

Register Faith

Pupils explore the experience of married life

Catholic schoolboys are soaking up the wisdom of married couples, writes **Bess Twiston Davies**

It is 11.30am on a damp January day in Tower Hamlets. A hop, skip and a jump from Shadwell DLR station in east London, Maria and Daniel talk through their marriage in a room full of teenage boys. "I always said I didn't want to marry and that if someone proposes to me with a ring, I am going to punch him in his face," Maria says, smiling. So Daniel gave Maria a pair of boxing gloves, saying, as he went down on one knee: "If you are going to punch me, I don't want you to hurt your fingers."

Both 25 and from Caracas, Venezuela, Daniel and Maria are volunteers for Explore, an educational charity with an unusual mission: to bring the happily married into secondary schools to be quizzed by pupils. For most, this is a rare chance, says Chris Ford, CEO of Explore: "This is an attempt to give young people the opportunity to have a dialogue with married couples about that relationship, because they very often don't have a chance due to home circumstances."

So for half an hour students can ask the couples "any question you like", Edmund Adamus of Explore explains to the Year 10 boys of Bishop Challoner Catholic Collegiate School.

Adamus is the director for marriage and family life at the Roman Catholic Diocese of Westminster, which for the first time has appointed an Explore local development officer to work with diocesan schools. Mary McGhee, a lively, efficient New Zealander, gathers the couples in the school hall for a pre-session briefing, and says: "We pray for God's blessing on this morning's sessions."

To start them off, Adamus asks the boys to shout out their hopes — and then fears — about marriage. "You've

got 90 seconds," he says. Top of the hope list comes "a wife who knows how to cook", while for fears, one boy wants a wife who "treats me right". "Respect" writes Adamus on a whiteboard. "That's very important." Then the floor is open to questions. Inevitably, sex crops up: did Maria and Daniel sleep together before marriage? No. They didn't live together either. "It was a bit risky," admits Maria, "but the first day after the marriage when we were in our home together was so exciting," she says.

"Are arguments frequent?" asks a boy in the front row. The main disagreement is whether — eventually — to go home. "Our country is dangerous," Maria says. "At 4am in the morning I wake up and have to call my parents. There are shootings, kidnappings. Our city has the world's second-highest murder rate."

Maria and Daniel's story couldn't be more different to that told in the classroom next door: Edward and Angela, who are now grandparents, grew up during the Second World War. They met at

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16, were separated when Edward did National Service, and after marrying at 23 lived initially off Edward's salary, saving Angela's for the big expenses. "We didn't really have holidays," Edward says, "but it didn't seem to matter."

Questions come thick and fast: what, ask the boys, makes a marriage last? "Trust," Angela says, adding: "It is important to keep the romance alive. You can get into a rut when you are in a relationship. First of all you think of pleasing your partner, with surprises. That can be forgotten when you have a baby."

Like all the Explore couples, Angela and Edward are volunteers and are practising Christians: "We're recruited two or three other couples as well," they say. "You get a sense of whether people can do this." They are Methodists, the



Maria and Daniel talk about the realities of their marriage with Year 10 boys at Bishop Challoner Catholic Collegiate School

Venezuelans are Roman Catholics and a third couple, Jeremy and Estela, from Yorkshire and Uruguay, are Anglican and Roman Catholic. None is here to push a religious point of view, just to speak of their own marriage; Explore visits schools of all faiths and none.

Yet do they speak to the converted? Catholic belief that marriage is holy, and hopefully lifelong, is well known. And this, after all, is a Roman Catholic school: crucifixes hang in classrooms, and glass cases contain a photo of Pope Francis and some of his quotes, notably on football. In such a setting, surely presenting Christian belief in marriage is simple?

For many pupils, whether Roman Catholic (57 per cent of the 1,000-odd intake are), Muslim, Anglican or Pentecostal Christian, family breakdown is

simply a fact. In 2002, the year in which most of Year 10 were born, only 10,044 marriages in England and Wales took place in a Catholic church. Within a decade that number had fallen to 8,440, according to the Office for National Statistics. Anglicans fared better, with 56,000 weddings occurring in church in 2012, but these and other faith weddings account for a fraction of the 262,240 British weddings that year. Little wonder that marriage and the Catholic family is the pressing topic for part two of the Vatican's Synod on the Family in October.

Hearing of a marriage that has lasted more than 40 years is novel for many pupils. "The couples were open with us. They talked about their financial struggles, and raising children, but it was inspiring how they stayed together,

loving together," one student, Ermal, aged 15, says after the morning sessions, which are part of the personal, social and health and economic education stream of the curriculum.

Mohammed, also 15, was surprised to hear "how hard marriage can be". He says: "I thought it was simple." Giovanni, in contrast, feels the media "exaggerates" marital problems and that films give "a warped view" of what marriage is about. "They take away the true meaning of marriage," Ermal concurs. "It is about sharing a journey with someone until you die." He concludes: "We don't know anything about marriage. Today has given us a bigger picture."

And perhaps, a smidgeon of hope. *Names of pupils have been changed. More details: theexploresession.co.uk*

Staying on in Iraq is an expression of trust in Jesus

Credo
Timothy
Radcliffe



There have been Christians in Iraq almost since Christ. They have endured poverty and disempowerment through the centuries, but never before have they been so crushed. I visited their prosperous villages in 1998, near Mosul and Qaraqosh. Many people were farmers or professionals. They lost this life with half an hour's warning when Isis came. When I visited them last week in the camps around Erbil, in Kurdistan, I was haunted by this question: What hope does their Christian faith offer them now? Of course, millions of Muslims and Yazidis have suffered as badly, but let

me focus just for this moment on these Christians.

I was told that in Arabic, there are two words for hope. *Amal* is the everyday optimism that things will go well. *Raja* is a deeper hope, based on our trust in someone, above all God. Most of these Christians have lost all *amal*. They believe that the Iraqi government is indifferent to their fate; Kurdistan will offer only a temporary refuge; they put no trust in Western governments, who they believe are interested only in Iraq's resources. They feel deeply betrayed by their Muslim neighbours, who took over the houses from which they fled. They see no future at all except exile in foreign lands. A bishop told me that even the babies in the womb were longing to go. From a purely secular point of view, they see no future at all.

But that deeper religious hope, *raja*, endures and is visible in countless ways. Some Muslims believe that if the Christians go, the

Iraq which they love is finished. In a Muslim restaurant in Baghdad, offering "upside down chicken", there was an image of the Last Supper of Christ with his disciples, and a light burnt before an icon of the Virgin and her child. I gave a public lecture to almost 300 people in Baghdad, 70 per cent of whom were Muslim. They begged the Christians to stay. One young man said: "You were here before us. We need you." The Christian minority has sometimes been the glue that held Sunni and Shia together.

Some Christians express their hope just by staying, even if they do not know what lies ahead. It is an expression of their trust in Jesus who promised that he would be with us "until the end of time" (Matthew xxviii, 20).

This hope is visible in the determination to get up each morning and do what must be done today. One of my Dominican brethren said: "Hope means that I

live now, whatever may happen tomorrow." In the centre of Baghdad Mother Teresa of Calcutta's sisters raise the disabled children of all faiths, rejected by their parents. God will somehow grant them a future.

The most surprising sign of hope was the commitment to education. If Isis is just defeated militarily, it will be reborn in another form. The enemy is the blind fundamentalism that fuels its violence. In 2012 the Dominican Father Yousif Mirkis, now the Archbishop of Kirkuk, founded the Baghdad Academy of Human Sciences. It has 500 students, mainly Muslim. They can study philosophy, sociology, anthropology, as well as languages. Is it crazy to attend lectures on Wittgenstein when Isis is decapitating people?

Archbishop Mirkis told me: "We need places where people can breathe the oxygen of debate." When so many believe only in force, the Church clings to its belief in reason. Here they discuss whether it is true

or not that *Je suis Charlie* rather than just chanting a slogan. Our Dominican magazine *Christian Thought* is widely read by Muslims who wish to think with us. Intelligent debate, when the world is exploding, is an expression of the virtue of hope.

Finally, in the camps, children came bounding up to meet this stranger in a white habit. They had been dragged out of their homes, fled for their lives, and live in squalor, but they had a confident, trusting spontaneity which is not always evident in Western children. Just before Communion in the Chaldean Catholic rite, two children come up to the altar to receive the sign of peace from the priest and they pass on to the congregation. These children are the messengers of hope in a future which they trust that God will give, even if now we cannot imagine how.

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