

## “It does you good to listen”

### Listening 2004 in Salford - Saturday October 23<sup>rd</sup> 2004



Families filled the pews of Salford Cathedral on the afternoon of Saturday, 23<sup>rd</sup> October for the Diocesan Celebration of Marriage and Family Life. The climax of a week long schedule of family activities in the Cathedral, the service culminated with Bishop Terence Brain presenting the findings of Listening 2004: My Family My Church in the diocese to Bishop John Hine. This followed a series of oral presentations illustrating the feedback and including personal

stories of family life from newly weds, parents, children, young adults, the widowed and those caring for sick family members. The Cathedral had been decorated with a novel series of ‘stations’ highlighting aspects of family life using the themes of Fount, Witness, Mystery, Welcoming and Fruit. The constant theme at each station was a fridge door, symbolising both the changing reality and the practical organisation of family life.

In reporting the feedback, participants heard that numerous responses told of how family life is not only valued but very much enjoyed. *“At times chaotic, at times fantastic, but we wouldn't change it for the world”* said one respondent. The family was seen as a place where ‘we've space to be ourselves’, and a place of acceptance and love that became a source of strength and support throughout life but especially in troubled times. The simple togetherness of family life, the gift of children and grandchildren, the shared moments of celebration were counted as amongst life's greatest blessings *“the times we share are precious, even in times of sadness or strife, are always valued.”* Families spoke of separation experienced through living and working apart but also of how technological developments in transport and communication helped families to keep in touch; and grandparents have an increasing role in the care of children keeping family contact alive across the generations.

Yet many families spoke of feeling under great pressure: pressures of finance, the demands of work, the care of sick or ageing relatives, strained and broken relationships and most of all of finding time for the family. As two respondents wrote: *“working long hours - financial worries - not spending ‘family time’ together”*, *“the need for both of us to work to pay the bills therefore less time for the children,”* and as a young person commented, *“parents work late so we don't have time together”*.

Many families spoke of being unsupported by society and especially by what they saw in

the media. Many spoke of living in conflict with prevailing views on the value of marriage and human life itself, sexual morality and the secularisation of Sundays. A thread of concern ran through the responses as to how the young would keep faith and how they would come through the conflict of values in which they'd grown-up. A great number of respondents spoke of struggling to get values right and some felt the Church was at times inactive or simply judgemental in response to the difficulties families faced: *"The Church is my rock"* one wrote, *"but it does nothing to reach my children"*, or as another commented, *"The Church seems to have a lot of people working on the breakdown of marriage and family but nobody on building-up and strengthening on-going families."* A consultation of the parish clergy revealed that there was a wide range of support being offered and a real desire to communicate this and give more.

Many responses spoke of the Church as a source of strength and support especially in times of crisis or bereavement and as the unique place where all the generations still meet. The Church community where welcome and acceptance was found was highlighted throughout the responses and wherever welcome or care was not experienced it was a source of genuine pain. The ministry of priests was especially valued to the extent that many responses expressed great expectations of their priests, frustrations when clergy were unable to respond, and gratitude for their presence. Many responses spoke movingly of drawing strength from the Mass, from the example and practical help of others and from personal prayer, as one respondent put it: *"Behavioural problems are very challenging. Don't cope very well sometimes, but try to start afresh each day. Pray a lot."*

In responding to the findings Bishop Brain spoke of the relationship of love that is God, the Holy Trinity, that is experienced best, most beautifully and most richly in families, in homes, in marriage. "That's one of the things that the family of the Church is trying to recall, to bring back and understand," he said. Although a good number of initiatives already existed to support marriage and family life across the diocese Bishop Brain spoke of the need to develop them further. He announced plans to begin formation for parish family ministers in the spring of 2005, to review and strengthen marriage preparation and enrichment, to better coordinator provision for natural fertility awareness and to create a new diocesan focus on marriage and family life within a Vicariate for Vocation. These initiatives would all begin with the introduction of Walk With Me, a prayer guide on marriage and family life for the Advent and Christmas season. "Thank you all for coming here today, thank you to all those who took part in Listening 2004 and to those on the working party who worked so hard to get us to this point today. I think we've all learned that it does you good to listen," concluded Bishop Brain.