



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF ENGLAND AND WALES

Reflection Document for the Clergy on Marriage and Family

The time between the two synods has been called by Pope Francis to be a time of “true spiritual discernment” on the family and its context in the society of today. The Bishops of England and Wales ask the clergy of our countries to reflect on the importance of marriage and the role of the clergy in accompanying of people on their journey of marriage and as families. The Synod next year has the title *The Vocation and the Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World*.

As clergy, we meet people at various stages of their vocation and journey. We meet many couples who are living together when they bring their children to be baptised. Not all these couples have thought about being married or they may have previous marital relationships which have broken down which they have left. We encounter couples at the stage of engagement who come to us seeking the celebration of marriage in the Church. We are witnesses to the celebration of the marriage which is a joyful expression of the commitment and love that the couple have for each other. We are part of the onward expression of life and love as the couple form a home, often are blessed with children, and seek our support and help to bring faith to the children and the family as a whole. This is often manifested through the ongoing celebrations of the sacraments of baptism, reconciliation and Holy Communion with the children born of the marriage. We also meet families in times of crisis such as divorce, or when they present for the baptism of children and sacraments after having been divorced and now civilly married. Sometimes people tell their story when they are very ill and preparing for death. We meet people at many different stages of family life which are often not cleanly defined in this way nor do they occur in the “traditional” order in which we used to think.

The Synod final document from last October calls us to echo Jesus’ own approach to dealing with what we could see as the messiness of family life in the contemporary world; we are, like Jesus, to look “...upon the women and men [he met] with love and tenderness, accompanying their steps with patience and mercy, in proclaiming the demands of the Kingdom of God.” (Synod Document, 11) The Synod does not shirk from the truth of the Gospel and the Kingdom, urging us to make the “demands of the Kingdom of God” but this must be accompanied with a compassion and love, seeing firstly persons who are loved by God and secondly their situations. As Saint John Paul II almost twenty years ago wrote in *Veritatis splendor* 95:

... a clear and forceful presentation of moral truth can never be separated from a profound and heartfelt respect, born of that patient and trusting love which man always needs along his moral journey, a journey frequently wearisome on account of difficulties, weakness and painful situations. The Church can never renounce the "the principle of truth and consistency, whereby she does not agree to call good evil and evil good"; she must always be careful not to break the bruised reed or to quench the dimly burning wick (cf. Is 42:3).

Pope Francis has invited reflection on the ways in which we accompany people so that step-by-step they may come to understand the call of Christ and the way in which they are to live in their lives. How do we reach out to people in their very diverse situations?

St Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo and Doctor of the Truth of the Church, offers us a way of looking at the Church from his age which is still relevant today. The Church in North Africa was

ruptured in the early fourth century by the Donatist heresy. St Augustine spoke against this heresy in the Council of Carthage in June 411. The Donatists believed that they represented a 'Church of the pure,' uncontaminated by dissent from those who betrayed their Christian faith during a period of persecution. They alleged that the Catholic Church of Augustine's day was contaminated by their ancient link with those who in the persecution a century earlier consigned the Sacred Scriptures to fire, *'the traditores.'*

Two parables from Matthew's gospel, chapter 13, figure prominently throughout Augustine's writings in this bitter dispute: *the wheat and the tares* (vv 24-30), and that of *the net gathering fish of every kind* (47-50).

The followers of Donatus wanted no contact whatever with Catholics whom they believed were contaminated and could not represent the Church of Christ. They considered themselves the sole representatives of the true Church because of their steadfastness during the persecution. Taking his cue from the parable of the wheat and tares Augustine argued strongly and insistently for patience and tolerance, and that to uproot the tares would mean damaging the good seed as well. Augustine was following what the master in the parable himself said: *'No, lest in gathering the tares you root up the wheat along with them.'* (13:29) Answering the assertion that the Catholic Church accepted and acquiesced to the presence of sinners in its midst, Augustine maintained that good Catholics would not be affected by sinners provided they did not imitate the behaviour of such people. The master in the parable was also content to wait until harvest time when a final separation would take place: the tares would be tied in bundles and burnt, whereas the wheat would be gathered into the barn. Augustine interpreted this as referring to the last judgement when Christ himself would separate the good from the bad once and for all.

In his understanding of the other parable, that of the net thrown into the sea and catching fish of every kind, Augustine again highlights the necessity of waiting until the final reckoning or judgement when the angels will separate the evil from the righteous. It is not for us to make rash or premature conclusions. Augustine makes another interesting point: when the net is cast into the sea the fisherman has no idea which are good fish and which are not since they remain out of sight. That will only become evident when they are sifted on the seashore. What Augustine implies is that we are not in a position in this life to pass judgement on others. Only Christ can see the full picture and will reveal it on judgement day.

Throughout this whole controversy with the Donatists, Augustine appeals for peace and unity in the Church: *"From now on live in the harmony of peace, adhere to unity, acquiesce in charity, yield to the truth."* (*Ad Donatistas post Collationem*, 18,24)

In preparation for the next Synod such key words of St Augustine can help us move the debate beyond particularly difficult issues and set these same issues in a wider context. The Church is called to proclaim the peace of Christ to his people, and to the world. People need and want to hear this proclamation, in their often confused and fragmented lives. The concept of charity is a hallmark of Augustine of Hippo's whole theology. Can charity allow us to live with difference, without diminishing what is essential to our Catholic faith? The ancient dictum of unsure provenance breathes the spirit of Augustine: *Liberty in what is doubtful, unity in what is essential, and charity in everything.* Augustine's own personal journey to find the truth was long and arduous; at times he despaired of finding it, before he gradually came to it in piecemeal fashion and by the kindness and witness of others. In a rapidly developing world, particularly where moral autonomy is concerned, we need patience and tolerance before clarity and truth emerge in people's lives.

THE JOURNEY OF ACCOMPANIMENT

Accompanying couples in the stage of engagement

The responsibility for a good and full preparation of couples for marriage lies with the priest. Some feel that this is often a time consuming task but in many ways the heart of the preparation is not only the couple getting to know the priest, but the priest knowing the couple so that he can address any possible misconceptions about marriage that the couple have.

The Synod noted that the whole Christian community should be involved in the preparation of those to be married. There should be specific programmes which “create a true experience of participation in ecclesial life and thoroughly treat the various aspects of family life” (Synod Document, 38).

There is an emphasis on the formation in the virtues, especially chastity which promotes growth in genuine love between the couples. The couple should examine the essence of mutual self-giving at the heart of a marriage, which is rooted in Baptism and images the relationship between Christ and his Church. They are gifts to each other and find completeness in one another and in their openness to God.

Questions for reflection:

- How important do you see preparation for marriage today in your pastoral ministry?
- Do you feel that you have had sufficient training to prepare couples for marriage?
- How do you engage married couples in this important process, so that it truly becomes a whole community celebration of marriage and family life?
- What, in your experience, is the attitude to couples to marriage preparation?
- Do you find the ambiguity present in many couples who come for marriage (i.e. that they are already living together, that they may already have children) difficult to approach with them? Do you feel you can challenge them to “live the virtues” in the situation they are in?
- What resources have you found to be most useful?

Accompanying couples in and through the celebration of their Marriage

The final part of the ‘immediate’ marriage preparation process is the opportunity to build towards celebrating the sacrament – giving and receiving their consent, making their vows, exchanging rings. Part of this period includes reflection on the Liturgy for the Rite of Marriage and choosing which of the three forms of the Rite is most appropriate to the couple’s situation – a nuptial Mass, a Celebration of Christian Marriage outside of Mass, A Marriage Service. The liturgical and spiritual catechesis at this point can offer guidance through the choice of Scripture readings and music for the wedding. Opportunity may be provided, where appropriate, for couples to receive catechesis and celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation at this stage too.

The couple celebrate their Marriage within the Liturgy, in the presence of witnesses – their families and friends. The celebration of the wedding is important as this gives opportunity for evangelisation, especially for those guests of the couple who do not normally come to Church or who have no faith.

Questions for reflection:

- How do you approach the celebration of the marriage with the couples you prepare?

- Do you use the time to utilise appropriate catechesis in choosing readings and hymns for the celebration?
- Does the subject of confession and reconciliation get addressed with couples?
- Do you craft a homily for the celebration based on the readings and your knowledge of the couple, making sure that there is a message for everyone present?
- How do you engage the parish community in marriage celebrations? Do you invite parishioners to these marriages or do they stand alone outside the liturgical life of the community?
- Do you make marriages known through effective use of parish media – newsletters, websites, social communication?

Accompanying those whose marriages break down

The Pope invites us to reflect on our pastoral practice with those Catholics whose marriage relationship has broken down and who have separated or divorced. What is the your pastoral practice if they remarry civilly?

Questions for reflection:

- How do you accompany those whose marriage relationship is breaking down? What are the sources of help and assistance? Do you refer them to others?
- How do people who are divorced experience being a part of the Church? How are they welcomed and included?
- If people come to you who are living in ‘second unions’ what is your pastoral practice? Do they come to the sacraments? How do you help them to approach the marriage tribunal? Are there cases where you think they might be welcomed to Holy Communion even though their objective situation has not been remedied? What might they be?
- How can the Church witness to being a Church of mercy and truth.

Accompanying people who have homosexual tendencies

Within our parish families there are those people who have a same-sex attraction; some struggle with recognising their sexual orientation, many try to live the Church’s teaching; but for them both civil partnership and “marriage” are possible through the laws of the state. The Church accepts people who are attracted to others of the same-sex whilst not reducing their identity to this single aspect, and calls them to chaste friendship.

Questions for reflection:

- How do you minister to those people who have homosexual tendencies and help them to integrate their sexual orientation?
- How do you minister to their families? What is the experience that the bishops need to hear?
- What is your approach when people who are in same-sex partnerships approach the Church for welcome and inclusion?
- Do you find the whole issue of same-sex relationships difficult and would like help and guidance on how to minister to these people effectively?

Conclusion

These reflections will aid the process of *true spiritual discernment* that the Holy Father has asked the Church to engage in between the two Synod meetings. The Church can never abstract itself

from the world in which we live in, but we witness to the truth of faith that the Lord gave us. In doing this work, we should strive to live by the precepts of St Augustine, of patience and tolerance, seeking the truth in charity. The Synod of Bishops is called to look at these issues “*by carefully surveying the signs of the times, we are making every effort to adapt ways and methods...to the growing needs of our time and the changing conditions of society.*” (Apostolic Motu Proprio *Apostolica Sollicitudo* B. Paul VI).

By reflecting on the pastoral situation of marriage, the clergy contribute to the process of the synod. One way that this could occur would be through:

- Personal reflection and common discussion of the issues raised at your deanery meetings.
- Collating the issues raised through the deaneries for a further focussed discussion at the Council of Priests
- Submitting to the Bishops’ Conference a short report from each diocese outlining the discussions that the clergy have held.

Please send any reports to be reviewed by the Synod Delegates for England and Wales by Pentecost 2015. This will enable Cardinal Nichols (Westminster) and Bishop Doyle (Northampton) to be informed by the responses for the debates and discussions at the Synod in Rome in October 2015.