



## **Background to the *Passing on the Faith* national project of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales**

*Passing on the Faith* is the third phase of the Bishops' national strategy in response to what families told them during *Listening 2004: My Family My Church*, a year-long participative enquiry in which the views of around 15,000 Catholic families were expressed. (*Celebrating Family: Blessed, Broken, Living Love* also comprises *Everybody's Welcome* and *Home is a Holy Place*.) During 2004 four major issues were raised that provide the context for this project, which has the over-arching aim of:

- **resourcing and supporting parents and grandparents in their “irreplaceable and inalienable” task of passing on faith in God;**
- **establishing what passing on the faith means and perhaps whether we can truly accommodate and applaud a variety of interpretations of this;**
- **identifying the complementary roles, rights and responsibilities of home, school and parish**

### **Strand A: Importance of Faith in God as Sustaining Families**

Clear espousal of gospel values by families; faith in God experienced as source of personal strength, hope, comfort, sustenance. The Listening 2004 report names the importance to families of:

- Gospel values as guidance, moral framework/reference
- Gospel values as unchanging
- Personal (rather than family) prayer
- Belief and faith in God
- Community of faith experienced as more significant than sacraments for sustaining family life
- Catholic schools
- Catholic clergy

*Families appear to value faith in God because it plays a large part in helping them practically to cope with the stresses and strains of their daily lives and the world around them. Their faith provides them with a structure and a moral foundation for their decision-making and discernment. It provides them with a renewable source of energy in the presence of God: always there, always available and always accepting of them, no matter what. Faith in God truly strengthens families, providing a broader outlook and a range of reference in all seasons and stages of family life.*

*Not Easy But Full of Meaning: Catholic Family Life in 2004: A report of the findings of Listening 2004: My Family My Church # 89.*

### **Strand B: High Anxiety Regarding Passing on of Faith in God**

Difficulties expressed around practicalities of transmitting faith within families: prayer, moral values, Christian parenting, involvement in and connection with parish life and worship, advocating for Catholic beliefs and practices in the sometimes hostile environment of the home.

*Without exception, every diocesan conversation reflected the struggle and anxiety of parents and grandparents in passing on (the) faith to their children and grandchildren. This struggle was represented by questions of how to pray with their children, how to answer the moral questions they raised, how to share gospel values, how to cope with challenging behaviour, how to keep children involved in the Mass and the parish and even how to justify being practising Catholics as children began to rebel.*  
*Not Easy But Full of Meaning # 91.*

### **Strand C: Anxiety Exacerbated by Absence of Understanding /Agreement**

It can't be stressed too strongly that families' responses communicated a lack of agreement in the home on matters of faith, whether this arose from 'mixed' marriages or variations in belief, understanding and practice. A similar lack of agreement is evidenced in the practices of school and parish which have not always equipped parents to explore what it might mean to raise their children in faith with God.

*The conversations that we heard on this topic rarely seemed to be informed by any great sense within families or the community as a whole of how faith is actually communicated and how it develops. This was further complicated by the variety in meaning of the term 'faith' to which we have already referred. For example, if a participant equated faith with Mass attendance they were likely to be more focussed on the practices or external appearance of an inner faith life: how to teach children their prayers, how to behave in Church, getting them involved in the parish etc. They were more likely to identify needs such as clearer catechesis for adults and young people, more relevant homilies, more activities in the parish or school for the young, more Church teaching and better role models. However if participants equated faith with a growing relationship with God they were more likely to request further resources for developing parents' own faith, a more explicit Church understanding and articulation of appreciation of family life and more emphasis on the welcoming and community aspect of parishes.*

*Of course all these needs are important and they were not always expressed in such diverse or exclusive terms. But they do illustrate a lack of coherence that exists among families and the faithful about the matter of communicating faith. For example, participants from a wide range of perspectives requested more and better catechesis. We sensed however that the meaning of 'more and better' varied quite considerably according to an individual's particular perspective, including their experience, maturity of faith and prevailing anxieties. Further conversation on this particular challenge will be extremely important.*

*Not Easy But Full of Meaning # 92-95.*

### **Strand D: Prevailing Sense of Grief**

The sense of failure as Catholic parents experienced and expressed by so many might be alleviated if there could be greater clarity about the school and parish expectations of the home. But even if clarity is not possible there still needs to be a place where this particular grief can be expressed, comforted and reconciled.

*Hardest to listen to was the pain of parents and grandparents living with the bewilderment, pain and guilt of failure. The crunch point comes, it seems, for many Catholic parents when a decision has to be made about when to stop insisting that their children go to Mass. A corresponding crunch point, therefore, for the family of the Church must be how to help parents manage the resulting guilt, bereavement and grief.*

*Not Easy But Full of Meaning #97, 98*

## **Passing on the Faith - the Celebrating Family context**

### **Family-sensitive models of catechesis**

The Working Group are interested in family-sensitive models of catechesis, sometimes called total community or intergenerational catechesis. There is a wealth of experience in England and Wales and elsewhere – but how do we evaluate and highlight it? Which programmes are effectively equipping parents: which tools, skills and understanding do they offer?

### **Build on the strategies and principles of Everybody's Welcome and Home is a Holy Place**

The Working Group recognises that families come in all sizes, shapes and structures and bring a lot of baggage, especially where the Church is concerned. Everybody's Welcome seeks to offer acceptance of those differences and meet families' most basic needs for safety and warmth. Home is a Holy Place seeks to build up families and affirm what they do best of all in loving one another. Re-cognising and affirming what is already holy at home is already effectively repairing and renewing the relationship between families and Church.

“What if the family were not merely an object of the church's teaching mission, but *one of the most basic units of the church's mission to the world* ? What I am suggesting is that the communal church and the domestic church need to recapture a vision of the Christian family as a sacred community. This will require an awareness of the 'sacred' in the 'secular', of God in the flesh of human life.”

Marjorie Thompson (1996). *Family: the Forming Center*. Upper Room Books

### **Respect for diversity, family systems, & parents' primary role**

The Working Group's family approach acknowledges people – children, parents, grandparents - not as isolated individuals but as individuals in relationship with others: not only here living, but also long since gone and still yet unimagined. Families are powerful and vulnerable systems, influenced by the cultures in which they live, the stage of life they are at, the balance or imbalance of their relationship with each other and other institutions and the health of their own emotional life. How can we work better with the powerful influences of family for passing on faith in God?

[www.celebratingfamily.org.uk](http://www.celebratingfamily.org.uk)

[www.everybodyswelcome.org.uk](http://www.everybodyswelcome.org.uk)

[www.homeisaholyplace.org.uk](http://www.homeisaholyplace.org.uk)

[www.passingonthefaith.org.uk](http://www.passingonthefaith.org.uk)

Elizabeth Davies  
Marriage & Family Life Project Officer  
1.12.09