



Clogher Walks With Pope Francis

Summary of Consultations with the Local Church of the Clogher Diocese in advance of the Synod on the Family 4th - 25th October 2015.

What is Synod Consultation about?

The Synod consultation in the Clogher Diocese emerged from the invitation extended by Pope Francis to all of the members of the Church to engage with the Bishops partaking in the Synod on the Family, to be held in Rome in October 2015. This Synod will follow on the Extraordinary Synod on the Family which was held in October 2014. The theme of the Synod is: **The Vocation and the Mission of the Family in the Church and the Contemporary World.**

The very concept of consultation with all the faithful, ordained and non-ordained, is new to many. It is rooted in the understanding of *synodality* – *of the members of the Church walking together* to discern the will of the Holy Spirit. This is a key component of the leadership style of Pope Francis, where collegiality and synodality form cornerstones of the governance of the Church. He has described it not as a parliament but as a ‘protected space’ where the voice of the Holy Spirit can be heard.

How it was done?

The consultation and the views which have emerged from it here in the Clogher Diocese are not sourced or measured scientifically, but reflect the sense expressed by those people – priests and laity – who volunteered to attend a series of Consultation Gatherings and the separate meetings of priests during February 2015.

A total of 257 people (lay and ordained) took part in 7 Gatherings across the diocese. These broke down as 108 male and 149 female. A further 7 written submissions were received. In total, 36 out of the 37 parishes were represented at the Consultation Gatherings. The representation of young people and young couples varied from venue to venue. However, there was ample opportunity for younger voices to be heard. All meetings were held at the level of combined Pastoral Areas. The initiative was organised by an eight-member Steering Group appointed by Bishop MacDaid, consisting of lay people and priests. The findings were forwarded to the Irish Episcopal Conference and have been included in the Irish submission to Rome in advance of the Synod.

Overall Impressions:

The levels of participation and the strength of many of the contributions, together with the vision for change, shows that there is an energy and a commitment on the part of many lay people in the diocese that is not being fully harnessed. A number of priests have expressed the view that the atmosphere and energy, and the experience, that was evident at the Consultation Gatherings of the wider Church (Priests and laity) was absent at the meetings attended only by priests.

What has emerged from the consultation is a strong support for the Catholic understanding of marriage and the family today. The sense of the faithful, lay and ordained, is that the Catholic understanding of marriage leads to secure, happy and fulfilled families. However, many problems and challenges were identified, at both a cultural and ecclesial level.

Another observation that emerged from the process is that there is a stronger sense of Catholic identity in the parishes that form part of Northern Ireland. It is clear that the sense of community in Catholic parishes in the southern part of the diocese (ROI) is nowhere near as strong as it was only a few decades ago. This appears to be due to the increased secular influence there, which is often hostile to Catholicism in particular, coupled with lack of adequate parish pastoral initiatives involving priests and laity sharing the mission of proclaiming the Gospel within a local community setting.

Summary of Findings

Initiatives for Families:

- There are many good initiatives within parishes and our diocese which help marriage and family, thus helping to counteract aspects that have a negative impact on marriage. These include ACCORD, some faith development initiatives such as New Heart New Spirit, and youth organisations too such as Clogher don Óige and John Paul II Awards. The work in the wider community of organisations - such as the GAA and other sports organisations for example - which help to support families, is also a very good model. However, the local Church must be careful to sustain initiatives and to reach out to families on the margins. In this regard, realising a sense of community within the Church is important. This is becoming more difficult under the present model.
- The Church in Ireland celebrates funerals, marriages and baptisms well and these also contribute to strengthening family-life and marriage and forge links between the family and faith community. Sadly, this is too often the only opportunity for engagement.
- The Church at present acts as a support to people, when it brings people together and creates a caring and responsible community. It is also present when it highlights issues and causes in the worshipping assembly that require awareness, prayer and action.
- Priests and Parish communities generally could do more to remind and encourage the laity of their priesthood that comes from their common baptism - to invite people to take their place of ownership in the Church.



Coping with Cultural and Social Change:

- The Church at the local level must always be ready to address the effects that cultural changes foist on us. This need not be in a cultural war sense. New ways need to be found in making the joy of the Gospel realised in people's lives, particularly as families.
- Economic hardship has impacted severely on many families in recent years. The local Church community must continue to be a support and welcoming space, a place for all to encounter the Lord.
- Homes today are more fragmented; some homes don't have or use a table around which to dine and come together. Excessive social media usage is often an obstacle to relationships and conversation. Getting the message of Jesus across can be difficult.
- What does the Church have to say? The Irish Church suffers from excessive clericalism. It needs to couch its message in a language of mercy and understanding. It also needs to have a life at the intellectual level that empowers it to dialogue with the world, not as being shy, confused and intellectually lacking in confidence.

How does the Church define a healthy vision of Marriage? Can it do more?

- Proclaiming the beauty of marriage as a life-long commitment, rooted in Christ, is the cornerstone of the family. There is always the risk of criticism from those who criticise the Church for being exclusive and narrow-minded. There needs to be a forging a renewal in the Church that proclaims the Gospel in a more joyful manner, one that is not critical or condemnatory of others.
- Priests and parishes could do more to help married couples realise how they are essentially a core foundation stone for the Church and do more to challenge any government policy that undermines married life or makes it less attractive by other models of relationship to non-married couples.
- The Church community could do more at a national level to win back some celebrations exploited by the world of business and commerce, such as St. Valentine's Day. These might prove to be a valuable means of connection with people.

Promoting Family in the Secular World:

- Church teaching must be reasoned and reasonable, focussing always on the joy of the Gospel. The Good News should not be reduced to a negative teaching. Language and listening are of immense importance. Can we do more to foster good listening?
- It is possible that our definition of marriage/family is also partly derived from the notion of positive support and nurturing stability that family ought to provide. Our notion of family is also partly defined by our understanding of what is the best possible atmosphere for children to grow up in. Other models of family may have elements that are good and positive for children but are they the best model? Isn't the best model the one we should be promoting or striving for?
- Secular movements have definitions of marriage that speak in the context of rearing children rather than creating them in the specific union of man and woman. The Church includes the latter element and teaches that the potential for creating life in the union of man and woman is something that is intrinsic to the very nature of marriage, as expressed in the different, mutually compatible and exclusive reproductive design of male and female.

- The diminution of commitment in general is damaging to society. We must show how marriage is for the common good, how it can build a healthy society for all members, married or single. Our role is to show how it is better for us that we look beyond ourselves and reach out in love in order to find ultimate fulfilment.
- Relationships challenge selfishness while much in our society encourages us to be selfish. The Church has a prophetic role in challenging the cult of the Self, while teaching about the dignity that belongs to each one of us, as the individuals we are and how we can contribute to a good society. Whether called to marriage or not, all of us are called to relationships and find fulfilment in positive connection to others.
- Ongoing Formation of Priests to support Families - Possibly we need listening projects to discover peoples' situations and attitudes so that priests can further understand family demands and needs. Also, pastoral courses to help us deal with family problems today.

Helping those on the Margins:

- Many families today see themselves as marginalised from the Church. The local Church community has a responsibility to address this.
- Many priests do try but others, for want of time and resources, are not always able to. Many of those on the margins have little connection with the local parish. This needs to be addressed by priests and parishioners together. Would it be possible for ACCORD to be expanded into a wider series of activities to incorporate schools and general parish life?
- Many of those on the margins take their lead from imagery. There is a fear of permanency probably taken from media imagery. Married people, grandparents, the wisdom of the elders must be openly seen so that younger people may learn. The higher ideals must be seen and promoted.

Indissolubility of Marriage:

- The Gatherings of Laity and Priests considered the place of indissoluble marriage. It was felt that the indissolubility of Marriage is understood and accepted by some but not all practising Catholics. Modern society seems to suggest that there are alternative choices to a lifelong commitment especially when times are tough. Modern tensions and pressures exert considerable stresses on younger couples causing conflicts leading to separation. More needs to be done to encourage understanding of and commitment to indissolubility with support for troubled relationships.
- More needs to be done to inspire and encourage people towards living together permanently; such as recognising successful marriages, helping troubled marriages and families and providing ongoing support. The Church needs to address the youth age category which are missing from the congregation in order to regain their respect; so that they will seek and understand the Church teaching on permanency of marriage. The Church could arrange more family oriented events creating a stronger Church community which gives itself strength.
- The importance of family prayer in the home also needs to be emphasised and enhanced at parish level. The importance of prayer and the relevance of prayer to the life of the family is a challenge that the Church needs to meet in today's materialistic world. More efforts need to be made by local Catholic communities to make the Lord's invitation to partake known. The Church as the People of God must be a welcome space.

Marriage as a Sacrament:

- While many people understand what marriage means as a sacrament; many do not appreciate or share that teaching. Therefore, this teaching should be reinforced and explained more fully by the Church in the most effective way possible. Sometimes marriage is undertaken as the next step in a relationship without due consideration towards its sacramental nature. The inclusion of God as the third party in the marriage is not often understood and God is left behind after the wedding ceremony is over.
- A greater understanding of marriage as a sacrament would strengthen the commitment being undertaken and the significance of the union. Perhaps this could also be undertaken in conjunction with a programme of greater catechesis on and promotion of the sacraments in general, including a review of the age / stage for receiving Confirmation.



The Presence of God in Marriage:

- Encountering the love and mercy of the Lord in order to live out marriage vows is a great grace. In this regard, the local Church at parish and diocesan level can play an important role. The presence of God in a marriage is very important to the families in our diocese. However, not all may be conscious of the life-giving presence of the Lord and how the marriage covenant mirrors that of God with all his people.

Pastoral Care for 'Wounded Families':

- With regard to pastoral care for 'wounded families', there were a number of differing views. The outstanding view was that as a Church we should be more caring and inclusive. Some people in irregular unions feel that they are outside the Church and this is having serious knock-on implications for some, including other family members – particularly younger people – feeling excluded. We must make all feel welcome, as Jesus welcomed sinners as well as those saved. The doors of the church should be open to all.
- There was concern on the part of some about remarried people receiving Holy Communion, with differing views being expressed. Some felt that allowing people in second relationships to receive Holy Communion was diminishing marriage and that the Sacrament of Reconciliation should be the route offered to them. Others disagreed with this, stating that we as a Church cannot be judgemental and that we also have to take into account the pastoral care of children from second relationships.
- However, the broad consensus was that if people who are in second relationships felt a desire to come to Holy Communion, who should judge? The question of finding theological solutions to this area needs to be addressed by the Synod. The value of this synodal consultation was highlighted.
- Regarding the encouraging of those who are cohabiting or civilly married towards sacramental marriage, there were many different voices with a wide range of opinions. One of the main threads coming through from the responses was the need for faith formation on a wide scale, from post-Confirmation right through to marriage and beyond. There was also an emphasis on welcome and encouragement especially for those who may be living together and/or non-attendees.
- The invitation to receive God's mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation must be encouraged continuously.



The Church as a Helper to Families:

- There is a view that the Church has a number of agencies that are available to help vulnerable people and families in difficulty and these are doing good work. ACCORD is an obvious one. There is a need for their services to be highlighted and advertised more.
- The parish can play its part in tackling economic and social inequality and its impact on families in a number of ways. The local Church needs to be a real community of love and fellowship.
- Opportunities for coming together and fellowship should be maximised – even the provision of an opportunity for a cup of tea or coffee after Mass on Sundays.
- The local parish should have means of helping the vulnerable and guiding them towards helpful agencies. The Church must continue to be a voice for the vulnerable in terms of influencing Government policy. The work of youth ministry too has an important part to play here.
- In the medium to longer term, the diocese should consider the setting up of a Family Ministry (even in conjunction with a neighbouring diocese) to enable agencies, parishes and families to work together to support the family.

Accompanying of Young Couples in the early years of Marriage:

- This needs attention and must not be left to agencies or to priests alone, even though both have a responsibility here. Greater co-ordination and planning is required.
- The local parish should be a family for all families. This should include visits from priests and parish teams, pastoral care, marriage retreats, renewal of marriage promises, celebrations of anniversaries as well as practical support where possible.
- The liturgy should be family-friendly too, with children of all ages being actually seen and heard, and welcomed, as part of the congregation.
- The Church at local level needs to project itself better as a community that is part of the wider community and not the preserve of an elite.



The Pastoral Care of Homosexual People

- This provoked some of the most intense debates and expressions of views, some of them strident on both sides. Indeed, many people voiced strong objections to the language used in the Synod documents.
- The viewpoints on the pastoral care of homosexual people centred on (1) promotion of Jesus' message of love and mercy to all people, irrespective of their situation in life, (2) the putting forward of authentic Church teaching on sexuality (3) the challenges which modern culture poses to the teaching of the Church (4) the need to create a welcoming space for all in all our parishes (5) pastoral care for families of homosexual people.
- The terminology of the Synod questions speaks of 'in the light of cultural sensitivities' thereby inviting responses that test the 'signs of the times' in the light of the Gospel.
- This whole question is a difficult and sensitive one for many people. These are questions which touch many people and families.
- What is clear is that the call to witness to the love and mercy of Jesus at all times and in all situations must be paramount. We must be open to how the Holy Spirit is guiding the Church on these questions, remaining faithful to the authentic teaching of Jesus on marriage and the family and enabling all those who form part of the Body of Christ through baptism to be part of the Christian community to the fullest extent possible. The use of language and approach will be critical to the fuller understanding of the issues involved.

The Role of the Family in the Work of Evangelisation:

- It was noted that in many parishes there are already good structures in place to support families and add to the good work of evangelisation being done in Catholic schools.
- However, some parishes lack structures and personnel to carry out this enhanced role. It is also recognised that such important and necessary work will become even more vital into the future, particularly in the light of social trends.
- The future place of Catholic schools and the space for religious instruction will also be a question that will arise and which could have implications that need to be anticipated. This calls for resources at a number of levels.
- It is felt that these questions need to be addressed in a strategic manner, taking into account current economic, social, cultural and demographic realities. Are there possibilities that we can take on board from other Christian communities?
- Above all, we need to constantly educate young people to pray. Prayer and the call to holiness is the route to renewal.

Other Considerations:

Many of the questions raised in the consultation refer to responses that could emerge locally from within the local Church of the Clogher diocese. Given that the process of consultation was welcomed and participated in, the suggestion of a Diocesan Synod (with an adequate preparatory phase) was made. This would assist all parishes and enable the Church locally to grow as a community - as the People of God on mission to encounter the Lord. A Diocesan Synod would be an opportunity to take stock of the questions raised and, moreover, agree appropriate pastoral and ecclesial responses with sound strategies.



The Extraordinary Holy Year – the **Jubilee of Mercy** – announced by Pope Francis; to run from 8 December 2015 (the 50th anniversary of the close of Vatican II) and following from the Synod on the Family, is a great opportunity to begin our renewed outreach to all in our Church. Given the place of Lough Derg here in our diocese, this has even more relevance and importance. The pathway to renewal means moving out to the margins and the periphery. From there the reform will come. From there, rooted in a radical encounter with the Lord, may our Church, wherever it is, be also the field hospital of the Lord.

Prayer to the Holy Family for the Synod

**Jesus, Mary and Joseph, in you we contemplate the splendour of true love,
to you we turn with trust.**

**Holy Family of Nazareth, grant that our families too may be places of communion and prayer,
authentic schools of the Gospel and small domestic Churches.**

**Holy Family of Nazareth, may families never again experience violence, rejection and division:
may all who have been hurt or scandalized find ready comfort and healing.**

**Holy Family of Nazareth, may the approaching Synod of Bishops make us once more mindful of the
sacredness and inviolability of the family, and its beauty in God's plan.**

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, graciously hear our prayer! Amen.