

“Nothing can substitute for the family”

Listening 2004 in the Archdiocese of Southwark - Saturday, 30th October 2004



Formation for parents and action to create friendlier, more inclusive, parish communities were two of many possible strategies to support marriage and family life identified at the Archdiocese of Southwark Family Listening Day on Saturday, October 30th. Well over a hundred participants joined Archbishop Kevin MacDonald, Bishop John Hine and Bishop Howard Tripp at the Archbishop Amigo Hall to hear the feedback from local families to the Listening 2004 process in the

diocese. In his opening remarks the Archbishop drew attention to the importance of the process. “The Second Vatican Council described the family as the domestic church,” he said. “There is no substitute for the family both as the context and framework for human growth and development and also for the developing and growth of faith. We can have all the programmes and packages for spiritual development and catechesis that we like but nothing can substitute for the handing on, the seeding and growth of faith that happens in the family. So it’s especially important to listen, to hear, to understand, to discern together the present situation, what’s happening and what God is calling us to do and to be in the future.”

Feedback from local families had highlighted the significance of family moments of togetherness, their difficulties in balancing work and family life and in coping in a world which did not seem to value family life. Whilst there was great appreciation for the moral framework provided by a strong faith in God and for the support derived from a sense of belonging within a warm parish community, parents were concerned that the church was not seen as attractive or so relevant by their children and teenagers. After a presentation of this feedback by the organising team, participants broke into small groups to consider corresponding questions and to devise practical solutions to the many challenges.

Their ideas included creating parish welcome packs and packs for young families containing supportive materials and contact details of local and national groups, establishing parish forums to continue the process of listening to one another, offering parents opportunities for maturing their own faith, reaching the isolated by making them feel needed rather than needy, creating more and varied family-friendly liturgies, tackling the post-confirmation gap in youth provision, organising deanery and/or parish networks offering family support, adopting a non-judgemental approach to difficult situations and increasing affirmation for the holiness of everyday life.

In the afternoon an open forum session convened to allow participants to comment and ask questions. Contributions were wide ranging. “No one says anything good about teenagers but they are lovely. We need to make positive efforts to love them, wait while they go off and make their mistakes and then welcome them back as adults. And stop looking at them as a problem.” “I know loads of people living outside the rules of the church but it doesn’t stop them being convinced Catholics. On a one to one basis we are fantastic but if there is a difficult situation there is no-one, no leaflet even, explaining who to go to and what to do.” “I’m single and I didn’t feel included in the project – I’m only here today because my parish priest asked me to come. Perhaps we could have a project in the future to find out what the reality is for single people?” “Could we involve more volunteers by promoting the work they are willing to do in the sense of it being a ministry, such as reading the gospel, welcoming people, participating in marriage education? It elevates the whole business from being a straightforward mundane job to a sacramental level.”

In his response Archbishop MacDonald acknowledged the breadth of the day’s conversation and its implications. “It’s fairly clear that although issues have come up under the rubric of marriage and family life, a lot of the background, concerns and related issues are much wider than that. I thought about this particularly when people were talking about formation and the need for education in the faith.” He also drew attention to some of his positive experiences of visiting deaneries in the diocese. “There are a lot of reports of very positive influxes of people from other cultures and of young families, coming into parishes, making a difference and bringing new life. I think that’s important to bear in mind. South London, and increasingly Kent, is very much enriched by a multiethnic black, Asian and eastern European population.” Finally the Archbishop emphasised the importance - and the difficulty - of listening. “I think it’s especially important to listen sympathetically, to enter into the mind, the spirit, the place where other people are coming from. It’s very challenging and costly, but essential, because people develop their convictions, their ideas about church, about marriage and family and so forth, on the basis of widely different experiences and personal histories. So I think today has been very important and I would like to express appreciation for all that the team has done to prepare for the day. We have lots of raw material here for our discernment and we will need to identify and take stock of them all.”