

“TO WHOM SHALL WE GO ... YOU HAVE THE MESSAGE OF ETERNAL LIFE.”

THE PASTORAL CHALLENGES TO THE FAMILY IN THE CONTEXT OF EVANGELISATION

Galloway Diocese contributed to Pope Francis' worldwide consultation on the pastoral challenges to the family. This article describes the work in the diocese and the work of the Church, especially through the Synod of Bishops, to reflect on these challenges.

An exciting invitation ...

In November 2013, Pope Francis invited Catholics worldwide to share their lived experience of the Church's teaching on marriage and family life. The consultation contains 39 questions asking how the Church's teaching on the family is passed on; how families are supported by the Church and how couples are prepared for marriage; what are the attitudes to cohabitation before marriage; how the Church responds to the difficulty of separation, divorce and remarriage; how the Church cares for the pastoral needs of the homosexual person; how faith is transmitted to future generations; how openness to life is understood in marriage; what relationship exists between the family and the person.

This invitation to the whole Church to respond to these issues was a result of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2013 to deal with the topic: The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelisation. A Synod of Bishops is a group of bishops chosen from different regions of the world to meet together with the Pope and help him to consider questions of faith, morals, and the activity of the Church in the world.

There was great excitement, extensive media coverage, and a sense of anticipation that the whole Church was being invited to speak honestly about issues at the centre of people's personal and family life, and that their experiences would be taken seriously. The exercise signalled an openness characteristic of the pontificate of Pope Francis.

... and an enthusiastic response

A great number of detailed responses were submitted from bishops' conferences, Eastern Catholic Churches, departments of the Roman Curia, Religious Orders, as well as from associations, groups, academic institutions, both Catholic and non-Catholic, all interested in sharing their reflections.

In Galloway diocese, the consultation was circulated in parishes and people had a month to reflect on the questions and submit their views. 270 people, including priests, deacons and religious, in the diocese submitted a response. Over 50% of responses were from people aged 65 and over. 5% were from people younger than 45. Almost all respondents appeared to regularly practice their faith. To analyse, collate and report upon the responses received, the diocese established a short-life working group. This group comprised three priests and three lay people. Bishop Cunningham reviewed and approved the summary document which reduced 450 pages of responses to 3 pages.

The summary document from Galloway together with those from the other Scottish dioceses were further collated and a national response was sent by the Bishops' Conference of Scotland to the Holy See. All of the many worldwide responses have been compiled in a 74-page *Instrumentum Laboris* (Latin for "working instrument") for reflection by the bishops and others contributing to the Extraordinary Synod in Rome to examine these matters in October 2014. Then, in 2015, the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod, continuing the work of the 2014 synod meeting, will reflect further on the points discussed so as to formulate appropriate pastoral guidelines to support the pastoral challenges of the family.

What reality does the *Instrumentum Laboris* describe?

The working instrument reveals that the experiences of people of Galloway diocese are similar in many ways to those of the whole Church. The faithful make sacrifices to live family life as the Church teaches, often in testing and difficult circumstances. While people know the goodness and beauty of family life transformed by Christ's love, the *Instrumentum Laboris* also describes the challenges of marriage and family life and the corresponding pastoral care with honesty and concern.

The working instrument can be downloaded from www.vatican.va and is divided in three parts. The first section gives indications – positive as well as negative – of the faithful's knowledge and acceptance of teachings on the family from the Bible and Church documents. The second part deals with various challenges and actual situations related to the pastoral care of the family. The third part is devoted to the topic of openness to life and the responsibility of parents in the upbringing of their children with particular reference to difficult pastoral situations.

Part 1: The Gospel of the Family in Today's World

The Bible teaching on marriage and the family comes first from God's plan for man and woman made in his image and likeness as given in the book of Genesis. The theme of human love mirroring divine love is developed in the Song of Songs and the prophets. The Church's proclamation on the family finds its foundation in the life and preaching of Jesus, who lived and grew up in the family of Nazareth. On the Cross, Jesus gave himself up with a love to the very end and, in his resurrected body, established new relationships among people. St Paul's letter to the Ephesians compares married love of a man and woman to the love between Christ and his Church.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the documents *Gaudium et Spes*, *Humanae Vitae*, *Familiaris Consortio*, *Deus Caritas Est*, *Caritas in Veritate*, and *Lumen Fidei* develop the teaching on marriage and family life. The documents constantly teach that families are consecrated to build up the life of the Church, with marriage an icon of the relationship between God and his people.

Knowledge of the Bible's teaching on the family varies depending on family life, the impact of the Church and other social factors. However the Bible's teaching on the family is much better understood than that of the Documents of the Church's Magisterium which should be made more accessible. Even when teaching on the family is known, there can be difficulty accepting it because of a want of an authentic encounter with Christ, and because Christian values are at odds with global diversity which seeks "immediate gratification" and a "culture of the moment". The call for a person to self-determination, ideology promoting gender as a product of social conditioning, and scientific research all provide challenges to Church teaching and its reception.

At the same time, the family, even when different in form from the traditional model, is understood to be the first and privileged place where the person is formed in society and for society, and so is a place to grow in maturity, build relationships and learn to give of one's self. As a "family of families", the Church needs to provide care for families living in stressful situations, always supporting the quality of relationships.

Part 2: The Pastoral Programme for the Family in Light of New Challenges

Marriage preparation programmes involving priests and lay people are well underway across the world. Care should be taken to make the courses accessible, relevant and competently presented. Family spirituality, however, is about much more than marriage preparation. Witness to the beauty of the family is essential and will be attractive because the Gospel is being lived, and union with God can be seen. In many parts of the world, although a successful outcome to marriage and family life cannot be presumed, young people have a high esteem for couples who, after many years, remain faithful in love.

A crisis in marriage and family life, most especially when faith is already weak, can become a crisis of faith. In such circumstances the ideal of living as a family is viewed as unattainable and frustrating instead of a possible means for learning how to respond to one's vocation and mission. The Church has a duty to care, and parish families, in a sensitive way, must draw near to a family in crisis.

Many responses indicate that the critical issue facing families is a difficulty in relationships and communication. This leads to isolation in a situation of crisis without an experience of being loved and, in turn, loving others. Violence and abuse in families, sadly, is neither occasional nor isolated. Dependences and addictions now include the Internet and social media. Media models of the family are often in opposition to the Christian model and transmit mistaken values. Virtual relationships undermine real ones and time spent on social networks reduces family leisure and social time.

There is concern about counter-witness in the Church, especially with regard to sexual scandals and paedophilia, including among the clergy. A lavish lifestyle of some clergy shows an inconsistency between their teaching and their conduct. The "showy manner" of the practice of some lay faithful fails to display the truth and humility required by the Gospel spirit.

Under the heading of so-called marriage difficulties, the responses consistently recount stories of great suffering as well as testimonies of true love. The mercy of God does not provide a temporary cover-up of personal misdeeds, but rather radically opens lives to reconciliation.

In Scotland, as in many parts of the developed world, cohabitation before marriage is widespread. More catechesis for young people about the beauty of marriage, and witness of chastity before marriage should never be overlooked.

The responses indicate that in Europe and across America, a very high number of people are separated, divorced or divorced and remarried, and that the phenomenon is on the rise. Many times, people find it hard to understand why the Church does not allow those who are in an irregular situation to receive Holy Communion. Sometimes the Church is seen to be at fault for not permitting an irregular marriage situation. This way of thinking can lead to viewing withholding of the sacraments as a punishment. There is a pastoral need to assist people in irregular marriages not to consider themselves separated from the Church, for as baptised persons they can, and indeed must, share in her life. At the same time, responses from some bishops' conferences emphasise that the Church needs to equip herself with pastoral means which provide the possibility of her more widely exercising mercy, clemency and indulgence towards new unions.

Every bishops' conference voiced opposition to "redefining" marriage between a man and a woman through the introduction of legislation permitting a union between two people of the same sex. The episcopal conferences amply demonstrate that they are trying to find a balance between the Church's teaching on the family and a respectful, non-judgmental attitude towards people living in such unions. On the whole, the extreme reaction to these unions, whether compromising or uncompromising, does not seem to have facilitated the development of an effective pastoral programme which is consistent with the Magisterium and compassionate towards the persons concerned.

Many responses and observations call for a theological study in dialogue with the human sciences to develop a multi-faceted look at the phenomenon of homosexuality. Others wish to call upon anthropology and theology and the sexual difference between man and woman in order to address the issue of gender ideology. The great challenge will be to develop a ministry which can maintain the proper balance between accepting persons in a spirit of compassion and gradually guiding them to authentic human and Christian maturity.

Part 3: The Pastoral Challenges concerning an Openness to Life

The *instrumentum laboris* reports that the positive aspects of openness to life are often unknown. A vast majority of responses emphasise how the moral evaluation of the different methods of birth control is commonly perceived today as an intrusion in the intimate life of the couple. With regard to the difficulties associated with the prevention of HIV / AIDS, many feel the Church's position needs to be explained better, especially considering certain distortions in the media. The main difficulty in accepting the Church's teaching on the fruitful love between a man and a woman is related to the large gap between the Church's teaching and civil education, especially in places where secularisation is strong.

Many people see the need to make better known a coherent anthropological vision of Church teaching on the openness to life in revitalised language, not only in pre-marriage preparation but also in instructional courses on love in general. The Christian couple's conscience tends more to concentrate on their relationship and less on the aspects of openness to life, weakening the relation between both. Freedom to be available to bring up children is influenced by work and other social issues. Many responses recommend rediscovering the meaning of conjugal chastity as part of the authentic character of a love-experience.

The challenges a family faces in upbringing children are manifold, often making parents feel unprepared for the task. Parents are called, as St Augustine once said, not only to bring children into the world but to bring them to God. The Church is called to assist families in the upbringing of children, beginning with Christian initiation. Christian education in the family is first achieved when children see their parents witness to the faith. This transmission of Christian faith is endangered by the change in attitude which makes parents fear applying pressure on their children with regard to religious practice. Often the task of education in the faith is passed by parents to Catholic schools.

In difficult family situations the witness of parents can be impeded. Such circumstances deserve greater pastoral attention to create a sense of belonging and not exclusion. Some parents in irregular family situations approach the Church with a great deal of respect and trust, while others, instead, display a negative attitude because of the shame felt by the choices they made.

When parents have a lack of involvement in the religious education of their child, they frequently display a reluctance and disinterest in preparation programmes offered by the Christian community, especially when their children are of an age to receive the sacraments. The Church is called upon to assist families, and with them, persons in irregular situations, without making distinctions. It has been observed that many times the children are the ones who evangelise their parents. New effort, creativity and joy are always required to strengthen the Church's pastoral response to the problems of family life. Examples of good practice to stimulate religious education of the family are offered in the *instrumentum laboris*. Catholic schools have a great responsibility to serve the family by creating a welcome environment and showing the face of God.

Moving forward

When the Synod of Bishops meets in October, dialogue and development of the richness of what is contained in the *instrumentum laboris* is expected to take place. To come to some idea of how to respond to the new demands of the people of God, the following three main areas are under discussion in the Church: 1) how the Gospel of the Family can be preached in the present day; 2) how the Church's pastoral care programme for the family might better respond to the new challenges today; 3) how to assist parents in developing a mentality of openness to life and in upbringing their children.

Since the love of God shines in a particular way in the Holy Family of Nazareth, this beacon of true love is to be contemplated in every family situation so as to draw light, strength and consolation.