

“Witness the feeling of belonging”

Listening 2004 in the Archdiocese of Westminster – Sunday, 14th November 2004



“The Catholic Church feels very strongly about the family,” declared Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor in his sermon during the opening Mass of the Archdiocese of Westminster family listening day on Sunday, November 14th. “I am delighted that many of you who are in the congregation today have come from all parts of the diocese for the listening day for the family. We need to do all we can to support, sustain and promote marriage and family life, striving for the ideal as Our Lord

would want us to do.” Preaching at Westminster Cathedral, the Cardinal drew attention to the many families of the Bible whose lives were not always ideal. “We know very well the difficulties, sometimes the separations and breakdowns, but I’d like to thank all of you, especially those of you who are parents, for all that you have done, amidst all the struggles, to bring up your children in the faith, to be faithful and to persevere. Pope Paul used to call the family the little church. Many of us have great reason to be thankful to our parents, for what they gave to us in their love.”

Over a hundred representatives of organisations and families joined Bishop Bernard Longley and Bishop John Hine in Westminster Cathedral Hall to talk about questions and issues raised by local families during the Listening 2004 process in the Diocese. The feedback had highlighted the overwhelming importance to families of time spent together and the sharing of love, concern and support. The major challenges of family life arose from juggling work and home life and from relationship difficulties. Support experienced within the Church ranged from belonging to a community with shared values to help at times of crisis to celebrations of important family events. However a significant number of families expressed difficulties in encouraging their children in the life of the Church. Families’ primary hopes of their parish communities were that they be accepted, welcomed and loved for who they are.

Participants began the afternoon’s work by breaking into small groups to discuss case studies arising from the feedback. Facilitator Sarah Johnson challenged the gathering to identify appropriate actions that could be taken by individuals, parish and the wider Church to meet the needs of families in those particular situations. Most groups identified befriending as a crucial first step: “Being a friend”, “Love not rejection,” “Acknowledge the problem,” “Personal contact and invitations.” Other strategies included providing adult catechesis, information about counselling and advice centres, and training for parish team leaders. “The prime thing that seems to be missing in the

Church is communication,” noted one individual. “Communication is very important but I also think we need to start by looking at how our faith and our humanity relate to one another,” said another. “As a young couple we were ‘adopted’ by an older couple in our parish who supported us when we were miles away from home – perhaps this kind of mentoring could help others,” commented a third. A number of participants drew specific attention to John Paul II’s teaching on human sexuality known as the theology of the body.

The second session focussed on broader issues in the Church such as the role of women, the influence of the media and the meaning of the family. A common theme in these conversations was a need for greater clarity and information about Church teaching. Other suggestions were for more ecumenical work, for more affirmation of parents, for greater cohesion between schools, churches and families and for more information about existing support. The conversation concluded with a ‘dreaming’ session.

One group dreamt of a Church where the family was defined as “a mini-community alongside other faith groups, where practical skills were available and support for inter-church families.” Another group, noting that the Church is a family, said it should “witness the feeling of belonging” by celebrating marriage and family life, supporting the divorced, separated, those in same sex relationships etc with love and care. A third dreamt of a Church where families were at the centre and where parish life prepared, supported and encouraged families using web sites, peer support as well as appropriate liturgies, including the full spectrum of those who feel marginalized. ‘Unambiguous’ catechesis relevant to each age and stage of life was also mentioned.

In reflecting on the afternoon’s work, Mgr Jim Curry noted the calls for more effort in support of marriage and family life but pointed out the pressures that families were experiencing. “People say they want these more things but when they are provided their diaries are full. Is catechesis being done in the right places, I wonder? Maybe we need to take it to people not expect them to come to us.” Communication had been an issue raised repeatedly: “It’s an age old problem. We need to improve it among ourselves in order to pass on the faith.” Another phrase used repeatedly in the day’s feedback was ‘the church.’ “Who do we mean?” asked Mgr Curry. “The paid officials, priests, groups, organisations, me? We need to take sexuality seriously - this seems to be a message too.”

Bishop Bernard Longley concluded by thanking all those present and those who had worked hard to prepare for the day. “Not only have we been communicating with each other here, and networking, but more importantly I think we’ve had a real experience, through the prism of these issues, of being together, of sharing together as a diocese and that’s very important for us.” Two issues had come out quite strongly: “Communication and how we each can find ways of communicating the rich teaching of the Church and, secondly, what some have described as befriending, providing pastoral support by married people for married people on the one hand and providing support for passing on faith in the family on the other.” Bishop Longley noted that the work of Listening 2004 in the diocese would not end here: “We have a process that must continue and there are many people here who are willing to be part of that process. We will be writing a report

and reflecting on how we can further develop our diocesan pastoral policy in support of marriage and family life in a way which reflects what we have heard here today.”