



*Catholic Marriage Care Ltd:
a characteristically Catholic mission in a context of social diversity
and contention?*

**THEME 1 FROM THE REFLECTION PROCESS:
*Catholic social Thought, ‘Catholic Ethos’ and relationship
poverty***

One of the major foci for the Reflectors’ discussions was that of the ‘Catholic ethos and identity’ of Marriage Care and its work. This was, of course, identified early on in the research questions themselves, together with the intention to explore this identity precisely in terms of that area of Catholic thought known as *Catholic Social Teaching*.

- 1. How does Marriage Care’s specifically Catholic ethos shape the provision and experience of marriage preparation provided by the charity?**
- 2. What contribution does this make to the effective societal embodiment of CST in our own context, especially in relation to relationship poverty and its alleviation?**

This research focus relates, too, to Marriage Care’s explicit espoused theological aim of working in the alleviation of ‘relationship poverty’. The important insight here is that marriage and relationships are loci not only for questions of morality and sacramentality, but also questions of human flourishing, and social justice. Indeed, marriage and family life, and the wider arena of human relationship can be seen as the fundamental realities in which theologies of morality, sacrament and social justice find fruitful points of practical and conceptual integration. The identification of our present context’s experience of widespread relationship poverty locates Marriage Care’s work clearly within the framework of Catholic Social Teaching.

What follows is an outline account of the conversations had by reflectors around various aspects of the interview data, in which themes related to this sense of Catholic identity and ethos came to the fore. Broad and recurrent themes emerged from our interviewees which are illustrated: questions of relationship poverty involving financial and social pressures, along with strong senses of the need and desire to *belong*, are especially clear. Such testimony can be heard as a challenge to the charity and the wider Catholic community as to how such needs and impoverishment are being met. In particular, the clear desire for belonging might raise questions for us about what belong to the Catholic community (‘being a Catholic’) means: is it about how we behave? What we believe? Or, rather, who we are?

1. What should 'Catholic ethos' and a 'Catholic identity' mean?

This was a theme which particularly exercised the academic reflectors, whilst resonating with the experiences and understanding of the practitioner reflectors. There seemed in the data and the charity's espoused theology to be a real lack of clarity around what is meant when there is talk of Marriage Care and its 'Catholic ethos'. There was even a suggestion that the Catholic ethos of Marriage Care is currently 'hopelessly vague' and a fear that if there is a failure to articulate this identity more clearly – for clients, charity workers and the wider church and society – then there is a risk of failing to embody that important sense of identity which is at the heart of the charity and its work.

One helpful insight was the recognition that 'Catholic ethos' might mean different things depending on what kind of organisation or practice was being spoken of: the Catholic ethos of a school is different from that of a Catholic homeless charity, for example. Building on this insight, the question was raised as to whether Marriage Care sees primarily itself as embodying a Catholic ethos as a mission to the world, or a Catholic ethos for nurturing the spirituality of the faithful? Is the ethos more one of mission or maintenance, of evangelisation or catechesis? This raises interesting questions, because Catholic ethos in a 'missionary field' would be different from a Catholic ethos in a 'monastic setting'. So what kind of Catholic ethos is it?

It was acknowledged that one of the central concerns for the charity at present is the relationship between Marriage Care and the institutional Church in this country, which in recent years has gone through some very testing times. Many of the challenges here revolve around different ideas of what Catholic identity means, and how it shapes (or not) the charity's work. (A very public part of these deliberations has been the changes away from the public use of the language of 'Catholic' in the name and literature of Marriage Care some years ago, and the move in recent years to restore this language and identity.)

In all this there is a genuine ecclesiological question of what it might mean to say that Marriage Care is a Catholic charity, particularly when it is largely funded by the state. Too often the theological and ecclesiological complexity of this question has been obscured by a certain politicisation of 'Catholic identity': a number of reflectors referred to often unkind debates about the politics behind alternative Catholic marriage preparation programmes, which seek to position themselves crudely as 'more' or 'properly' Catholic in relation to Marriage Care. The basis for such claims calls for deeper reflection on these questions of identity and ethos might mean in different contexts. One parish priest interviewed expresses this well:

P2 – p. 10: ' ... Marriage Care may come up against increasingly let's say sort of conservative groups and even conservative bishops to produce something ... or rather, they ... might even produce their own ... "we'd rather do this than what Marriage Care produces" which I think would be a pity ... the challenge for Marriage Care ... over the long term, to adjust its process, or its programme, to include a bit more stuff on the sacramentality of marriage and how it fits within the Church ...'

Clearly here 'Catholic ethos' is being simply equated with catechesis in Catholic sacramental theology. Is this the only way it is to be understood?

Other questions were raised in relation to Catholic identity: How should *belonging* to the Catholic Church be understood? What makes these people (those coming for marriage preparation) Catholic? It was recognised how couples coming to the Church for marriage often feel surrounded first by a forest of technicalities, most of which they don't understand, rather than by a sense of welcome and belonging. The experience of Marriage Care – as of many parish priests – is that such couples are far from well informed and educated in Catholic teaching, with most of them being in a non-faith position in any day-to-day sense. BUT, on the whole, they still carried a sense of 'Catholic identity' of 'being Catholic'.

P2 – p. 2: *'... one of the key changes which all of us clergy talk about, is the fact that families ... while they are still – certainly within the Church and they're certainly Catholic – there's kind of a lack of appreciation or understanding of what it is to be a Catholic and what the responsibilities are and what the commitments are and what the challenges are ... the upbringing of children ... the practicing of the faith ... the actual understanding of what marriage is within the Catholic Christian context ... there's a huge gap there ... it kind of worries us because we don't know what to do about it ... the kids know more about the faith and about God, than their parents do. So there's a huge kind of issue there.'*

The data suggests that all the couples interviewed (apart from the rather unusual Hindu couple) were at the marriage preparation course under duress, because they were seeking 'church' weddings. This fitted well with the experience of the charity in the ground. This observation impacts how we are to speak of ethos and Catholic identity: there *is* some sense in which the Catholics in the couples had a sense of Catholic identity – but it rarely was about believing certain things, or behaving in accordance with certain church rules. This is the Catholic sense of identity with which the Marriage Care charity works, and it shapes the charity's own sense of identity and ethos. The charity and its volunteers are, of course, better informed and integrated into church practice; but they speak into situations of Catholic living which are often quite different, and so are shaped more by a missionary than simply catechetical ethos (not that these things are separate, of course, NB)

An example of how a mismatch of a sense of what it is to 'be Catholic' can be unhelpful is illustrated by the view of one of the priests interviewed, who stated that couples should be treated as though their marriage is a vocation from God, equally as important to the vocation of priesthood and in need of equal formation. Some of the reflectors found this illuminating and helpful for building a strong sense of marriage:

P3 – p. 14: *'The formation of married people is so important (...) And all the decisions I had to make during that time, a long time, and theology and all that formation and spiritual formation and guidance! If it takes six years to become a priest how important ... just as marriage is as well ... they need more formation, especially if they haven't got it from the home, or from themselves, it's a new opportunity for marriage, for a young couple.'*

Here is a strong, thoroughly Catholic view of the sacramental life of marriage and family, which throws into relief the crucial importance of good marriage preparation. IT is such a conviction that underpins the commitment of Marriage Care's work. However, this sense of vocation to marriage was not recognised among the couples themselves, and they had really

no sense of a day-to-day connection between the sacrament of their marriage and their daily lives. This mis-match of sense of Catholic marriage raises the question of mission and Catholic ethos. Can we work with the word 'ethos' to develop that missional dimension? Or is there a danger that a particular kind of emphasis on 'Catholic ethos' can slip into saying simply "we're going to pretend that they're practising church members with a lively and informed faith because, if they call themselves Catholic that's what they *should be*". ? Our desire is (like Pope Francis!) to be attentive to the realities – to what *is*, as a basis for discerning what God is calling us to. In this light, the team was struck that there is a sense of a Catholic identity that runs deep even if a person admits they are not practising any of the things that a 'good Catholic' should practise. This then raised the question of the 'ordinary Catholic' and 'what do we mean by ordinary Catholic here?' For many there seemed a sense that identity does not emerge from practice, it doesn't even directly emerge from being baptised, or their First Holy Communion; it's something much more diffuse than that. But it is also, arguably, something that runs far more deeply than that, also. Couples interviewed expressed this in a number of ways:

C5b – p. 4: *'... yah, I think we're unfortunately part of that 'hatch, match, dispatch', as we go to Christenings, weddings and funerals for the most part ... I don't go to Mass necessarily all that often, I still sort of have ... quite a strong faith, and yah, so solo prayers every now and then ... we're not practising as such? But still sort of, I don't know (turning to Shannon) I don't know how you would describe us?*

C5a: *We still call ourselves Catholic.'*

C1a – p. 15: *'It's not just about this one Sunday ... where I'm showing everybody how faithful I am (...) when we met ... we both knew that we had Catholic backgrounds, that when people might not believe in sex before marriage ... I have absolute, again, respect for people who for whatever reason want to choose that but, I don't think you need to ... kind of burden, this guilt or anything ... I guess there's different social aspects that for me, like you know, some priests they tell you, you have o go to Mass every Sunday'*

C6a – p. 8: *'... and my cousin went to a course ... hers was more religious focused: what the bible teaches ... about the use of contraception, and they really say that they shouldn't use it ... And when she told me that I was like, oh my goodness! I didn't know they were allowed to say that?! ... I was just so shocked, because I didn't know people were still taught that they shouldn't use contraception, I didn't know that was still advocated ...'*

The ways in which Marriage Care – or any marriage preparation provider - works with these 'ordinary Catholic' couples has ecclesiological implications. The team ask whether this has been thought through by Marriage Care, and others. What are we, as marriage preparation providers, and the wider church, actually saying about these couples in the way we relate to them? And what are we doing ecclesologically when we put them through a preparation process?

This questioning is not an indication of any sitting loose to church teaching on marriage. For both reflection teams it was clearly important that facilitators of the marriage preparation days should really know Catholic teaching, and be prepared to hand this on, as it is equally crucial for the couples to know what the teaching is if they're getting married in the Catholic Church. The real issue is, how is this teaching best engaged with in the real context of the marriage preparation day, and the 'ordinary Catholicism' of many of those attending?

This returns us to that strong sense of Catholic ethos and identity which is embodied in Marriage Care's particular mission for enabling healthy relationships in society and the alleviation of relationship poverty. Through these deliberations the teams found themselves in a conversation that was pervaded by a specific question: how do we use the moment – the opportunity - of a person coming to receive the sacrament of marriage within this context of brief preparation, as a place of spiritual growth? Perhaps it is that Marriage Care might helpfully think of itself more as an organisation that is interested in the spiritual growth of its clients? IN such a perspective, the sometimes controversial the use of the language of 'facilitator' rather than 'catechist' might be seen as testimony to something more akin to that spiritual discernment which characterises early enquiries after faith. One question that arose here was that of particular vision or emphasis: is this work about enabling a Catholic spirituality for these couples (more faith focused)? Or is it about ensuring the relationships are merely strong and healthy (more relationship focused)? It is, of course, immediately obvious that, in posing those questions, we are falling into the trap of splitting spirituality and practice, faith and daily life. Straight away the response came, These are all part of the same thing! But the questioning here also makes clear the need for Marriage Care to make explicit their deep conviction that healthy relationships and relationship practice are deep expressions of and helps towards spirituality and the living of sacramental grace in marriage. This is a particular theological contribution that the work and this research can begin to make. And it is clearly a part of the often unspoken ethos of Marriage Care and its volunteers, as this quote from a FOCCUS facilitator illustrates:

FF1 – pp. 11-12: *'That it's not just a stamp, you know, something that you should do, um, I think it's inviting them – when they're here in the sessions – to reflect on 'where is spirituality in your life?' And it will always be there, not saying you know, are you good practicing Catholics?! ... But reflecting on, um, 'What is happening in your life? What are your values and your spirituality? Where is that coming from?' ... you know, asking those sort of open questions if there's the opportunity, um, just for reflection on where it is.'*

2. An Explicit versus Implicit Ethos and Identity?

This discussion of ethos and identity so far has brought us to the point of recognising that the *practices* of Marriage Care marriage preparation, and those of the couples attending, require further attention. It is here that we will begin to see embodied, though largely unarticulated expressions of Catholic ethos and identity. Such awareness alerts us to the danger of too simplistically focussing on what is clearly explicit to name what is 'Catholic' whilst failing to appreciate what is implicit, what might often be recognised, through careful discernment, as 'deeply Catholic', even whilst below the surface.

It is clear that an explicit Catholic identity is not always of service to organisations engaging with the wider world. Most of the couples and facilitators themselves expressed a sense of concern about, if not actual fear of, the institution of the Catholic Church and its doctrines. For many the Church is associated with preaching, judgement, sin, all of which are negative connotations.

C1a – p. 20: *'... people, you know, have such a rigid view of Catholicism, like "Oh my gosh ... Catholic! That's like the strictest kind of Christian!" It was something I hadn't really experienced as we'd grown up in a Catholic community, and no-one was particularly*

strict ... it was not strange or anything ... But when you're on the outside looking in, the Catholic Church or I don't know, people have an idea of what Catholicism is ... and that it's this really very rigid infrastructure.'

C4b – p. 5: *'... the Catholic Church – I'm sorry I am going to say this but – I found it very ... it's more um, procedural? (...) Very procedural, whereas the Orthodox Church, it's not about the rules the Church has laid down but about your beliefs.'*

FF1 – p. 5: *'... the institution of the Church, the abuse, the centralisation ... the Church is a human thing, but um, and so M struggles with why the Church is – to him – seems distant from Christ sometimes.'*

At the same time, it was suggested that perhaps there is a deeply Catholic ethos already resonating in the organisation even when the word 'Catholic' is not mentioned. The theme of 'Implicit versus Explicit' refers to Catholic ethos and Catholic Social Teaching instincts of Marriage Care, where there is a lot of implicit Catholic sense, which is embodied by those running the course. For them it is a Catholic course; but, for good pedagogical and communication reasons, in this particular context it may not be being presented explicitly all the time.

From an ecclesiological point of view the team observed a separation and lack of integration between the secular and the spiritual, endemic in our culture, and frequently a part of our church life. As a result there seems to be a certain anxiety amongst facilitators and some clients around anything that appears 'overly Catholic'. There was a feeling among the team that such caution from the facilitators was, perhaps, unnecessary, given the evidence from many of the (especially non-Catholic!) clients who expressed an interest in knowing more. The question was raised: to what extent is Marriage Care intentional in their implicitness? Do they fear that if they were explicit it might put couples off? Is there a lack of confidence among facilitators that needs attention? Some data witnessed to these ambivalent feelings about 'being Catholic' among the volunteers:

MP1 – pp. 6-7: *'... I'm always aware that if I get that wrong, then it might um, put a big ... a big wedge between them and the Church that may already be there (...) we try to make it non-threatening'*

FF3 – p. 16: *'... a lot of people in our centre aren't Catholic and I don't want them to feel excluded (...) I am quite passionate about my work of helping peoples' relationships, and I don't think we should only be thinking about whether they're Catholic or not ... that's more the proselytising thing isn't it?! But I'm not trying to say people should become Catholic, I just think that we're so fortunate ... because Catholic marriages do last longer because there's commitment there, but if we can pass that on to other people, socially, that makes a huge difference!'*

On the other hand, whilst the clients also recognised the 'hiddenness' of Catholic content, their reactions to it were not entirely as one might expect. One interviewee suggested that Marriage Care 'didn't seem to do God', and another 'there was a real lack of faith'. Such comments led the reflectors to desire something rather more explicit whilst retaining a sensitivity to the risks of being overly explicit, identified above. The fact that most of them noticed there was little explicitly Catholic about the marriage preparation programme indicates that they are expecting something or even desiring something more:

MP3b – p. 18: *'... we have had couples that have missed (the spiritual/sacramental part). You know, because when they mention in it in the feedback that comes up that they would have liked to have heard a bit more.'*

C4a – p. 11: *'So I don't think during the day, we talked a lot about the Church, I don't think that was the purpose, but the fact that it was, you know, part of the process ... that was a good image!'*

C1a – pp. 23-24: *'... it didn't particularly strike me as Catholic at all, until the last kind of 5 minutes where you talked about the sacraments (...) you need more from your faith than a children's education. So you'll have questions as an adult, and I think that's why a lot of people do move away because ... where's the next level of that as an adult ... to have a point, as reference to come back in and actually have an exploration of faith of some description ... might be an opportunity to think about it or get some fresh ideas ... but there really wasn't anything like that ... for me there was a real lack of faith.'*

Currently it looks as though the sacramental teaching has been separated from, and is outweighed substantially, by the 'secular' teaching of skills. This description does, of course, highlight an error in thinking that somehow the practices and skills relating to relationships and their nurture are *not* sacramental, and 'merely' secular. In fact, the teams suggest that what is needed is a social sacramentality permeating the whole course, holding the more specifically religious elements and the skills-based material together.

C6a – p. 14: *'... I think put it in a little bit more – not one chunk – but kind of intertwine it a little bit throughout all the different things people do, because if it's a big chunk people get bored of it possibly and its right at the end, and people are tired (chuckling) and they want to go home. If it was through all the aspects a little bit, that might work.'*

MP1 – pp. 13-14: *'with the current system, um, where it's a chunk about the religious bit ... that gives focus ... whereas what we're working on at the moment is trying to spread it more throughout the whole course. Whether that will be an improvement? I don't know; whether it will just become natural ... but we won't know until we try it!'*

P1 – p. 11: *'... the theological side of it ... it was a bit of an 'add-on''*

MP3b – pp. 19-20: *'(Smiles) admittedly this material is ... focuses very much on the relationship side ... which is good, but, that is a little bit ... you wish there was a little bit more spiritual content.'*

3. A Catholic identity built on Catholic Social Teaching.

A basic conviction which this research set out to explore was our sense that reading the practices of Marriage Care through a Catholic Social Teaching lense might enrich our understanding and practices around marriage preparation. In this final section of the first thematic paper, we simply gather some first thoughts from our research conversations which identify ways in which the Catholic ethos and identity of the charity might be understood in terms of Catholic Social Teaching. Initially the team seemed to be having

trouble with connecting Marriage Care and Catholic Social Teaching (CST), whilst convinced by the instinct that connections were there. At a workshop on CST, many were shocked at how little explicit connection there was between marriage and CST themes in church teaching. In fact we have needed to work quite hard to make these connections clear. WE believe that the fruits of this work – whilst perhaps not yet fully ripened – are of real service not only to Marriage Care, but to the wider church and the theology and practice of marriage and family relationship more widely.

a) 'Spirit at Work' in human life and practice.

This was a particularly powerful theme in the Marriage Care reflector group, which resonated strongly with the academic group in sharing. The internal team recognised within the data a powerful sense that the Spirit is at work in Marriage Care; and we see that through the service of the volunteers, as they appear to recognise the Spirit at work' in the work they are doing with the couples. Many of the facilitators felt that they were *called to service*, wanting to reach out and lead by example. The 'Spirit at work' can also be found in the affirmation of the parish priests and the development and understanding of the couples. One reflector shared his strong sense of connection with the Genesis narrative of Creation: when couples say "this was good", they are in effect affirming this experience of God's Creation as just that – God's creation, graced by the Spirit. Whether they appreciate it or not, they are then saying that what the Church is offering is 'good', what is happening here at Marriage Care is 'good' in this Spirit shaped way:

MP3b – p.11: '*... the fact that we were quite united to ourselves ... because our marriage wasn't just the two of us anymore, God was with us so everything that we did was with Him involved ... there was a desire "wouldn't it be lovely to pass that on to the others?!"*

MP2 – p.11: '*... I wanted to volunteer for a Catholic organisation, to just hopefully give something back ...to the community ... It's given me the opportunity to interact with other Catholics around the country as well, like-minded Catholics ... so yes it's been a real boost to my spirituality.'*

Affirmation of priests:

P1 – p.3: '*... we've developed a very good relationship, I'm very happy'*

P2 – p.4: '*Well my connection with Marriage Care is that I support them ... I've always been supportive ... they're a brilliant group and I wouldn't want to see them upset or offended or moved on!*

The grace of human kindness and generous attention, as simple but essential charism, was clearly testified to:

C5a – p.15 '*... there were two helpers there on the day. You entered the room and there were 14 other people, so you are going to be a little apprehensive, but they made you feel so comfortable straight away.'*

C1b – p.23: *'... they actually listened to what you had to say and so that was good. I actually flipped my position and really enjoyed it, I found it was useful. ... I thought it was actually a very good course'.*

FF2 – p.24: *'... 95% say: "Thank goodness we did this! It's really good!"'*

b) Option for the poor. Marriage Care has a consistent and effective commitment to work with those across social and economic groupings in society. The charity does its work regardless of the client's ability to pay. This is not always popular with government departments but popular with our competitors in the counselling sphere, who feel able to refer poorer clients to Marriage Care. Marriage Care and its volunteers do this work because they believe that that is a calling to serve society in a deeply practical way, and in areas of acute need and potential suffering.

c) Alleviation of Relationship Poverty. Above all, Marriage Care sees itself as committed to the alleviation and prevention of relationship poverty. It is this that forms the major link with the identity of Marriage Care as a Catholic charity rooted in CST.

For couples living in today's culture there is a deep fear of marital breakdown, almost as if it is an expectation, and a pervasive set of family and relationship experiences of breakdown which scar whole generations. That divorce is now seen as an easy 'way out' option if things get difficult. The internal reflectors shared that, from their own experience, they sense how this fear and strong sense of uncertainty and vulnerability holds partners back from giving themselves totally to each other in complete trust. Marriage Care would like to be that place of hope for those couples that no matter what difficulties they encounter along the way, they learn that it is possible to grow from difficulty through love.

d) Vocation to community work. It was acknowledged that the facilitators themselves portrayed a sense of vocation about their work at Marriage Care, a desire to give something back to the community. For many reflectors this too connected the organisation – so highly dependent on and committed to this volunteer culture – with CST. Whilst it might be true that some of the facilitators would see their role as a vocation but would not necessarily see it as a part of CST, none the less, their role in preparing people for a lifelong and healthy marriage contributed to the 'common good'. Of course, marriage preparation is rarely meeting people at a point of acknowledge relationship poverty: but, it working to prevent such impoverishment in the future, it does work with inherited relational poverties, poverty of emotional intelligence and so forth. The sense of contributing through this work to a common good, and a better world was clear from the volunteers themselves.

FF2 – p. 21: *'That's part of my calling – calling? Well perhaps that's too grand – but you know what I mean, it's a little vocation ... and that's why I do it ... Oh it's wonderful! It's great!'*

MP2 – p. 11: *'I have for a long time before I came on board with Marriage Care, I wanted to volunteer for a Catholic organisation, to just hopefully give something back to the community.'*

e) Community & Common Good. 'The family (couple) lives its spirituality precisely by being at one and the same time a domestic church and a vital cell for transforming the

world' (Pontifical Council for Justice & Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* 248- 254)

The particular nature of marriage and family in society and in the theology means that the work of Marriage Care can be seen is a key part in building good strong sustainable communities and so contributing to the Common Good. *Amoris Laetitia* is very strong on this point (182 – 1970). The marriage preparation day is geared towards preparing couples to live with 'a big heart.' (AL#196); but also, by introducing to couples the concept of seeing a counsellor before things go wrong in a marriage, the course embraces 'even those who have made a shipwreck of their lives' (AL 197)

In the light of these convictions, when the team looked at the connection between Catholic Social Teaching and Marriage Care, the question was raised whether a sense of the 'common good' is absent in these couples' relationships? Rather, there seemed a sense of unchallenged assumption that marriage is about 'our relationship'. The team noticed that the couples failed to see or were confused as to what their marriage had to do with other people because "quite frankly it's just about the two of us" ; their marriage was not about contributing to the wider community but the two of them in their own private world.

It was recognised that some of the couples desired to give back to the community in some way (Hindu couple and Thai chi on a Saturday, and the mother who goes into prisons), but very few of them reflected on the contribution their marriage as such might make to the 'common good'. This raises the question as to how the CST convictions of Marriage Care might be better communicated to couples.

It appears that community and participation is a theme that resonates more in the facilitators and the clergy data than the couple data. There are strands about the loss of community support for marriage and the need to recreate this somehow. Perhaps it is too much to expect the involvement of the couple with the wider community of the church. These couples are in transit and still making a life. A few have mentioned their hopes for their children and wanting them to be involved in the school and church community. But the community doesn't offer much to them – for the team, this raises questions about what more could be done to help build a sense of belonging to the Christian community – as a support and not as a demand on their time and energy.

f) Human dignity. This is a CST theme clearly reflected in the mission and values – the espoused theology of Marriage Care. Marriage Care offers support, care and accompaniment to all those in whatever state of life who suffer the destructive forces of poverty relationship poverty and breakdown: 'As Christians we believe all are loved by God and called to love, relationship and deeper community. For Catholics, as for many others, the call to marriage has a special place in this understanding. This informs our work and fuels our commitment to the prevention and alleviation of relationship poverty that so obviously harms our culture and society today.' (Annual Report 2016) It is this truly Catholic ethos that is embodied when our marriage preparation facilitators enable a context of welcome, inclusion and attentiveness to couples (see above)

g) The sacramental and the social: social sacramentality. As already hinted at in this document, there was a growing sense in our reflections that the sacramental and the relational needed to be more intentionally held together in marriage preparation; we need to develop and communicate a social sacramentality of marriage and relationship. Such an

insight corresponds with those of CST whose major themes also illustrates such a sense of grace lived in ordinary: for example, the workplace as a place of grace; the practice of finance and property ownership as open to grace; the call to work in and for creation as a sacramental and highly practical way of living (*Laudato Si*). CST fundamentally speaks of the sacramentality of everyday life. Marriage is certainly a place we can reflect on the sacramental within the social. It is also a place of potential healing for people who have suffering relationship deprivation in childhood. A Christian marriage is ultimately about making each other holy/whole/close to God. Sharing and knowing a love of God allows both partners to know that He accepts them both as they are.

The data suggests that our participants, whilst not explicitly speaking of these matters, none the less are journeying within and towards such an understanding. There is a recognition of what is 'good' and a desire to nurture and better articulate that good. This is – at best – a social sacramental instinct.

h) Solidarity

It seemed clear to the team that a key driver for Marriage Care volunteers and an outcome felt by couples is a sense of solidarity with the couple in giving them the best start for married life. Katrina talks about the overall purpose being that of keeping families together in the long term:

FF3 – p. 13: *'And we give them a lot to take away and we try to encourage them – people aren't always going to look at it (smiling) – but the ones who are interested will. And we always say, you know, even if you just put it on a shelf when you get home, if you get to stage where you find you're not resolving your problem, just think about having a look at that pack, there might be something in there that's helpful (...) it's about keeping families together...'*

One couple noted that if we want marriage to last a lifetime the relational information and the relational skills communicated in the course are essential – they also know where to come if they have difficulty in the future.

C4b – p. 11: *'I think that it was time well spent (...) and that was what I was telling some of my girlfriends, either thinking of engagements or getting engaged ... it would be the mature thing to do (...) It would be a good sound approach to your future.'*

C4a – p. 11: *'Yah, knowing yourself a little bit more and how to end all difficult moments. And you need that if you want your marriage to last forever.'*

Another couple mentioned the benefit of being prepared for future problems and being aware of patterns of miscommunication.

C5b – p. 11: *'... one thing that they really focused on was they really focused on the breakdown of communication? And what to do ... And it opened, I think, both of our eyes to counselling, and in the future. (...) and I think that is something that will stick with me (smiling) throughout our marriage. Where before I would have seen counselling, as you only go when you're really in trouble.'*

One reflector saw this work of solidarity in terms of nurturing our common life and call, given to us and created by God.

'The image of a gardener might be useful. We believe that marriage preparation waters and fertilises the seeds of the domestic Church that has been planted by God through the relationship of the couple for each other. In some cases the seeds are already there, we are just facilitating, in others there are 'wow' moments as new perspectives are seen and processes stored and remembered for later use.'

These embryonic insights into a CST identity and what it might mean for a charity such as Marriage Care are the basis for future work and development in this area. We are convinced that there is something important here, not only for the charity's understanding of Catholic identity, but also for a maturing of notions of CST as a *lived* spirituality. One of our reflectors helpfully summed up this growing sense of Marriage Care as embodying a spirituality of Catholic Social Teaching:

'For me CST is all about relationships; with each other, with our world, with inanimate objects (like money) And that is EXACTLY the charism of Marriage Care, developed, honed and experienced over the last 70 years. In a nutshell we offer "Better relationships better lives."