

“We need to remember the good things”

Listening 2004 in the Diocese of Hallam Saturday, November 13th 2004

“It’s been an extraordinary day,” commented Bishop John Rawsthorne at the Diocese of Hallam Family Listening day on November 13th. Speaking at St Bernard’s Catholic High School in Rotherham, the bishop acknowledged that the day’s conversation had been more about quality than quantity. “The numbers who have come have been small but the quality of the discussion and the contribution has been very good indeed.”

Coordinators Martin Harpham and Susan Tym had structured the day as a ‘drop-in’ event, to allow families to come and go as they pleased and to fit the diocesan conversation into their busy lives. The feedback from local families to the Listening 2004 process in the diocese, with conversation starters arising from families concerns, were displayed at four ‘stations’ around the hall. Participants were invited to reflect individually or in groups on the issues raised and to post suggestions for action to effect change at parish level, within the diocese and nationally over two years and ten years.

The main findings of the feedback to the brochures overwhelmingly illustrated an appreciation of the happiness of family life, of the companionship and love experienced and of the joy of family celebrations and activities together. Families hoped that this happiness at home would continue, that society would offer acceptance, friendship and tolerance and that the Church would provide a listening ear and networks of family support. Difficulties with conflicting societal values were outweighed by an appreciation of friends, neighbours and extended family and the benefits of modern technology, utilities and transport. The main difficulties experienced as families within the Church were the tensions arising from the Church’s moral teaching, institutional failures and the role of women and the difficulties experienced in keeping children involved in the practice of the faith. These three areas formed the focus of group conversations.

Although numbers were small those participating were highly articulate and well informed with many years experience of marriage preparation, counselling, parenting and family life between them. In the area of Church teaching, parenting courses were recommended at parish level, both for parents and for adolescents, and at diocesan level the creation of a new marriage enrichment programme. Nationally it was suggested that the Church harness the trend of cohabitation, connect it with the historical practice of betrothal and adapt liturgical and pastoral practices accordingly, seeking to engage and accompany couples on their journey to the Sacrament.

In the conversation regarding recent scandals in the Church it was acknowledged that much progress had been made in the area of child protection to ensure that such disasters were less likely to happen again. But participants requested liturgies of lament for those still suffering and a more open and honest approach by the Church as a whole towards acknowledging and accepting fault where it lay. On the issue of women in the Church

there were calls for women to be accepted into the diaconate and the priesthood to ensure that gifts were not lost to the Church.

On the question of retaining the involvement of young people in the life of the Church participants recognised the importance of a strong grass-roots faith community. More opportunities for developing friendships within the parish were suggested and the need to keep parents engaged with the Church was identified. Outreach in shopping malls and sports centres was suggested where time and space could be offered to young people to talk about the challenging issues they faced in their lives. Individuals who were gifted at engaging young people should be employed by the Church to do so. At national level a strategy should be developed to empower lay people to provide effective leadership in the Church.

In his concluding remarks Bishop Rawsthorne encouraged participants to be hopeful. "I think it's possible to be too downhearted at the moment about all sorts of things but also marriage. You can easily get a very wrong picture. There are good things going on and we need to remember those good things. We need to support them and we need to build on them, as well as challenging people when necessary." Bishop John Hine also expressed appreciation. "We've been at days with huge numbers. This perhaps has been the smallest number. But the quality has been superb and I'm really delighted to have been part of it. Its not just the proposals that you were making in the groups but the reasons you gave for them that I found so very interesting."

Ends: 741 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

The Listening 2004 coordinators in Hallam are Susan Tym or Martin Harpham. St. Wilfrid's Centre, 524 Queens Road, Sheffield S2 4DT Tel: 0114 255 4790 Email: mharpham@ukonline.co.uk or suetym@ukonline.co.uk

Additional information from: Elizabeth Davies, Marriage & Family Life Project Officer
Tel/Fax 01902 621594 Email: daviese@cbcew.org.uk

Photos are available.