

“Look to the future”

Listening 2004 in Menevia – Saturday, September 18th 2004

Over 50 parishioners and parish priests joined Bishop Mark Jabalé, Bishop John Hine and Bishop Emeritus Daniel Mullins for the Diocese of Menevia Family Listening Day in Swansea on September 18th. The day began with Mass at St Joseph’s Cathedral before moving into the Cathedral Hall for a presentation and reflection on the feedback from local families to the Listening 2004 process. Bishop Mark set the tone of the proceedings by challenging participants to use the day as an opportunity for positive expression and forward-looking thinking.

Peter Macpherson, Director of Menevia Family Life, using the theme ‘*What do the people say? Are the Bishops listening?*’ began by reporting back the broad outlines of the responses received to the brochure questions. Between 9,000 and 10,000 leaflets had been distributed through the parishes including some in the Welsh language. About 1.5% of these had been returned completed, five of which were in Welsh. Peter spoke of a pervasive air of sadness in some whether the issues raised were about out-of-date Church laws, or the clergy, or the irresponsible behaviour of our present day society. But also many of the returns spoke of the joy of the family.

Participants then divided into groups to look at a wide range of topics including the clash between secular and moral/religious influences on children, the role of the media, divorce, re-marriage and nullity, problems of reception of the sacraments, the role of catholic schools, the provision of marriage preparation and support across the diocese, the marginalized (divorcees, single parents, lapsed, the bereaved, homosexuals), the leakage of young people from the church, the role of women in the church and the need for adult education in the faith.

In responding to some of these issues participants questioned the difference between moral and religious values and secular ones. Good influences present in our society now included a respect for people of all colours, creeds and nations and an awareness of man’s responsibility for the environment. But young people needed a substantial grounding in their own faith and its concomitant moral values. Rather than imposing such values participants thought parents could be involved in a constant dialogue with their children about the issues that arise from the media and from their experience of life. But the difficulty of such an involvement in a society that encourages or forces parents to spend most of their time away from their children at work was acknowledged.

Another group stressed the need for more adult education in the faith but also for more faith sharing. Parents are recognised to be the first educators of their children in the faith and therefore need a full formation themselves. Parish, school and home all had a part to play in the education of young people and homilies could be used more effectively to support marriage and family life. Marriage and sacramental preparation provided additional opportunities

Maureen Clayton, a Parish Family Life Representative and member of the Diocesan Family Life Commission, opened up the afternoon session. The challenge of the second part of the day was to establish how the needs of the morning's conversations could be met: *How can we put this to work?* This session elicited a wide range of suggestions including prayer groups, meditation groups, programmes such as, "Landings" "Alpha" and faith-sharing groups such as Focolare. A greater acceptance of those having marital problems and clarification of the rules regarding Holy Communion for those in irregular situations was identified as a priority, as was good engaging liturgy for young people. Participants recommended that marriage preparation be available on a deanery basis and ways explored of ensuring a continuity that could survive a change of parish priest. Calls were made for greater awareness of the relationship counselling services available, with "National Marriage Week" being used as an opportunity to highlight these and other marriage support services. Groups recommended that ways of making the parish a welcoming place for the marginalized be explored, using such groups as the SVP, Prayer groups, Family groups, and Retreat experiences. A considerable space should be given in the newsletter to publicise the activity of parish groups with contact names and numbers provided.

Participants were informed of the "family groups scheme" taking place in some parts of the diocese. Originally the initiative of an Australian priest these groups comprised not only married couples but single people and young people and included those who may not be regularly practising at Mass. In general there was an appeal for priests to trust the laity to take responsibility in the welcoming role, but it was also recognised that some are less than truly welcoming.

More use should be made of the sacramental opportunities (baptism, first communion, confirmation, etc.) to build on adult faith and education. Priest and people should focus on different ways of making the church and the Mass more welcoming and hospitable and less judgmental. Constant efforts should be made to inform the parish of the good things being done in the community.

"There was little doubt that two dominant themes were that lay people stood ready to serve and to offer their variety of talents and that they looked to the clergy for a positive, constructive and collaborative lead in their efforts to advance the work of God's church, in answer to the frightening problems faced by the family in today's society," commented Peter Macpherson. The day concluded with a summary by Bishop Mark who repeated his earlier challenge to participants to look to the future. The findings of the process and the feedback from the day's work would be included in a report to the Diocesan Pastoral Council and would form the basis of a series of articles in Menevia News.

Ends: 951 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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