

‘An agenda for us all’

Listening 2004 in the Diocese of Lancaster Saturday, September 25th 2004

Support parents as first educators of their children, provide lifelong community support for marriage and build better relationships between priests and people were some of the main recommendations at the Diocese of Lancaster Listening day on Saturday, September 25th. In the surroundings of the University Chaplaincy Centre over 70 individuals from parishes and family life organisations gathered to discuss the response to the Listening 2004 process in the diocese. The Family Life Commission in Lancaster had developed their own set of questions to elicit the feelings of local families but the issues presented to the gathering were, by and large, similar to those raised in other dioceses using the nationally developed brochure.

In their opening addresses, Commission members Paul Marley and Sheila O’Gara highlighted the difficulties faced by families in bringing their children up in the faith and the hurt experienced in families where lives did not or could not conform to the ideals of the Church. “If only the Church could be more understanding of the difficulties faced in even good Catholic homes and free us of the constant questions ‘Where did we go wrong?’” was one quoted response. It became abundantly clear throughout the day that a misunderstanding of church teaching often created unnecessary burdens for the laity, particularly in the area of divorce and the Eucharist. Bishop Patrick O’Donoghue acknowledged that more would have to be done to dispel these misconceptions.

After meeting in groups to discuss a range of issues that extended beyond marriage and family life, the gathering formulated a number of practical recommendations. Parenting programmes, marriage preparation, parent and toddler groups and healing ministries such as Rainbows were all identified as key opportunities for supporting the personal development of parents to further enable them to be first teachers of their children. The sanctity of married sexual love was highlighted as an area that deserved affirmation and exploration, with attention given especially to symbolism, spirituality, forgiveness and trust. Marriage support and enrichment was considered to be best offered from within a strong and vibrant parish community, ideally placed to offer couples a life-time of nurturing and encouragement. Catholic schools also needed support to develop and sustain their mission of Christ in the world. Priests were reaffirmed as spiritual leaders of the community but groups suggested that more could be done to relieve them of other responsibilities by a more collaborative approach to parish ministry. A request was made that time be set aside for laity and priests to get to know each other better. The value of the Listening 2004 process was also acknowledged by a request for more similar forums: “Listen to those who know – young people, married couples, divorcees,” was one suggestion.

In the plenary session that followed the contributions made by individuals highlighted the challenges of supporting marriage and family life. “The family unit is changing in society and the church needs to embrace all types of family in order to survive. Jesus talked

about tolerance, love, acceptance and forgiveness. We need to talk more about other kinds of familial love not just married love,” said one participant. “From my experience following church teaching has been positive - though not without hardship. There are positive things to be said about the teaching but this hasn’t come across today”, said another. “The discussion today has been very interesting, but I’m conscious that we have to look at how we operate - what is our mission? We listened earlier to Matthew’s gospel and that’s a useful perspective: Whatever we do these to the least of these my people we do unto the Lord,” said a third.

In his response, Bishop Patrick O’Donoghue acknowledged the ‘very many tremendously wonderful families to be found in every parish’ in his diocese. “This is a listening occasion,” he said. “So there are no easy answers. But what has become very clear to me today is that we are not developing an agenda for the priests but an agenda for you, the church. Together we must reflect on what’s been said to develop a way forward, working together. We have to think about it very, very carefully because this is something in which we are all very deeply involved. This is just the beginning of the listening process.”

Ends: 673 words

Notes for Editors

Listening 2004 is an initiative of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family. It aims to establish the reality of family life, its strengths, challenges and needs as well as the means by which families can be supported by the church. More information available on the website www.listening2004.org.uk

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Photos are available.

The questions posed in Lancaster’s own brochure were:

1. What do you feel are the positive and encouraging aspects of modern family life?
2. What do you feel are the major problems facing modern family life?
3. How do you feel the Church can/should address these issues?