

## **“Celebrate it as it is”**

### **Listening 2004 in the Diocese of Shrewsbury – November 6<sup>th</sup> 2004**



Over a hundred representatives of parish families, organisations and agencies joined Bishop Brian Noble and Bishop John Hine at St Nicholas High School, Hartford, for the Diocese of Shrewsbury Family Listening Day on November 6<sup>th</sup>. It was a day marked especially by the participation of young people, both in terms of the

feedback gathered through schools and the work contributed by the young people present, some of whom met in separate session facilitated by Fr Jonathan Leach of the Diocesan Youth Service.

The day began with a series of presentations reflecting the issues that families had reported in their feedback to the Listening 2004 brochure. A teenager reported on the stresses of school life and worries about achievement, of family life in cramped conditions, of friends with broken families, as well as the joys of being loved by grandparents and the sadness when they became infirm. A young family reported the difficulties of juggling work and home life and of having to give the care of their children to others in order to manage earning enough to pay not only bills but also debts. An older married couple reported the pain of seeing their family lapse from the practice of their faith and the struggle to support both grandchildren and ageing parents. A single parent recounted the guilt and lack of self-esteem that accompanied her struggle to do the job of two people. “How can I teach a high moral code to my children when there is lack of a suitable role model?” she asked.

Participants responded by acknowledging the authenticity of the issues raised. One group commented that the presentations had somehow “made us feel more normal. We could all relate to some of them in terms of what is hurting families, especially the economic pressures, and distances and separation.” Another group acknowledged the importance of grandparents in sustaining both families and the Church. A third group applauded the conversation: “In the past people were struggling on their own and felt ostracized. This is a much healthier culture now that we are actually airing some of these issues.”

After lunch two members of the Diocesan Family Life Commission provided some personal reflections on the feedback. Clara Donnelly highlighted the concerns of adults regarding the effects of the ‘image and success culture’ on young people, their financial

concerns especially the high cost of housing, the pressures of the 24/7 work culture and the loss of close knit communities. Nevertheless, what came out repeatedly, she reported, was “how incredibly important and valuable the family is in their lives.” Holidays and meals together, enjoying the gifts and talents of children and watching them grow and develop were all significant blessings, as were family reunions and the bonds of extended family life especially with grandparents.

Fr Michael Gannon reported on the difficulties experienced by families in the Church, often through children lapsing in the traditional practices of the faith but also through feeling excluded from the community life of the parish. Yet for all its perceived faults the Church was also a tremendous benefit for people in terms of the support, friendship and encouragement it offers. “We need to affirm that God is to be found in the messiness of family life and that there are often real gospel values lived out in family life despite the difficulties,” he commented. “The bottom up approach in looking at these important issues concerning family life is significant.”

Responses to the presentations were varied: “Each family is a single cell of the body of Christ - the more that families share their experiences the more we can build up the body.” “We felt that families need more welcoming, acceptance and a place to share problems; more creative thinking and a compassionate understanding of people and how they live. Families need less disapproval and adherence to traditional way of doing things.” “One group not catered for are the non-Catholic partners in a marriage. One of my deepest regrets is that my wife and I cannot share communion together.”

Participants made a number of practical suggestions to further support family life within the diocese. These included appointing a trained family liaison officer in every parish, who could link in with schools, encouraging parishes to assess the needs of all parishioners and how these are being met, and promoting a clear and confident vision of the Church’s teaching and the family. A number of groups expressed the importance of all parishes receiving feedback from the day and from Listening 2004 generally, to show that action had been taken and that families had indeed been listened to. Representatives of the Catholic Children’s Society registered the need for them to respond practically to the concerns expressed by families by integrating them into their work. The Family Life Commission similarly promised to respond practically to the feedback received from families.

The youth group identified three areas where they would like to see some action: more fundraising for families who are poor, more leisure activities for young people and families and more family events in church, not just for adults but for children too. In the closing liturgy the children identified the ‘hearts and hands’ and ‘the hammers and bombs’ that they had personally experienced at home and displayed a banner depicting all their families.

In his concluding remarks Bishop Noble reminded participants of the excellent adult education department in the diocese and the resources listed in the ‘green book’ that were available to any family or parish group. He also drew attention to the recent publication

of *Cherishing Life* by the Bishops' Conference. "You'll find that a very rich teaching in very accessible language." Finally Bishop Noble referred back to his pastoral letter of the previous September in which he had encouraged families to respond to Listening 2004 by 'telling it as it is.' "Today I suggest that we take as a motto 'Celebrating it as it is.' By that I am suggesting that we recognise the messiness that is the human condition and that is at the heart of living and that we celebrate marriage and family life as it is, for good and for less good. That involves an attitude towards failure and messiness which is compassionate and forgiving and supportive. My thanks go to the Family Life Commission for all the very hard work that has gone into this day and into the process that preceded it."