

Keep the home flames burning!

Listening 2004 in East Anglia - May 15th 2004



“Your family life should be a burning bush, a place where people encounter the fire of God’s love,” said Bishop Michael Evans of East Anglia, in Bury St Edmunds last Saturday. Speaking at the first of the Listening 2004 diocesan conversation days, he continued: “That includes your children, that includes each other, that includes all those who visit you in your home. The school and the parish are there to support parents and families in their vital vocation of

nurturing children in the faith, of inspiring them with the seeds of the Gospel.”

Bishop Michael’s remarks came at the end of a day long reflection on the results of the feedback from parishes and individuals to the questions in the Listening 2004 brochure. Coincidentally Saturday, May 15th was also the International Day of Families. Over 50 people representing 75% of the parishes of the Diocese of East Anglia took part as well as members of Marriage Care, Marriage Encounter, the St Vincent de Paul society, the Diocesan Child Protection Commission and the Catholic Children’s Society. Bishop John Hine, chair of the Bishops’ Conference Committee for Marriage & Family Life was also present to listen and take note of local marriage and family life concerns.

These included the need for greater support for marriage, both in terms of preparation, continuing support and counselling. Some parishes had experimented successfully with training mentor couples to be on hand as a source of support and advice. Another suggestion was that couples married for ten, twenty and thirty years be available to engaged couples to talk about the challenges of various stages of married life. A number of participants highlighted the importance of marriage counselling. The presence of paid, trained counsellors within a diocese was an important sign of the value that the Church places on marriage.

There were calls for greater availability of natural family planning information especially instructors. Participants also noted that better publicity about the support services that already existed across the diocese would be helpful. Greater emphasis by the Church on marriage and parenting as vocations was considered a useful means of helping families reflect on and discern priorities in their busy lives.

Parents expressed a need for more help in raising their children in the faith, both in terms of deepening their own understanding and being able to integrate it into the life of the home. Adult formation and catechesis were identified as possible ways to address this, as well as a greater emphasis by the Church on the home as a place of prayer, tradition,

ritual and Christian witness. Greater sensitivity was called for both in terms of understanding the many pressures on family's time and in recognising that families' engagement in Christian witness often takes them beyond Church-related activities. A reduction in the number of Sunday Masses could have a particular impact on families dependent for their livelihood on shift work.

Young people were a major concern, with one call for a similar listening process targeted at teenagers, to find out their experience of the Church and what they needed. Greater involvement of young people in every aspect of the life of the parish was identified as one way to hold on to them. "The challenge," remarked one participant "is to build highly loving supportive communities within our parishes for all of us, including our families."

At the end of the day's activity, Bishop Michael announced that a "dynamic and forward-looking" Diocesan Commission for Marriage and Family Life would be re-established. Its first priority would be to act on some of the suggestions made during the day. However, Bishop Michael reminded participants that "a great diocesan pastoral plan is not going to answer all of our problems. In the end it's in your parish communities and in your family homes that most of this vital work is going to take place. Yes, encouraged and inspired by the diocese, supporting in some way, but in the end it is up to you, in your homes, in your families, in your parish communities to live the vocation that each one of us has."