



Listening 2004 in the Diocese of Cardiff - Saturday 20th November 2004



“It's got to start with you”

Just under a hundred representatives of families, parishes and family organisations joined Archbishop Peter Smith and Bishop John Hine on Saturday November 20th for the Archdiocese of Cardiff Family Listening Day at St David's College, Cardiff. The Listening 2004 process had been extremely successful in the diocese with over two-thirds of parishes actively participating. Coordinator Anne Ballard reported that she had received individual responses numbering well over the expected 1.5% response rate suggested by similar Church-focused projects. The virtually unanimous view of all who had participated was that the family is absolutely essential for human individual happiness and for a stable, ordered society. “But families also feel that the family is under

attack and it must be defended,” she reported. “They see the Church as a bulwark and that its voice must be heard publicly.”

In their feedback local families had highlighted major difficulties in juggling family life, managing a work-life balance and parenting in a society of often conflicting values. Loneliness was frequently apparent and there was widespread sadness when children ceased to practice the faith. There was great concern expressed for families unable to share communion, particularly for those divorced and remarried. Generally there was appreciation for the role of the parish priest but some felt that they did not fully understand the situation of families today. “Yet in spite of the many difficulties affecting families the responses were remarkably positive,” reported Anne Ballard. “They speak of the joys of family life, of love and companionships, of sharing family meals and celebrations, of taking pleasure in the company of children and grandchildren and rejoicing in their success.”

The young people of the diocese had been heavily involved in Listening 2004 through a series of creative competitions offered in schools, as well as in responding themselves to the brochure questions. Winning competition entries were on display around the auditorium, and the day’s activities included a live performance of a song composed about family life. Students from local schools participated in all workshops and five students wearing the winning t-shirt (slogan: “Families are the rainbow after the storm”) worked hard throughout the day guiding participants and leading the liturgy. In reporting the feedback from young people Ansti Corelli drew attention to their preoccupation with loss. “Death was a major concern in nearly every questionnaire,” she reported. Young people valued family life and found arguments and conflict the main difficulty. Respect for one another was a major issue. Those who did not attend church felt that the Church did not communicate with them and make them feel involved. Those who did attend felt that Church leaders were not listening to them. Services were seen as boring and repetitive. Social activities were seen as a good way to be involved.

Participants then broke off into groups to consider what they, the parish and the Archdiocese could do for a diverse series of groups in the church community including carers, inter-faith families, single people, parents, the elderly, the separated, divorced and remarried, single parents, newcomers and visitors. In reporting their conclusions very many practical steps were identified: “Many in our parishes feel marginalized and we need to do something about this – by welcoming them both at the church door and afterwards.” “Acceptance is a key issue here but of situations not of values. We need to be less judgmental.” “A contact in each deanery could establish a network of caring and support”. “Create opportunities for dialogue within church and within parishes.” “Use the SVP as a starting point.” “Fun activities should be part of parish life.” “We need education on church teaching especially regarding communion.” “Perhaps we should advertise the possibility of annulment and offer divorce support groups so that people feel the door is not ajar but wide open.” “We were worried about children not going to Mass but thought that being a Catholic is more than about going to Mass.” “Liturgies for teenagers might help.” “Self-help groups would be useful.” “Better marriage preparation before and after so people know where they can get help. Having a parish contact might help – a trained couple with children possibly.”

In his response Archbishop Smith thanked everyone for giving up a Saturday to come along. “I think it’s been a very fruitful day and I ask you to pass my thanks on to your parish, to all those who have participated in the whole process. It’s the first time that I can think of that the bishops have asked

for something like this and it seems to have been a very fruitful process. Generally speaking, I'd say we should rejoice in the families that we have. The press are always taking the line of the negative. They will tell you that a third of marriages break down they will never tell you two-thirds of marriages survive, sometimes with grave difficulty." The Archbishop encouraged participants to go back to their parishes and identify just one step that could be taken to further support marriage and family life. "Our own diocesan commission for marriage and family life will be meeting next month to see what we have got, what people have said about marriage and family life, where the gaps are and how can we help and support. But the key thing here in the Archdiocese of Cardiff is that it's got to start with you. It's for you to say what have I heard today, what ideas have I picked up, what can I do in the parish? This has got to grow in the local community because as has been said frequently today every parish is different. We'll obviously look at how can we support these initiatives, how can we develop better networking and communication as to what is available."