



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

**THEME 2 FROM THE REFLECTION PROCESS:
*Marriage - doctrine and practice for the 'ordinary Catholic'.***

A second theme that emerged from our reflections concerned the place of *doctrine* - not only in the content of the marriage preparation course itself (for which see Theme 3 for more of a focus), but also in the lives and thinking of the couples coming for marriage preparation. In particular, the data encouraged us to look deeper than just 'how much do they know?' about the teaching of the Catholic church on marriage; for, whilst there were some obvious gaps in catechetical knowledge – unsurprisingly given the profile of the majority – there was also evidence of deeper instincts, understanding, values and lived spirituality. In giving an account of how doctrine and practice 'work' in the lives of those 'ordinary Catholics',¹ we set out to honour the complexity of their knowing and spiritual sense, as much as drawing attention to the real catechetical needs that are well-known and recognised throughout the church. In doing this, we are suggesting that it is through beginning with this real though often unarticulated sense of people's faith / spirituality that we can begin to speak together meaningfully and truthfully about more formal doctrine.

The account that follows witnesses to some key insights around: language; 'teaching with authority'; lived spirituality (sacramentality); and the realities of the church's teaching authority (or lack of) in the lives of many 'ordinary Catholics'. One extremely clear feature of the data is the ways in which the present pope - in his person and teaching – has provided a focus for many who are trying to make sense of these questions in their own lives. It is with this sub-theme that we begin.

¹ This is not all together a perfect term for what we mean here. We are using it as the language most commonly used in our reflection conversations to describe the Catholics who make up the majority of Marriage Care marriage preparation clients. That is, these are the majority who would certainly identify as Catholics, perhaps attend church occasionally or intermittently, but do not feel constrained by all the church's teachings and rules, and may demonstrate a variety of levels of committed faith and catechetical understanding. The group includes those often referred to in the church as 'lapsed' Catholics, and in sociology as 'cultural Catholics'. Neither term, to our minds, seems quite right for this extended Catholic family, whose particular experiences and spiritualities we wish to attend to.

1. The “Francis Effect”. Nearly every single one of the interviewees made some reference to Pope Francis. It was striking to the reflectors that he was never far from peoples’ minds. Particularly notable are the ways in which the interviewees related the current Pope to themes of inclusivity, welcome, respect, compassion, realism, charity and love. What seems to emerge is the way in which Pope Francis seems to represent a Catholicism which people respond to in especially positive ways. What is telling is how this Catholicism is characterised by those interviewed: it is accessible, warm and welcoming. He explains and meets people on their level, meeting them where they are, and is seen to understand the complex situation young couples and families find themselves in. What is being recognised and positively responded to by many of the couples in particular, is Pope Francis’ apparent opening up of spaces in which they can talk freely and honestly about faith and doctrine, without fear of judgement or being closed down by formal ‘right answers’.

Of particular significance here is the widely articulated sense from our participants that we are living in a culture where it is ‘spirituality’ which is the dominant mode for faith / religious thinking and understanding. Whatever we mean by this term (and it is contentious) it refers us to the personal, the discerned, the practically appropriated and lived, and the engagement of things beyond ourselves. Whilst not essentially anti-doctrinal, this is a cultural move which considers ‘teaching’ in terms of how far it nurtures the spiritual – with significant ecclesial and especially catechetical implications. There is some work to be done on identifying what couples/facilitators/priests are saying about spirituality if our marriage preparation is to really bear fruit for couples and the wider life of the church and society.

There is a typically late modern focus on spirituality as ‘me-time’ or healing brokenness. Far from simply being a selfish turn away from church community this might also be understood as indicating deeply felt needs of people in our society – for rest, healing, and the holding together of often very fractured and displaced lives. Here the importance of personal relationship also comes to the fore – not only as a practical way of living, nor as a romantic ideal but as a response to that deeply felt need for connection beyond ourselves, for *love*.

This spirituality has implications for how we envisage marriage preparation – many of which can be seen in Marriage Care’s work. For instance the preparation course is intentionally called *Preparing Together*, because it is not primarily about preaching/teaching the couples but rather it seeks to encourage them to focus on one another, and open up to each other’s inner world. This interpersonal openness is a locus for spiritual growth and, ultimately, turning toward God in renewed faith.

All our participants - couples, facilitators and the clergy – witnessed to this spiritual sense and frequently referred to Pope Francis in trying to articulate this further. It is as if their moment of looking at marriage and relationship was also a moment of returning to something spiritual or something beyond themselves; yet, at the same time, they are aware that all sorts of things in their lives - around stress, busyness, finances - militate against being able to pursue that:

C1a – p. 22: *‘But ultimately there are parts of the Catholic Church which are not compatible with certain thinking within society ... there are doctrines ... but it’s how you approach that incompatibility ... as Pope Francis is doing, he is ... trying to*

accommodate at least a discussion about family structures ... it doesn't require a change in doctrine to have more of an open space to have that discussion or have facilitation ...'

CF1a – p. 3: *'I am actually really pleased (with the Catholic Church), and I think also maybe because of the fact that we have a new Pope and bringing new ideas, really helped me get back into it.'*

FF3 – p. 6: *'I think what's happening now is wonderful! (Smiles and chuckles) With our new Pope ... he certainly seems to be um, getting it back to what it's all about.'*

P1 – pp. 5-6: *'I changed (the parish website) on the direct influence of Pope Francis! ... He said: "I want you priests ... treat people nicely" ... busy priests, bothered by people who haven't been near a church for a few years ... a lack of welcome ... We call ourselves a church of mission and here we get the un-church ... uncontaminated by ... any sense of religion and the first thing we'd say is "Go away!"... I think that's part in which we can show a kinder face. I think Pope Francis has reminded um, fellow clergy that, you know, that ... people expect to find Christ here!'*

P3 – p. 12: *'He's real! Because there's a lot of fragmentation and brokenness, so he knows where to pick up. And still we must be hopeful ... that something good will come out of these times ... maybe something will emerge.'*

p. 13: *'... that's what Pope Francis seems to do, he seems to draw people back into the Church or back into the faith or makes it attractive to them ... it's a caring institution really ... not just about rules and regulations ... it's about that dialogue with the people.'*

MP2 – p. 11: *'It's been great that Pope Francis has come on board and he appears to be doing great things in terms of pulling back the ... Catholic family ... and sort of Catholics in general to a position where we have a voice ... so I am really pleased that Pope Francis seems to be really elevating the Catholic Church to a position where it should be in terms of, you know, speaking out.'*

C4b – p. 10: *'... the fact that we've got a new pope, Pope Francis, has also helped because he is having quite a fresh message?'*

C1b – p. 21: *'I think the current pope is actually very good ... demonstrating compassion and so his attitude towards things that were previously looked down on, is actually quite um, enlightened. SO things just like our situation – um, people who have kids before marriage – he's actually been quite welcoming towards and he's softened the approach to that.'*

These are the characteristics of the spiritual sense the reflectors discerned in the data: a spirituality of open communication, inclusion, belonging, being open without fear of judgement, compassion. These are relational themes indicating a strong spiritual sense of relationship, strongly coherent with marriage and family relationships.

2. Mediation: The need for a dialogue, a spiritual language, an integrated spirituality

The reflectors recognised that there is currently a lack of trust towards Marriage Care and its 'Catholic identity' on the side of some of the clergy, particularly marriage and family life workers of some dioceses who dismiss it because it does not seem to be based thoroughly and explicitly enough in Catholic Teaching. This is often how the lack of doctrinal emphasis, and didactic pedagogy is interpreted. Certainly the traditional content offered by Marriage care is predominantly based on relationship skills, and the expressly catechetical content is limited. This may be a point for further reflection ND work for the marriage Care team. More fundamentally, however, these observations raise questions not only around Catholic ethos / identity (Theme 1) but also in relation to *integration* – integration of if, practice, faith and doctrine. Such a need for deeper integration calls particularly for a focus on spirituality which can bring these aspects of faith and life together in the personal appropriation of each man and woman.

There is a real challenge here about the different kinds of approach to Catholic marriage preparation and the need to agree on a particular, accessible language and an appropriate mediation of the sacramental teaching of marriage in the Catholic Church. The teams both feel a strong desire to demonstrate Marriage Care's particular gift here: the vocation to speak of faith in mediated ways. The commitment of Marriage Care marriage reparation is to adopt ways of talking which do not use religious language for the sake of it, or as our only (or even primary) language, but rather witness to an understanding that all good human living is, in some sense, sacramental – an ordinary holiness.

There is a way of introducing theology - for the facilitators to teach (and be formed by) and the couples to be taught - which is experienced as off-putting or unwelcoming. The question came up in reflection, Have Marriage Care have leaned a little too much on the side of safety in order to be welcoming, but in fact losing opportunities for teaching along the way? Is it this that has led to some mistrust among clergy and other church workers?

In reflecting on what we were seeing of Marriage Care clients and facilitators, it became clear that the language of perfect is unhelpful; the language of 'grace' is more appropriate. Grace abounds even in our sinful lives, and is known in particular ways in our brokenness. This leads us to reflect on the deeply biblical theme of *opening our eyes* – facing realities as they are: things will go wrong and can get messy – but the teaching of redemption witnessed to a constant dying and rising each day.

One of or reflectors at this stage in the conversation brought up the Emmaus journey, in which Jesus doesn't mention who he is until the very end; his presence is discerned by those who talk and eat with him. There is a move from implicit to explicit, but the reality of the presence is there throughout. Can this teach us how to lead people into encountering grace? The sacramentality of Christ's presence is woven throughout but the language/mediation is soft and gentle and integrated into the secular and everyday. The Emmaus journey could possibly be used as a way of relaxing the problem of fearing being too explicit. In a sense, Christ 'plays dumb', putting questions to the fore, and retelling stories, and not seeking to engineer things to happen in a particular way.

Part of what Marriage Care is about in relation to doctrine concerns finding a language to talk about faith/doctrine that is not 'bookish': it is about *facilitation* rather than direct pedagogy and catechesis. What is called for is a kind of 'theology of facilitation' which describes the ways in which the primary move is meeting people where they are, facilitating their own spiritual sense, and then opening up next steps. One reflector made reference to the book *Christ the Listener*, portrays Jesus as always aging an ear open to the needy, and moving from their to opening minds in ways akin to Socrates' pedagogical methods. What is central, and deeply scriptural, is that sense of a 'whole person formation' as essential for people's arriving at Truth.

It was acknowledged that the couples and the facilitators do have a sense of spirituality, but they simply don't name it or perhaps don't even recognise and identify it as spiritual. Because of this lack of recognition and lack of language to name it, they can't reflect on it and therefore cannot always develop it. So the naming of that spirituality, the making of the connection between it daily life is something that needs to be facilitated for it to really become an explicit energy in their lives.

All this led the teams to the core insight that an authentic Christian spirituality does not admit of the separation of 'secular' and sacred'. The challenge then is to embody this insight in the marriage preparation day more deeply, recognising relationship skills and sacramental understandings of marriage are all of a piece, and not to be presented as if from different places or ways of thinking. This does not mean that Marriage Care should begin the preparation programme announcing Catholic dogma and the sacramentality of marriage like sending a bull into a china shop! Rather it articulates as belief that there is something immensely rich that the Catholic Church has to say about relationships, and the theology is practical, and the practice theological. It is the idea of being explicit but open, explicit but non-threatening - Pope Francis himself being the advocate of this approachable, accessible model, particularly in his recent exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*. Pope Francis talks to us in accessible language which is not preachy and very practical; we have a gift here, we have these riches of the Catholic Church which get buried under the dogma and the rules.

FF2 – p. 21: '*...FOCCUS does that sort of thing for people ... The fact is: is that Catholic?? Is it the Church caring for their relationship? ... yes. Because I'm a Catholic, doing it on behalf of the Catholic Church, therefore it is ... I'm not competing for religion, that's not my role, I don't want to find more Catholics. I want to help young people have a good married life.*'

FF1 – p. 10: '*... it's got to be accessible to the non-Catholic partner ... I'm confident that God is in all things, so it doesn't have to be 'Chapter and Verse': "This is the Catholic teaching ..."*'

P2 – pp. 9-10: '*... it's got to be the right type of theology. So it's no good coming in with the old, out of date concepts with some of the right wing stuff in fact ... well, people are just going to walk away! It's got to connect with peoples' experience and experience of the world ... not just a, a bringing up what we had in the past, that's not going to do it! Because we're in a different time! So Tridentine theology is not going to cut the mustard.*'

The spirituality the team are talking about is 'a way of being': but how can we *be* in the world when living amidst the 'quick-fix' society, temptations of consumerism and individualism and the temptation of busyness which comes across in all the interviews; the 'rapidification', to use a word coined by Pope Francis.

MP2 – pp. 16-17: *'... we in society – we are looking for the easy fix, we are looking for the quick fix (...) And if it's not there, then we want to move on!! We're not willing to wait! (...) (Spirituality) goes out of the window! (...) somewhere along the line they have lost that connection between their spirituality and the Church ...'*

FF3 – p. 18: *'I don't think there's the same expectation of staying together ... I think there are far too many people who think it's the easy option ... it's a bit too easy to split up now ...'*

C1a – p. 24: *'... some people do enter marriage thinking "well if it doesn't work out then, you know, it's fine, it doesn't matter", for both of us, it's something that we only anticipate doing once ... our values lie that way.'*

P2 – p. 2: *'... the huge pressure on families ... and on couples to stay together ... when I was first ordained it seemed that more couples stayed together and there was less kind of breaking ... there was breaking up but there was less of it ... so the social pressures on families and I suppose, a lack of understanding and appreciation of what the expectations of marriage are.'*

P3 – p. 10: *'But yah, what does ... how does the Church – as we live in this total culture – what ... it is quick-fixes ... it's a fast culture, you get rid of it if you don't get on with it ... and maybe that's why there's less priests as well, because families are unstable; I think it affects the priesthood and the marriage, it affects your relationships ...'*

So it is about the practising of the virtues, daily actions and small changes. Pope Francis focuses such practice very simply in the use of three essential words - "please", "thank you", "sorry". He writes: "Let us not be stingy about using these words, keep repeating them day after day, the right words spoken at the right time daily protect and nurture love". Love in whatever capacity requires daily effort. Constant acts of love and kindness. Every day we need to come up with new ways of appreciating, and acknowledging our family members; and that's our literal family members *and* our global family. Reflectors noted how Pope Francis uses the word 'gaze' and 'gazing' extensively, and that this was something that could quite easily be integrated into the preparation course. It's about the gaze and gazing, face to face and eye to eye. It is in the practice of the gaze that married couples can learn to give themselves time to talk things over, to embrace leisurely, share plans, to listen to one another, and simply gaze into each other's eyes, to appreciate one another and build a stronger relationship.

WE close this thematic account with an especially striking quote from one of the FOCCUS facilitators we interviewed. The team were impressed with the deep respect shown here for the individual, and even the priority given the individual journey over the couple relationship. The facilitator's framework for understanding builds on a strong sense of 'God in all things', the journey of life, respect, being catholic with a small c, welcome, building

trust, humility. It was highlighted how these were actually a fantastic representation of Catholic social teaching in the microcosm of interpersonal relationships.

FF1 – p. 13: 'I don't know whether the bishops think we're Catholic enough, but I'm sure we are! Catholic with a small 'c' as well? Universal you know? Reaching out um, being open (...) It's a great project because it's, it's real, it's where people actually are, and that is the only starting point actually.'