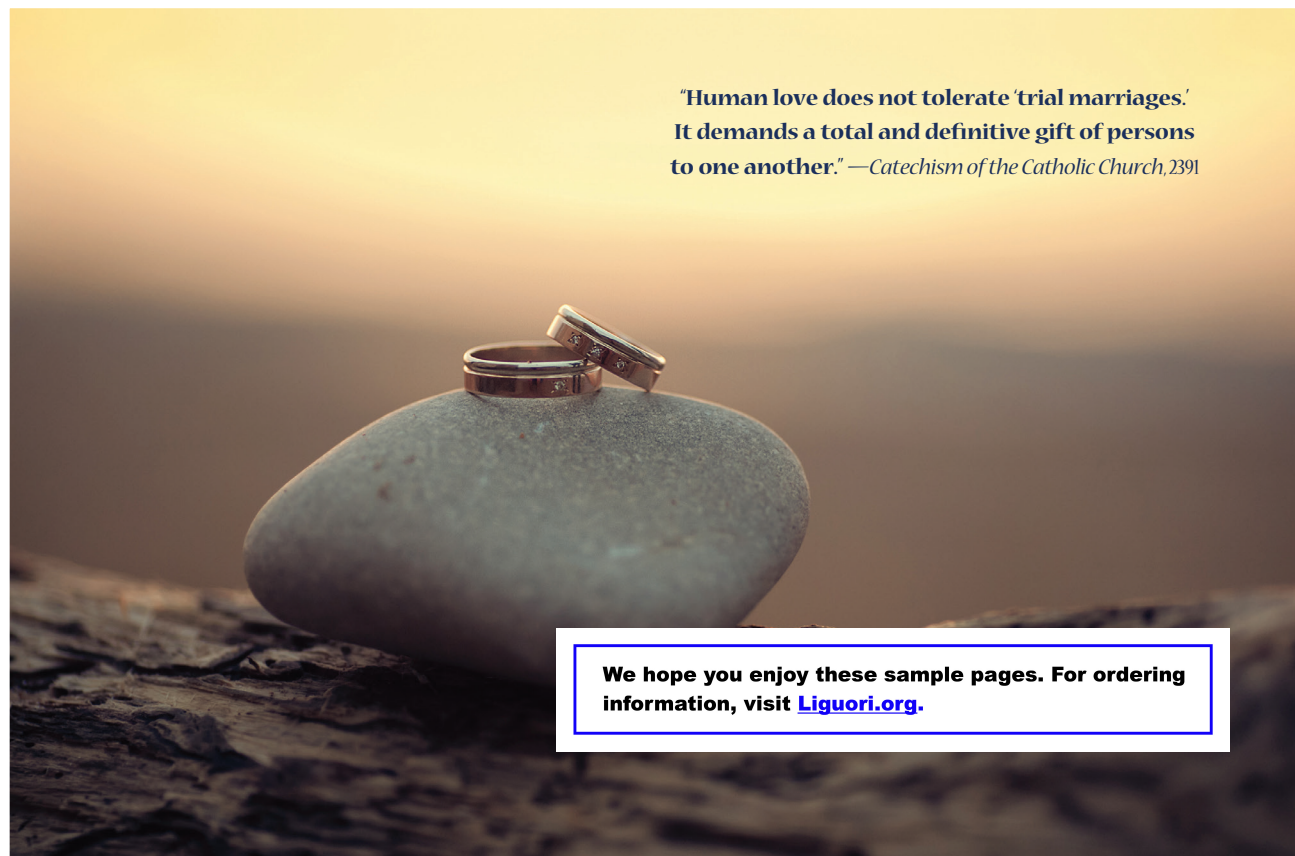
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LIVING TOGETHER OUTSIDE OF MARRIAGE DOES THE RING MATTER?

BY JAMES HEALY, PHD, AND MSGR. JOSEPH M. CHAMPLIN

**"Human love does not tolerate 'trial marriages.'
It demands a total and definitive gift of persons
to one another." —Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2391**



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Jack and Peggy were married in 1960. They say, “We didn’t know anybody who was living together, and we don’t think our friends knew anybody either.” Few could make that claim today. There are more than 7.6 million cohabiting opposite-sex couples in America today, and the majority of



those who marry this year will have lived together first. These statistics also apply to Catholic couples.

As a Church and as a society, how do we make sense of this reality? More personally, how do we respond if our children,

friends, or parents make the choice to cohabitate?

When we listen to cohabiting couples, they offer a variety of reasons for living together. These range from just wanting to be together more, sexual accessibility, economic necessity, wanting to “take the next step” in commitment, and testing for compatibility to trying to reduce the possibility of divorce. It’s important not to assume that we know *why* a couple is living together until we ask them.

IMPROVED ODDS OF MARITAL SUCCESS?

Implicit in the reasons given by the more serious couples are questions about commitment. In a country where the divorce rate for first marriages still hovers between 40 and 50 percent, cohabitation may seem like a perfect way to see, in advance, if a particular relationship is “marriage-worthy.” The social sciences, though, clearly tell us that cohabitation actually has the opposite effect.

After many years of research, it still appears that, as a group, couples who live together before marriage divorce at significantly higher rates than couples who don’t. The exact percentage depends on a variety of variables. The longer a couple lives together, the higher the divorce rate of the subsequent marriage. The more cohabiting partners in a person’s life, the higher the divorce rate if a marriage takes place. If the partners are already publicly engaged before they move in together, there is no increase in the divorce rate. But if they move in together as a way of discerning their decision to marry, their chance of divorce climbs. And if they move in together with no discussion of marriage but end up marrying anyway (this is quite common), the divorce rate skyrockets.

Why is this so? Because cohabiting couples blend their lives in such a way that it’s difficult to leave, even if it’s reasonably clear that one should. When, as often happens, an ultimatum is offered (e.g., “Either we get married or somebody needs to move out”), the path of least resistance is to marry. Moving in with somebody you’re not sure you want to marry makes it *more* likely, *not less*, that you’ll marry the person against your better judgment.

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