

“Individuals and their differences are a grace”

Listening 2004 in the Bishopric of the Forces

The Annual Assembly of the Bishopric of the Forces gathered at Amport House, Andover on Saturday, October 16th to be presented with the findings of the feedback from Service personnel and their families to the Listening 2004 process. In his presentation coordinator Sqn Ldr Matt McKevitt of RAF Honington reported little evidence of Service-specific problems. In fact the feedback had suggested a positive relationship between Church and families, with the work of the Services chaplains especially valued. Those who had participated – 4.8% of the targeted community – seemed to understand family and the Church as ‘twin pillars’ in support of their faith. Often the unity of family life was interwoven with the unity of belonging to the family of the Church.

Early problems with distribution, said Sqn Ldr McKevitt, were quickly overcome and did not detract from the exercise of information gathering. Support from the Principal Chaplains (RC) was germane to the success of the project. However, the absence of trained facilitators led to some problems resulting in the exercise being terminated on affected units. Again, in the main, those who responded were practicing Catholics. Some felt that Service life and the Services' support structures assisted with family life in this modern society. However, there was a feeling that the practicing of faith in the Services did not allow for participation in wider Church activities such as prayer groups and third world support groups. Many respondents said that they enjoyed a rich and supportive parish life, but they believed that their children and many lapsed Catholics were not being supported as well as they could be. There was a general agreement that support services such as Marriage Care and LIFE should be more widely publicized throughout Service establishments.

There was a call for a less judgmental attitude from the Church in the areas of marriage and relationships and there was a significant call for it to be made easier for divorced Catholics to return to the sacraments. Many saw the role of the RC chaplain as not being sufficient to meet the needs of family involvement in the full range of Church activities. All understood the pressures on chaplains and recognized that there was a requirement for support groups. The overriding message from all respondents was that the family was the bedrock of their lives and that this was twinned with their faith. Both were intertwined, in that the values gained from their faith were those same values that gave pleasure and sustenance to their family life. Many expressed the view that, whilst family life was becoming more difficult to manage due to the pressures of work and career development (both parents were often working), it was also a great grace and a refuge from the loneliness of other secular pursuits. The absence of Catholic schools was a factor in some cases and there were requests for more support for parents in educating their children in the Catholic faith.

A great number felt that the liturgy needed to be more child-friendly but understood the difficulty where chaplains could only provide one Mass per establishment. Some people

and their families attended local churches to fulfill this need thus skewing the makeup of the Service parish. The Church was seen as relevant in all areas of family life and whilst many struggled with the pressures of explaining morality and sexuality to their children in an overtly secular society, there was a distinct requirement for support from the Church hierarchy to counteract the media messages that denigrate faith and champion secularism. Participants also thought that there was a need for more understanding by the priests of the pressures and joys of family life. More communication with the wider Church was called for and a sense that single Servicemen and women were not getting the full support of the wider parish Church family was a recurring theme. Although many felt that the Church's teachings could be better explained or modified to suit the modern world, the consensus was that the Church's example was a beacon of certainty and honesty in an ever changing world.

“What struck me as I collated the brochures,” commented Sqn Ldr McKeivitt, “is that individuals and their differences are a grace and that the perceived decline in family values is actually a lack of valuing of the family within the community.” He concluded his report by recommending that the Bishopric appoint a full-time laity adviser on family to support the work of the Chaplains.

In thanking Sqn Ldr McKeivitt for the report, Bishop Tom Burns pointed to the huge emphasis on values and love of the Church, the sacraments and the Mass “as fundamental dimensions in peoples’ lives” that he had heard reported, as well as the need to value family life, appreciate better the essential role of families and create a greater sense of inclusivity within the Church. Bishop Tom commended a wider distribution of the report so that it could be discussed more fully at local level. “It is a remarkable document which merits, and will receive, more study because a considerable number of pastoral needs have been expressed.” He also agreed to give consideration to the appointment of a family liaison officer.

Ends: 864 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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