



Listening 2004 in the Diocese of Liverpool – Saturday 22nd May 2004



“An unexpected gift”

The Liverpool Archdiocesan Assembly gathered last Saturday to hear what local Catholic families had had to say about the reality of their lives in response to the Listening 2004: My Family My Church initiative. Nearly one hundred representatives from the deaneries of the Archdiocese joined Archbishop Patrick Kelly, and auxiliary bishops, Vincent Malone and Tom Williams, for a day of reflection that pulled few punches. In presenting the many challenges of being family and being Church, the coordinators Margaret Rogers and Fr Tony Slingo highlighted particularly the many instances of grace ‘outside the walls’. As one participant asked, how can we celebrate God’s presence in all these loving situations?

The day began with four stories that illustrated contemporary reality for local families: a lack of awareness and appreciation of the holiness of life within the home; the tension and pain of loving those whose lives did not conform to Church teaching; the generation gap and the lapse from traditional Church practices amongst the young. These stories resonated strongly with the Assembly members present. “We could identify with a lot of the issues raised.” “We experienced both joy and sadness as we listened.” “We are extremely heartened that a diocesan event is willing to face up to these real life issues,” were just some of the responses.

After lunch the coordinators presented their own reflections on the feedback. "Amidst all the changes that have affected the family, stable loving family life is still highly prized," reported Margaret Rogers. Watching children and grandchildren grow and develop, enjoying close marital unions and experiencing the support of grandparents were all seen as great blessings. Yet the impact of modern culture, and its obsessions with sex, material possessions, perfection and success created great pressures. Relationship skills were essential if individuals and families were to manage their burdens but there seemed to be less and less opportunity for youngsters to acquire these.

The polarity of families' experience in the Church was evident. "When it works, Church is massively successful and important to people," reported Fr Slingo, "When it doesn't it is massively wounding." Spiritual and moral support was the principal blessing experienced by church families, followed by sacraments and prayer, and practical help and support. Families' hopes of the church were for acceptance, just being there and for offering a sense of belonging. Difficulties experienced with the church arose mostly from irregular situations: "When the ideal, set, expected, norm of family or personal relationships is not the reality of life, the Church is seen very strongly as rigid, judgmental, excluding and rejecting," said Fr Slingo. Handing on the faith within the family was expressed as another massive challenge.

Assembly members noted the many opportunities that exist in the church to be good news for one another, particularly the key life moments when people approach the church to arrange baptisms, weddings or funerals. "Are we welcoming or do we turn people away? The sacraments are big opportunities for the Church" Questions were asked about how the church helps those that already belong: "Do we help them to grow into maturity?" One participant noted that even though the local response to Listening 2004 had exceeded both expectations and previous experience, there were still many families who had not taken part. Yet another suggested that Catholics were sometimes too busy lamenting the loss of a so-called golden age to see the 'gold' in this age: "Every age has its problems. But in continually celebrating what is good, we can support our people."

In his closing remarks Archbishop Kelly acknowledged that he had initially been hesitant about the Listening 2004 process, but that this "unexpected gift" had provided the diocese with "much food for thought and challenge for action." With existing diocesan structures under review, the feedback from Listening 2004 should be seen as something providential, from God, which needed to be listened to. In seeking a way to approach and resolve the many issues raised during the day the Archbishop returned to an ancient understanding of the family as church: "There's a phrase which we've had around for a long time and that is domestic church. I think there is something very, very valuable here and it may lead us to understand one part of our diocesan life in a new way. We can affirm lots of things we do with new vitality and this will help us." In thanking Margaret Rogers and Fr Tony Slingo Archbishop Kelly acknowledged that there had been a lot of anxiety around both the process and the organisation of the day. "But" he said, "it has been tremendous. Thank you very, very much indeed."