

DRAFT

Reflection and Consultation in Archdiocese of Dublin on

The vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in the contemporary world

Questions on the Lineamenta for

2015 Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishop

Submission of Parish of Our Lady of Good Counsel, Ballyboden, Dublin 16

Introduction

The Parish of Ballyboden is in South Co. Dublin adjoining the parishes of Ballyroan, Rathfarnham, Churchtown and Marley. It has a population of around 9,000. Details on the Parish can be found on its website, www.ballybodenparish.ie

The above mentioned reflection and consultation in parishes requested by Archbishop Martin is welcomed. It has been coordinated in Ballyboden by the Parish Pastoral Council. D

Response

The first objective of the process was achieved in that many in the parish were made aware of the Synod and its theme. This will be a basis for keeping parishioners informed on the next stages of the Synodal and post Synodal processes and on the theme itself. It also gave any parishioners who wished to the opportunity to submit their views, concerns and suggestions for priorities in supporting families in responding to their vocation and mission. The Parish Council, therefore, does not see this as a once off consultation, but as the beginning of a process in the parish in raising awareness of and commitment to the vocation and mission of families, to be further developed in the years ahead.

A relatively small number of responses were received and a small number attended the discussions. However, it is considered that these responses reflected the views of many parishioners. These have been fully taken into account in this submission. The relatively small response could be put down to a number of factors possibly including difficulties in giving written responses, non-involvement in groups that could help coordinate responses, satisfaction with Church in the parish as is, lack of particular interest in the concepts of vocation and mission of the family. There is much in the nature and extent of the response for the Parish Council and the parish more generally to reflect on.

We would welcome an exchange of experiences, once this phase is over, on how the consultation process operated in parishes more generally in the Archdiocese from which we could learn.

Format of Submission

Rather than following the order of questions in the Lineamenta, we have adopted a family life cycle approach and deal with the questions as applicable in that context.

Pre-marriage

Up to the recent past in our parish and in Ireland more generally, many in their 20s, were able to

become established in their careers (usually the men), to obtain a home, and start a family. Now third level education and career preparation can last well into their 20s for each of a couple and frequently they are well into their 30s before they secure more steady employment, acquire a home and are in a position to start a family. This reality together with rapidly changing values in relation to sexual relations outside marriage and contraception has led to a rapid growth in cohabiting couples, which for many in Ireland is an interim stage before marriage. For example, of 344, 944 couples without children in 2010, 261, 652 were married but 83, 292 were co-habiting couples. However, in the same year there were 57,671 cohabiting couples with children under 20, representing 9.2% (7.5% in Census 2006) of all couples with children under 20 in 2010. In the intervening period since 2010 these trends appear to be going upward and becoming more socially acceptable and even commonplace.

We are not sure how this trend can be reversed, but it may be possible for the Church to encourage couples to shorten the period of cohabiting. One way of doing so is to inform people of the well documented risks and dangers cohabiting poses to achieving a permanent relationship. A decision to live together may not be as secure a basis for a lifelong relationship as a commitment to marriage. Usually one of the couple (generally the woman) would prefer the security and status of marriage. and support should be given to these preferences by presenting clear evidence based arguments for marriage. Young married couples would have particular credibility in presenting these arguments. More fundamentally it is considered that the Church should also endeavour to lead a public debate on how the economic and social obstacles to getting married could be overcome.

Marriage Preparation

Many saw the value of marriage preparation courses, particularly those organised by ACCORD. However, for some they are too short. They considered there should be greater emphasis on relationship training going back to the second level education cycle. Some also considered that couples need support in the early stages of marriage and particularly with the pressures that arise with the first and subsequent children, especially if both parents are working. (See below).

Getting Married

Concern was expressed that all the requirements associated with getting married in Church could be an obstacle to marriage and at least to its delay. It was suggested that the various requirements need to be streamlined and, where possible, reduced. There was concern with what appears to be the beginnings of a drift away from Church weddings. Hotels are now offering facilities for civil weddings, a growing number of which are humanist, as part of an “all in wedding package”. Church weddings by comparison can result in significant extra costs and take up significant time on the day. It is also the case that many guests are no longer practicing Catholics. In view of this the suggestion was made that couples be given the option of just having a wedding ceremony separate from the Mass. This could be celebrated on another occasion eg the evening before, for the couple with family members and friends who wished to attend. This would enable the sole emphasis to be placed on the sacrament of matrimony, which at present can be seen mainly as an insert into the Mass. Having separate marriage ceremonies occurs in other countries, so it should be possible to introduce this option in Ireland.

Early Years of Marriage

Marriage is a life long state and commitment. It is often the case that the relevance of the marriage preparation does not become apparent until the couple are living together after marriage and meeting the difficulties and challenges that this brings. There was strong support, therefore, as recognised in the Lineamenta, for the provision of specific support at this stage. Such support could

be provided by couples trained, for example, by ACCORD. These couples could be drawn from older married couples in the parish who could act as mentors and would also be available as a support.

Later Years of Marriage

It was pointed out that couples at later stages in their marriage can also benefit from support. One or both spouses may invest little time or commitment in their relationship and thus not reap the benefits of a true loving relationship for themselves, their families and community. This lack of engagement can also increase the risks of marital breakdown.

Supports for couple relationships – small groups

The provision of support could be greatly facilitated through the development of small groups for couples to share their experiences, benefit from relevant talks, other inputs, and social outings. This could also include guidance on making time for effective communication, conflict resolution, for effective relationship with children, other family members, and with God through prayer, scripture reading, meaningful participation in the sacraments (for latter, see below). Couples would also benefit from time away in a suitable setting (eg a retreat house) for more extended time together.

Parish programmes with at least some of these elements could be developed with a pooling of ideas and resources between parishes and dioceses. This type of support and engagement can also greatly help to build the Parish Community and foster greater religious practice.

Wounded Families

There was strong support for a more compassionate approach to families where the couples are separated, divorced, remarried, and single parent families. There is a recognition that the Church's teaching on marriage has to be respected and that a balance has to be struck between a compassionate, pastoral approach to wounded families and ensuring that the Church's teaching is not undermined.

Where children are involved, however, the principal criterion should be what is in the best interests of the children's faith development and commitment to the Church. If one or both parents are excluded from the sacraments that can result in a falling away from religious practice that could jeopardise the faith of the children who are innocent in these family situations. As for the adults involved, the impact on couples from social and economic pressures, the level of maturity when marriage was entered into, problems arising from addictions, domestic violence etc. and the commitment to a new relationship should all be mitigating factors in the context of permitting a return to the sacraments.

The fact that this issue is getting such prominence at the Synod is very much welcomed as is the compassionate, pastoral approach being adopted by Pope Francis.

Parenting

Much concern was expressed with parish support for parenting. A key group in this regard are pre-school children. There are few Church related pre-school childcare services, little support for parents at this crucial stage of their marriage and little effective provision made at Mass to accommodate families with toddlers and young children. Yet the weight of research in this area shows that the preschool years are among the most critical in a child's development and also one of the more vulnerable in a couple's relationship.

A number of people also commented on how the programmes for First Communion and Confirmation often do not lead to sustained commitment and religious practice after the ceremonies

are over. The roots of this often go back to the pre-school phase. Accordingly, support for parenting should begin as early as possible in the child's life.

How to support parents

It is considered that the suggestions made above in relation to supporting marriage could also support parenting. This could include space and time to share experiences, ideas, supports (eg babysitting), social outings etc. It could also greatly help to raise awareness and inspire parents in relation to their responsibility to pass on the faith.

Passing on the Faith

Much concern was expressed, especially among the older age groups, over the fact that the faith is not being passed on to the young generations. This is put down to the steep fall off in religious practice, the pressures of modern life and life styles, the impact of secularisation and the fact that religious beliefs and commitment get little positive recognition but are often questioned negatively or even ridiculed. It was also observed that many are not given the support to mature in their faith and have it provide direction in their lives. The following are a number of suggestions put forward that might help to remedy this.

Mass

There were strong views coming forward from some young parents stressing the importance of Children's Masses on a regular basis. These would enable both parents and children to relax and be themselves and be a source of joy rather than one of restraint, tension and often boredom for the children. There could be scope afterwards for parents to meet and socialise, to learn of relevant couple and parenting activities and be encouraged to participate. It would be about community building and putting the relevance of the Church at the centre of people's lives. A number of parishes could combine to organise Children's Masses with individual parishes organising them on a rota basis.

There was also a number of suggestions for special masses to attract people back to Church practice and to seeing the relevance for their lives. It was pointed out that there is much to learn from the large numbers who attend Mass at Christmas and for Easter. Could there be other such occasions of significance during the year? Suggestions included masses at significant dates during the school year, for people celebrating significant birthdays, wedding anniversaries, anniversaries of the deaths of loved ones, etc which would draw families of all ages and make them familiar with mass, its meaning and relevance to their lives in a positive way.

Religious practice in the home

Much concern was also expressed with the degree to which religious practice in the home is declining. There were numerous comments to the effect that children no longer know their prayers, let alone say them. Suggestions made included the encouragement of a "prayer rhythm" for the home, at mealtimes, bedtime and in the mornings. Given the major impact of TV, DVDs. Tablets, laptops, iPhones etc. it was suggested that these be harnessed as an aid to prayers and the imparting of religious knowledge.

Passing on the Faith

Enabling parents to fulfil their mission to pass on the faith is a major challenge. Research here in Ireland shows that they do not find solidarity and support from the Christian Community in this regard, as most of the focus is on schools. Yet research also shows that young people are still most influenced by parents. Parents need to be made aware of this and, in particular, that values are as much "caught" as taught. They are caught from the way

parents relate to each other and to their wider families, neighbours, community, the less well off, as citizens, and how they spend their time and money.

Adult Religious Practice and Faith Development

It was also pointed out that many adults do not have a significant, mature understanding of their faith, which hampers passing it on to their children. Given the time pressures on parents today it is recognised that there are great difficulties in remedying this. There were suggestions for harnessing IT to support adult religious practice in the home and faith development. These could be developed for prayer, the word of God, faith development and in other areas such as couple relationships, parenting, community and social justice, backed up by group meetings. Reference was also made to the potential for “streaming” in Churches not just in relation to celebrations of the Eucharist but for other purposes such as talks, Choir recitals etc.

Greater use of IT and the social media could also be made to exchange experiences, good practices, resources for faith development with other parishes, dioceses and other countries, especially English speaking – UK, USA, Canada and Australia, where much innovative work is being done. Parish and diocesan websites are one key way of achieving this and these could be adapted to facilitate this.

Reflection and consultative process

In conclusion, the following is a brief outline of the reflection and consultative process used by the Parish Council. It was decided as a first step to include a notice on the consultation in the Parish Newsletter of 15 February. A condensed version of the Lineamenta containing its main points on the vocation and mission of the family, the main questions and web references to the Lineamenta (copy attached). It was circulated at all Masses on the following Sunday and in Parish schools on the following week. It was limited in size to one page, front and back, for ease of circulation. Members of the Parish Council spoke at all Masses to introduce the note and urge people to send in their views on the following Sunday, 1st March (copy of their talk attached). People were invited to put notes with their views could be placed in special boxes in the Church or emailed to the Parish Office - ballybodenparish@eircom.net. Parishioners were invited to a discussion on the theme on Wednesday, 4th March and the deadline for sending in views was extended to Sunday 8th March. A draft was put on the Parish website on Tuesday, 10th March with a view to completion by Monday, 16th March.