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Pure Sex, Pure Love

A New Survey Reveals Significant Generational Differences in Catholic Attitudes Toward Marriage

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Do you believe that your spouse should be your soul mate first and foremost? Do you agree that marriage should be whatever two people want it to be? Do you believe that living together decreases the chances of divorce? Depending on your age, you'll probably have very different answers to these questions.

A new study released last week by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University found significant generational differences in attitudes about marriage, daily married life and the role of the Catholic Church in the sacrament of marriage.

Relationship Goldmine

All you regular readers of Pure Sex, Pure Love know how I adore studies, surveys and statistics about what young-adults are thinking and doing. This recent CARA online survey of more than 1,000 Catholics, commissioned by the Committee on Marriage and Family Life of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, is a goldmine of opinions on relationships, all broken down by age groups, Mass attendance and gender.

So what do young-adult Catholics have to say? Here's just one small sampling of data from the survey.

Catholics aged 18-25 are most likely to agree "somewhat" or "strongly" with the following statements:

88% ... When you marry, you want your spouse to be your soulmate, first and foremost.

This is in keeping with national figures of similarly aged folks. But interestingly enough, among a slightly older group of Catholics, those in the 26-46 group, that percentage dropped to 75%.

84% ... Couples don't take marriage seriously enough when divorce is easily available.

This is quite a strong statement—and young-adults are more likely to agree than other generations. By comparison, 67% of Catholics age 47-64 (the age of many of their parents) agree with that statement.

69% ... Marriage is whatever two people want it to be.

So while young-adults seem to express concern that marriage isn't taken seriously enough today, they also believe that it is an individual and

perhaps changing relationship. Only about half of folks in older generations agree with this statement.

43% ... Living with a partner before marriage decreases the risk of divorce.

Living together is very popular among young-adults of all religious backgrounds, but this is truly a generational difference. Only 17% of Catholics 65 and older agreed that living together is a plus for marital longevity.

Taken together, these four bits of data can help us predict some of the challenges young-adults will face in marriage.

On the one hand, we value marriage. We're afraid of divorce and concerned that it's become too easily accessible. On the other hand, we're not always making choices that help us toward our goal of strong, lasting unions.

What Does It All Mean?

The fact that we want to marry our soul mates is an indication of how much important—and how much pressure—we're putting on marriage. If our spouse is our soul mate, he or she should be perfect for us, unable to hurt us, and certainly not someone who will reduce us to tears or screams of frustration, right?

But most marriages have some tearful moments and screaming matches, so what then? When we tell ourselves that our spouse must be our soul mate, we're asking for an element of perfect understanding that's hard (if not impossible) to achieve, and setting ourselves up to be disappointed.

So, to try to prevent this kind of disappointment, many young-adults decide to live together to test things out. Yet according to countless surveys, living together before

marriage does not decrease the likelihood that a couple will divorce, even though many of us think it should. At best, cohabitation has a neutral effect—neither helping nor hurting the couple’s chances at happily ever afters—and some research points to negative effects, especially when the couple chooses to live together as a trial run, or a way to test out their relationship before making a permanent commitment.

Added Pressure

Why do we have all this pressure surrounding marriage? Perhaps because we’re unclear about what marriage really entails. A century ago, you could ask anyone what “marriage” entailed, and you’d get predictable—and similar—answers. Roles and responsibilities of men and women were clearly understood. Today, young-adults believe that marriage is whatever two people want it to be.

This individualism allows us tremendous benefits and eliminates many of the restrictive gender roles of yesteryear. But it also puts an added pressure on young couples: With so many possibilities, what should marriage mean for them? How do you know if you are meeting your responsibilities? How do you know what you can reasonably expect from your spouse?

Clergy and marriage preparation leaders should closely examine the results of this data-rich CARA study. Young-adult expectations of marriage are very different than those of their parents’ and grandparents’ generation, and it’s time to talk about what this means for the future of Catholic matrimony.