

Marriage belongs to us all

Last Sunday we celebrated the feast of Pentecost, the feast when The Holy Spirit came upon the apostles empowering them to fulfil His mission to spread The Word throughout the world. The commission that Christ gave to the apostles, was not one that was to be confined to the clerical leadership of the church, it was a commission for all of us. In his homily on the Sunday before the Ascension, Fr. Stephen talked about listening to the Holy Spirit. In our experience, the Holy Spirit does not normally come and sit on our shoulders and whisper in our ears. When the Holy Spirit has a task for us, it usually comes through a request from somebody else. Sometimes a seed is planted, but it must grow and be nurtured.

The time around Pentecost is a time of decision, a time to ask ourselves “What is the Holy Spirit asking me to do, now?” Since the beginning of the year, we have been asked to consider the future of the Church through the synod process. Many people gave their views about what their priorities are for the church, both locally and internationally. However, none of those aspirations will happen unless each of us asks themselves what their part in the renewal of the church should be. The future of the church is in our hands. By “our hands” we mean the hands of ordinary lay people. It is not to be left to the clergy. That is the way of continuous decline. There are not enough of them and for the most part they are an ageing group of men. We also cannot wait. The time is now.

We may lament the decline of the number of clergy, and there were many responses to the synod consultation saying that this was a priority, but we must consider where they are to come from. They will come from catholic families which are secure and will nurture their children. That process of nurture begins with a secure relationship between their parents

For over forty years now, we have been helping couples to prepare for their marriages through the pre-marriage courses we have facilitated. In recent years we have begun to see children of couples we helped a long time previously. We are starting to think about when we should retire from this ministry. We will not be around for the grandchildren of previous couples! We are reluctant to leave if there are no other couples to take over this ministry in this parish. But we are now both nearer to eighty than seventy and our departure cannot be delayed for ever. This is why we are appealing this weekend for some married couples to come forward to answer our call to this ministry. This is pre-eminently a ministry for married couples. Who else could take it on?

The marriage preparation programme we have helped to develop for our diocese is, we believe, unique. First, it is delivered over five sessions, ideally a week apart. This gives the couples the time to reflect on the session, to talk about it and absorb its significance for them before the next session. Second, it is designed to be facilitated by a married couple. This enables the engaged couple to hear the witness of a couple trying to live a sacramental marriage. Third, using the latest research into the key features of successful long-term marriages, we set out to answer the question neglected in all ecclesiastical documents “How do we do it? If we are to live a thriving marriage for 30 or 40 or 50 years or more, what do we need to do to achieve that?” Fourth, we use an inventory, a large number of statements to which the couple, individually respond, which generates a profile of their relationship at that time. It shows the strengths and weaknesses for them and has proved to be very accurate over the 24 years that we have been using it.

All of the programme is set in the context of living marriage as a sign of the love that Christ has for His church, as the author of the letter to the Ephesians says, “This mystery (the love between husband and wife) has great significance, but I am applying it to Christ and the Church” (Eph. 5: 32).

This is the essence of the vocation of marriage. It is both a great privilege and an awesome responsibility. If couples are to take their vocation seriously, they cannot settle for just being ordinary; they must strive to be the best married couple that they can be. The task of those married couples who deliver this programme is to equip the engaged couples with the insights and tools to help them become the best married couple they can be.

There has been a programme of marriage preparation, delivered by married couples in this diocese for forty years. The feedback from the engaged couples shows that the course is valued very highly by them. Any commercial company would be ecstatic if they received the approval ratings that our course receives.

The need for new couples to join this ministry is not just in this parish. This ministry is being carried out by just twelve couples in the diocese at present, most of whom have been working for many years. We have all found that working with the engaged couples to be a hugely enriching experience. But we now need some more labourers to work in this special vineyard. In providing this preparation we are helping engaged couples to create a more secure foundation for their life together.

What sort of couple would be suitable for this ministry? Ordinary married couples who are willing to give some time to sharing their experience and their love with engaged couples, warm and welcoming personalities. We will provide training in understanding and presenting the course and continuous support, especially in the initial stages. Do not think you need to have a perfect marriage, they don't exist. It is not necessary for both partners to be Catholics, provided the non-Catholic partner understands the church's beliefs about marriage and can promote them to the engaged couples.

There will be people who will immediately see that this ministry is not right for them. They still have a role. If you are one of those people, you may know married couples who you think could be suitable. Please go and ask them. You may be the messenger that the Holy Spirit needs! All have a role in praying that this ministry will be enriched by new couples offering themselves to work and grow with engaged couples.

In all of the work in which we have been engaged over the past 46 years, in a variety of settings, our meetings with engaged couples have been the most enriching. We meet couples on the threshold of their new lives together, full of love and joy. That love and joy is infectious. But it is also a challenge to us to remember that marriages do not thrive by chance but by constant attention to one another, by listening and by ensuring that we do not just drift along.

We cannot in the course of this short paper and what we will be saying at the Masses this weekend convey all the details that will help you decide if this ministry is for you. But, if you do think this ministry might be right for you, please get in touch. You are not committing yourselves by having a talk with us, but it might help you decide if you want take part in the training. Even that does not commit you. The training will help to find out what delivering the course would entail. You could then decide if this is the ministry to which the Holy Spirit is calling you. Send us an email to janeandcharles@googlemail.com if you would like to know more.

It would be a tragedy for, and a betrayal of future generations of engaged couples, if there were no couples willing to take up this invitation.

Charles & Jane Perryman