



The Silent Saints

Tomorrow (26th January) the Bishops Conference for England and Wales will launch a major initiative on family life. "Listening 2004".

The Bishops Conference Committee for Marriage and Family Life are actively encouraging every Diocese to engage in a conversation process with families around the themes; Families at home, Families in the world, and Families in the church. They hope to identify the difficulties families face and how they cope? To highlight what is good about family life and the needs they have. The outcome will be to better inform the Bishops Conference about the state of family life and how it is supported within the church.

I welcome the initiative. I have said for some time that we need to invest more in the listening elements of the church. It is in careful listening that we can tune into the reality of peoples lives and those we seek to serve. Listening with purpose is also important. We have to be open to the possibility that it may help to shape our own diocesan and national structures so that we are better able to respond to the needs of those around us. My hope is that it will provide a living witness to the good news of family life in ways that ordinary people can understand us.

Family life lies at the heart of the church or as one of my colleagues puts it the hearth of the church. Familiaris Consortio the encyclical on the family in the modern world refers to the family as the domestic church. Our defence of the sanctity of marriage and for people to building lasting and binding commitments to each other is still important. There are those who oppose our teaching; however the experience of what is happening in the world is making people reconsider their position. When 1 in 100 pregnant women in the UK are tested they are found to have HIV in some inner city areas it is 1 in 90. At the same time we are seeing significant growth in other sexually transmitted diseases. The move away from marriage to cohabitation and the recognition of same sex partnerships are realities we have to face. In the light of these things our teaching on these matters will be tested and needs to be better understood. We are a mature church and have nothing to hide; it calls for a mature response.

The great thing is we have so much to celebrate, even with its imperfections; its struggles and brokenness there are living examples of hope for family life across the country. People who each day struggle to live out their vocation as parents, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. The silent saints of the church, people who nurture the faith in the lives of those entrusted to their care even when their own reality is so challenging to themselves.

The Listening 2004 process is important for us all, the difficult bit will be responding to the conversations in a way in which people feel they have been heard and taken seriously. The appropriate response also lies with us, perhaps a starting point is to uncover the many silent saints and celebrate with them the fact that they have a place at the hearth of the church, in so doing we will work a rich seam of hope, faith and vitality for family life.

Kevin Flanagan