



Listening 2004 in the Diocese of Middlesbrough – Saturday 11th September 2004



“Start at the roof of the house”

Improved communications, increased lay involvement and attention to adult formation for marriage, parenting and passing on faith were some of the immediate practical needs identified during the Diocese of Middlesbrough’s family listening day last Saturday. “If we are going to help our young people it’s got to start at the roof of the house,” said Bishop John Crowley. “That’s where we begin. More and more as I go through life I’m aware of my gratitude to my parents, to my mother and father, to our family life together. For me the concomitant of that gratitude is a desire to do much more for family life in our diocese than we have done thus far. We’ve heard today of some wonderful examples of people’s work and lots of different initiatives in different parishes. But one of the things I’ll take away from today is that that’s not enough.”

Bishops Crowley's comments came after hearing the feedback from local families in response to Listening 2004 and to the reactions of those gathered. Nearly 100 individuals -

parishioners, priests and representatives of marriage and family life support groups - had gathered at All Saints School, York for what turned out to be a lively and free-flowing conversation.

The day began with a consideration of families' experience of parish life. Gwen and Peter O'Reilly from Hull recounted both positive and negative experiences reported by families. Parents of young children often felt challenged in bringing them to Sunday Mass. The sacramental moments, though hugely important, were not uniformly helpful in making adults feel welcome. Families were asking for support in parenting, in managing money, in sustaining healthy marriages, at times of sickness, especially where mental health was concerned and in bereavement. Positive sources of support, such as Teams of Our Lady and the Saint Vincent de Paul society, were mentioned but too often there was a lack of awareness about their availability. As one respondent had put it, "the family is being torn apart by work ethics, two working parents, lack of money, parish priests not trained to deal with the issues and a lack of support from the church."

Families asked to be allowed to become more involved in the life of the church and to put their gifts to use in service of the community. They also expressed a desire for stronger community within the parish. "Community building takes more than forty-five minutes a week" was one remark. Time and space to build the strong relationships so desired between parishioners needed to be created. Interestingly it was suggested that parishes involved in fund-raising might be closer knit than parishes without such a focus.

The second stage of the conversation turned to the question of young people in the parish. This was animated by Ella Haswell and James Preece from Holy Cross Parish, Cottingham, who spoke of their own experience and that of other young people in their local church. They mentioned the gap between confirmation and marriage when very little seemed to exist for young people. When it was provided they often felt it was more of an effort to entertain, to attract and retain the young, rather than to simply help them face the real challenges of living lives fully integrated with faith in God. As young people in church they sometimes had a sense of almost being a curiosity. They suggested that adults were possibly afraid to present young people with the full facts of the Catholic faith in case it was rejected.

The difficulties of the divorced-remarried provided the focus of the final part of the day's conversation. Fr Alan Sheridan JCL, Judicial Vicar, took the opportunity to explain the work of the Marriage Tribunal and some of the history of the church's teaching on marriage. This part of the day provoked the most heartfelt reaction from those present: "The Church's teaching has caused people great pain" "Why are the divorced and remarried barred from communion but not those cohabiting?" "The whole sexual teaching of the church needs to be re-examined – right through from bad thoughts to adultery."

Many 'green shoots' were identified during the course of the day: examples of good work taking place all over the diocese which were allowing people to learn and grow together in faith as well as providing practical support to families. These signs of growth were noted by Bishop Crowley as being centred largely on small groups meeting in homes and families, just as in the days of the early Church. "There are a lot of tremendously good things going on but

we don't share them enough. I'd say that's one very practical need we need to address," he noted.

The innovation of the Listening 2004 process was also cause for comment. As one participant remarked, "I'm 76 years old and this is the first time in my lifetime that we have had this kind of conversation and we've two Bishops present! We need to do more of it." In thanking him Bishop Crowley acknowledged that he too would be "a little bit different after today than I was before" as a result of Listening 2004. "There's a commitment to the church here today which is very encouraging," he continued, "I'm going away enormously encouraged by that but also to reflect on what needs doing."