

“Where the family is together, society is together”

Over ninety North Staffs Catholic parishioners attended a conference on family life at the Holy Trinity Centre, Newcastle-under-Lyme on Saturday 19th June 2004. This conference, entitled Family Listening Day, was being held as part of a nationwide initiative launched by the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales.

Monsignor Pat McKinney, the Episcopal Vicar in Staffordshire, presided, and in his welcoming address he told the assembly that the initiative aimed to establish the reality of family life in today's world - its strengths, challenge and needs, as well as the means by which families can be supported by the Church. The initiative, he said, was about listening - the clergy listening to lay people, and lay people listening to each other. But, having done that, it was essential that there should be a follow-up in terms of practical action.

John Hartley, Chairman of the North Staffs Area Pastoral Council (a lay body linking the activities of the 25 Catholic parishes in North Staffs), then summarised the responses to the 5000 questionnaires sent out during Lent. None of the respondents had any doubt, he said, about the merits of family life. It was the bedrock of society; it was where people belonged, where their roots were. "Where the family is together, society is together," said one. "The family was a sanctuary, a refuge from life's pressures, a place in times of need" said another. But the challenges and problems referred to by the respondents were manifest. Drugs, alcohol, broken marriages, the decline in sexual morals and the growth of selfishness, were all worries regularly faced by respondents. But two problems stood out. The first was the pressure and stress of modern life, arising partly from parental workload (both parents working and weekend working), and partly from the stresses caused by our "must have" consumer society and by the emphasis placed today on the importance of success. The second was parental concern about teenagers leaving the Church, as reflected in Sunday Mass attendance. Respondents did not despair, however. They saw much good in young people; and they considered that the Church was a source of support and consolation to families in many areas of life, not least in times of sorrow and loss.

The keynote speaker, Mrs. Nuala Scarisbrick, co-founder of LIFE, gave a wide-ranging and stimulating address on the moral problems confronting us in our country today---her theme being that life is precious and God-given from the moment of conception to natural death. She outlined the emotional and psychological problems encountered by young people, arising from teenage pregnancy, abortion, sexually transmitted diseases, and the failure of society to understand that sex without true love was flawed. One indicative statistic of the collapse in moral standards was that up to 1950 only 5% of births were outside marriage. That figure has now risen to 50%. Her organisation, LIFE, was not founded merely to oppose abortion; it was there as a caring and supporting body to help young unmarried mothers through their pregnancies, and in the follow-up phases afterwards.

In the afternoon session, some structured questions, based on the responses to the Lenten

questionnaire, were considered in small- group discussions. The ten principal suggestions arising in a final plenary session were that the Church in our parishes should consider:

1. placing even more emphasis on the preparation for marriage, for example by creating a specialised unit in North Staffs led by professional counsellors;
2. ensuring that all support services (e.g. Marriage Care, LIFE) and their contact numbers are publicised in parishes;
3. nominating an individual or a small group in each parish to help those whose marriages are in difficulties, and those recently married;
4. creating a number of House Groups (by locality) in each parish, where meetings would be regularly held, both to improve communications generally, and to encourage parishioners' awareness of the lives and problems of nearby fellow-parishioners;
5. creating in each parish a Family Co-ordinator (or team) and a register of families;
6. creating a Welcoming Ministry in each parish, with formalised follow-up procedures;
7. ensuring that every now and then homilies specifically relate to problems created by the time-pressures of modern life and by the consumer-oriented, need-to-succeed society in which we live;
8. creating well led youth groups in each parish for the 8-13 and 14-16 age groups, aimed at providing for each group social, sporting and musical activities, and wide-ranging discussion-sessions;
9. placing even more emphasis on the need for young, role-model chaplains (and assistant lay chaplains) in secondary schools; and
10. providing more "youth-led" Masses, i.e. in terms of liturgy, music and reading.

The day finished with a moving service of prayers, readings and hymns to celebrate the joys and blessings of family life. After thanking everyone for making the day so successful, Monsignor McKinney said that the next step was to report the conference's findings to the Hinsley Hall Conference in July and to the Archbishop, and then to work out some of the practical ways forward.