

“The Lord is saying: get on with it”

Listening 2004 in the Diocese of Plymouth Saturday, October 9th, 2004

A need for stronger, more cohesive parish communities, increased opportunities for adult education and a broader understanding of marriage preparation were among the recommendations made at the Diocese of Plymouth Family Listening Day on Saturday, October 9th. Nearly 100 parishioners from across the far-flung diocese joined Bishop Christopher Budd at St Cuthbert's Conference Centre at Buckfast Abbey to talk together about the issues raised by local families in response to Listening 2004. Local coordinator Rev Tony Irwin pointed out that although the response rate had been patchy, families had been very frank in their replies. He questioned whether the lives of those who did not take part were so very different from those who did. “Do they not share some of the same concerns, problems, joys and fears as those who participated?” he asked.

After meeting in groups to look in greater detail at questions of loneliness, lapsation, prayer in the home, racial justice, passing on the faith, religious vocations and appropriate responses to the feedback at parish, diocesan and national level, the representatives reconvened to share their conclusions. Community building was a recurrent theme: “Parishes need to discuss these issues themselves and identify needs – only local solutions can meet local needs. There is no ‘one size fits all’ answer.” “We need to provide support for all parents, catechists, single people and children within the parish - and opportunities for friendships and trust to be built” “There's a need for better communication. It doesn't just happen - we need to be taught how to do it. We need education in communication skills.” “We had a strong feeling that people really value peer support; married couples appreciate contact with other married couples and the same goes for parents and young people.”

A desire for more teaching on matters of doctrine was expressed (“so we know the reasons why”) as well as a hope for greater incorporation of the lived experience of married couples and families within the expression of the Church's teaching on marriage and family life. “Is our theology informed by the messiness of family life? The Church is strong when it starts where the people are.” Alongside this ran the theme of a broader approach to marriage preparation to fully integrate the remote, proximate and immediate aspects. “Marriage preparation should be life long and it should underpin the whole of our pastoral work.” The inter-church aspect of marriage was also mentioned as a need to value all marriages and not only those between Catholics.

The loneliness expressed by so many who responded to the Listening 2004 brochures drew some practical suggestions for action. Welcome packs for new parishioners, improved methods of communication such as newsletters, photographs in the church porch of pastoral workers, open social events and directories of support groups were all suggested as ways to help newcomers meet and get to know others. “We need to create a climate of inclusiveness. Even within marriage people can be lonely” was one comment. Collaborative ministry was identified as a means of freeing up priests for more visiting and the needs of priests themselves were also mentioned: “Our priests need support. It is a very lonely job being a parish priest. They need encouragement from us as well as the diocese as a whole.”

In his response Bishop Christopher began by reassuring those present that diocesan resources would be affected by what he had heard that day. “The biggest resource we have is the formation department. A lot of our financial resources go in there and if they need to be tweaked a bit, more

towards marriage and family life we can work that out together.” He acknowledged the need for more community building activity and the challenges of ensuring a welcome for those in irregular situations and a sense of belonging for those on the margins. “Even though some people may be restricted by our understanding of marriage, its indissolubility and so forth, there are still many ways in which people can in fact still belong. But what we are shaped by is received as gift, we don’t make it up. It comes to us from revelation and that’s very important. As human beings we respond to it and this is often messy. Our day to day pastoral work involves dealing quite often with messy situations, including our own,” he added.

Bishop Christopher concluded by admitting the challenges of supporting marriage and family life in the ways highlighted in the Listening 2004 process. “But it’s all there, the cauldron is boiling, the fire is on, and the Lord is saying do something about it. You’re the people in 2004: get on with it. Others will come after you and take up where you have left off. I think our contribution now is crucial. But whatever happens at national level won’t actually be particularly helpful unless it impacts locally, in your parish communities.” Bishop Christopher suggested that participants take the feedback from Listening 2004 back to their parish councils and deanery forums and begin to think about ways to respond practically at local level. At diocesan level the reflection would continue at a residential meeting of the Council of Priests in November, and the next meeting of the Diocesan Pastoral Council in February 2005. A full report would then be published.

A two minute silence was observed at midday to pray for the family and repose of the soul of Ken Bigley.

Ends 920 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.catholic-ew.org.uk/listening2004

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Photos are available.