

IMAGES ON EARTH OF THE WONDER OF GOD

(Pope John Paul II's description of Christian marriages)

These are notes from the meeting of the Diocesan Council of Laity on 10th May 2008 which focused on how we might further support marriage and family life. Bishop Michael and the Council of Laity invite Parish Pastoral Councils and other parish groups to discuss these thoughts and ideas, and to offer further ideas for action.

Bishop Michael introduced the topic by highlighting the wide range of topics linked with 'marriage and family life': the radical decline in the number of people getting married (in East Anglia's Catholic churches, from 513 in 1990 to 229 in 2007); the high instance of marriage breakdown, divorce and re-marriage; cohabitation before marriage; the large numbers of families which no longer fit the conventional model; issues surrounding family planning and birth control; the need for better marriage preparation and support in parenting, both remote and immediate; the challenge of modern youth culture and its perspectives on marriage and sexuality; the vital role of our Catholic schools in teaching about vocation, relationships, marriage and parenthood; the need for our parishes to be even more welcoming to all and family-friendly, as well as making sure that single people, and the widowed, be included; the need for the distinctive Catholic understanding of the sacrament of marriage to be presented positively and joyfully, not only in word but also by the example of couples themselves. We do need to welcome as fully as possible people who are in non-conventional families, but part of our call to proclaim the Good News is to proclaim the particular call to married life and love.

It was obviously not possible to cover all those topics in a single day, and Bishop Michael invited members to focus on positive and practical ways in which parishes and the diocese could better support marriage and family life, within the teaching and discipline of the Catholic Church. The *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* (pages 51-53) already contains many ideas, and these should be revisited by parishes. The *Diocesan Commission for Marriage and Family Life* has been very active for the last few years, and is currently moving forward some important projects. The Catholic Bishops' Conference *Celebrating Family* project – rooted in the *Listening 2004* initiative and survey - has been giving a fresh focus on marriage and family life, with its three phases: (a) *Everybody's Welcome* (already echoed so strongly in our *Diocesan Pastoral Plan*); (b) *Home is a Holy Place*, about seeing, knowing and responding to God's presence at home in our families; and the forthcoming phase (c) *Passing on the Faith*, supporting parents and grandparents in passing on the faith to children. A lot is already happening, but we need to make sure that it is implemented as fully as possible at parish level, as well as developing strategies of our own.

After the group discussions, various comments were made and suggestions of good practice offered:

- ❖ Above all, the need to get across more clearly & positively the 'value added' of Catholic marriage. Priests should preach and teach more about marriage, while humbly acknowledging the limitations of their credibility, as celibates (although they often have a deep experience of married life through being allowed deeply into the lives of a wide range of married couples). Their role is to proclaim joyfully God's view of the mystery of marriage. Married couples themselves have the key role to play in bearing witness to the vocation to marriage.
- ❖ Parish communities need to be welcoming and non-judgemental. It is vital that parishes be family-friendly and child-friendly communities, with a real sense of 'extended family'. Simple things like tea and coffee after Mass, children's liturgy groups, social events, mother & toddler groups, etc, all help.
- ❖ Non-Catholic spouses should be enabled and encouraged to participate as fully as possible, so that they have a sense of belong to the Catholic community. This includes inviting them forward for a 'blessing' at Holy Communion, while recognising that some feel uncomfortable about this.
- ❖ **Marriage Care** needs to be strengthened in the diocese, and made better known.
- ❖ More thought and reflection needs to be given to how the Church approaches 'cohabitation': how do we balance (1) clear presentation of teaching with (2) loving people where they are and leading them forward?
- ❖ It was noted in passing that secular studies have suggested that couples who live together before marriage are more likely to break up than those who don't; couples who pray and worship together are less likely to break up.
- ❖ Couples and families should be encouraged to come to Mass together, not only for their own spiritual benefit, but as an example and witness for others.
- ❖ Why are there so few Catholic marriages today? The issue of birth control and family planning also needs to be addressed, as part of the vocation to parenthood. People are having fewer children, and there are less young people around to get married. People are waiting much later to get married (average 34 for a man, 31 for a woman, and still rising).

- ❖ There are so many external factors nowadays which discourage people from getting married and staying married. This gives us an opportunity to put across the real reasons for getting married – all connected with marriage as a vocation and sacrament.
- ❖ We also need to nurture a ‘culture of vocation’ in our children and young people. This must begin in the family from the first beginnings, and be strengthened by both school and parish. Each person is personally called and gifted by God to do something special for him. Young people will not have a sense of vocation to marriage or priesthood unless they have a fundamental sense of being personally called by God.
- ❖ Our Catholic schools have a vital part to play in all of this – developing a sense of personal vocation, but also helping young people to understand and appreciate the sacredness and specialness of the sacrament of marriage. Young people (and older people!) need to understand that their relationships are part of their spiritual life.
- ❖ Every Confirmation preparation programme should include a session on Marriage, as most candidates will one day end up living out their Confirmation through marriage and parenthood.
- ❖ The modern youth culture needs to be addressed in a way that really speaks to young people. We should not be afraid to question aspects of that culture, but a ‘dogmatic and authoritarian’ approach does not work today (if it ever has). Television is very intrusive in the value-forming of young people; how do we present to them in a positive, joyful and attractive way the very different way of life that Jesus calls them to?
- ❖ Special care and support needs to be given to people who are experiencing difficulties in their marriages and family lives, and those who are separated and divorced.
- ❖ The Catholic Church teaches that marriage – as of a man and woman committing themselves fully to each other for life and with an openness to new life – is the fundamental unit and foundation of society. Without in any way undermining that teaching, we also need to give as much support as possible to one-parent families and to people involved in various forms of non-conventional family life.
- ❖ We need to celebrate marriage and family life much more than we do, especially in the context of the pressures of modern life. Make a fuss of wedding anniversaries, births, baptisms, etc. Each parish could have an annual celebration and renewal of marriage, alongside the annual Diocesan Celebration of Marriage and Family Life at the Cathedral. Such celebrations should be sensitive to members of the congregation who might find any public renewal of marriage difficult (e.g. the widowed, divorced, etc).
- ❖ In addition to these notes, Parish Pastoral Councils etc are invited to review the ideas given on pages 51-53 of the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan*.
- ❖ In the end, everything to do with marriage and family life is about Love – not only the love of the couple and family, but God’s own Joyful Love being proclaimed and lived out in their relationships.

Mary Mustoe-Arthur, who chairs the Diocesan Commission for Marriage and Family Life, informed members of the latest diocesan projects: to develop Marriage Care in the diocese, provide Parenting courses, and give support to families with children with learning difficulties. A part-time coordinator is to be employed to ensure that this work takes place. This has been made possible by a grant from recent Bishops’ Conference fundraising activities. She also reminded members of the 2008 Celebration of Marriage and Family Life at St John’s Cathedral on Saturday 28th June at 11.00 a.m.

A prayer based on the Eucharistic Preface for Marriage and Pope John Paul II

Father, all-powerful & ever-living God,
 we do well always & everywhere to give you thanks.
 You created us in love to share your divine life.
 We see our high destiny in the love of husband & wife
 which bears the imprint of your divine love.
 Love is our origin, love is our constant calling, love is our fulfilment in heaven.
 The love of man and woman is made holy in the sacrament of marriage
 and becomes the mirror of your everlasting love.
 Pour out your grace upon all married couples and families,
 that they may be images on earth of the wonder of your love.