

Report to Bishop Treanor

We held two separate **Listening Days** for the **Religious of the Diocese**, one in St. Anne's Parish Hall, Dunmurry, June 12th, and the other in Drumalis, Larne, June 27th, with a good representation of sisters, brothers and priests over the two days.

After opening with prayer we had two sessions devoted to the following two themes:

- What kind of Church do I want to be a part of, with and for the people?
- List the three principal points I would like to make for inclusion in a Diocesan Plan.

Both Listening Days were marked by the candour, energy and generosity that the Religious brought to the discussion. They were very happy to be consulted and spoke their minds very frankly. One person said towards the end, to general agreement, that the listening experience had been very rich and should not be confined to just one day.

A More Inclusive Church.

There was a strong sense of two models of Church running in parallel, one of them traditional, hierarchical and clerical, and the other, more in touch with the real lives of the people. The Religious, by and large, called for a 'humble and listening' Church in which renewal would come from the people. One person said that the clerical Church often seems not to trust the holiness of the people. Both groups were very clear in their sense that any renewal process must be from the bottom up, rather than top-down.

It was clearly stated that the place and role of women must be addressed. "Women, and especially mothers, have been neglected and must be included." At the Dunmurry event there was widespread agreement that that meeting itself should have had a female facilitator!

On both days individuals asked the question: 'Who owns the Parish? Is it the priest or the people?' The clear implication was that the people are not accorded their proper place in the life of the Church and the diocese and that change is essential.

Some speakers argued strongly that the Church is failing with regard to the faith that does justice: “We are losing the poor! Are we Just? Or just throwing crumbs at them?” “The poor are still excluded: There is still snobbery at work in the Irish Church.”

There was strong agreement that the Church must find ways of listening respectfully to those who are disaffected from it. “The Church is a cold place for people in irregular situations.”

Structural Change

The Religious said that structures must be put in place to facilitate the emergence of a Church that is really respectful and inclusive of all its members. “There should be a Pastoral Council in every parish. PPs less controlling and more trusting”.

One person spoke of the great need for training in ‘Leadership and Committee Skills’ for both Clergy and Laity. The implication was that there is not now a culture in the Church, clerical or lay, that is conducive to building real communities.

There was widespread agreement about the need for a process of planning and renewal, but one that would be genuinely inclusive.

Formation

There was a universal recognition of the need for formation for lay people. Initiatives like Pathways, Family Ministry etc. need to be built upon.

There should be a corporate plan for study and reflection on the Word of God.

Peer- ministry has been seen to be more effective than any other, especially among young people. In order for this to develop there will have to be investment in training.

Ministry

The Church’s ministry is currently understood almost exclusively in terms of the priesthood. Even with that, priests are overburdened with administration and don’t have time to devote to their pastoral responsibilities. The Church of the future will need a much wider cohort of paid lay pastoral workers. In relation to the challenges of personnel some people called for the introduction of the permanent diaconate, open to all the baptised. However, other voices expressed the worry that an

extended diaconate would lead to a wider clericalisation and ‘fossilisation’. “Hire lay pastoral workers in every parish.” The re-integration of married ex-priests and the ordination of women were also raised.

One person suggested, partly in jest, that if all the priests were to take a half-year sabbatical it would call out all of the skills and talents of lay people that are currently dormant. Another was very critical of much of the preaching currently on offer and said that lay people could well do much better.

Planning Process and Diocesan Synod.

There was huge support for the idea of a planning process leading to renewal in the Diocese and involving a Synod or assembly of the Diocese. The emphasis would not be on any one event but rather on the opportunity that the process would give to harness the good will and ideas of laity, religious and clergy working together with a spirit of respect and openness. However there was universal concern that it not be simply a ‘paper exercise’ with no tangible outcomes. **The Religious, just like the Priests, had a genuine fear of yet another process promising much but leading to a false dawn.** People said that if planning and renewal were a priority then a talented person should be hired and put in place to oversee and drive the process as has been done in other places. There must be clarity and openness in the process and people put in place to implement any conclusions.

Conclusion

Over the two days the Religious spoke with great enthusiasm about their hopes for the Church but called for radical change. It was interesting that when they called for greater inclusiveness in the Church’s way of doing things they kept their focus almost exclusively on the lay faithful. At no stage did they demand or seem to expect a greater role or greater say in the life of the diocese for themselves. Though it was never said, it seemed clear to the ‘Listeners’ that the religious themselves have much experience of not being consulted or listened to.

The two Listening Days were very worthwhile and energising for all involved. The Religious, in spite of falling numbers and a rising age profile still represent a remarkable pool of talent and good will in the diocese. (It is worth noting that as many Religious as Diocesan Priests attended their respective Listening Days.)

Recommendation

We recommend that the Bishop get the incoming Vicar for Religious to set up a special Day for Religious in the coming year. In place of the usual mass at the Cathedral the 'Day' should include a liturgy organised by the Religious and a forum for the Bishop to listen to the concerns of the Religious. He should explicitly ask them if the current processes for the inclusion of Religious in the life of the diocese are fit for purpose.