



# “The Heart of the Deepest Truth”

National Pastoral Congress 1980

*Sector Report on Marriage and the Family*

## **C: MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY**

1. THE statements put forward by Sector C on marriage and family life, young people and individuals with special needs illustrate extreme concern. This comes firstly from an awareness of present urgent needs. Secondly from a wish to redress the sufferings of those, who while honestly striving to effect God's will, feel a sense of rejection by the Church.

### EDUCATION FOR MARRIAGE

2. Education for marriage should be related to three distinct areas—the Church, society and the individual. The local Church must look to its own education. It should seek ways in which it can express the goodness, beauty and spirituality of married life in its prayer and liturgy. It should explore ways of involving non-Catholic partners in worship and full parish life. It should listen to the experience of married people and appreciate their unique insights into what is contained within a permanent sexual relationship.

3 Society needs educating about the fundamental value of permanency in marriage, and of parenthood and family life. Acknowledgment of such values must then have implications for policies on family housing, finance and employment. A working party is called for to study these areas and assist bishops so that such matters become an accepted part of the Church's teaching on marriage.

4 Individuals, too, must be educated concerning marriage and family. This process must be started in childhood by parents and continue in schools and parishes linked as Christian communities. Since the understanding of relationships is of great importance, ways in which this might be fostered were examined.

5 The sector asks for a national policy which should establish the expectation that four months' notice before marriage should be given so that a programme of preparation might be possible. This should centre on developing the relationship of the couple and should aim to present a clear view of the Church's teaching on responsible parenthood and the planning of families. Further, it should indicate how married couples bear witness to Christ and express clearly the notion of married spirituality.

### GROWTH IN MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

6 As growth in marriage was considered more deeply, the sector called for a development of the Church's theological and pastoral thinking. This would start from the complex reality of marriage, which is a relationship that changes profoundly throughout a couple's life together. A renewed positive theology must do full justice to all aspects of this relationship.

7 The needs of families must be carefully considered, by priests, religious and laity working together. Liturgy must provide for the spiritual life of families and action at parish level must embrace a wide number of other needs. The special contribution of the single and of childless couples should be constantly remembered.

8 On contraception, delegates first stressed that they were not talking about methods involving abortion, and that they were concerned with couples who strove to develop a Christ-centred marriage unselfishly and responsibly.

9 It was strongly felt that the starting point was the need for a positive teaching on sexuality – teaching which stressed that intercourse can be a life-giving act between a married couple, even when, as on the vast majority of occasions, it does not produce a new human life. It is an act which can sustain and heal the relationship by which a married couple make Christ present to one another.

10 A large majority agreed that there is widespread lack of understanding and disagreement amongst Catholics on contraception and that this hinders both the development of the Church's teaching and the sacramental life of many Catholics. They called for a fundamental re-examination of the teaching on marriage, sexuality and contraception. A majority felt that such an examination should leave open the possibility of change and development in the Church's teaching. A substantial minority were prepared to go further and say that there is now a need for change and development. A request for the Church to give resources to permit work on natural family planning and on the psychological, sexual and spiritual needs of the married received unanimous support.

## FAMILY BREAKDOWN

11 On marriage breakdown, delegates were mindful that one marriage in three was likely to end in separation and divorce. Hundreds of thousands of rejected spouses and deprived children, Catholic as well as non-Catholic, stand in need of comfort and care.

12 Parishes must organise themselves to respond to the situation. A network to welcome newcomers, to discover needs, and provide appropriate help is essential. Parishioners must be made aware of what the single parent families in their midst need. Such families must be identified - schools can help in this. Help must be offered with discretion — perhaps through a parish sister or deacon who specialises in this work. The parent needs friendship and practical help. The children of single parents need experience of normal family life.

13 Partners of a broken marriage experience a sense of failure, hurt and rejection. They need reassurance, encouragement and acceptance. The sector recommends the bishops authorise the study of the experience gained by the Association of Separated and Divorced Catholics in the USA. There are those who have divorced and have re-married and long to share completely in the sacramental life and mission of the Church. We ask the bishops to consider with compassion their desire to re-establish unity with the Church through the sacraments.

## YOUNG PEOPLE

14 The enthusiasm and spontaneity and hope of the young is a gift to the Church. Yet, sadly, many young people feel alienated from the Church because they do not see its relevance to their lives. They have rejected the institutional Church, not through conviction but through incomprehension. What has too often been presented has been a set of moral imperatives that say little about Christ and his Good News, and its relevance to their own particular life style and concerns. It is vital that we enter into real dialogue with the young, listen to them and help them to reflect on their own lives in the light of the Gospel. There was a call for a national strategy for service to young people to be backed up with provision of properly trained personnel and services.

15 Young people who have left school and those in non-Catholic schools need proper provision for their continuing formation as Christians.

16 Catholic schools should be communities of faith. For this it is vital to have trained personnel committed to the formation of young people, and chaplains. In-service training should be provided for staff and management to reflect on their role, study problems and find ways of making their schools centres of Christian life.

17 Guidelines are needed for parents, parish and schools, to work together in the formation of young people. Catechesis should take place in terms that relate to young peoples' experience and language.

18 The sacrament of confirmation needs re-consideration. Its theology needs presenting anew. The majority of the Sector want confirmation to occur near the time for leaving school.

19 The whole community must recognise the potential contribution young people can make to the life of the Church. Every parish must provide opportunities, structures and positive encouragement so that young people may take a realistic part in the decision-making and work and liturgy of the parish, through participation in prayer— and other small groups. Opportunities for growth should be constantly available. The involvement of priests and bishops with young people was seen as a major priority, to enable them to come to an understanding of one another.

20 Many young people have special needs. A study of the particular needs of the young people in the Forces should be initiated by the Bishop to the Forces. The special needs of the single, homeless, the unemployed and unemployable must also be our concern, however difficult the problems may seem. Positive pastoral plans should be made in every diocese to investigate the requirements of these special groups and ways of reaching out to provide for them in very practical terms. Special recommendations were made that the Church provide for young people in care and those leaving care. The message of Christ must be taken to all young people. The role that committed young Christians can play in this was recognised. Adequate training facilities must be made available to provide for the mission of the young to the young.

21 It was recognised that many young people in the Church have moral standards—especially in sexual matters—which differ from elder members of the Church, and some are alienated from the community because of this. Real opportunities must be provided for the Church to enter into dialogue with these young people, to listen to them and explain the Church's teaching.

## SPECIAL GROUPS

22 To carry out its mission through and with people with special needs, the Church needs to undergo an immense process of attitude change.

23 Church authorities are required at all levels to divert substantial resources into more explicit support for the caring family and for the steadily increasing number of people with special needs.

These resource changes should include:

- the multi-purpose use of school buildings
- the use of Church land for sheltered and other special housing
- the building of hospices with the same effort that was applied to schools in the past
- a mutually agreed transfer of appropriate buildings of Church bodies, religious Congregations and others for use for people with special needs
- short-term respite facilities together with some long term provision, both to serve local requirements.

24 Economy of effort implies:

- using voluntary effort and skilled professionals
- liaison with statutory and voluntary bodies, avoiding duplication of effort
- an ecumenical approach to solving problems should be followed
- liaison across boundaries and client groups.

The needs include:

- emergency action where public services are inadequate because of public spending cuts
- links between institutions and local community
- more back-up for informed family and local network by traditional societies
- full time, paid, co-ordinators at some levels.

25 Elderly People (The aim here is to enable rather than disable)

The local Church community should accept responsibility for care of elderly people of all beliefs in its area. An explicit resource provision should be made at local level commensurate with local needs. Attention should be paid to geriatric units and hospitals, potentially neglected. Spiritual needs of elderly people should be understood and met. Further teaching on the implications of euthanasia is required.

#### Mental Illness

26 The sacraments of healing, reconciliation and the anointing of the Sick were felt to be celebrated in a way that was unsatisfactory and did not fully allow individuals to feel their healing power.

27 Guidance is needed on ministering to the spiritual needs of mentally handicapped people, particularly so that their reception of the sacraments of the eucharist, penance and marriage might be facilitated. A number of moral dilemmas concerning the mentally handicapped continued to require examination.

#### Physical and Sensory Handicap

28 Communication here is vital and a directory of pastoral care is required. Access to church buildings should be universal.

29 Protection of employment rights needs attention. Counselling must be sustained.

#### Homosexual People

30 Study of the principles contained in 'Pastoral Care of Homosexual People' (published by The Social Welfare Commission) is recommended in view of past and prevailing prejudices and discrimination.

#### Special Pastorates

31 Support of the pastorate to seafarers and their families is requested. The spiritual needs of oil-rig workers must be considered.

#### Travelling People

32 Support of this pastorate by bishops is requested. A recommendation is that they should sponsor a Pastoral Guidelines booklet for parish clergy.

#### Immigrant Groups

33 Attention is drawn to the need for tolerance and understanding. Parish clergy need to be sensitive to the difficult work of chaplains concerned.

#### Consultation to continue

34 The hope was expressed that the process of consultation, dialogue and discussion which had begun in parishes, deaneries and dioceses in preparation for the Congress would continue. There was a need to discuss recommendations and plan action. The bishops were urged to establish a Continuation Committee, which would be responsible for this.

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