

Encouraging Couples to Time of Abstinence Before Convalidation

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One of the greatest joys of being a spiritual father is to reconcile souls with Christ in the Sacrament of Penance. There, we have the unique function not only of absolving sins on behalf of the Church, but also of being instruments of Christ's healing. However, most individuals in irregular marriage situations are not able to confess themselves because they are sleeping with someone who, in the eyes of God, is not their spouse. This is sometimes called "living in sin," but nuances like this are unhelpful when accompanying couples in regularizing their marriage in the Church. Jesus always met people where they were, but it was always in order to lead them into a life of grace, that is, a loving relationship with Him. Couples who meet with us in order to "get married by the Church" are reaching out to be touched by Christ. They are usually aware of their sinful circumstances, and that is why they turn to the Church even if their motivations are not completely pure. In imitation of Our Lord, we as priests have the unique privilege and responsibility to meet these couples where they are — but ultimately to lead them to a life of grace and to heal their relationship with Christ and with each other. Therefore, to accompany a couple toward the convalidation of their marriage is really an extension of the Sacrament of Penance — not just for the individual, but for the couple together.

Convalidating a marriage in the Church presents several challenges. It first requires catechesis that convalidation is not "getting your marriage blessed by the Church." Rather, it is actually being united in the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, which can only take place in the Church and before a priest or deacon. Unfortunately, the custom has been to wait before the night before the convalidation (like before or after the rehearsal) to ask the couple to make their confessions. This is inadequate preparation in most cases. As Christ's ministers of reconciliation, we should encourage the couple to go to confession at a determined time — certainly before the convalidation rite (Rite of Matrimony) takes place — but even weeks or months before the convalidation. Of course, we cannot require them to go to confession without first explaining the conditions. To make a valid confession, they will need to make a commitment to Christ of sexual abstinence until their marriage convalidation. We as priests need to discuss with the couple in the external forum the amount of time and the sleeping

arrangements *before* the sacrament of confession. It might even be helpful for them to make a pledge to God and to each other in our presence — outside of confession — to help them realize that this is part of their commitment to Christ and each other in preparation for holy matrimony.

While it is difficult not to generalize, the time of abstinence probably needs to be shorter for younger couples than for older couples. There is a balance between asking something that will be almost humanly impossible and being too lenient and dismissive of the power of God's grace. We should never underestimate the grace of God and the disposition of the couple themselves. St. Paul said, *I can do all things in Him who strengthens me* (Phil 4:13), and this is the battle cry of all Christians who face the Cross. In explaining the reasons for the time of abstinence, it should be emphasized that the abstinence is firstly an act of penance, an act of self-denial in reparation for having offended the Lord by doing it "their way," thereby contravening His plan of a loving union in holy matrimony. Secondly, it is also a way for the couple to communicate verbally in their time of marriage formation instead of simply trying to solve their problems with sex. Thirdly, it is of utmost importance that the couple begin receiving the Holy Eucharist during their marriage formation so that they can be strengthened and healed by Christ's Body and Blood in preparation for the sacrament of matrimony. According to pastoral prudence, this can be done privately if there is risk of scandal. Proper catechesis should be given on the conditions that two cohabiting persons can be admitted to Holy Communion who are not yet united in the Sacrament of Matrimony. Fourthly, and possibly as a means of romantic persuasion, it encourages the couple to look forward to a new honeymoon the night of their convalidation — that for the first time ever God will sanctify their sexual embrace after a time of hopeful abstinence.

In terms of the sleeping arrangements, it is not the act of sleeping together in the same bed that could cause a fall but rather the initiation of sexual relations. Some couples may not be tempted to initiate sexual contact by simply sleeping in the same bed. Others may need to sleep in separate quarters in their home for obvious reasons. They should also be urged to avoid seeing each other in the nude, for example, when they are dressing or bathing. Even if they are accustomed to this after having been cohabitating or civilly married for years, the goal is that they are healing from having misused their sexuality before the sacrament of holy

matrimony. Furthermore, occasions of mutual nudity can be a strong temptation for any couple to lapse back into bad habits before they are united by Christ in holy matrimony.

As spiritual fathers, we have to use good discernment, and we have to love the souls of the couples in our care enough to exhort them to live in the freedom of truth. Every couple is unique, and couples who have been living together for years can have a lot of spiritual, emotional and even sexual baggage. Because they are weak, the couple may fail. They need to be reminded that if they fall, they should come to confession as soon as possible, not receive Holy Communion until sacramentally absolved, and simply begin again. Our hope is that their period of abstinence, confession, and receiving Holy Communion during marriage formation will bring them closer to Christ and each other in this life and more perfectly reflect the mystery to which St. Paul refers in his Letter to the Ephesians, that is, the love of Christ and His spotless bride, the Church.