



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

**THEME 3 FROM THE REFLECTION PROCESS:
*Formation and pedagogy for practices of family and relationship***

The research's focus was on the marriage preparation day, and so it was unsurprising that one key theme that arose was that of pedagogy and formation. However, this was not, as our conversations deepened, simply about the methods and contents of the course – important as they are; rather, more complex themes around faith formation came to light. These were broadly considered under two main headings: the formation of the facilitators; and the formation and education of couples themselves. In particular, we became acutely conscious that – as an exercise in Adult Education – the marriage preparation day was continually having to adapt to work with the levels and types of formation / education that presented themselves in the room on any given day. Such an observation is complexified further when we remember that relationship education is a whole-person, and whole-life question: both couples and facilitators will be approaching this area of learning with lessons learnt – for good and ill - not only from church and school, but (more powerfully) from their own family and relationship histories. Marriage preparation does, in fact, begin at birth! (*Amoris Laetitia* 205 ff). All this has particular implications for the facilitators and the expertise they need to make the day as fruitful a contribution as possible to couple learning.

1. Formation of Clients. What became clear through the interviews was that - quite aside from the Marriage Care day - the 'spirit is at work' in the lives of these couples, as their lives and thinking and knowledge consistently spoke of an on-going spiritual journey, in which 'lessons had been learnt'. For some couples this life-learning, acutely thrown into relief by the imminent commitment of marriage, expressed itself in a particular desire to go back to Church. A number witnessed to a sense of going from "okay so we're here, this is weird to attend on a Saturday" in relation to the marriage preparation day, to a sense of really feeling energised as a result of the course with Marriage Care. This was something that the Marriage Care team had not really recognised before, and had not looked for. What became startlingly clear was that, not only is the 'spirit at work' within the limits of the marriage preparation day and FOCCUS, but that there is also a kind of preparation going on spiritually before that and afterwards. The marriage preparation has a context which is, of itself, authentically spiritual in that it testifies to the on-going faith journeys of the couples. A good number of interviewees were able to express this clearly:

C1a – p.11-12: *'...certainly since I've been back in London ... back in the UK, I've started to go to Mass more ... for me it's much more, to be an active participant rather than like a passive one'*

C1b – p.16: *'... we also want to buy into the community and the Catholic community ... I think growing up as a Catholic I always thought that the Church enriched our upbringing...'*

C1 – pp.17-18: *'I was an altar boy ... I was pretty, quite pious ... I genuinely thought: "Hmmm, maybe I'll be a priest!"...but then I think as I grew up ... I moved away from ... being a practicing Catholic ... it was only really when I met Hilary that I started seeing a bigger picture again'*

CF1a – p.3: *'... when people are asking me if I would like to get my kids baptised, you know, for me... it's a no brainer, because the only thing you're going to teach your kids is how to live a healthy life and, you know, it's just love and forgiveness and, you know, it's all these beautiful words so I don't know why people would not do it basically!'*

These comments indicate that the point in life these couples have reached – as they settle to commit to marriage, and celebrate the intention for a life-long loving relationship and family – is itself a moment of encounter with something beyond ourselves, a 'seeing the bigger picture' again. It is into this life-learning that the small contribution of the marriage preparation day can speak. What was encouraging is the way that it did speak to people:

C1a – p. 11: *'... I've started to go to Mass more.'*

pp. 28-29: *'... if anything, perhaps, it made me a little more inquisitive ... I think probably increasingly because of Lola [the couples' child], we are open to these processes or trying to explore how we will feel about it or how we fit into things and certainly, um, the Marriage Care day ... it was a good day really ...'*

C7a – p. 14: *'... I walked away from it not feeling like someone had tried to sort of convert me ... I found it engaging ... I thought it was good.'*

C7b – p. 14: *'Yah I think it certainly made ... with the right priest and Marriage Care, has certainly put (the Catholic Church) in a more positive light for me in the end ... you know, who knows what will happen next type-thing?'*

C3b – p. 8: *'...so I didn't know what to expect actually? ... I was surprised, nicely surprised actually, I liked it, yah, the people running it were so funny, and really good... he wasn't that happy to go on a course, he was like "Oh, its Catholic ..."'*

C3a – p. 8: *'It was a lot better! It was really good actually ...'*

C6a – p.8: *'It was better than I thought it was going to be ... I was probably a bit anxious about what they were going to cover ...'*

What is equally clear here is that what was valued was the type of pedagogy – not didactic, not closing down, but opening couples up to ideas and thinking and leaving them free to respond from their own, often complex, place of life-learning. In this the day seemed to

reflect well the Catholic church's own philosophy of education, with its emphasis of free assent, and discursive methods.¹

The marriage preparation course explicitly encourages couples to adopt a lifelong commitment to continuing development in their relationships, and as such it can be seen as a contribution to a relational and spiritual journey. This theme of journey is, in fact, one that emerges from the data itself as couples spoke of their experiences:

C1a p. 23-24: *'It certainly is good just even to have that data to reflect on ... marriage isn't an easy ride ... marriage is the beginning, it's not the end of something...'*

Several couples mentioned how important the sunbeam exercise was, as each partner found ways to reflect on their feelings for the other, and communicate these to their partner. For Marriage Care, this is an exercise of theological significance, as made clear by the statement on the bottom of the relevant work sheet, which reminds the couple that 'this is where God lives'. It was felt, in the conversations, that this element of integrating relationship and spirituality could be made more explicit in the day, particular as it proved to be a very powerful exercise for the participating couples:

C7b – p.18: *'... when they wrote little sunbeams there's something very personal about that which is important ... to source for the future.'*

(C2a and C2b actually brought the sunbeam exercise to the interview with them) – p.13:

C2a: *'... I brought something with me ... little pieces of that ...'*

C2b: *The sunshine...*

C2a: *... that was hugely valuable because some of that stuff is under your nose ...'*

C5b: *'Like throughout the day we had this booklet, and there's this one page with the sunbeams and the rays coming out of it ... It's a really nice thing to do! They are things you don't say on a daily basis, something that you do that inspires me ...'*

Lessons in attentiveness were being joyfully learnt and enabled here – an attentiveness which, as the sheet makes clear, is ultimately an attentiveness to the way God is working in people's lives and relationships.

The marriage preparation facilitators are meeting the couples at a particular time in their marriage and faith journey, and recognise God in this work. Many facilitators were clear how the Holy Spirit permeates the course content: a commitment to continuing to love each other, and the development of our relationship and skills that we have learnt – these are 'spiritual practices'. The course aims at opening couples up to the marriage journey, equipping them with the tools they need to help them, enabling them to talk about things they hadn't talked about before. But in all this there is also a fundamental sense of creating a space that allows the holy moment to engage with them. As one facilitator puts it:

FF1 – p.11-12: *'... 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 ... reflecting on 'What is*

¹ "Truth, however, is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue, in the course of which men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth. Moreover, as the truth is discovered, it is by a personal assent that men are to adhere to it." Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humane* 3

happening in your life? ... Where is that coming from ... your needs spiritually?' Um, you know, asking those sort of open questions if there's the opportunity ...'

The reflectors also became aware, in keeping with the general experience of action research as more broadly practised, that the process of the research itself was contributing to the learning. It was recognised that the data not only attested to the ways in which Marriage Care, the clergy, and the couples were already rooted in grace, learning through their life and relationships, but that also the interviews themselves seemed to have raised a new energy within most (if not all) of the participants. The way the interviewees told their stories was very striking and all signified this extraordinary sense of spirituality and a desire to care for people as a strong motivation; so we're looking in this research to ask "what makes people want to do this?" If it is the opportunity to reflect and narrate the experience that contributes to deeper learning, how can this be further facilitated? It was the process of being asked to tell their stories and experiences that enabled an articulation of something 'beyond themselves' at work, a naming of a spirituality:

FF1 – p. 13: *'... it's been an important part of my journey as a person ... Through the training, thought the experience of couples, it has enriched my faith and challenged me ... I'm glad that it encompasses people of all faiths and none ... that's a really good sign... ecumenism... But connection is the word I prefer and openness ... God in all things. Confident that yes it will all ... if we are prayerful.'*

C5b – p. 19: *'... I've been into church before when there is no Mass on, and I actually just quite enjoy sitting there and having my, whatever spiritual time, by myself ... in that setting. And I think walking through the door and into a church, of course, you immediately feel more ... close to your faith. Um, but yah, but I get frustrated with the quasi boredom of the ... Mass. So I want to buy in ... so many churches are so stuck in their ways.'*

CF1a – pp. 6-7: *'So sometimes actually, you know, going to Mass on Sunday Morning, is the best get-away sometimes. Just the 'me-time' ... I'm just in my head ... what do I need to do to get better ... you know, some people will have a massage ... and I prefer ... just ... looking out of my head, my brain, and making sure that it's all connected to the right place.'*

P3 – p. 11: *'Yah, you remember somebody said something that you could connect with later on, you know? Because people are searching for, you know, for happiness, for its through doing God's will is that we find true happiness, if you're a priest, you try to be a good priest, if you're married you try to make it a good marriage, you do the best you can, and that brings happiness, it bares fruits ...'*

There appears to be a journey both of relationship and of spirituality (individual and couple), which the course re-generates and encourages into articulation and deeper reflection. But there is a lot more going on outside of the course, as we have seen. The challenge is to enable links to be made, connecting up relationship skills, spirituality, life-learning and faith. These are the links we have to make; we have to make ourselves open and vulnerable and then open to the spirit.

C1a – p.28: *'(The course), if anything, perhaps it made me a little more inquisitive? And made me want to find out a little bit more? But I don't know where I'd go for that to be honest, I don't know who I would speak to, um, maybe the new priest who is coming in, I don't know.'*

Well, yah, I don't know where I would find that kind of ... discussion happens, I really don't know'

One of the places where the making of connections is most challenging is in relation to the Church and the couples' experiences and personal spirituality. There is recognition among the majority of the couples that there is an existing gap between participation in Church life and getting married – for many, it is simply about a signing on to a course in order to use the church for a wedding.

It was agreed that all facilitators (and couples too if possible) should be well-informed of the foundations of Church teaching and doctrines, particularly do to with the sacrament of matrimony. In particular, there is a need, in keeping with the best of adult education pedagogy, to be able to explore the 'whys' behind doctrine and Church rules/teachings. To meet people where they are and speak about these things requires far more than just know what the church teaches; it calls for a wisdom of discernment, listening and careful understanding. We are working in a culture where there is, already, a learning around diversity, personal freedom and a (often quite proper) suspicion of rules. There is some work to do in deepening understanding around 'church rules' - their meaning and purpose – and limitations

The teams both agreed that not enough currently exists in the Church in terms of available, accessible and appropriate formation for married couples. There is a 20 year gap for some of these couples who are marrying, where the Church hasn't been part of their lives since they were young. But they are taking a step and are coming back to marry in the Catholic Church. We are demonstrating that we are able to engage with those couples, and we seem to be encouraging development. The limits of the marriage preparation day are, however, real; knowing how to enable couples to take next steps is an important challenge into the future.

Facilitators

The place where the challenge of formation hits home most is internally, in Marriage Care and among their own practitioners / facilitators. In fact, facilitators are likely to have had similar experiences growing up to the couples, and may have considerable gaps in their own formation, whilst being rather more engaged with church than the majority of couples attending preparation days. This is part of the gift of solidarity that the Marriage Care team brings. However, these gaps in formation – which are varied both in extent and type – raise questions about the responsibility of Marriage Care to close those gaps, so as better to enable and encourage facilitators. In particular, the data suggested there were some areas where a lack of confidence in articulating faith and spirituality might be an issue:

C1a – pp.25-26: 'I'm not sure the two ladies, who were very, very nice, would have been equipped in that way ... it didn't seem like you could ask a deeper question ... there was the actual factual "what does the sheet say?" response (about the sacrament), but it didn't have some kind of open discussion about it ... I don't know if they would have been comfortable with it ... I think you'd need to have some kind of theological background ...'

Might there be a gap in the facilitators' understanding? Or perhaps the charity has tended to be too gentle - even cautious - in our approach to teaching about sacramentality? Are the facilitators aware of what is going on in conversation, of a deepening of the couples' love and

the spiritual working on holy ground, and how are they equipped to respond to this? It seems the personal journey of each facilitator is very important:

FF1 – p. 13: '(Working as a facilitator) has been an important part of my journey as a person ... Through the training, through the experience of couples, it has enriched my faith and challenged me and you know, I've grown; so yah, it's all one, actually.'

This last quote from a facilitator interview demonstrates the lively importance of the facilitators' own spiritual and faith life. Most of those giving the course or facilitating on the FOCCUS programme, seemed to have had very profound personal experiences of God's love which the team found inspiring and uplifting. Some of the facilitators witnessed to an experience of God's loving them and a desire then to show, that to others, which shaped their Marriage Care work. T the same time, the work itself contributed to this spiritual sense:

MP2 – p. 10: 'I think that for me that has been a real boost to my spirituality.'

The reflectors pondered the ways in which Adult Education – so large a theme in the post Vatican II church – had appeared to dwindle in church life and (especially) resourcing in more recent years. If it is the case that couples and our facilitators (in different ways and to rather different degrees) experience some lack of confidence and some real catechetical lack, they are part of a wider crisis in adult faith formation which is affecting the whole church. For Marriage Care facilitators there is a need for a particular kind of formation which necessarily includes not only confidence in doctrinal matters, but also confidence in discerning what is needed in any given situation. Facilitators need to feel at ease and comfortable with couples, and enable that same ease for couples who might be coming into a more explicitly 'churchy' place than they are used to. That's the bridge we need to build – from disconnection to formation.

There was a particular tension identified here by the Marriage Care reflector team. One of the main problems for facilitators of being more forthcoming with teaching the doctrine of the Church is due to their overall desire and sensitivity to ensure a continuously welcoming approach to couples, particularly given the awareness, substantiated by this research, that most of these couples will include one partner who is either not Catholic, of other faith, or that either one or both of them have not entered a Church in years. For many at Marriage Care (and again, the data from couples encourages this), the charity plays a significant role in being 'the smiling face of the Catholic Church' which is of high importance, particularly for those who have not been to Church for a long while and for those who have never stepped inside one. One reflector referred back to a Christian charity where he used to work, where something of this same tension was articulated in terms of 'God's name is not mentioned once, but His fingerprints are all over it'. The earlier theme of 'explicit and implicit' emerges again here. Some of the interviewees for this project believe that there are visible signs of Catholicity precisely in this welcoming, 'meeting people where they' are, non-didactic approach.

There was a concern that some of the facilitators seemed to believe their own personal religion should be kept separate from their role as a facilitator. Whilst this might be appropriate in a counselling situation, the role of facilitation in marriage preparation days might call for a different approach, built on a more thought-through Catholic pedagogy. This raises questions for the charity, not only in relation to the training and formation of facilitators, but also concerning recruitment and on-going formation. In particular there was

a desire to explore more explicitly the role of facilitators in relation to spirituality and enabling the couples' spiritual growth at this crucial moment of marriage preparation. Ideally it was felt that facilitators might be enabled to get to a place where – when appropriate – they can share personally about their own faith and spirituality – warts and all! This means that there needs to be a combination of didactic and experiential teaching and learning in the formation of the facilitators. This raises challenging questions for the charity: where and when does such formation take place? What form does it take? How much time does it take?

The tension between the didactic and the discursive is given particular focus around the question of the explicitly catechetical content of the marriage preparation day. The structure of the day includes a session towards the end which looks at the sacramental understanding of marriage and takes the couples through the liturgy for marriage so as to enable a deeper understanding of this theology. It was recognised how one couple said it was good to have the sacramental part as a chunk at the end rather than at the beginning, as that may have put them off if it were the first thing that was put in front of them.

C5a – p.12: *'I think where they have it had the end is good, because by then you're quite relaxed ...'*

For others, however, this seemed a bit like a religious 'add on' to the day, and our reflection conversations led us to explore possibilities for a more integrated delivery of the day, in which faith matters and questions, and especially spiritual awareness permeated the whole day. This remains a challenge of the charity, which – for a variety of historical and practice reasons – has traditionally seen the day as a complement to the catechetical materials delivered by clergy. This tendency to separate lay and clerical preparation, and (more profoundly) the 'secular' and 'sacred' sides of preparation was something the reflectors all wished to move beyond, towards a more integrated and collaborative formation. However, it was clear that for many facilitators and clergy this supposed division of labour was assumed:

MP1 – p.6: *'I think I'm treading a very fine line between delivering the course and trying to make it accessible to people who may not be interested in that side of things ... if you get awkward questions ... the spirituality is the one where I feel least able to answer ...'*

FF3 – pp.9-10: *'... the couples should see the priest as well, because we're definitely not ... we don't do the whole thing ... about the sacrament. Ours in some ways I think it's more of a briefing for the people who come who aren't Catholic...'*

These observations lead us to the fourth major theme of the research: Lay and clergy working together in marriage preparation.