

The Call, the Journey and the Mission

An Invitation from the Bishops of England and Wales to Reflect on the Gift of Marriage and Family Life

The Response of *Two in One Flesh*

1. WHAT ARE THE JOYS AND HOPES OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE TODAY?

The Church ALWAYS needs to distinguish between marriage and family life. The two spiritualities are different and they require different types of pastoral care.

Marriage:

Joys – These include living life to the full including our sexual intimacy, giving together and forgiving each other, having fun, the experience of being accepted and belonging, and resting secure in our faithfulness

Hopes - caring and sharing until the end; faithfulness, permanence and fruitfulness in terms of our sexual intimacy benefiting our relationship as well as being a source of new life

Family:

Joys - sharing deeply in the lives of the children and grandchildren

Hopes - That each child/grandchild will know that they are loved unconditionally just as they are, hopefully leading them to understand the unconditional love of God.

There is also the hope that whenever a member of the family needs help of any sort, another member of the family will always provide it.

2. WHAT ARE YOUR STRUGGLES AND FEARS OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE TODAY?

Marriage:

Struggles - continuing to try and love each other through financial difficulties, misunderstandings, miscommunication and the ensuing misery. This includes the loss of sexual intimacy, particularly at times of ill health, especially when mental illness is involved.

There is also the inability to address the different attitudes and traditions that are brought to the marriage due to inadequate marriage preparation or a lack of openness.

Fears - the sense of a loss of the presence of God within the relationship and experiencing the lack of support from the Church, which results in a perceived sense of indifference to the couple's pain and anguish.

There is also the fear of losing one's spouse as a partner through severe illness, death or separation.

Family:

Struggles - when the intrinsic value of an individual member of a family is diminished in the workplace by redundancy or dismissal and lack of support, it has a very negative effect on the whole family. Struggles also include conflicts, and the ensuing chaos.

In some cases, children suffer at school because they and their parents do go to church and their parents are still together.

Fears – One fear is that our children will lose faith in God's love for them.

3. HOW CAN WE BETTER UNDERSTAND MARRIAGE AS A VOCATION?

One way is by more regular reflections from the pulpit of the Good News that every single person has a vocation and that God has a plan for each and every one of us. For many people, this finds its fulfilment in marriage and, again, this Good News needs to be highlighted, not just at the time of their wedding, but throughout every year where couples are reminded about their calling and affirmed on an ongoing basis to live in awareness that God is with them and will lead them and guide them every step of the way. Marriage preparation will then not be a new sense of vocation but will develop an idea whose seed has already been sown.

There is a need to understand that God created men and women because in the intimacy of their relationship within marriage, the nature and reality of God is revealed. Married couples are all called to reveal the nature of God through their relationship by being generous, faithful, forgiving, merciful, compassionate, altruistic, unconditional, and loving.

4 HOW DOES YOUR MARRIAGE ENRICH YOU?

It is a source of joy; a relationship where we belong and are accepted, and therefore we find peace. It gives a clear purpose, a faith-filled perspective, a companion for the journey, a safe harbour, somewhere to always come home to. It's a source of pleasure on a heavenly journey, and a source of life and fulfilment cemented in a particular way in the sexual relationship.

5. HOW DOES YOUR FAMILY LIFE ENRICH THOSE AROUND YOU?

Family life creates a community of love which attracts, welcomes, embraces and envelops other people. Of its nature it informs and invites and inspires others and the ripple effect gives other people a vision of all the Christian values of acceptance, mercy, forgiveness, compassion, openness, listening and true justice.

6. IN WHAT WAY, THROUGH THE ABIDING PRESENCE OF GOD, IS YOUR FAMILY 'SALT OF THE EARTH AND LIGHT TO THE WORLD,' AND A PLACE OF AND FOR HANDING ON OUR FAITH?

Stepping a long way outside of our comfort zones to take up different leadership roles within the Church. We can name specific and practical examples as follows:

- By being involved in leadership in the Worldwide Marriage Encounter movement.
- By producing resources to deepen the spirituality of married couples such as the *I am with You Years A, B and C* books of reflections on the Sunday readings and the shorter *Marriage Matters* reflections for parish bulletins
- Through others witnessing the way in which strength was and is obtained from God to stay together when one spouse is severely affected by mental illness. This is witnessed by people both inside and outside the Church.
- Adopting an elderly gentleman without any family to live within our own family for 14 years, until his death.
- Initiating an ecumenical neighbourhood scheme, which is still running after 40 years
- Fidelity to a marriage until one partner left, and the children were raised in the ethos of the Church and the living witness of that.
- Building and setting up a retreat centre where couples could come for Marriage Enrichment, being invited by the builder to go to his home for dinner as he wanted his wife to meet us as 'we give something of'.
- Our home being a place where others could come to work out their differences and difficulties and the family absorbing those values and continuing them in their own lives.
- Developing a programme for engaged couples, which is still going on after 30 years
- Giving talks on marriage in schools
- In some cases, all the children are active in Church ministries.

7. DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER COMMENTS?

Much of the Church's practises and language seem irrelevant to young people. The young of the Church need to hear that God loves them in a way that is meaningful in the context of their own lives. In particular, the Church needs to communicate more effectively to young people the importance of Scripture and the Eucharist. It is therefore important to prepare supporting programmes such as those produced by groups like 'Care for the Family'. We need to distinguish between values and practices

Formation and preparation for marriage is crucial. Couple witness is vital - in schools, Church and society.

Ongoing affirmation and encouragement of married couples is essential to create an understanding that marriage IS a vocation in which the couple is called by God to live in love on a daily basis in ways small and large; making a cup of tea/coffee, staying awake to look after a child at night, attending the football match and holding down the daily job(s).

All parents can benefit from a good parenting course but special support is needed for the parents with children that are facing the challenges of addiction, sexual orientation, mental health issues and emotional disturbances. This includes cases where children have entered into same sex partnerships.

There is also a need for the pastoral care of families that are affected by mental health issues, the separated and divorced and those whose partner has died.