

World Synod on the Family

Responses of some Catholic families from Ballarat and surrounding areas to ***THE VOCATION AND MISSION OF THE FAMILY IN THE CHURCH AND CONTEMPORARY WORLD.***

Overall comments

- We welcome the Lineamenta as an honest document that has laid key issues facing the family on the table. The document acknowledges that the Church does not have the answers to difficult situations faced by many people. The document provides a valuable opportunity for detailed consideration of how best to respond to these issues.
- We welcome the opportunity for lay people to comment on the Lineamenta, noting that this may be the first time an opportunity like this has been provided. It is an important step forward for the Catholic Church.
- We welcome the unequivocal statements in the Lineamenta that reiterate the indissolubility of marriage and the "openness to life" aspect of sexuality and the commitment to the truth.
- We welcome the inclusive approach of the document and the Church's desire to reach out to those who are outside of the Church. We note that "inclusiveness" and "acceptance" are broad and subjective terms. This highlights the importance of clarity to distinguish between what the Church can embrace and build upon as opposed to the things that the Church must take a clear stand against.
- For example, "men and women with a homosexual tendency ought to be received with respect and sensitivity". However, "there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family". Providing clear distinctions such as this in other challenging areas will help all Catholics more effectively live out the values highlighted in the Lineamenta.
- We suggest that inclusiveness of those who are outside of the Church has the highest chance of success – and will be more authentic - if parishes themselves (and the broader Catholic Church) can model inclusiveness towards regular mass-going Catholics. Developing a culture of inclusiveness towards parishioners requires a preparedness to listen and act in response to concerns, to ensure sacramental programs are flexible enough to respond to a variety of needs, and to have an attitude of charity and acceptance towards those with different views to your own
- in this regard, we believe there are areas for improvement. For example, the needs of strong home-schooling families could be better catered for in sacramental programs. The programs' content can be very basic and foundational, perhaps with a view to cater for those who not attend mass regularly but who have children undertaking sacraments. However, the latter's needs are very different to the former's and we would welcome the development of content for sacramental programs that is inclusive of the needs of all parishioners.

- further, there is a feeling of marginalisation within the parish amongst some strong home-schooling families. There is a perception that the choice by some families to home-school their children – and the requests made of the parish that relate to this choice - is regarded warily or with annoyance by some.

- We believe that further dialogue with parish leaders would help address this perception, leading to a more inclusive and united parish community. This, in turn, can strengthen efforts to reach out to those in our local communities who are outside of the Church.

Specific questions (note – the responses below were to a selected group of questions discussed)

Question 4 – What is being done to support strong families?

The parish youth group provides a valuable source of spiritual and social support for our children. We are deeply grateful for the work that is being done by the parish and by volunteers to run the group and tend to the needs of our children.

The provision of the sacraments, prayer opportunities, talks and workshops (e.g. workshops in Gregorian chant) at the parish nourish our spirituality, deepen our faith and help prepare and resource us to fulfil our roles in the family and areas of ministry in the parish. We strongly value the work of priests and the broader parish in this area.

Question 4 (cont.) - What more could be done to support strong families?

- **long term married couples (i.e. those married for 10, 15 years or more) are an underutilised resource within the parish.** We would like more opportunities to contribute, particularly in the area of catechesis, marriage enrichment and sacramental preparation. We have outlined a number of suggested ways in which we can support married couples and families in this response to the Lineamenta. We believe that a partnership between priests and experienced married couples could be formed to develop/implement of program of outreach to strengthen marriages

- **sacramental programs need to be flexible enough to cater for the needs of all in the parish** i.e. for regular mass-goers as well as for those who attend less regularly (e.g. when their child is receiving a sacrament). This may necessitate more than one program and there are families within the parish with the experience and knowledge to help develop and/or deliver these programs. We would like to offer to contribute in this way

- **homilies and programs at the parish should reinforce the values taught at home.** The values taught by strong/home-schooling families are those values highlighted in the Lineamenta document. In a culture so hostile to Catholic values, reinforcement of the values taught at home by priests in the homily can provide a significant support to the efforts of families to pass on the faith. In this regard, homilies which have a **strong focus** on the word of God (especially the Gospel) are the most nourishing and – given there appears to be some discretion as to what can be covered in the homily - can be used to reinforce the important values of the indissolubility of marriage, sexuality with an openness to life etc.

- **support for home-schooling.** Home-schooling allows strong families to properly nurture the faith of their children and has proven academic outcomes. A more supportive attitude and understanding

towards home-schooling among priests and other leaders in the parish would help strong home-schooling families to feel supported.

Question 5 – What is being done to help families in trouble? How might troubles be prevented? How effective is pastoral care being offered to families “on the periphery”?

Troubles can be prevented by providing support early on in the marriage. There are a range of groups, associations and programs that do this (see page 5). We would welcome further dialogue about how we can support the implementation of some of these groups and programs within the Diocese. It may also be fruitful to learn from what other Christian churches are doing to support families in trouble.

Question 7 - What needs to be done to equip ordained ministers and others to work effectively in the area of marriage and the family?

A greater spirit of cooperation between priests and laity could improve the effectiveness of marriage and family work. For example, collaboration between long term married couples and priests on marriage support programs and outreach.

Question 10 - How can couples living together before marriage or in de facto relationships be encouraged to choose marriage?

One way is for long term married couples within the Church to try and build relationships/networks with those in de facto relationships through a parish outreach program. Through interaction with these couples as part of this type of program, opportunities could arise to share the Church's vision of marriage and family life.

Question 11 - What is being done to help people understand the greatness and beauty of the indissolubility of marriage? What more could be done?

As part of a parish outreach program (see previous answer), long term married couples could convey content about the Church's teaching regarding the indissolubility of marriage.

Groups and associations (see page 5) like NACF, menALIVE, Ministry to the Newly Married etc. help to support the Church's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage. Parishes should identify ways in which they can promote and support these groups.

Question 12 - How can we help people understand better the power of a relationship with God in marriage and of the grace of the Sacrament in their lives?

This is a difficult challenge for the Church, given that only a low percentage of Catholics attend mass. However, sometimes you have to be a bit creative. One possibility is to have themed masses e.g. in Melbourne there is a “footy mass”. This possibly gives mass a wider appeal. Also, it could be effective to develop informal ways of interacting with those who are not involved with the Church. For example, inviting them along to regular social occasions (such as BBQs) which might provide an opportunity to invite them to particular masses and/or informal “faith sharing” from long term married couples and families.

Question 13 - How can we help people understand better that marriage is a key part of God's original plan and is therefore a way of fulfilment not confinement, joy not sorrow?

One way to do this is to build bridges between long term happily married couples and newly married couples. We could identify "Marriage Champions" within the parish who have a proven record in being a joyful witness to marriage to build bridges with younger couples.

Question 14 - How can the family be helped to become "the domestic Church" with a missionary vocation? How can we help develop a family spirituality?

Developing a family spirituality necessitates an understanding of the roles of the respective spouses. A significant gap is a cultural mentality which doesn't acknowledge the role and responsibilities of fathers in developing spirituality within children. Both scripture (Ephesians 6:4) and tradition (Familiaris Consortio) highlight the role of fathers as having a responsibility for the spiritual education of their children.

The acknowledgement of, encouragement in, and resourcing of, this important role - in homilies, sacramental preparation and parish catechesis - would help families to develop a stronger family spirituality.

Further, groups such as menALIVE support men in developing a family spirituality. Parishes should consider ways in which they can provide strong support to groups such as these.

It also important to promote motherhood as a vocation. The fact that the Blessed Virgin Mary lived and sanctified this vocation is enough to demonstrate its greatness. Women who undertake this sacrificial role should be given more of a voice by the Church – they have much knowledge to share about family spirituality.

Question 15 - What can be done to provide an effective and comprehensive catechesis of marriage and the family, starting in early life and involving life-long formation?

There are good programs and associations around (see page 5). We don't need to reinvent the wheel, we just need stronger promotion of these by individual Catholics and through the school and parish system.

Question 16 - Do we need to shape a new language in the area of marriage and the family? If so, how?

John Paul II has shaped a new language in his work on Theology of the Body. It is worth considering how this language and these ideas can be made more widely available to those both within and outside the Church.

Question 18 - Do we need to do more to support couples in the early years of married life? If so, what?

A good program that could be implemented more widely to support couples in the early years of marriage is:

Ministry to the Newly Married - a mentoring program for Newly Married Couples, married in the Catholic Church, in the first five years of their marriage. Each Newly Married couple is

matched with an “Adoptive” Couple, with whom they meet four times during the year at 2-3 monthly intervals. Each year the Newly Married couple is linked to a different Adoptive Couple so, over the five years, the Newly Marrieds tackle twenty different topics (4 topics x 5 years) and get an insight into five different marriages.

To support couples in responding to health and other challenges of married life in the early years, the development of a register of doctors and psychologists who support and operate by Catholic teaching would be a useful resource.

Question 20 - What movements and associations are there in the area of marriage and the family?

To name just a few, there are:

National Association of Catholic Families (NACF) - a lay organisation that aims to offer mutual support for Catholic families in maintaining the Catholic faith. It bases its work on a number of documents among them, Familiaris Consortio, the Charter of the Rights of the Family and Evangelium Vitae.

Ministry to the Newly Married – as above.

Missionaries of God's Love (MGL) - MGL is a Catholic religious congregation that came into being in Canberra, Australia in 1986. It is partnered with a lay organisation which is now called The Disciples of Jesus Covenant Community. A core part of its apostolate is focussing on young people. It manages managing parishes at Narrabundah (Canberra), East Burwood (Melbourne) and Manila, Philippines which are developing as centres of renewal and evangelisation, and drawing the young back into the life of the Church.

Worldwide Marriage Encounter – A Worldwide Marriage Encounter is a weekend away, offering married couples a special kind of "time out", a different kind of "weekend getaway". It is an opportunity to recharge their “relationship batteries” and more deeply explore the precious nature of their marriage. It offers a gentle, nurturing environment, away from the pressures and distractions of daily living. Thus, it allows both spouses to share your feelings, hopes and dreams with each other in ways that normal, daily living tends to inhibit.

menALIVE – a National Catholic Ministry to Men. The flagship event for the menALIVE ministry is the menALIVE weekend. menALIVE teams work in partnership with parishes throughout Australia and New Zealand to run these weekends. The program delivers relevant talks and personal testimonies, opportunity for discussion in small groups and, most importantly, it provides the space and environment for men to reflect.

Question 20 (cont.) Can these contribute more broadly and effectively?

The effectiveness of these groups/programs/ministries and associations can be improved by:

- ministries such as menALIVE are performing very valuable roles, however the support given to such groups at the parish level varies. This could be strengthened by stronger and more enthusiastic promotion at the parish level, by priests dropping in on the menALIVE prayer group every now and then and by interest from the Bishop in ministry to men and how this could be strengthened across the Ballarat diocese
- there are many Catholic couples in the parish who have strong families and years of experience in marriage and in rearing and educating children. These couples are an underutilised resource and would welcome the opportunity to contribute to strengthening marriage and family life by drawing on the resources of the above groups and associations. For example, experienced couples could partner with priests to deliver marriage support programs within the parish such as the Ministry to the Newly Married program (above)
- strong families could also look to establishing the above groups/associations (e.g. NACF) in the Ballarat Diocese which would strengthen support for marriage and the family locally
- developing a stronger culture of volunteering within the Church is required so that there are sufficient (human) resources available to run these programs. Further we need to ensure that volunteers are appropriately qualified and or trained to perform the roles required of them.

Question 26 - How can we communicate more effectively the Church's vision of married love and the beauty and dignity of parenthood as precented, for example, in Humanae Vitae?

This area presents particular challenges for the Church. For example, given that the contraceptive lifestyle is so accepted by many in the Church and broader community, priests may be reluctant to broach the issue in their homilies out of fear of offending some parishioners. However, in the longer term the absence of clear teaching on this issue undermines the achievement of the Church's vision for marriage and family life. As the Lineamenta states "Conscious that the most merciful thing is to tell the truth in love, we go beyond compassion".

The fundamental way in which the Church's vision is passed on is through parents as the "first educators" of children. Parents have a responsibility to inform themselves about the Church's vision and share this with their children.

Effective forms of communication include:

Use of social media - the use of social media and the internet can be a very effective tool to communicate the Church's vision to children. Facebook and Twitter and the internet generally have broadened exponentially the information that is available to share with our friends and family, including information that supports the Church's vision for married love and the beauty and dignity of parenthood.

For young people, effectively communicating the Church's vision of married love and parenthood is often most successfully done as part of a group to which they belong and feel welcome in. Examples of where this is done particularly well include:

- Missionaries of God's Love and Disciples of Jesus Covenant Community (as above)
- Confraternity of St Michael the Archangel – beginning in 1991, provided regular Catholic catechesis to hundreds of young people who used to travel long distances to get there (Oak Park), and it grew by word of mouth, and many marriages came out of it. The fruits of the Confraternity included vocations to the religious life, marriages and countless life-long Catholic friendships.

Locally, the St Patricks Cathedral parish youth group would be an ideal forum through which to communicate the Church's vision in these areas. This could involve inviting expert speakers from the Respect Life Office.

menALIVE, as mentioned, has played a very important role in highlighting the value of fathers and fatherhood.

Parishes inviting experts in this area to address parishioners in talks/presentations on the subject can be very effective

Question 29 – What more can we do to prevent abortion and foster a genuine culture of life?

Innovative and non-judgmental projects in this area abound. One way to help foster a genuine culture of life is to share this information more through social media. Particular examples of websites and projects include:

- The Babes Project - <http://www.thebabesproject.com.au/> - has been set up to encourage women facing a crisis pregnancy to continue with the pregnancy. The Babes Project establishes pregnancy support services and accommodation for women and children in the perinatal period, throughout Victoria.
- Emily's Voice - <http://www.emilysvoice.com/> - Emily's Voice exists to help Australians fall in love with the unborn and encourage and support women facing an unplanned or crisis pregnancy. Emily's Voice started in 2008 when a group of friends gathered for dinner, and the subject turned to abortion. The group and their friends decided that a positive, life-affirming, truthful media campaign was needed to challenge a culture that accepts 80,000 abortions each year.

The parish could also host talks to address a range of topics – including this one – and invite expert speakers, for example from the Respect Life Office in Melbourne or representatives of groups who have done important work in this area, such as:

- Sisters of Life – The Sisters of Life is a contemplative / active religious community of women founded in 1991 by John Cardinal O'Connor for the protection and enhancement of the sacredness of every human life. In addition to the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, we are consecrated under a fourth vow to protect and enhance the sacredness of human life.