

DIOCESE OF PORT PIRIE
PASTORAL CHALLENGES TO THE FAMILY IN THE CONTEXT OF EVANGELIZATION
SUMMARY OF RESPONSES
December 2013

PREAMBLE

In general, people of the diocese were encouraged by the invitation to speak of their experience and express their opinion and are hopeful that their responses will 'go somewhere'. There was a strong request for feedback and follow through at the diocesan level.

However, many people found difficulty with the survey document. They mentioned the abstract 'churchy' language, the exclusive and sexist language, the multitude of questions, the technical nature of the background material offered and the short response time allowed as militating against adequate response.

To quote a senior member of one parish community: *'It is my belief that if 'the Church' (being the people) were to take a step back and think of the ordinary people who are not academics, it would not provide questions 'the ordinary bloke' just cannot understand'. There seems to be such remoteness and disconnection between 'the Church' and ordinary people.'*

SURVEY PROCESS

People of the diocese of Port Pirie were invited to participate in the Survey process in the following ways:

- A simplified format available on the diocesan website Via Survey Monkey
- A hard copy simplified format available through the parish
- An abbreviated and simplified format designed especially for discussion groups

Sixty eight (68) responses were received with four of those responses being the collation of a group discussion with collective attendance of one hundred and fifteen (115) people. In total 183 people participated in the Survey.

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES

A summary of the 68 responses received via a variety of survey formats follows. The collation aims to be inclusive and generally verbatim with no attempt to weight responses.

1. The Diffusion of Teachings on the Family in Sacred Scripture and the Church's Magisterium.

In regard to the Documents:

The majority of respondents reported lack of familiarity with the teaching of the Church in the context of the Vatican documents mentioned. Limited access to the documents, lack of time and opportunity to engage with the documents and irrelevance were cited as reasons for this lack of familiarity.

Knowledge, Understanding, Acceptance, Rejection of the Church's Teaching on the Family.

While there is knowledge of the Church's teaching, more often than not it tends to be received in a negative mode about what is *not* permitted. There is a lack of knowledge and understanding of the Church's teaching from a positive and life giving perspective. In most cases there is acceptance of the Church's teaching on the part of those who responded to the survey but not always an understanding of the basis of the teaching.

For practising Catholics (mainly older people), the main lines – but not all - of the teachings on the Family are generally **known and accepted as ideals**. There are great values at the heart of the teachings which ordinary people generally subscribe to and value e.g. the gift of spouses to each other, the gift of children, the great values of fidelity, mutual respect, forgiveness, the emphasis on stable family life.

For the non-practising Catholics, which include so many of the generations below c 50, what the Church teaches, if they think or know about it at all, seems to be of little account or relevance to them. But this is not because they are not seeking spirituality - very many of them are with a great hunger – but they cannot find real spiritual sustenance in a way which makes sense to them.

Serious questions were raised about the **adequacy of the Church's attitudes/regulations towards divorce, re-marriage, contraception, responsible parenthood and same-sex unions**.

The opinion is widely held that most people, aware of the teaching of the Church, make up their own mind about issues such as contraception. People are more inclined to practise what they judge to be acceptable in modern day society rather than the teachings of the Church.

In regard to people **outside the Church** the general opinion is that where there is knowledge of the Church's teaching it is criticised as outmoded, rejected and sometimes ridiculed.

What are the cultural factors which hinder the full reception of the Church's teaching on the family?

The question implies that the Church's teaching on family is the only way to holiness and understanding God. It seems exclusive.

Internal Church cultural factors:

For the majority of non-practising Catholics, especially the generations under c 50, the leadership seems to be widely regarded as largely irrelevant because out of touch in the following areas:

*Teachings appear to be articulated and/or rest upon **fixed understandings** (e.g. 'natural law') emanating from a still largely static medieval theological metaphysical framework (e.g. the tone of the Preparatory Document). The paradigm-shifting consequences of the post-Darwinian world, i.e., an evolutionary creation, quantum physics, the new cosmology and huge advances in biological and psychological sciences seem not to be reflected in either the concepts or the language of the traditional teaching in so many areas, including family matters.*

The teaching of *Humanae Vitae* are widely perceived as wrong, and widely ignored. The Church lost credibility when it did not follow the recommendations of the committee set up at the time. Since then, most people have simply taken what they consider good and moral, decided what works for them and left the rest.

Inadequacy of **attitudes and pastoral practice** towards divorce/re-marriage and committed same-sex unions.

Imposing **celibacy** on diocesan priests whether they feel called to this or not.

Banning the **Third Rite of Reconciliation** - a previously highly-valued communal expression of repentance and forgiveness.

The rigid maintenance of the **exclusion of women** from even the principle of full and equal sharing in ministry and governance – on the basis of repeated 'flat earth' type arguments; and even the attempt to suppress discussion of this matter.

The impact of the grave mishandling by Church leadership of the whole **clerical sexual abuse** saga.

An earlier church culture of **'learned-helplessness'** and 'child-parent relationship between clergy and laity which is still very much alive in some parishes.

Overseas clergy with a different cultural background who are not capable of giving adequate pastoral assistance to their parishioners.

There is questioning of whether some priests are in total agreement with the Church in teaching on Marriage and family.

Too often the **clergy** are preaching to the converted and not moving outside of the 'Church'.

The majority who need to hear the Church's message do not attend Church.

Priests who cannot and do not relate to families; Priests who preach God as a tyrant; Lack of preaching on conscience.

Language barriers. The Church needs to speak in a way that is understandable to the ordinary person in the pew and in the street – not in elevated or 'churchy' tones. Use of symbols to represent God and language in the liturgy that is sexist and exclusive of women.

Cultural Factors in Community

Some respondents identified a general acceptance and **tolerance of all lifestyles** as problematic. People want to be politically and socially correct and are more inclined to practise what they think is accepted by modern day society rather than the teachings of the Church.

Many believe the Church needs to **'get with the times'** regarding family dynamics, sexuality, contraception, IVF etc.

The division of families (for work, travel across state and country boundaries).

Cross cultural marriages and marriage between two people of different faiths can be problematic in hearing and accepting the teaching of the Church.

The culture of marriage for love means that sex is seen as an expression of love, not as a means for procreation. Marriage as an institution is not always valued highly in society, as many choose to wait until absolutely settled before marriage (with home, work, children) or not get married at all. Marriage is not seen as necessary for family life today.

Cohabitation is generally accepted and is on the increase.

The disintegration of the family unit is identified as being at the foundation of many of the world's problems. Marriage is seen as a problem, as people have seen and experienced so many broken marriages, separations and divorces. Life-long commitment is hard to imagine.

Widespread **fear of commitment** at every level leads to a 'disposable' 'throw-away' society that too easily moves out of a relationship when difficulties arise.

Our **secular/materialistic society** and an environment that gives high priority to sport, work and making money creates enormous pressure and high expectations. In this climate of fast paced lifestyles people are too 'busy' to make time for God/spiritual life. At the philosophical level, people are too 'time poor' to nurture relationships.

The **marginalisation of religion**, a growing disrespect for authority and even an open hostility towards Christian faith.

The media, the pressure it exerts and the poor image of the Church projected in the media.

A Question: Is there a change in regard to having children? One respondent questions whether the culture is changing in regard to having children. There is an increase in the number of births. Are women feeling more the need to be mothers?

An observation: Multi-cultural families appear to be more in tune with the Church's teachings than Aussies.

2. The Pastoral Care of the Family in Evangelization

How have Christian families been able to fulfil their vocation of transmitting the faith? What signs would indicate that a family is taking their faith life seriously?

A cautionary note: Signs can be deceptive. No one can judge the seriousness of another's faith life.

Regular faith worship, attending Mass, especially Sunday Mass was universally identified as a key sign that a family is taking their faith life seriously. **Follow through** during the week with the teaching of the Sunday Mass e.g. by forgiving offences, involvement in Church events other than Mass, especially as a family, giving financial assistance to the Church and celebration of the feasts and seasons of the Church's year e.g. Easter, Christmas, were also seen as significant signs.

Regular prayer as a family was seen as important but very difficult to achieve. One respondent mentioned the 'sign value' of a library of sacred books in the home.

A searching faith and preparedness and ability to respond when challenged about religious matters; Robust discussion, understanding where love has its source and searching together for the sacred; speaking God's truth and not watering it down were named as vital for faith life.

Witness to the faith in everyday life: by example, kindness and charitable acts; an active community spirit; in simple ways by teaching children to love their neighbour, be good and kind to people. There is no need to bring back pious practices for the sake of doing so. There is need for new pious actions in today's world – **acts of extra-ordinary ordinariness!**

Sharing faith and spirituality with young people: Spiritual reading at home; nurturing children's faith in the home; speaking of God's love in one's life and sharing reasons for wanting to go to Mass rather than seeing Mass as duty or obligation were mentioned as key signs. However, some identified this sharing as problematic since we do not have an educated laity. It is generally very difficult for families to pass on the faith these days because they do not understand it well enough themselves.

The great example and sign-value of **parents and grandparents** was acknowledged and appreciated.

The Catholic School. Parents make commitment and sacrifice to provide Catholic education for children. Parents often feel inadequate/incompetent to teach children faith/spirituality and expect the school to take on this role.

Extra curricula Activities: Encouraging children to attend YCS and other youth groups, camps, activities are signs.

The Sacramental Program: Involving children in the Sacraments, ensuring that they receive the Sacraments.

Shared ministries in the Church is a good place to start in the transmission of faith e.g. both husband and wife or couple to participate together as Eucharistic Ministers, Children's Liturgy leaders, Readers, Collectors, Offertory. This could be extended to pastoral ministry, for example deacons.

Does the Church provide adequate preparation for Marriage?

Many respondents simply do not know what the Church offers in regard to Marriage Preparation and cannot judge whether the preparation is considered adequate. Others believe that the Church and other agencies offer assistance but this is not always accepted.

It is the view of many that the quality and availability of **Marriage Preparation Programs** depends largely on the priest and hence varies from parish to parish. The priest can offer good preparation for Marriage and support people in every and any way possible. Keeping in touch with couples is most important and appreciated.

One respondent considers the preparation in some cases to be 'over the top' – citing 30 + sessions and long waiting lists! Another view identified discrimination against non-Catholic partners in programs.

Centacare offers Marriage Preparation programs and also gives assistance to families in crisis. Larger towns are more able to provide preparation for marriage through Centacare and other agencies, but this opportunity is not readily available in small communities.

*Marriage preparation is not happening in many situations and with the growing number of people being married outside a Church this has fallen by the wayside. As an agency of the Catholic Church Centacare offers the **FOCCUS program** to those referred by local Priests and whilst this is insufficient it provides some basic understanding of each partner and their compatibility for marriage.*

*It is my view that much could be gained by **greater attention to the preparation for marriage**. It is my hope that the new Federal government may place greater emphasis on the need for this preparation which we are strongly supportive of happening. It is an issue that I believe the Church should be strongly supporting as the pain of people living in poor relationships is something we see in our work with couples often at a stage where it is difficult to re-ignite the flame between them. (Director of Centacare Catholic Family Services, Country SA)*

Marriage preparation with recognised professionals, not just the priest is necessary. Support groups, Teams of Our Lady, Marriage Encounter and many other groups are helpful. While these have been offered, not many people want to take up the opportunity to engage in them.

One response called for better access to **Natural Family Planning** education and support.

What pastoral care does the Church offer families in crisis?

Centacare is very helpful and well supported in our diocese.

'In today's society couples and families can take a variety of shapes and forms within modern Australian society. As an agency of the Catholic Church we see many of the different shapes of families and often are dealing with these people at crisis times in their lives. The importance of demonstrating responses based on respect and compassion are important in our work and we believe this approach is important for the Church so that it can be instrumental in the lives of those who are vulnerable.

We are particularly conscious of the upbringing of children and how we can support them receiving the best outcomes for their development. This is often challenging given

the families we deal with where children are 'at risk'. To gain some credibility with the parents in this family environment and enabling us to work with them to achieve positive change we have to be willing to recognise there are a range of cohabitation arrangements, including same sex relationships. It is our hope that the Church would be supportive of our attempts to improve the lives of the children and aim to lessen some of the disadvantages they may face in their lives. (Director of Centacare Catholic Family Services Country SA)

People find other **agencies** of greater assistance e.g. schools, playgroups, mothers clubs. Most people will seek out suitable family and marital counsellors to assist them in their issues.

In their times of crisis the Church should **listen to people but not judge** them and promote the teaching of Pope Francis – Eucharist is not a reward for the perfect but nourishment for those in need.

Priests are available for counselling/spiritual direction but this depends on the individual priest.

If the **Parish Pastoral Council** is functioning well they can offer assistance to families in crisis in collaboration with agencies such as St V de P, Fred's Van, Centacare, Boystown, Caritas. Parishioner to parishioner outreach is important.

The **stability of the Catholic school** was mentioned as an important avenue of pastoral care offered by the Church to families in crisis.

Offering assistance to families in crisis is difficult as many couples arrive at the door for help when the crisis is in full swing, and they have often made the decision to separate before arriving to see us. Again many problems are complex and multiple and should be worked through with a professional counsellor.

St Vincent de Paul outreach to struggling/poor families is outstanding and was frequently acknowledged by respondents.

3. Pastoral Care in Certain Difficult Marital Situations

How common is cohabitation in our local community?

The majority of respondents answered that cohabitation is very common in their community and that amongst young people today it is the norm.

Middle aged people, especially divorced or separated Catholics settle for cohabitation.

What is the experience of the baptised who are separated, divorced and remarried? Do they feel marginalized or suffer from the impossibility of receiving the sacraments?

A lot can depend on individual priests and parishes. Some experience love, acceptance and compassion from their fellow parishioners. However, most responses agreed that people in this situation feel that they have sinned, cannot be forgiven, experience a lot of guilt, are disempowered, patronized, insulted, suffer greatly from not being able to receive communion and certainly do feel marginalised – many through no fault of their own.

Many seek a loving relationship with God and want to be a part of the Church. Others leave the church never to return.

'One woman in our church is a very strong participant – she cleans the church and leads Children's Liturgy but she won't take communion. Other friends who are very committed to the church in every way won't receive communion because of having a child outside marriage. I think many in this situation, however, stop connecting with the faith community entirely, or only connect at weddings, funerals.'

What can be done to support people in these situations on their journey of faith?

If these people choose to stay within the church then we should accept them lovingly and show understanding that we are all made in the image of God. Offer them respect, inclusion, a listening ear, support, friendship and be a Church that stresses the love of God not the fear of God.

A suggestion for parish response: A support group similar to A.A association involving people who have been in the same situation? Invite them to 'come to the table' and also go out to visit them.

Access to the Eucharist would be important pastoral care for people in difficult marital situations. As Pope Francis reminds us - *The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.* (Evangelii Gaudium #47)

*'It is my view that there needs to be attention given to the **declaration of nullity** for people who wish to join the Catholic Church who have been previously married outside the Church in a bad relationship and these people have re-married and are in a positive relationship. The hurdles often faced by these people in being able to join our Church can lessen the enthusiasm to join the Church. Whilst I am not aware of current Canon Law I am aware that in the past it was often harder for non-Catholics married outside the Catholic Church to join the Church than it was for Catholics who married outside the Church. This might have changed but if not does need addressing as a way of showing an openness to those who wish to join our Church.'*

The Marriage Tribunal may be able to offer assistance. People should be encouraged to seek annulments.

4. On Unions of Persons of the Same Sex

What is the attitude of the local Church towards same sex unions?

It is well understood that our church is quite publicly opposed to gay marriage. Respondents expressed disapproval and feelings of discomfort with the notion of same sex unions. Nevertheless, they expressed considerable sympathy and support for people desiring to live in a same sex union.

Some who responded to the survey reported that the issue of same sex unions is **not discussed** – and is perhaps not discussable – in their local community.

Some respondents identified a growing climate of acceptance where **young people** don't have a problem with the idea of same sex unions and think that the Church's position is exclusive and lacking in compassion.

Parents these days are seen to be more accepting of their children who discover they are Gay or Lesbian. The Church must be more accepting of Gay and Lesbian people before they can gain any credibility in terms of teaching on same sex unions.

There was a call for the possibility of **civil unions** to be seriously considered.

What pastoral attention can be given to people who have chosen to live in a union of this type?

Loving acceptance, respect, support, a listening ear and understanding that we are all made in the image of God were suggested as fitting responses. Some stressed acceptance of people in this situation without seeming to condone their lifestyle. Homosexual people should be loved and supported in the same way as those who are heterosexual. There needs to be acceptance by the Church of this 'natural' response to sexuality – acceptance that love has God as its source.

As an agency of the Catholic Church who offers services to all people in our region we have to be open to couples who come from different family arrangements. We do offer counselling to same sex couples and in our work with vulnerable families need to form good relationships with a range of people from different backgrounds. (Director, Centacare Catholic Family Services, Country SA)

Pastoral care is to develop in them a deeper understanding of the faith, such as having a personal prayer life, lectio divina, eucharistic adoration, work as volunteers in the Church...

There was general agreement that there needs to be more **pastoral attention and public acknowledgement** of people who live in this type of union. One person would like to see a liturgical recognition of gay love – not marriage.

People are born this way. *Let's get with the science/psychology – sexual preference is not chosen. Let's teach intimacy - being committed to the particular and therefore the peculiar regardless of sexual preference for a long period of time if possible. There's nothing immoral about being homosexual. Promiscuity is the sin not sexual preference!*

5. The Education of Children in Irregular Marriages

How and when do parents in irregular marriages approach the Church?

Many found the term 'irregular' to be irrelevant and even insulting. There is a strong opinion that this descriptor is not acceptable or commonly in use in our parishes today.

What do they ask? Do they request the sacraments only or do they also want catechesis and the general teaching of religion?

Hallo! How many are approaching the church? Why would they bother? Those who do come generally want to get their kids baptised and arrange for them to receive the sacraments regardless of their marital status. And when a priest rejects their requests they generally leave the church.

These couples generally approach like all other couples. Many are what the church calls "un-churched". They simply ask to have their kids baptised or confirmed. They like to have the education done for them but are also very happy to be involved too if they are supported. These situations can present an opportunity to evangelise.

6. The Openness of the Married Couple to Life

What knowledge do Christians have today of the teachings of Humanae Vitae on responsible parenthood?

There is very little – to none at all – informed knowledge and understanding of the teachings of Humanae Vitae. They are mostly ignored by the average Catholic. It has become completely accepted by society today for couples to take control in planning their families with little thought about Catholic teachings. People generally choose to ignore this part of their Catholic faith but rather live by their conscience. They are not looking to the Church to direct them.

What aspects pose the most difficulties in a large majority of couple's accepting this teaching?

Birth control; Sex before marriage; Abortion; Ignorance and misunderstanding of the NFP success rate and also the science behind it; Self-centeredness; Societal pressures; The economic reality of coupling.

Are you aware of the Church's teaching on IVF? Are you comfortable with this teaching?

The majority of responders said that they are aware of the Church's teaching on IVF. While a few said they are very comfortable with the teaching most said they are not comfortable with it. They see it as a very difficult area because of the deep emotions and the complexity of issues involved. People want children and want their marriage to be fruitful and so they will make decisions to achieve this that may not be in line with the Church's teaching. Adoption is not a serious option for many people.

7. The Relationship Between the Family and the Person

What critical situations in the family today can obstruct a person's encounter with Christ?

Practices within the Church itself can obstruct a person's encounter with Christ. The use of exclusive masculine pronouns for God in the liturgy, the discounting of women is noted and even giving them subordinate roles can be perceived as tokenism. *Many are disillusioned by the church hierarchy and structures but their faith is still there.*

Start acknowledging the discrimination within the Church's own structures, its failure to protect children, its pontificating and at times failure to acknowledge its own sinfulness in past ages. Let's start with some humility and inclusiveness and really begin to create a new age where the laity will be central not the clergy.

The crisis of faith has come from the church in the last few decades being an unwelcoming community with so many rules and regulations that it has pushed people away. People have been turned away in droves and have not been followed up.

The need for a kerygma of the proclamation of the saving love of God, prior to any other theological concerns. Follow the pastoral approach of Pope Francis.

Social Factors. Many of the families we (Centacare) are involved with have little faith and have difficulties in getting through day to day activities. Mental illness, unemployment, disability, poor financial positions, poor housing and homelessness, lack of educational opportunities, drug addiction, the rapidity of change and other various social ills and personal difficulties contribute to the breakdown of relationships.

When people suffer disadvantage unless we are very active in supporting these people religion will not have the chance to be in their lives. We have a responsibility in being the face of the Church to ensure we are receptive to all people.

There is so much to do about acknowledging the full rights of **women and children** on the planet and the **planet's own needs** to be acknowledged.

Secularism, intolerance of any religious point of view, media bias and lack of a religious voice in the public media can all constitute an obstacle to a person's encounter with Christ.

8. What other challenges or proposals related to the topics in the above questions do you consider urgent and useful to treat?

The Church and Child Focus. The Church does come from a difficult position as there is no doubt that credibility has been lost through the sexual abuse that has occurred from people who have been seen as representing the Church. The Church needs to ensure that it is very clearly child-focused and that it maintains an exceptionally strong position in this value base and continues to reach out to all people in a manner that shows acceptance to those who require help.

'I am appalled at what I see and disturbed at what some of our priests have got away with all these years. I have been a Catholic all my life and at present I am ashamed at what I see and hear.'

'All we see about the Church is bad press. I long for a Church that my kids can feel proud to be part of. I'm not sure how we can make this happen in modern day Australia.'

Reconciliation. Many people feel alienated from our church communities today. The joy and community spirit of Vatican II has been overtaken by fundamentalism. Look at the hordes that turned up for the 3rd rite of Reconciliation - it had a whole community coming together to pray for forgiveness - it worked so it was stopped and people no longer feel connected. Reconciliation seems to be a disappearing - if not lost - sacrament. There was a strong plea to bring back education on the Sacrament of Reconciliation from the pulpit.

Women and the Church. *The Vatican needs to involve more women in every aspect of Church life starting at the Vatican.*

Marriage/annulment/divorce. The leaders of the Church should reflect upon laws pertaining to marriage, annulment, divorce. Change is definitely required in this area. *The annulment process needs to be removed and simply allow people who are divorced to remarry. This has been one of the single most hurtful experiences of people's lives and is insulting to their person and their dignity.*

Natural Family Planning. The fruits of fertility awareness and Natural Family Planning are openness to life and respect for each other and communication. These skills should be taught in the community - beginning in the school.

The Church and Indigenous People. The Church needs to consider how it relates to our Indigenous people and how it can connect with them. Are there ways of bringing the values of the Church to be attractive to our Aboriginal people? Are we attempting to reach out to people from Indigenous backgrounds and so that our religion can have relevance to them? These are questions that do need addressing by **all** involved in the Church.

Sound Catholic Teaching. There is need for a united, consistent and informed forum to share authentic Catholic teachings on all matters that impinge on religious beliefs and freedoms. It would be a good idea to ensure that each family has a copy of the Catholic Catechism. Suggest that priests focus on the teachings of the Church on Family in their homilies at Mass – at least 6-12 Sundays per year.

Listen. Present the teachings of the Church on Family in a way that may help people to understand them better but mostly we need to listen to people. We don't have to have all the answers. Reach out to people no matter what their situation and be practical in our actions to show that as a Church we share the joys and the hopes, the grief and anxieties.

Use of the internet. Everyone who wants to get a message across these days makes use of the internet. Each diocese should include teachings of the Catholic Church on their website with links to 'in depth' sources of information.

Re-focus on Spirituality. Focus on the Face of Jesus. The call to holiness is an urgent prerequisite for all actions, plans, intentions. Jesus worked with the situations of the day and offered hope. The church today is stuck in the old days - reach out to the young and their families by leaving the pulpit!

I believe people need to come back to 'faith' experiences. We need to be still and find God deep within. Rediscovering 'hope' is essential. Deep prayer and trust in the power of the Holy Spirit is our hope. I believe we must offer opportunities for everyone to come together for prayer and an awakening to the power of the Holy Spirit amongst us.

**Diocese of Port Pirie
18 December 2013**