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Pastoral guidance for cohabiting couples – suggestions for the current Polish context

Duszpasterstwo par kohabitujących – propozycje dla obecnej sytuacji w Polsce

Abstract:

Premarital cohabitation in Poland, although still not as widespread and common as in many western countries, is becoming an attractive form of being in an intimate relationship for a growing number of young adults. This state of things – in spite of the recent, more welcoming attitude towards cohabiting couples introduced by Francis – is not fully recognised by the Polish Episcopate. The Church in Poland had to wait over two years to receive a general guideline for the application of Amoris Laetitia. Also, until now the Polish bishops have not been able to propose any systematic marriage preparation program (MP) or working document – which would offer principles on how to deal pastorally with cohabiting couples. In this article I specifically concentrate on the newest empirical research regarding the quality of cohabiting unions (prior to and after they transit to marriages) as well as on the new orientation towards those living in ‘irregular’ situations introduced by Francis. Based on these two perspectives, I make several suggestions on how to deal with the Polish cohabiting couples in the context of marriage preparation in a pastorally sensitive and at the same time effective and realistic manner.

Keywords: cohabitation, Poland, pastoral guidance, marriage preparation, Pope Francis.

Abstrakt:

Kohabitacja przedmałżeńska w Polsce, mimo iż nadal nie jest tak powszechnie praktykowana i akceptowana jak w wielu krajach zachodnich, staje się bardziej atrakcyjną formą bycia w związku (intymnym) dla coraz większej liczby młodych Polaków. Ten stan rzeczy – pomimo wyraźnych zmian w podejściu do par kohabitujących zaproponowanych przez

papieża Franciszka w encyklice *Amoris Laetitia* – nie jest w pełni zrozumiany przez Kościół katolicki w Polsce. Przygotowanie 11-stronicowego dokumentu zawierającego ogólne wytyczne do stosowania encykliki zajęły Episkopatowi Polski ponad dwa lata. Jak dotąd nie zaproponowano również propozycji programu formacyjnego (na poziomie diecezji czy metropolii), który oferowałby konkretną pomoc w przygotowaniu par kohabitujących pragnących zawrzeć sakrament małżeństwa. W tym artykule autorka koncentruje się na najnowszych badaniach empirycznych dotyczących jakości związków kohabitacyjnych (przed i po zawarciu małżeństwa), a także na nowym kierunku w postępowaniu z parami, które żyją w tzw. nieregularnych sytuacjach, wyznaczonym przez papieża Franciszka. Opierając się na tych dwóch perspektywach, przedstawia kilka sugestii, jak podchodzić do par kohabitujących w kontekście przygotowania małżeńskiego w sposób pastoralnie przyjazny, a jednocześnie skuteczny i realistyczny.

Słowa kluczowe: kohabitacja, Polska, duszpasterstwo, przygotowanie do małżeństwa, papież Franciszek.

Premarital cohabitation in Poland, although still not as widespread and common as in many western countries, is becoming an attractive form of being in an intimate relationship for a growing number of young adults (Wilk 2013; Mynarska & Matysiak 2010; Matysiak 2009, 215; Mynarska & Bernardi 2007; Slany & Slusarczyk 2007, Slany & Kluzowa 2004; Slany & Baszarkiewicz 2004; Duch and Titkow 2004, 72; Cwiek 2002; Kwak 2005; Slany 2002, 1990; Giza-Poleszczuk 2002, 207–301; Toranski 2002; Debrowska-Caban 2001)¹. This state of things – in spite of the recent, more welcoming attitude towards cohabiting couples introduced by Francis – is not fully recognised by the Polish Episcopate, which has done very little to address this emerging phenomenon in a comprehensive and pastorally sensitive manner. The Church in Poland had to wait over two years for a guideline for the application of *Amoris Laetitia* (Konferencja Episkopatu Polski 2018). Also, until now the Polish bishops have not been able to propose any systematic marriage preparation program (MP) or working document – which would offer principles on how to deal pastorally with cohabiting couples².

¹ According to the official statistics cohabiting unions constitute between 1.4 to 4.5% of all unions in Poland. Polish sociologists speculate that – although most Polish couples still have their first living together experience only after marriage and the pace at which the cohabitation rates are growing is slow when compared with the rapid diffusion of this type of union in other countries – Poland is not as ‘immune’ to the spread of cohabitation as it is commonly believed to be, and official statistics only indicate the tip of the iceberg.

² I write more in detail on the context of the Catholic church in Poland and its lack of systematic pastoral response to cohabitation in: A. A. Ukleja, *An Engagement Ritual: A Pastoral Proposal*

At the same time the need for adequate marriage preparation in Poland has become more important than ever in the light of the growing number of divorces as well as of unmarried cohabitation (GUS 2013, 9). Adultery, incompatibility of the spouses, bad sexual life, violence, abandonment and alcoholism are included among the main reasons for marital dissolution (CBOS 2013). These findings apply equally to marriages between Catholics. The growing number of Polish couples who instead of marriage choose for cohabitation as their first live-in relationship should not be left unnoticed either. Many western studies evidenced the association between cohabitation and a higher chance of subsequent marital instability and dissolution. The Catholic church as well as society have two ways of responding to these problems. The first one is to make a canonical annulment of the marriage and civil divorce procedures, respectively, more difficult. The danger of this approach is that the spouses are left alone with their marital difficulties and risks. The second one is to promote and support marriage with intensive marriage education through the life-span of the marriage, starting with an adequate preparation long before the marriage is solemnised.

In this article, I specifically concentrate on the newest empirical research regarding the quality of cohabiting unions (prior to and after they transit to marriages) as well as on the new orientation towards those living in ‘irregular’ situations introduced by Francis. Based on these two perspectives, I make several suggestions on how to deal with the Polish cohabiting couples in the context of marriage preparation in a pastorally sensitive and at the same time effective and realistic manner.

1. The Heterogeneity of Cohabitation – The Empirical View on the Phenomenon

The extensive demographic and sociological research about unmarried, heterosexual cohabitation, as it has developed since the 1980’s in western countries, shows it to be a complex and diverse phenomenon: diverse in its origins, prevalence, typologies, external reasons for its diffusion and acceptance in the west (Cherlin 2010, Kalmijn 2007, Kwak 2005, Kiernan 2004, Heuveline and Timberlake 2004, Smart and Stevens 2000). It also shows that cohabitants constitute a heterogeneous group with diverse legal and socio-economic situations, living in diverse living arrangements: with or without marital plans, with a long-term

or short-term duration, with or without children, full-time or part-time living arrangement, thus giving the experience of living together diverse meanings, and finally having different chances for marital success and stability. The heterogeneity of cohabitation creates certain difficulties in comprehending and evaluating (also ethically) the phenomenon and consequently, in introducing appropriate social policies as well as in establishing and adapting educational, therapeutic and pastoral programs to diverse needs and expectations of cohabitants. For that reason I limit my presentation of the results of the empirical research only to the cohabiting couples who after a period of living together opt for marriage.

1.1. Cohabitants and Their Fragile Marriages

The heterogeneous character of cohabitation briefly sketched above extends to marital outcomes among couples with cohabitation experience. Cohabitants who eventually enter marriage, compared to those couples who married straight away, tend to have different marital outcomes, including: higher levels of conflict (Stafford, Kline and Rankin 2004), more negative communication in marriage, higher perceived marital instability and lower levels of marital quality (Jose, Oleary and Moyer 2010, Cohan and Kleinbaum 2002, Markman et al. 2010), lower levels of marital satisfaction (Teachman 2003) and male commitment to his spouse (Stanley, Whitton and Markman 2004), higher levels of domestic violence and consequently a greater likelihood of divorce (Brown et al. 2006, Stanley, Kline and Markman 2005, Dush, Cohan and Amato 2003, Teachman and Polonko 1990). The chance of divorce is significantly higher even for those who did not cohabit themselves but are married to a partner who previously lived in cohabitation (Wu 2000, 131–136). Researchers make a distinction in terms of increased separation between direct marriage, cohabitation leading to marriage, and marriage with a separate previous cohabitation. For example, in the US, women who cohabited before marriage were more likely to divorce (24%) than those who married directly (18%) (Department of Health and Human Services 2002), whereas in Canada (outside of Quebec), starting conjugal life through cohabitation increased the risk of separation by two thirds (Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk 2004, 937). In the UK, cohabitation prior to marriage was associated on average with a 15% greater risk of divorce, whereas those who lived in more than one cohabitation had a 45% greater risk (Hayward and Brandon 2011, 21). These results suggest that there might be something ‘risky’ in the experience of cohabitation and/or that some cohabitants bring certain attitudes and patterns of behaviour that might shake the quality and stability of marriage.

1.2. Explanation of The Cohabitation Effect

30 years of social changes have led to the acknowledgment of cohabitation today as a “taken for granted” type of living arrangement. Many young adults are brought up in environments marked by the high level of divorces of the previous generations. Some of them are exposed to the experience of divorce in their own families or in those of friends, while some others have simply accepted the commonly recognised information that marriage might end in divorce. Studies show that there is a general belief among the young generation that living together prior to marriage helps one to understand the potential of the relationship and weeds out the weakest couples and filters out the most stable couples and, therefore, also prevents divorce (Stanley, Kline and Markman, 2005). The results of numerous studies in this regard have been, and to a large extent still are, counter-intuitive. Regardless of popular perceptions and expectations, cohabitation prior to marriage does not reduce the likelihood of eventual divorce. Quite contrary – statistically speaking, it increases it. How can one make sense of the vivid association of cohabitation with the greater risk for problems in marriage and marital breakdown, commonly named by the researchers as the cohabitation effect? The existing research points to four sources of explanation.

The first source is the so-called ‘selectivity hypothesis’. It explains that a decision to enter into a cohabiting union and to choose it over marriage is influenced by certain socio-demographic features and certain values that individuals hold such as a lower economic and educational level, experience of parental divorce, a lower religious involvement, low self-esteem, psychological problems, etc. Furthermore, the same characteristics that make young couples choose to cohabit in the first place, are, if cohabitation leads to marriage, linked to an increased risk of marital instability and dissolution (Stanley, Kline and Markman 2005, Dush, Cohan and Amato 2003, Woods and Emery 2002, Teachman and Polonko 1990).

The second explanation is the so-called ‘experience hypothesis’, which refers to the patterns and behaviours that couples already develop while living together, and these include: money management, conflict-resolution styles, dealing with the issues of fidelity and violence (Ambert 2005), and also an erosion of self-esteem or attitudes towards marriage and childrearing (Axinn and Barber 1994). Cohabitants, who live in cohabitation prior to marriage for a long period of time, and especially those with numerous partners, somehow become less positive and interested in marriage after having lived together. These patterns and attitudes might be carried into marriage, lead to changes in behaviour

in the marriage itself and affect its stability and quality (Rhoades, Stanley and Markman, 2012).

The benefits of being married are similar worldwide, yet Soons and Kalmijn and Liefbroer and Dourleijn accentuate the presence of the cross-national differences in the quality of a relationship between cohabitants and married couples (Soons and Kalmijn 2009, Liefbroer and Dourleijn 2006). According to the third, ‘institutionalisation hypothesis’, when cohabitation is more institutionalised, cohabitation becomes less selective³ and the well-being of the cohabitants and married couples is more similar. Consequently, in countries where cohabitation is not embedded in norms and attitudes, cohabitants receive smaller social acceptance, and therefore normative disapproval of certain behaviour which may lead to lower well-being of those who engage in this behaviour. This can also consequently increase feelings of shame and guilt and sometimes result in feelings of depression.

Fourthly, Stanley and his colleagues use the ‘inertia hypothesis’ to explain why the experience of some people who live in cohabitation increases the likelihood of getting married and creating poor-quality marriages (Stanley, Kline and Markman 2005, 14–20). In another study Stanley et al. point out that: “living together (...) makes it relatively more difficult than dating without cohabiting for a couple to veer from a path toward a future together, even into marriage” (Stanley, Rhoades and Whitton 2010, 252). Various relationship constraints⁴ (Markman 2004, 245) keep the partners together and make it more difficult to terminate the relationship when compared with dating and living in a separate household (Dourleijn and Liefbroer 2009, 204–205). This is not to say that living in cohabitation per se increases the risk but that cohabitation before clear and mutual commitment to the common future makes higher risk relationships more likely to stay together. The researchers observe that recently more and more individuals enter constrained romantic relationships before dedication⁵ (Stan-

³ In less institutionalised countries a stronger selection is likely to be at work – only a selective group chooses cohabitation: for instance, people who are less religious, people with more liberal attitudes toward marriage and divorce.

⁴ Constraint commitment is a psychological force that increases the costs of leaving a relationship and can take many forms: the “immorality” of the divorce, social pressure from friends and family, pregnancy, concern for the children’s well-being or the fear of loss of contact with them, financial obligations, the logistical difficulties involved in actually ending the relationship (division of joint bank-accounts or shared lease, mortgage or possessions), or considering alternatives such as living alone or having less money as less attractive.

⁵ Dedication commitment is a psychological force that brings two people together and motivates sustaining the relationship. It is strongly connected with the quality of the relationship and its main role is to provide a sense of security. It has four crucial components: a strong desire for a future together or a long-term view, a sense of “us-ness” and “we-ness” (understood as being part of a team), a high sense of priority for the relationship and more satisfaction in sacrifices for the other.

ley 2002) develops. Also, they believe that these relationship transitions increasingly happen because of the sliding processes versus the deciding process. They alarm that the beginning of cohabitation without having future, marital plans is associated in various studies with a greater risk of divorce and they suggest that sliding into cohabitation, without discussing (or discussing too quickly) the meaning of the step being taken, could become problematic if it turns into marriage (Stanley and et al. 2010, 917). Consequently, if this pattern of relationship development continues, we might expect an increasing number of couples with weakened commitment dynamics functioning at the base of their relationship/marriage. This might have far-reaching consequences on children of cohabiting parents or parents with cohabitation experience with certain relationship patterns as they experience instability in their families (Bumpass and Lu 2000, 39) and are exposed to the multiple number of partners in their parents' lives (Cherlin 2010, 5–6).

1.3. Diversity of the Marital Results for Couples with Cohabitation Experience

Most of the authors seem to come to the general conclusion that premarital cohabitation increases the risk of a later marital breakdown. Recent research, to a certain degree, questions the earlier conclusion, or at least a facile interpretation of this conclusion. It is worth to point out that the indicated association was stronger two decades ago and that it has recently lowered among the younger generations. Here are several examples.

In several studies it has been shown that women who are in an intimate relationship only with their future husband (either in premarital sex or premarital cohabitation) do not face the increased risk of marital instability and breakdown (Jose, Oleary and Moyer 2010, Lichter and Qian 2008, Teachman 2003). According to another study, based on three waves of data and conducted on the sample of several hundred newly-weds, once the factors of premarital relationship, sociodemographic and marital relationship are incorporated in the study, the cohabitation effect disappears significantly (Manning and Brown 2006). Likewise, other studies have demonstrated that marital and cohabiting unions are very similar in some aspects (Willetts 2006, Brown and Booth 1996) and might even be associated with some benefits for the relationship, such as the establishment of a more egalitarian division of household work (Baxter, 2005). Additionally, there is a very strong argument confirmed in a number of studies that having definite marriage plans or being engaged does not only give a higher chance of making it to marriage but also eliminates any effects

of the cohabitation effect, giving this group of men and women equal chances of marital stability and quality similar to those who marry directly. According to the most recent study of Manning and Cohen, women who were engaged when entering cohabitation fared no worse, and some women even better than women who did not cohabit (Manning and Cohen 2012). Newcomb and Bentler conclude that it seems clear from the data that the impact of premarital cohabitation on a subsequent marriage is not a simple or direct relationship, but rather a multifaceted one (Newcomb and Bentler 1980). In light of the fact that cohabitation has become a normative stage in the relationship process, the results of Manning and Cohen suggest a reduced effect of cohabitation on marital instability. It is expected, as the institutionalisation hypothesis seems to prove, that the cohabitation effect would decrease even more or even scatter overtime (Sock, Casper and Wyse 2008).

To conclude, these diverse findings might suggest that classifying all cohabitants into the same category might decrease the researchers' ability to exploit the complexity that exists in how cohabitation matches into relationships and life course trajectories (Manning and Smock 2005). The presented results address the importance of recognising socio-economic variation in the potential role of cohabitation with respect to marital quality and stability.

2. *Amoris Laetitia* – An Incentive for Change in Dealing with Couples in 'Irregular' Situations

2.1. Old Accents in the Magisterial View on Cohabitation

Until recently, the Catholic church monotonously insisted on a certain (marital) ideal while also erecting a barrier to those who do not meet all its criteria. Among other contemporary forms of living together, also unmarried cohabitation met with an unanimous and radical disapproval. Catechism of the Catholic church discussed cohabitation under the section of condemnation and like adultery, incest, polygamy or sexual abuse, it was described as one of the most serious offences against the dignity of marriage.⁶ Commitment, exclusivity, fidelity, openness to children and the institutional character are considered as constitutive elements that differentiate marriage from other kinds of partner-

⁶ Catechism of the Catholic church 2353: "Fornication is carnal union between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman. It is gravely contrary to the dignity of persons and of human sexuality which is naturally ordered to the good of spouses and the generation and education of children. Moreover, it is a grave scandal when there is corruption of the young."

ships. Supposed absence of these qualities among cohabiting couples was the precise reason for why cohabitation, as a general phenomenon, was thoroughly criticised. Cohabitants were pictured as a homogenous group of individuals who lack self-restraint, carry anti-marital attitudes, and their unions as having a transitory nature, based on free love, excluding commitment and fidelity, including premarital sex and consequently questioning the institutional character of marriage (universal scope: *Familiaris Consortio*, 80–81; Family, Marriage and “De Facto” Unions, no. 1 and local scope: USCCB 2009, 26–28). This view, as the body of scientific work discussed above has evidenced, was undifferentiated and distorted and led to several acute consequences: a) all the cohabiting unions, including those who lived in a committed relationship and were strongly marriage-oriented, were deprived of the access to the sacramental grace; b) it influenced the kind of treatment the cohabiting couples received during their pastoral encounters with the clergy, oftentimes leading to unjust, insufficient or inadequate moral evaluation and pastoral discernment.

2.2. Francis Changes Nothing, Yet He Changes Everything⁷

A very propitious, pastoral orientation (compared to the earlier teachings) towards cohabiting unions has been suggested in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis’ *Amoris Laetitia* (2016). I consider it pastorally welcoming for two crucial reasons.

Firstly, Francis acknowledges and engages with the experiences of young cohabiting couples in honesty and openness. Following the results of the interviews on family issues⁸ the Pope has directed his attention to the diversity of the types of cohabitation in the world in terms of social circumstances, as well as of the different attitudes towards marriage among cohabitants (*Amoris Laetitia*, s. 293–294).⁹ In *Amoris Laetitia* Francis makes a fair presentation of different types of cohabitation, including the recognition of couples who cohabit with clear mar-

⁷ The title of this section is a paraphrase of the commentary of Cardinal Kasper on the exhortation of Pope Francis *Amoris Laetitia*. He said: it “doesn’t change anything of church doctrine or of canon law—but it changes everything.” Cf. Christopher Lamb, “Compassion is this Pastor’s Watchword,” April 14, 2016, <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/8269/compassion-is-this-pastor-s-watchword>.

⁸ *Amoris Laetitia* to a great extent is Francis’s post-synodal reflection on family synod documents *Relatio Synodi* and *Relatio Finalis*. The publication of ‘relatios’ was preceded by a process that lasted for more than three years. It started with a worldwide questionnaire on family issues sent out by the Vatican to bishops with the purpose of getting data from the experts and the laity. The synod of bishops took place in October 2014 and was followed by another questionnaire and another synod on family in October 2015. Also, the final publication of both ‘relatios’ was preceded by the publication of two ‘working documents’.

⁹ Francis discusses people who live together: *ad experimentum*, in unions that have not been religiously or civilly recognised, including couples who “distrust marriage and live together,

ital intentions which eventually leads them to a sacramental marriage. He goes beyond the traditional association of cohabiting couples with anti-institutional (anti-marital) resentment, prejudice or resistance and he recognises that cohabitants are frequently conditioned in their choices by cultural and contingent determinants (e.g. lack of economic security, high costs of marriage).

Secondly, the integration of the empirical research into the encyclical, for the first time in papal teaching, has played more than an informative role. Francis has opened up the possibility of a more nuanced moral re-assessment and pastoral guidance of couples living in cohabiting unions based on the particularities of their lived experience in relationships. On several occasions Francis has repeated, after the synod fathers, that the church: “does not disregard the constructive elements in those situations which do not yet or no longer correspond to her teaching on marriage” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 294) and that the role of pastoral discernment is to identify those positive elements in “those signs of love which in some way reflect God’s own love” (*Relatio Finalis*, no. 71). Consequently, he has recognised that a range of relationships at least in “a partial and analogous way” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 221) realises the ideal of Christian marriage already, and among them are cohabiting couples who aspire to marriage and eventually marry. Those couples who “attain a particular stability, legally recognised” and “are characterised by deep affection and responsibility for their offspring, and demonstrate an ability to overcome trials” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 293) are already, in some sense, an authentic union. Whatever the situation, he has concluded that the processes of pastoral discernment should aim at looking for the positive elements which can be transformed into opportunities for growth. This process of growth is to be encouraged patiently, discreetly, and attentively to the nuances of the concrete situation. Ultimately, Francis has abandoned a kind of ‘one-size fits all’ approach here, at the price of proposing a couple – tailored pastoral guidance.

3. The Urgency to Recognise the Present Reality of Cohabiting Couples in Poland

The newest research shows that most of the Polish couples, when they decide to get married, choose a religious marriage (Szukalski 2018).¹⁰ Before these couples say their sacramental ‘yes’, they will need to go through the marriage for-

putting off indefinitely the commitment to marriage”, and also “those who, after having lived together for a long period, request the celebration of marriage in church”.

¹⁰ In 2017, 62.3% of all newly established first marriages were religious marriages (56.7% in cities and 70.5% in rural regions).

mation program (required in Poland), including couples with different motives for marriage, some of them cohabit premaritally, and among them are possibly couples with high risks. Such a heterogenous reality brings new, baffling issues for the whole system of pastoral care, especially among those priests, deacons or lay pastoral ministers who prepare couples for religious marriage.

While many dioceses and archdioceses around the globe have quickly implemented *Amoris Laetitia* in specific and practical guidelines for cohabitants (e.g. De Bisschoppenconferentie van Belgie 2017; Archdiocese of Portland, Archdiocese of Malta), so far the Polish bishops have been able to offer, only two years after the publication of *Amoris Laetitia*, a general guideline for its application, which does not include any specific, executive instructions (Konferencja Episkopatu Polski 2018).¹¹ Neither is there any systematic diocesan or metropolitan marriage preparation program or working document – which would present principles/suggestions on how to deal pastorally with Polish cohabiting couples. This implies that the pastoral care for couples who are living together up until recently has been based on several suggestions of the Polish Bishops' Conference formulated in two documents: *Służyć prawdzie o małżeństwie i rodzinie* (Konferencja Episkopatu Polski 2009) and *Dyrektorium duszpasterstwa rodzin* (Konferencja Episkopatu Polski 2003). In both documents the topic of cohabitation receives only brief but negative treatment.

All the present efforts of the Polish church seem too little and too slow when confronted with the needs, expectations as well as overlaps, tensions, inhibitions, and hindrances of the growing number of the Catholic cohabiting couples in Poland. Knieps-Port le Roi and Coleman formulate an opinion that the fact that many couples have already shared the experience of living together should be acknowledged by the MP providers and therefore MP programs should be tailored to their specific situation/needs (Knieps-Port le Roi 2012, Knieps-Porte Le Roi and Coleman 2012). Certainly, the lack of pastoral sensitivity and adequate structural response regarding how to deal with cohabitants who ask for a religious marriage is no longer acceptable and certainly pastorally irresponsible.

As cohabitation is in contradiction with and therefore indicates a departure from the magisterial teaching on marriage, pastors might feel troubled when coming across couples who live in cohabitation and might apply diverse strat-

¹¹ The Polish bishops welcome the positive pastoral message stemming from the encyclical. On 11 pages they emphasise the need to serve the engaged, spouses, families and people living in irregular relationships according to the pastoral criteria proposed by Pope Francis: acceptance, accompaniment, discernment and integration. While strongly insisting on the necessity to change the accents in pastoral ministry, they give rather little attention to the particularities of life. The situation of cohabitants is addressed in the context of couples who after a failure of their sacramental marriage, entered an informal union with a new partner. The so-called premarital cohabitation is not discussed directly.

egies that are not the most effective or pastorally welcoming. For example, the example of the church in the US shows that many dioceses had a standpoint that the situation of couples who live in cohabitation needed to be confronted in the early stages of MP. Most dioceses focused on the teaching about the sacrament of marriage, the meaning of sexual intimacy or explanation of why cohabitation is incompatible with this teaching, while at the same time encouraging couples to rethink their situation in the light of her teaching, without making specific demands. Some dioceses insisted on the separation of the cohabiting partners and on sexual abstinence until after the marriage. There was also a different approach towards the liturgical celebration of marriage for couples with 'cohabiting' experience. In some dioceses it was assumed that if the couples continued to live in cohabitation before marriage, they appeared to the community as if living as a husband and wife, therefore a small and modest marriage ceremony was recommended. Some other dioceses suggested to apply the same liturgical celebration to cohabitants as to couples with no experience of living together (Gavin 2004).

Below, based on the practical guidance prepared by the US bishops to the clergy (National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1999), I explain why these pastoral strategies prove not to be the most effective and, using the good practices from other western countries, I present pastorally welcoming suggestions on how to take care of the cohabiting couples during MP in the Polish context.

3.1. To Ignore or to Condemn Cohabitation?

In general, the idea of introducing specific pastoral guidance for cohabitants is strongly advised. A frequently applied, unwritten rule of ignoring or neglecting the reality of cohabitants often results in the opposite of what is expected and may be intended: couples do not stop living together and instead they are disappointed by the encounter with the priest; they feel neglected by the harsh and highly moralising attitude, and, as a result, those who do not find any support and understanding of their life experience withdraw from the life of the church for many years after the marriage ceremony. Ignorance, inaction, or punitiveness to the fact of cohabitation is inappropriate when engaging with both committed and uncommitted cohabitants.

The complex and heterogeneous nature of cohabitation demands additional knowledge (about the current scientific data regarding cohabitation and potential risk factors associated with cohabitation) and the formation of communicative skills for all those working with cohabiting couples. In this way, the issues which should be raised and discussed during MP program can be dealt with more

efficiently. Some priests in Poland are still unaware of the fact that some cohabitants may have special needs, and even those who are aware of these needs often simply do not have the resources to deal with them. These priests usually ignore the fact of cohabitation when preparing couples for marriage. Some other priests represent beliefs that are in such strong conflict with the couple's choice for cohabitation that they feel obliged to a punitive approach towards them and, as a consequence, often refuse to prepare couples for marriage unless they stop living together before the wedding day. Neither a lack of any pastoral guidance nor a negative and highly moralising attitude are pastorally effective. Given that some cohabitants who marry run a higher risk of living in unstable marriages and of divorcing, it would be irresponsible to ignore these issues. Instead, the high-risk factors should be identified, discussed and dealt with, if required, with the assistance of adequate psychological or legal specialists.

3.2. To Refuse or to Postpone Marriage?

Canon Law clearly articulates the right of couples to get married: "All can contract marriage who are not prohibited by law" (CIC 1983, can. 1058). Impediments define who is legally incapable of contracting a valid marriage, and these can be of divine origin (e.g. being already married) or of ecclesiastical origin (e.g. being in sacred orders). Impediments of ecclesiastical origin can be dispensed only if a dispensation from the appropriate church authority is received (CIC 1983, can. 1078). There is no dispensation possible for impediments of divine law. No divine, natural, or canon law impedes a wedding between cohabiting persons (CIC 1983, canons 1083–1094) and therefore the fundamental right of the believer to the sacraments in general (CIC 1983, canons 213, 843) and to marriage in particular (CIC 1983, can. 1058) should prevail in such cases. Unquestionably, cohabiting couples can, and must be allowed to, marry.

Marriage can be prohibited under certain circumstances. For example, marriage of a Catholic to a baptised non-Catholic is prohibited. For such a marriage to be valid, the dispensation of the local church authority must be acquired (CIC 1983, can. 1086). This gives us a direct response to the question whether a local priest could prohibit marriages of cohabiting couples. Following canon 1077, a local priest can, only in a specific case, establish a prohibition of marriage of a Catholic (who is one of his subjects or who is actually present in his territory) but he can only do so for a time, for a grave reason and while that reason persists. In any case, no such prohibition could be invalidating since only supreme authority can attach an invalidating clause to a prohibition. To conclude, in and of itself, the fact that a couple is living together is an insufficient reason

for postponing or refusing to celebrate their marriage. However, for the reasons discussed in the previous paragraph, it should be recognized that such couples may be in need of particular formation and preparation (Boyle 2006).

A review of canon law on the topic of cohabitation with similar reflection was offered in a report from the U.S. bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family: "Since cohabitation is not in itself a canonical impediment, the couple may not be refused marriage solely on the basis of cohabitation. Marriage preparation may continue even if the couple refuses to separate. Pastoral ministers can be assured that to assist couples in regularising their situation is not to approve of cohabitation" (National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1999). Also, data collected in the US over the last 15 years show no positive association between the practices of priests who refused to prepare cohabitants for marriage, unless they separated until the moment of the wedding, and a reduction in the incidence of cohabitation (Markey 2000).

3.3. To Concentrate on Cohabitation and Its Risks or on The Meaning of Sacramental Marriage?

Certainly, MP for cohabiting couples, like other MP programs, should not be irrespective of the spiritual depth of committed love for the other. Development and adoption of a theological-pastoral approach which integrates both relational and religious components is recommended (Knieps-Port le Roi 2012, 19–21). The religious component should be equally present during the MP and next to the minimum required by the 'directory': marriage as a sacrament, marital spirituality and rite of marriage (Konferencja Episkopatu Polski 2003). One may add two other topics, which seem particularly relevant given the profile of cohabiting couples: the meaning of the marital promise and the nature of the vows, as well as the meaning of marital commitment. It is a pastor's responsibility to help a couple realise that the sense of commitment is what gives real significance to the religious wedding far beyond a good venue, ambience or a white dress. It is precisely here, in marital commitment, that relational and spiritual dimensions of the marital union interpenetrate and interact with each other. Since many cohabiting couples have unbalanced marriage expectations and run higher risks of marital instability and failure, it seems of crucial importance that the meaning of the marital promise and the nature of the vows should take a central place in all MP programs. Also, it is recommended to discuss the sacrament starting from the personal faith experience of the participants. The Christian vision of marriage should not be a point of departure but rather a potential point of arrival. Pastoral encounter should be strictly connected with the reality

of those who ask for marriage and who take their own experience of relationship and faith seriously. Beginning with an account of the positive elements of the relationship may paradoxically lead to the situation in which a couple feels ready and comfortable to confront its own limitations and struggles without having a feeling of being morally disqualified. Perhaps a presentation of a Christian vision of marriage as a destination to which we travel (even if many will never reach it fully) and not a mould into which we must all be pressed abruptly, might be helpful. I applaud a pastoral approach in which pastors first discover the good of the relationship that is already there within God's common grace to humanity, while at the same time helping the couple to enrich their relationship with the elements that can make their marriage a saving grace.

3.4. Identification of The Key Issues

It is certain that cohabitants – just as couples who want to enter marriage without the experience of living together – will need to tackle the basic topics which are relevant for a successful development of every relationship. These include: conflict-resolution, children, money, sex, communication, etc. At the same time we need to remain aware of the possible risks of suffering from the cohabitation effect among married ex-cohabitants. It is highly advisable and most effective to identify the key issues associated with cohabitation effect and propose a possible way of approaching them pastorally:

Commitment towards marriage. Couples transit into cohabitation in diverse ways. This decision or slippery slope is motivated by different internal and external factors. Also, cohabitants differ from each other in terms of their intentions or perspectives on marriage. In the previous paragraph I gave evidence that the way couples enter cohabitation (sliding versus deciding) and the presence or lack of a future (marital) perspective at the outset of cohabitation strongly determines the success of a marital relationship. I also showed that, due to certain socio-demographic and personal characteristics, as well as the experience of living together itself, cohabitants might develop ambiguous attitudes towards marriage – for example, they are afraid of marriage or have greater openness to divorce because of models they have experienced and these attitudes might be carried all the way to marriage. Therefore, couples should be encouraged to discuss with each other what they understand by love and commitment. The following questions: “Why did you decide to cohabit in the first place?”, “What were the reasons you came to the decision about marriage?”, “What meaning do you attach to the phase of cohabitation as well as to marriage?” might help identify the couple's commitment towards marriage and address the potential

issues adequately. As Pope Francis suggests: “The decision to marry should never be encouraged unless the couple has discerned deeper reasons that will ensure a genuine and stable commitment” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 209).

Expectations towards marriage. Research shows that once cohabitants marry, they are more likely to be dissatisfied with the marriage than couples who married without any cohabitation experience. It’s possible they may have idealised marriage while living in cohabitation and often, when married, they get surprised by the marital routine such as boredom, pain, disillusionment and conflicts. Pope Francis encourages looking at marriage as a lifetime project: “Each must set aside all illusions and accept the other as he or she actually is: an unfinished product, needing to grow, a work in progress” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 218). It’s important that couples become realistic in their expectations and are made aware that every marriage has its own cycles, that the part of the marital promise that every couple makes at the altar, ‘for better or worse’, is not only symbolic. It is very important that the couple discusses what both expect from marriage and from each other and what kind of life they would like to build and share together. Such a conversation could help them realise how much in common they have and look for the compromise in issues that divide them.

Children. Although the proportion of out-of-wedlock births has risen since the first half of the 1990’s and after 2000 in Poland, because of the decreasing share of women marrying in the event of premarital conception (extramarital births recently constituted 21% of all births [GUS 2013, 6]), most cohabiting couples still marry after the child is born. This proves that marriage is still considered as an appropriate environment for having and raising children in Poland. On the other hand, research shows a close linkage between cohabitation and children’s family instability. The UK study shows that rates of relationship dissolution for cohabitants with children also differ remarkably depending on whether the parents are still cohabiting or married on the day of the child’s birth. Some couples choose marriage in order to bring stability into the life/lives of their children. It’s important to confront these couples with a question: “Are you getting married primarily or only for the sake of your children?”. This might have far-reaching consequences on children of cohabiting parents or parents with cohabitation experience (prior to marriage) with certain relationship patterns as they experience instability in their families and are exposed to the multiple number of partners in their parents’ lives.

Dealing with conflicts. Generally, married ex-cohabitants tend to handle conflicts more poorly than couples with no cohabitation experience. Having an idealised vision of marriage, some deliberately avoid conflicts while cohabiting and therefore enter marriages without having much experience in dealing with

conflictual situations effectively. On the other hand, there are cohabitants with the attitude that their relationship is good ‘as long as it lasts’. The problem is that the possibility of walking away at any time while living informally together does not encourage couples to practice self-discipline in dealing with conflict. These somehow dysfunctional patterns of dealing with conflict resolution frequently follow couples into marriage and lead towards verbal, mental or physical abuse. Based on the Polish literature review, I point out that the quality of a relationship between partners in marriages (in terms of closeness, acceptance of each other as well as trust, friendship, openness and support for personal development) (Braun-Gałkowska, 2008; 2009, Plopa 2006) is strongly associated with the exercised ways of communication between the partners before marriage (concretely, with the patterns of communication, argument, conflict resolution and resolving misunderstandings) (Braun-Gałkowska, 2008; 2009; Jakubowski 2000). A consultation (or series of consultations) with a skilled consultant of family life could serve as an opportunity to detect and tackle many of the difficulties and risks which concern cohabitants and they are associated with future marital distress and a higher chance of marital separation. We keep in mind that a successful marriage is at stake here, even at the price that such conversations might guide some couples to the discovery of painful self-knowledge (e.g. about their relationship, about themselves as partners) and result in a decision that they are not ready for marriage at all or with this particular partner.

Fidelity. Studies indicate that those married couples who cohabited prior to marriage are less sexually exclusive both before and after marriage. The lack of sexual fidelity in cohabitation is related to a higher rate of divorce. Sexual fidelity patterns seem to be an important issue that requires verification and certainly MP program serves as a good occasion for that.

4. “Work in Progress”

In conclusion, a balanced approach to cohabiting couples is recommended. The phase of marriage formation can serve as a perfect occasion to welcome the couples with the gospel values of love, understanding and acceptance and to challenge them with the gospel message of commitment and faithfulness (National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1999). It should be clearly pronounced that cohabitants are not predestined to fail in marriages. A correct identification of the risk factors and efficient pastoral response to the actual needs of the couples through the development of good skills and attitudes can surely influence the quality of future marriages. Certainly *Amoris Laetitia* sets the ground per-

spective for dealing with cohabiting couples in a pastoral and non-stigmatising way. It inspires and gives hope for a more inclusive church, also in Poland. Although the encyclical has been received positively by the Polish Episcopate, a lot depends now on how its message will be applied in the daily pastoral practices with cohabiting couples.

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