

Letter from a Parish Priest

Dear Friends:

You have asked me to witness your marriage and I am pleased that you wish to be married in the Church. Before I give you my answer about witnessing your marriage, I want to share a few thoughts with you.

I am sure that you know that the Church does not approve of your living together before marriage, and I hope you are not surprised that I also disapprove of it. By asking me to witness your marriage with the usual kind of wedding celebration, you are putting me in an awkward position. I feel that if I do witness the vows in a big celebration I am giving tacit approval to your present behavior. I would be treating you in the same way as I would treat couples who have not been living together. I am uncomfortable with that because I want to encourage young people to live up to the Catholic Christian standards before marriage.

Let me try to explain why I think that what you are doing is wrong. I don't want to talk just in terms of the commandments, though I believe what you are doing is contrary to them. I would rather talk about your relationship to the community—both the civil community and the church community. Both these communities disapprove of couples living together prior to marriage.

By your living arrangements, you are saying quite publicly that you don't care very much what these communities think. And yet, now you come to me, an official in the church community, and ask me to treat you in the same way I would treat a couple who had respected the community's customs and rules.

Putting it another way, you have been living as if married, in effect saying to the community, to your friends and your families, that you wish to be treated as if married—at least you want to live that way. But now, you come and say you want to be treated as unmarried and have a big celebration of the fact that you are now marrying. There is some kind of contradiction here, and it puts me in a difficult spot. If I say yes, I seem to be saying that what you are doing is okay. If I say no, I am refusing to help you get back into the community.

I think that living together and sexual relations prior to marriage are wrong. Sexual relations are a sign and symbol of a total gift of one person to another. That total gift is made in the marriage vows in which two people give themselves publicly and irrevocably to each other for life. To engage in sexual relations before making that formal, public, permanent gift and commitment in marriage is to falsify the sacred symbol that sexual intercourse is. It is to give yourself in this act that symbolizes total giving, but which in this case can be reversed because you haven't given yourself to each other in marriage. We don't like people who give gifts and then take them back. Even children see the error in that; but premarital sex can too easily become such a gift, which can be taken back.

God's laws regarding sexual behavior are not whimsical nor arbitrary. They are guidelines to the deep significance of sexuality in our lives. They recognize the profound sacredness of our sexuality and are directly opposed to the cheap, selfish and shallow view of sexuality that is found in so much of our culture.

I think I can understand the social and economic pressures and your own feelings that have led you to live together. I would like to hear your reasons, but I am convinced that another solution could have been found—that will permit me to witness your marriage.

I would be happy to witness your marriage in a simple quiet ceremony with two witnesses and perhaps your immediate families. That is what I would do if you had been married in a civil ceremony and now wished to have the marriage validated in the Church.

By your living together you seem to be saying, "We want to be like married people". I would be very happy to treat you like married people, and witness your vows simply and quietly.

But I have serious difficulties with treating you like any other couple wishing to be married, who has not been living together.

Another possible solution might be for you to live separately from now until marriage. That

would be a public statement to your family, your friends and to me that you are trying to live your courtship in a Catholic way.

I hope you will think about these things. I also hope you will come to see me again and that we can work out some way that will allow me to witness your marriage.

I am happy that you love each other, and that you wish to marry. I hope that we can work out the difficulties that I have had with your present living arrangements.

I hope to hear from you soon.