

CATHOLIC BISHOPS LAUNCH CONVERSATIONS ON MARRIAGE AND THE DIVERSITY OF FAMILY LIFE

The Catholic Bishops of England and Wales are marking the 10th anniversary of the United Nations International Year of the Family this year by encouraging a wide ranging conversation in homes and parishes about the reality of family life and the Church in the 21st century.

The Marriage and Family Life Project, promoted under the title *Listening 2004: My Family My Church*, is described as “an ambitious invitation to every church community to ask local families, whatever their background, to talk together about some fundamental matters”

Bishop John Hine, chairman of the Bishops' Committee for Marriage and Family Life and auxiliary bishop of Southwark, will lead the programme and will be present at each meeting held in England and Wales along with the local diocesan bishop.

Bishop John Hine, said: "*Listening 2004* is an exciting and innovative way to celebrate the anniversary of the 1994 Year of the Family. It is an opportunity for the whole Catholic community to see more clearly what can be done together, with God's help, to build a stronger future for families, at home, in the wider community and in the Church.

"The importance of families to the stability and future of society cannot be understated, and supporting the family is a priority for the Catholic Church. However, people's experience of family life - the joys and blessings, the trials and challenges - are all different, and it is vital that the Church listens to what families have to say. It is also important to recognise that families exist outside the context of marriage, and that some marriages do break down, and so the Church must listen to the particular experiences of those in single-parent families who need the support of other families and the Church as a whole. It is vital that as many people as possible take part in this initiative so that we have as wide a range of experiences represented as possible."

Bishop John added: "This initiative is a great chance for families to discover at grass roots what they can do to help each other. As it is essentially a listening process, the outcome must remain open, but we hope for a greatly renewed interest in, and concern for, family life, including a greater appreciation of the difference which individual families can make to one another's lives. We also

hope for a greater awareness on the part of parishes, deaneries and dioceses of the good news about family life and the useful work already happening in some areas that is worth trying in others."

Elizabeth Davies, Marriage & Family Life Project Officer said: "All the different kinds of family in the diocese will be represented at these gatherings as well as those whose work in the church touches families' lives: priests, teachers, religious, catechists, marriage preparation providers, counsellors, adult educators and members of the many sodalities, agencies and organisations that give so much to encourage and support family life.

"This will not only increase parish awareness of families' concerns, strengths and needs, but they will also direct the focus of *Listening 2004* in the diocese.

"As a result of *Listening 2004*, an overall picture of Catholic family life, created from actual experience, will be drawn up so that it can be shared with the whole community. The process will then begin of reflecting on what families have said and taking into consideration the hopes and expectations that families have of their Church. The strategies and organisations already in place to support family life will inform the deliberations, enabling parishes and dioceses to learn from each other about what really helps families."

She added: "From all that emerges during *Listening 2004*, it will be possible to know families better, to identify what truly helps them, and to ascertain the many practical things which individuals, parishes, organisations and groups can do to encourage, celebrate and support family life."

Contact Elizabeth Davies, Marriage & Family Life Project Officer:
Tel/Fax: 01902 621594
Email: daviese@cbcew.org.uk
Post: 39 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1BX

FURTHER INFORMATION FOR EDITORS:

Listening 2004: My Family My Church has four main aims:

1. To find out what is already happening in the Catholic community to encourage and support family life. 2. To ascertain what particular work is being done to provide for marriage preparation, enrichment and support. 3. To hear from families about the reality of their lives, their needs and the means by which our church community can offer more effective support. 4. To deepen awareness and appreciation of the importance of the family in the life of the church.

Listening 2004 materials, and feedback as the year progresses, will be available on the website: www.listening2004.org.uk