



Listening 2004 in the Diocese of Portsmouth – Saturday 16th October 2004



“Don’t lose your voices now”

One hundred participants gathered at Bishop Challoner School in Basingstoke for the Diocese of Portsmouth Family Listening Day on Saturday, October 16th. They included representatives from most of the deaneries, including the Isle of Wight, Jersey and Guernsey, from schools and from secular and religious organisations supporting family life, including AL Anon, Anchor Trust, a Young Offenders Team as well as Interchurch Families, Teams of Our Lady and Marriage Preparation catechists. Together with Bishop Crispian Hollis and Bishop John Hine they listened and reflected on the findings from the Listening 2004 process in the diocese. Dr Richard McCord, an observer from the United States Bishops’ Conference was also present.

In presenting the feedback from local families, Angela Wills and Patricia Cox spoke of their sense of privilege as they read the responses that came in. “Sometimes, we just had to stop:

sometimes to weep, sometimes to laugh. We were aware that we were on holy ground.” The high points for many were the times spent together as a family, taking holidays, sharing meals and celebrations. Correspondingly the pressure on family time was cited as the biggest difficulty. The need to work longer hours to earn enough to live on conflicted with the desire to spend more time together. Families hoped mostly for happiness and fulfilment, to remain close to God and together as far as possible. Materialism and consumerism were seen as harmful to family life as were the pressures of time, peer pressure across the generations and the occasional clash of Christian family values with those of society. Health and education services, community support, and advances in technology and communication were particularly valued by families. Within the Church families were glad of supportive communities of like-minded people where they felt a sense of belonging, especially in times of trouble. Prayer, the sacraments and Mass offered hope, peace and spiritual nourishment, though for some the church was not experienced as helpful. One of the greatest difficulties and sources of pain was the fact that family members – usually children and grandchildren – had ceased to practice. “The more we say what we want our Church to be, the more we are saying ‘We are the Church.’” said one correspondent. Yet another commented, “We have been asked to share our problems - now involve us in planning the solution.”

Following the feedback presentation, a series of shorter talks illustrating particular family experiences took place. Edna Hunneysett shared her experiences of caring for a mentally ill family member, Jack Dominian spoke about mature marriage, Clare Sheeran shared the experience of being excluded from the Eucharist and Kate Harris talked about experiences of marital breakdown and separation.

Participants were then asked to reflect on all that they had heard, identifying what had surprised, pleased or saddened them, what the Spirit might be saying in all of this and how the church could practically respond. Amongst the surprises were the frankness of those who had taken part, the sharing of such intimate stories, the lack of concern about pro-life issues, and the strength of people’s faith. There was pleasure in the good news of family life, the willingness of those taking part to be involved in the outcomes and that the church was keen to listen. Sadness derived from an increasing sense of isolation and exclusion within the community, that only 30% of parishes had taken part and that it had taken so long for the church to want to listen. The Spirit seemed to be suggesting that we should see family in a broader, more diverse context: what was once exceptional is now normative and vice versa. It was suggested that families and individuals should be known, loved and welcomed for who they are. The practical promotion and support of family life should become a priority because families are the Church. At the same time there was a challenge acknowledged of enabling already very busy people to be part of the response. Organisations such as Teams of Our Lady were seen as a useful model for other areas of family life, offering one-to-one or peer support. Marriage was seen as a source of strength for the community with couples trained to support both healthy and hurting families.

In his response Bishop Crispian acknowledged that the day had been “enormously rich because of the experiences that have been shared and which I have been privileged to listen to today.” He encouraged those present “to get on” and tackle the issues that had been raised. “What I think is emerging increasingly in the life of our diocese in all sorts of ways is a

caucus of adult responsible Christian people who have the Church at their heart, who know what is needed and have the capacity to begin to put these things into practice. I will be with you all the way but our diocese isn't a hierarchical structure, it is the people of God. Within that people there are some who minister as priests and deacons, others who minister as married people, others who minister in a million different ways. We all make our contribution. All I can do is to say to you, go ahead, do these things. Some of them we will get right, some of them we won't get right, but the great thing is that we should be engaged. You have found your voices on marriage and family life – don't lose them now."