



ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN THE CHURCH'S PASTORAL MINISTRY REGARDING THE PRACTICE OF COHABITATION WITHOUT FORMAL MARRIAGE

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Abstract

This study examines the ethical dilemma in church pastoral ministry toward cohabitation without formal marriage, highlighting the gap between the normative affirmation of marriage as a covenant and the need for contextual pastoral accompaniment. Previous studies have tended to assess cohabitation from moral or sociological perspectives but have not articulated an integrative pastoral response model. This qualitative case study involved purposively selected participants (pastors, church elders, and cohabiting couples). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, limited observation, and literature review, and analyzed using thematic coding. An Aristotelian virtue ethics framework was synthetically integrated with Franz Magnis-Suseno's ethics of responsibility and enriched by a deontological perspective from Immanuel Kant, particularly concerning moral duty and the categorical imperative as a universal norm. This deontological lens sharpens the analysis of moral obligation, public commitment, and respect for human dignity within relational structures. Findings indicate that cohabitation is primarily driven by economic pressures and customary demands rather than theological rejection, and that churches adopt a moderative strategy: liturgical inclusion combined with structural restrictions. The study contributes to the formulation of a gradual pastoral model that upholds doctrinal integrity while fostering relational transformation.

Keywords: cohabitation; deontological ethics; ethical dilemma; marriage theology; pastoral ministry; virtue ethics

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji dilema etis dalam pelayanan pastoral gereja terhadap praktik kohabitasi tanpa pernikahan resmi, dengan menyoroti kesenjangan antara penegasan normatif tentang pernikahan sebagai covenant dan kebutuhan pendampingan kontekstual terhadap pasangan yang hidup bersama. Studi sebelumnya cenderung menilai kohabitasi secara moral atau sosiologis, namun belum merumuskan model respons pastoral yang integratif. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus terhadap informan yang dipilih secara purposif (pendeta, majelis gereja, dan pasangan kohabitasi). Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi terbatas, dan studi pustaka, lalu dianalisis menggunakan thematic coding. Kerangka etika kebajikan Aristotelian diintegrasikan dengan etika tanggung

jawab Franz Magnis-Suseno serta diperkaya melalui analisis etika deontologi Immanuel Kant, khususnya mengenai kewajiban moral, imperatif kategoris, dan penghormatan terhadap martabat manusia sebagai prinsip universal. Perspektif deontologis ini mempertegas dimensi komitmen publik dan konsistensi norma dalam relasi pernikahan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kohabitasi lebih banyak dipengaruhi tekanan ekonomi dan tuntutan adat daripada penolakan teologis, serta bahwa gereja mengembangkan strategi moderatif: penerimaan liturgis disertai pembatasan struktural. Studi ini berkontribusi pada perumusan model pastoral gradual yang menjaga integritas ajaran sekaligus membuka ruang transformasi relasional.

Kata Kunci: dilema etis; etika deontologi; etika kebajikan; kohabitasi; pelayanan pastoral; teologi pernikahan

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of cohabitation without a legally recognized marital bond has become increasingly evident in contemporary congregational life. This practice generates significant ethical and pastoral challenges for the church, as it simultaneously engages two fundamental dimensions: the theological understanding of Christian marriage as a sanctified covenant, and the church's pastoral vocation to embody a ministry characterized by love, restoration, and renewal. John Leavitt and colleagues argue that cohabitation has risen markedly across many communities due to complex cultural and economic dynamics, thereby requiring the church to formulate responses that are not merely normative but also contextually informed and pastorally nuanced (Leavitt et al., 2020, p. 50).

Theologically, marriage is understood as a covenant that reflects the sacred and publicly committed relationship between Christ and the Church. In contemporary Christian tradition, this affirmation is articulated as an integral component of Christian moral teaching, which is not only normative but also relational-ethical, emphasizing fidelity, commitment, and responsibility (Hart, 2018, pp. 112–113). Consequently, some theologians regard cohabitation as inconsistent with the relational structure envisioned within Christian faith and moral anthropology (Smith & Jones, 2019, p. 87).

The issue of cohabitation extends beyond questions of individual morality and is significantly shaped by socio-economic and cultural factors.

Contextual pastoral research indicates that customary practices such as *belis* (traditional bride wealth) may contribute to the postponement of marriage due to substantial economic demands and cultural pressures, leading some couples to delay formal marriage or to cohabit without ecclesial blessing (Dete et al., 2024, pp. 94–97). These findings demonstrate that cultural dynamics and structural burdens play a substantial role in shaping relational decisions among Christian couples. Thus, lived realities do not always align linearly with the church's moral ideals, necessitating a pastoral approach that is more inclusive, context-sensitive, and transformative.

Moreover, contemporary Christian ethical approaches no longer focus solely on determining right or wrong actions but increasingly incorporate the dimension of character formation and virtue ethics as integral to everyday moral life. Alasdair MacIntyre contends that virtue ethics enables the church to view cohabitation within the broader framework of ongoing moral formation, rather than merely as behavior to be condemned

(MacIntyre, 2016, pp. 64–65). Such an approach opens space for the church to develop responses that transcend legalism and instead foster contextual discernment and restorative engagement.

In light of these considerations, this study is guided by two primary research questions: (1) How can the church construct an ethical stance toward couples who cohabit without a legally recognized marriage in a manner that is both pastoral and contextual? (2) What model of ministry can be developed that upholds love, restoration, and Christian doctrinal teaching within congregational life?

Although numerous sociological and theological studies have examined the causes of cohabitation or offered moral evaluations, a research gap remains concerning how the church might practically formulate a responsive pastoral ethical stance toward couples who cohabit without formal marriage. In other words, relatively few studies have systematically proposed a pastoral ministry model that simultaneously preserves the sanctity of marriage and offers a

transformative, love-centered approach to cohabiting couples within the life of the church.

The working hypothesis of this research is that the church can continue to minister to couples who cohabit without a legally recognized marital bond through a restorative pastoral approach that honors human dignity while maintaining the theological teaching concerning the sanctity of marriage.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study design, focusing on an in-depth analysis of the ethical dynamics and the church's pastoral responses to couples engaged in cohabitation. This design was selected because it enables a comprehensive and contextual understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, particularly in examining moral considerations, pastoral policies, and the lived experiences of those involved within congregational life. The research participants include pastors, church elders, and couples who are currently or have previously been in cohabiting relationships.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured

in-depth interviews, limited participant observation, and a review of relevant literature. Data analysis was carried out thematically through processes of transcription, data reduction, coding, thematic categorization, and reflective interpretation.

As an analytical framework, ethical theory is employed as an interpretive lens. Aristotle's virtue ethics is utilized to understand cohabitation from the perspective of character formation and moral habituation oriented toward the ultimate purpose of life (*telos*) (Aristotle, 1999, pp. 18–20). Meanwhile, the thought of Franz Magnis-Suseno provides a foundation for normative reflection on moral responsibility and human dignity (Magnis-Suseno, 1987, pp. 14–18). The integration of these perspectives allows for an analysis that transcends a merely legalistic framework, incorporating dimensions of moral formation and the church's pastoral responsibility in a contextual and transformative manner.

In addition to Aristotle's virtue ethics and Franz Magnis-Suseno's ethical reflections, this study also considers Immanuel Kant's

deontological ethics, particularly in examining the dimension of moral obligation and universal normative principles.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Empirical Realities of Cohabitation within Congregational Life

The empirical findings of this study indicate that cohabitation without a legally recognized marriage within the examined church community cannot be reduced to a rejection of Christian doctrinal teaching. Based on in-depth interviews with couples who had cohabited, as well as corroborative accounts from church leaders, the decision to live together was more often motivated by economic pressures and customary obligations than by a theological denial of the sacredness of marriage. In one documented case, a couple expressed their intention to receive a church blessing; however, the substantial financial demands associated with *belis* (traditional bride wealth) and customary wedding ceremonies resulted in an indefinite postponement of their plans.

In certain cultural contexts in Indonesia, *belis* is not merely a

ceremonial symbol but also a form of social legitimation that determines the recognition of a relationship within kinship structures. Failure to fulfill such obligations may result in social stigma or inter-family conflict. Consequently, the decision to cohabit is often perceived by couples as a pragmatic strategy to preserve relational stability while gradually striving toward economic readiness. This phenomenon aligns with contextual research findings demonstrating that economic factors and customary burdens significantly contribute to the postponement of formal marriage within specific Christian communities (Dete et al., 2024, pp. 94–97). In this sense, cohabitation emerges from the interaction between religious values and social structures that constrain individual choices.

Beyond structural determinants, psychological and relational dimensions also surfaced in the field data. Several couples emphasized that they had already established emotional commitment and domestic responsibility—including child-rearing—and therefore regarded their relationship

as constituting a “family,” despite the absence of ecclesial blessing. This perception reflects a shift in understanding of relational legitimacy, in which emotional stability and practical responsibility are prioritized before formal institutional recognition. Such a shift mirrors broader modern cultural dynamics that privilege the functional dimensions of relationships over symbolic-institutional validation.

Nevertheless, the data further reveal that cohabiting couples do not entirely repudiate church teaching. They remain aware that ecclesial marriage carries sacred significance and represents the ideal to which they aspire. This awareness demonstrates a form of moral ambivalence: on the one hand, they engage in a relational practice not yet aligned with ecclesial norms; on the other hand, they continue to affirm the theological value of marriage. This ambivalence suggests that cohabitation is not necessarily synonymous with secularization of faith but is often an expression of tension between normative ideals and socio-economic realities.

Theologically, marriage in Christian tradition is understood as a

covenant reflecting public commitment and fidelity before God and the community of faith (Hart, 2018, pp. 112–113). Within this framework, ecclesial blessing is not merely an administrative formality but a symbolic participation in the church’s moral and spiritual order. Accordingly, cohabitation generates tension insofar as the relationship has not yet been incorporated into this public covenantal framework. However, the findings of this study indicate that the couples involved do not reject the covenant’s meaning; rather, they encounter structural obstacles to formally actualizing it.

From a virtue-ethical perspective, this situation may be interpreted as an unfinished moral process. Aristotle maintains that human action is shaped through habituation and unfolds within a dynamic orientation toward an ultimate end (*telos*), namely the attainment of the good life (Aristotle, 1999, pp. 18–20). If the couple’s orientation remains directed toward long-term commitment and responsibility, cohabitation may be understood as a stage that has not yet reached its ideal form. However, it is not entirely detached from that moral

trajectory. This analysis does not seek to relativize ecclesial norms but rather to situate the phenomenon within the broader framework of character development and lived context.

In sum, the empirical reality of cohabitation within congregational life reveals a complexity that cannot be reduced to a simplistic binary of right and wrong. It represents an intersection of faith, culture, economic conditions, and relational dynamics that collectively shape individual moral decisions. Recognizing this complexity constitutes a crucial foundation for the church in formulating a pastoral response that is not merely normative, but also contextually grounded and theologically reflective.

Institutional Tension: Between Normative Integrity and Pastoral Compassion

The findings of this study indicate that cohabitation raises not only individual-level concerns for couples but also institutional tensions within the church. Interviews with church leaders reveal a serious internal struggle over an appropriate response: whether the church should

firmly enforce disciplinary measures to safeguard doctrinal integrity or prioritize a dialogical, gradual pastoral approach. This tension is not merely a matter of personal preference but reflects an inherent value conflict within the life of the faith community.

On the one hand, the church bears a theological responsibility to uphold marriage as a sacred and public covenant. In Christian theology, marriage is not simply a social contract or private agreement but a covenant witnessed by God and the community of faith (Hart, 2018, p. 113). Ecclesial recognition thus carries significant sacramental and ecclesiological dimensions. When couples choose to cohabit without a church blessing, the church confronts the potential relativization of its moral norms, which may influence the broader congregational understanding of marriage. This concern is echoed by several church leaders who fear that excessive tolerance may foster moral ambiguity within the community.

On the other hand, an overly legalistic approach risks producing social exclusion and disrupting

pastoral relationships. Some church leaders acknowledge that harsh disciplinary actions, such as total prohibition from worship participation or social ostracism, may lead couples to disengage entirely from church life. In this regard, the church functions not only as a normative institution but also as a community of formation and restoration. The tension between safeguarding doctrinal standards and embracing members who struggle reflects an ethical dilemma that cannot be resolved through mechanical rule enforcement alone.

Through the lens of responsibility ethics, as articulated by Franz Magnis-Suseno, moral decision-making must consider human dignity and the concrete consequences of actions (Magnis-Suseno, 1987, p. 16). As a moral community, the church is called to act not only in accordance with norms but also in prudence, carefully weighing pastoral implications. In the context of cohabitation, the ethical question extends beyond “Is this practice consistent with church teaching?” to include “How can the church provide guidance without severing a relationship of faith that remains

open?” This responsibility-oriented approach demands attentiveness to situational complexity and resists moral simplification.

Institutional tension may also be examined through the framework of virtue ethics. Aristotle emphasizes that virtue lies in the capacity to discern the mean between two extremes, the “golden mean” (Aristotle, 1999, 1106b). In the ecclesial context, the first extreme is rigid legalism that leaves no room for growth; the second is permissiveness that obscures moral norms. Pastoral virtue consists in the ability to navigate between these extremes through practical wisdom (*phronesis*). As a form of prudential judgment, *phronesis* enables decision-making that upholds universal principles while remaining attentive to particular contexts.

Field data indicate that the church under study attempts to adopt a moderated position. Cohabiting couples are welcomed in worship services, yet their participation in formal leadership or structural ministry roles is temporarily restricted until their marital status is formally regularized. This policy reflects an effort to preserve doctrinal

integrity without severing pastoral relationships. Nevertheless, this approach does not eliminate tension; some congregants perceive it as insufficiently firm, while others regard it as overly restrictive.

From an ecclesiological perspective, this situation demonstrates that the church exists within a dynamic interplay between its normative identity and its pastoral mission. The church is not merely a guardian of doctrine but also a witness to restorative love. When confronted with the phenomenon of cohabitation, it is challenging to integrate these dimensions reflectively and responsibly. The institutional tension that arises should not be interpreted as institutional failure, but rather as evidence that the church is actively negotiating how to embody its faith commitments amid complex social realities.

Ultimately, the tension between normative standards and pastoral compassion in cases of cohabitation reflects an ethical dilemma that requires practical wisdom, respect for human dignity, and commitment to theological integrity. The church's response

cannot be reduced to a binary choice between condemnation and permissiveness; rather, it must be understood as an ongoing effort to integrate truth and love within a contextualized and discerning pastoral praxis.

Theological Analysis: Cohabitation in the Perspective of Character Formation

A deeper understanding of the phenomenon of cohabitation requires an analytical framework that goes beyond formal normative evaluation. Instead, it traces the dynamics of moral formation as they unfold in concrete human life. In this regard, Aristotle's theological-ethical framework offers a relevant interpretive lens. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle affirms that every human action is oriented toward an ultimate end (*telos*), namely the good life (*eudaimonia*) (Aristotle, 1999, pp. 18–20). Moral evaluation, therefore, is not determined solely by conformity to external rules, but by the orientation of action and the gradual formation of character through habituation (*habitus*).

When this framework is applied to the findings of the present study, cohabitation cannot be understood merely as an act detached from moral purpose. Interviews indicate that couples who live together without formal marriage often continue to orient their relationship toward long-term commitment and express the intention to solemnize their union ecclesially when circumstances permit. This orientation suggests that the moral trajectory of the relationship has not entirely deviated from the ideal telos of Christian marriage. In other words, there exists a dynamic movement toward fuller commitment, even if it has not yet been realized in the formal structure expected by the church.

From Aristotle's perspective, virtue is not formed instantaneously but emerges through sustained moral practice and habituation (Aristotle, 1999, 1103a–1103b). Individuals become just by performing just acts and responsible by concretely exercising responsibility. If cohabiting couples demonstrate domestic responsibility, relational fidelity, and commitment to child-rearing, then elements of virtue are

indeed being cultivated, even though the relational structure has not fully aligned with ecclesial norms. This analysis does not aim to justify cohabitation as an ideal state; rather, it acknowledges that moral life frequently unfolds in stages of incomplete growth.

Such a theological approach also helps the church avoid moral reductionism. If evaluation is based solely on formal status—"blessed" or "not blessed"—the dynamics of character formation and inner moral orientation are at risk of being overlooked. In virtue ethics, moral quality is not assessed by a single isolated act but by the overarching direction of one's life. As Alasdair MacIntyre emphasizes, moral practices must be interpreted within the broader narrative of human life, which remains open and directed toward particular ends (MacIntyre, 2016, pp. 64–65). Accordingly, cohabitation may be understood as part of a moral narrative that remains open to transformation.

Nevertheless, this theological perspective does not entail relativizing norms. Aristotle maintains that virtue presupposes rational deliberation and conscious

choice oriented toward genuine good (Aristotle, 1999, 1094a–1095a). In the ecclesial context, the telos of Christian marriage extends beyond emotional stability or domestic responsibility; it involves covenantal commitment publicly affirmed within the community of faith. Consequently, cohabitation remains in tension with this normative telos. It is precisely within this tension that ethical reflection becomes necessary: how can the process of moral growth be directed toward a fuller realization of its telos without severing pastoral relationships?

Practically, this theological analysis encourages the church to place character formation at the center of its pastoral response. Rather than limiting its stance to identifying transgression, the church may focus on cultivating virtues such as fidelity, responsibility, and public commitment. This approach aligns with the understanding that Christian ethics is concerned not merely with regulating actions but with shaping persons. Thus, cohabitation is not perceived as a static and final condition, but as a stage in a moral journey that requires guidance toward

a relational form more fully consonant with Christian marriage.

From this teleological perspective, the ethical dilemma surrounding cohabitation is not framed as an absolute opposition between right and wrong, but rather as a dynamic of growth that demands practical wisdom. The church is called to discern the moral trajectory of the relationship, to strengthen the virtues already present, and to guide couples gradually toward a legitimate covenantal commitment. In this way, a teleological approach enriches pastoral reflection by integrating norm, process, and purpose within a coherent ethical framework.

Deontological Analysis: Moral Obligation and Normative Tension

In addition to the teleological approach that emphasizes purpose and character formation, the phenomenon of cohabitation must also be examined through a deontological lens, particularly within the ethical framework of Immanuel Kant. Deontological ethics situates moral obligation at the center of ethical reflection, rather than consequences or processes of moral

growth. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant asserts that an action is morally right when it is performed out of duty and can be tested by the principle of the categorical imperative, namely, whether the maxim underlying the action can be willed as a universal law without contradiction (Kant, 2012, pp. 37–38).

In the context of cohabitation, the deontological question arises: can the practice of living together without a legally and ecclesially recognized marriage be accepted as a universalizable principle? If all individuals were to disregard the formal institution of marriage and opt for cohabitation without public commitment, the social and religious structures that sustain the meaning of marriage would likely erode. Within this framework, cohabitation stands in tension with moral norms that require public recognition and validation of relational commitment as an expression of social and religious responsibility. Marriage, therefore, is not merely a private contract but a commitment that bears communal significance.

Kant further maintains that human beings must always be treated

as ends in themselves and never merely as means (Kant, 2012, pp. 42–43). This principle becomes particularly relevant when cohabiting relationships are evaluated in light of respect for personal dignity. If cohabitation is entered into without a clear long-term commitment, there exists a risk of instrumentalization—where one party may be reduced to a means for emotional, sexual, or economic fulfillment. From this perspective, the church possesses a strong normative basis for affirming the necessity of formal commitment as a safeguard of dignity and clarity of responsibility.

Nevertheless, deontological analysis should not remain confined to abstract normative formulations. The empirical findings of this study reveal that many cohabiting couples retain a sense of moral obligation, particularly toward their children and extended families. They do not perceive their relationship as a rejection of moral norms, but rather as a response to specific socio-economic circumstances. The tension between ideal norm and lived reality highlights the complexity of the ethical dilemma faced by the church. Norms remain authoritative as guiding principles,

yet their application unfolds within imperfect, constrained human contexts.

Within the Christian moral tradition, obligation is inseparable from love as the highest Law. Jesus summarizes the Law in the command to love God and neighbor (Matt. 22:37-40). Accordingly, the application of moral norms cannot be detached from pastoral principles that prioritize compassion and understanding. Herein lies the church's ethical challenge: to maintain the integrity of its teaching on marriage as a sacred covenant while simultaneously acknowledging the vulnerability and lived realities of its members.

Deontological ethics helps the church maintain moral consistency and resist relativism. Without clear norms, the church risks diluting its theological identity. At the same time, enforcing norms requires practical wisdom to avoid devolving into rigid legalism. In pastoral contexts, an excessively punitive approach may alienate couples from the faith community, whereas excessive permissiveness may undermine the

theological significance of marriage as a covenant or sacrament.

Thus, deontological analysis demonstrates that cohabitation touches the very core of moral obligation and the structure of public commitment. The church is called to affirm normative teaching as its ethical horizon while simultaneously cultivating dialogue and accompaniment. The tension between obligation and lived reality does not signify moral failure; rather, it constitutes the arena in which the church exercises both its prophetic and pastoral vocation. Within this space of tension, the integrity of doctrine and the embodiment of Christian love are tested and concretely realized.

Pastoral Reflection: Between Doctrinal Integrity and Contextual Accompaniment

The phenomenon of cohabitation situates the church within a field of tension between safeguarding doctrinal integrity and providing contextual pastoral accompaniment. On the one hand, the church bears a theological responsibility to uphold marriage as a sacred covenant

affirmed before God and the congregation. On the other hand, it is called to embody the love of Christ through acceptance, accompaniment, and transformative processes that are not punitive. This tension is not merely an administrative ecclesial concern, but an ecclesiological issue that touches upon the very identity and mission of the church.

Pastoral theological reflection underscores that an approach emphasizing discipline without accompaniment risks widening the gap between the church and its members. Andrew Purves argues that pastoral ministry must be grounded in participation in Christ's reconciling and restoring work (Purves, 2001, pp. 34–36). This implies that the church is not merely a guardian of norms but also a space where restoration and spiritual growth are made possible. In the context of cohabitation, such a vision calls for honest dialogue about couples' reasons, struggles, and aspirations, without prematurely resorting to stigmatization.

Pastoral reflection must also take into account the socio-economic factors that influence the decision to cohabit rather than marry. Empirical findings indicate that financial

burdens, familial expectations, and administrative obstacles often play decisive roles. Within this framework, moral concerns cannot be separated from the structural realities that shape them. Contextual theology reminds us that the proclamation of the Gospel always occurs within concrete human situations (Bevans, 2002, pp. 3–6). Therefore, a pastorally relevant response must remain attentive to context while maintaining normative orientation.

At the same time, the church retains an educational responsibility to articulate the theological meaning of marriage. Within Christian tradition, marriage is understood as a communion reflecting the relationship between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:25–32). This sacramental or covenantal dimension situates marriage not merely as a private agreement but as a public testimony of faith. If the church fails to consistently teach this dimension, the theological meaning of marriage risks being reduced to administrative formalism.

Accordingly, a balanced pastoral reflection requires a dual movement: the affirmation of the norm and the accompaniment of the

process. Affirmation of norm entails the continued proclamation of the importance of public commitment and ecclesial recognition of marriage. Accompaniment of process entails the church's presence alongside couples in their journey toward such commitment, rather than engagement only at the point when formal requirements have been fulfilled. This approach resonates with a gradual and transformative pastoral model in which faith development is understood as an ongoing process.

Such reflection challenges the church to formulate pastoral policies that are both clear and flexible. Clarity is necessary to prevent inconsistency in ministerial practice. Flexibility is required to ensure that such policies can be applied prudently across diverse situations. In this way, the church may avoid two extremes: rigid legalism and unprincipled permissiveness.

Ultimately, the phenomenon of cohabitation invites the church to reconsider its identity as a community of grace. The Christian community is not constituted by moral perfection but by the shared calling to repentance and the renewal of life. In

light of the Gospel, the church is summoned to bear witness to truth while embodying love. Doctrinal integrity and contextual accompaniment are not mutually exclusive realities; rather, they are complementary dimensions that must coexist in faithful discipleship to Christ.

Ecclesiological Implications and the Formulation of Pastoral Policy

The phenomenon of cohabitation does not merely raise questions of individual morality; it also engages the ecclesiological dimension of the church as a community of faith. The church is not simply an administrative institution that formalizes marriages, but the body of Christ entrusted with preserving its holiness, unity, and public witness within society. Accordingly, the response to cohabitation cannot be reduced to an individual pastoral decision; rather, it reflects the church's self-understanding and identity.

Within the framework of New Testament ecclesiology, the church is called to live in the light of God's holiness (1 Pet. 1:15–16). Holiness in this sense does not imply exclusive

separation, but a commitment to a pattern of life that reflects the character of Christ. When confronted with cohabitation, the central question is not merely whether the practice conforms to established norms, but how the church can maintain the integrity of its witness without forfeiting its inclusive character as a community of grace.

In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasizes that Christian community rests upon the Word and grace of God rather than upon the moral perfection of its members (Bonhoeffer, 1954, pp. 26–28). This insight provides a crucial foundation for the church to resist positioning itself as a distancing judge, and instead to embody a fellowship that calls each member to repentance and growth. In the context of cohabitation, the church must distinguish between unconditional acceptance of the person and critical evaluation of the practice. Acceptance of the person remains unconditional; moral assessment of the practice remains grounded in the light of faith's teaching.

A further implication concerns the need to formulate systematic pastoral policies. Such policies should articulate clear

theological principles regarding marriage while also outlining procedures for accompanying couples in cohabiting situations. Policy clarity prevents excessive subjectivity in pastoral decision-making, which may otherwise create perceptions of inconsistency. Conversely, overly rigid policies risk neglecting the complexity of concrete human situations.

From the perspective of public theology, Stanley Hauerwas reminds the church that it is called to be an alternative community that embodies a distinctive way of life shaped by the Gospel (Hauerwas, 1981, pp. 99–102). The church's vocation, therefore, is not merely to accommodate social realities but to offer a transformative vision of life rooted in Christian discipleship. However, this vision must be enacted through patient and sustained formation. Consequently, premarital catechesis, family counseling, and even economic accompaniment may become integral components of a comprehensive pastoral framework.

Ecclesiological implications also extend to the formation of younger generations. If cohabitation becomes increasingly normalized

without critical theological reflection, the sacred understanding of marriage may gradually erode. The church must therefore strengthen its teaching on the theology of the body, covenantal commitment, and social responsibility in relational life. Preventive faith formation is often more effective than reactive intervention after moral challenges have already emerged.

In all policy formulation, the church is called to integrate justice and compassion. Justice ensures that norms are upheld consistently; compassion ensures that their application does not injure human dignity. Within this tension, the church exercises both its prophetic and pastoral vocation. Although cohabitation presents an ethical dilemma, it also provides an opportunity for deeper theological reflection on marriage, community, and grace.

Thus, the ecclesiological implications of this phenomenon extend beyond internal regulation to a renewed understanding of the church as the living body of Christ within a changing world. Pastoral policies grounded in mature theological

reflection will enable the church to remain faithful to the Gospel while cultivating space for growth and transformation among its members.

A Redemptive-Contextual Pastoral Model for Cohabiting Couples

Drawing upon empirical findings, theological analysis of Christian marriage, Franz Magnis-Suseno's ethics of responsibility, and Immanuel Kant's deontological perspective, this study proposes a pastoral model that is gradual, redemptive, and normatively accountable. Within this framework, theology provides the foundation for understanding marriage as a sacred covenant before God and the congregation, while deontology underscores the dimension of moral obligation and normative consistency. Their integration enables the church to preserve doctrinal integrity while embodying compassionate accompaniment.

Stage of Acceptance and Pastoral Dialogue

The church receives couples without prejudice and establishes empathetic,

dialogical relationships. Theologically, every person is understood as created in the image of God and endowed with inherent dignity. From a deontological standpoint, each individual must be treated as an end in themselves, never merely as an object of judgment. Such acceptance does not legitimize the situation but constitutes the initial step of accompaniment grounded in respect for human dignity.

Stage of Moral Clarification and Theological Education

The church articulates the theological meaning of Christian marriage as a sacred covenant, a public commitment, and a testimony of faith within the community. Marriage is not merely a private contract but a divine vocation with communal implications. From a deontological perspective, public commitment represents a moral obligation that must be universally accountable. Normative teaching is thus affirmed clearly, yet communicated persuasively and reflectively.

Stage of Character Formation and Spiritual Discipline

Pastoral accompaniment continues through spiritual formation, counseling, and the cultivation of virtues such as responsibility, fidelity, and commitment. Theology emphasizes repentance and faith development as processes of life transformation. Within a deontological framework, this stage helps couples recognize that marital commitment is not merely pragmatic but a moral duty that safeguards dignity and relational clarity.

Stage of Facilitation and Legal Accompaniment

Where obstacles are economic, administrative, or customary, the church provides concrete support—facilitating family dialogue and assisting with legal processes. Here, the church's social responsibility as a faith community becomes visible. Norms are not only proclaimed but also embodied through tangible support that enables couples to fulfill their moral and theological commitments.

Stage of Gradual Ministerial Integration

Participation in ministry is granted progressively in accordance with the

couple's demonstrated growth in commitment and faith. The guiding principle is not permanent exclusion but educational and responsible integration. This approach preserves the balance between doctrinal consistency regarding marriage as a sacred covenant and the concrete expression of Christian love.

In sum, this pastoral model integrates the theology of Christian marriage with a deontological analysis of moral obligation. The church is called to remain faithful to normative teaching as its ethical horizon while offering contextual, compassionate, and transformative accompaniment to couples living in cohabitation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study demonstrates that cohabitation constitutes a complex social reality that cannot be reduced to simplistic moral categories. The practice of living together without formal marital recognition creates tension between the church's theological norms and the concrete dynamics of congregational life. Consequently, reductive or overly

simplistic approaches prove inadequate for both explaining and responding to this phenomenon. What is required is an integrative analytical framework capable of comprehensively synthesizing the ethical, theological, social, and pastoral dimensions.

From the perspective of theological ethics, cohabitation is situated within the horizon of moral orientation and character formation. Ethical life is not determined solely by formal compliance with external rules, but also by the direction and telos that shape the entirety of human existence. Within this framework, the findings indicate that some cohabiting couples intend to commit to a long-term relationship and maintain relational stability. This suggests the presence of a dynamic of moral growth that has not yet been fully realized in the normative form expected by the church. Ethical evaluation of cohabitation, therefore, must take into account processes of virtue formation, rather than focusing exclusively on administratively defined relational status.

At the same time, teleological analysis does not negate the

importance of objective norms. From a deontological perspective, moral obligation and public commitment are essential elements in understanding the meaning of Christian marriage. Marriage is conceived as a sacred and public covenant, involving not only two individuals but also social responsibility and communal witness. In this regard, cohabitation remains problematic insofar as it has not yet fulfilled the dimension of communal recognition and formal affirmation. Moral norms function as a regulative horizon that safeguards doctrinal integrity and preserves the theological meaning of marriage as a covenantal institution.

The tension between norm and lived reality should not be construed as an absolute antagonism, but rather as a dialectical space requiring practical wisdom. The church is called to balance doctrinal consistency with contextual pastoral accompaniment. An overly legalistic approach risks fostering exclusion and alienation, while excessive permissiveness may obscure normative boundaries. Mature pastoral reflection must therefore

integrate justice and compassion simultaneously.

This research further underscores that structural factors, including economic pressures, cultural shifts, and evolving understandings of relational commitment, frequently shape cohabitation. As such, it cannot be interpreted solely as an individual moral failure but must be recognized as part of broader social dynamics. An effective ecclesial response must account for these contextual realities without relinquishing theological orientation. Faith formation, character development, and premarital pastoral guidance emerge as crucial instruments for cultivating awareness of marriage as a covenantal communion.

From an ecclesiological standpoint, the phenomenon of cohabitation challenges the church to reexamine its identity as a community living within the tension between holiness and grace. The church is called to uphold doctrinal integrity while simultaneously creating space for repentance and transformation. Acceptance of individuals is not equivalent to legitimization of particular practices. This conceptual

distinction is vital if the church is to preserve doctrinal holiness without disregarding the dignity of persons who remain in a process of spiritual growth.

The formulation of systematic pastoral policies constitutes a practical implication of this reflection. Such policies must be grounded in clear theological principles regarding the meaning of marriage and complemented by gradual, educational mechanisms of accompaniment. Policy clarity ensures ministerial consistency, while flexible implementation allows context-sensitive application. In this way, the church may avoid reactive responses and develop proactive, transformative pastoral strategies.

Methodologically, the qualitative approach employed in this study enables in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, preventing the discussion from remaining at the level of abstract normative reasoning detached from concrete reality. This approach enriches ethical reflection by incorporating authentic voices and experiences, thereby contributing to a

more contextually grounded pastoral theology.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of cohabitation presents not only an ethical dilemma but also a reflective opportunity for the church to deepen its understanding of marriage, community, and moral formation. The integration of virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and ecclesiological reflection yields a more comprehensive analytical framework for addressing this issue. The church is called to remain faithful to its doctrinal commitments while remaining responsive to evolving social dynamics. In such fidelity and prudence, the church can continue to exercise its prophetic vocation without losing its pastoral character as a community that restores, accompanies, and guides believers toward mature faith.

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