



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

**THEME 4 FROM THE REFLECTION PROCESS:
*Clergy and laity working together: the wider ecclesiological questions***

A strong theme which has arisen from the reading of the data is an apparent role conflict and even occasional power struggle between parish priests and the marriage preparation day facilitators. This is not, usually, about any kind of animosity between the groups; rather it reflects both historical and ecclesio-cultural expectations around catechesis, marriage preparation and lay and clergy roles in the church. Parish priests seem both to praise Marriage Care for its vital part in teaching couples the skills needed in order to sustain a healthy, lifelong marriage, and, at the same time, see the charity as somehow more 'secular' or not catechetical. Once again, this feeds into **a false dichotomising of the sacred and the secular**. There was a sense in the interviews of clergy's not seeming very confident in allowing Marriage Care to teach the couples about the theology of marriage. Two out of the three interviewed parish priests had intentionally set up their own parallel marriage preparation in response to this seeming lack. In this they are both typical of many clergy who use Marriage Care marriage preparation days, and also reflect something of the charity's own sense of its proper limits and its expectations of clergy as collaborators in marriage preparation.

P2 – p. 6: *'So, this year we decided that we ... they didn't seem to do God in it really, you know? There was nothing much on the sacraments much, but this year ... we started this course ourselves ... dealing with marriage from the very beginning of time – the Old Testament, the scriptures, the teaching of the Catholic Church ...'*

P1 – p. 10: *'... there is clear blue water between the – I know vaguely what goes on (at the marriage preparation classes) – um, there is separation between that and what we do, or I do. Um, so I'm around occasionally, I look in. But no, it's a discreet course, it works as a unit ...'*

These clergy positions matched many of the facilitators' expectations. Indeed, many facilitators did not seem confident in their own competence to take on that responsibility of teaching 'the sacramental part', with the result that 'the theological part' of the day is currently being perceived as a bolt on to the secular part on relationship skills. The reflectors' conversations saw this situation as one of impoverishment – both the Marriage Care's course, and to the parish based work, in that it unhelpfully and untheologically

separated theology from relations, the sacred from the secular, the ecclesial wisdom from the lay wisdom. Facilitators seem to have appropriated this separation – whether as a result of experience, lack of confidence or wider ecclesio-cultural sensibilities:

FF3 – p. 13: *'... where we have our centre, (the parish priest) doesn't like sending his couples on any courses at all, he does the whole thing himself ... but you do worry that those couples aren't getting anything about their relationship, they're just getting the whole thing about the sacrament.'*

MP1 – p.13: *'... my priest doesn't like me doing anything to do with religion on that course. He prepares his couples very thoroughly for marriage and his view is that the religious side is his job, the relationship side is mine ... I would be perfectly happy for him to do all the religious side of it because he's the expert, but I know I need to do it because lots of couples won't get it elsewhere.'*

MP3b – p. 18: *'... we say, "We're not here to speak on the spiritual; that you would have to address it to your parish priest". And ... as Christians ourselves we feel that, that's not enough, it would be nice to give a bit more.'*

The strong presence of this theme throughout the data lead the reflectors to deeper conversations about what might be going on here. As a result, a number of sub-themes were identified:

1. Trust vs. Fear

It was recognised from the data that there seems to exist a combination of trust and fear between Marriage Care and the clergy /parish priests. This resonated with the longer experience of the reflectors in the Marriage Care team. When the priests send couples to Marriage Care there is an investment of trust there; at the same time there is often a lack of communication between the Marriage Care facilitators and the clergy who use this service: the priest doesn't ask what is in the course and nor do Marriage Care really know what the parish clergy may be doing with couples in preparation. The challenging question is, what lies at the root of this division of labour and lack of communication? Is there a certain fear or anxiety as well as an assumption of trust at play? The ambivalence of clergy in relation to the marriage preparation day was evidenced in the interviews, in particular suggesting an assumed division of labour defined by the supposed 'secular' and 'church' content:

P1 – p. 11: *'I was not sure they were right to move into the sacramental side ... Because they're value is in what they do, and I wasn't sure about some of the Marriage Care catechists' competency ... in the theological side of it ... I just wasn't happy because you never know quite what they're doing ...'*

P1 – p.4: *'The diocese is pushing very hard Marriage Encounter ... And I'm vaguely unhappy about the – as it were – opposing camps. You know, within the same Church. We get: "I'm for this", "I'm for that" and a lack of a more cohesive thing ...'*

P3 – p.6: *'No involvement of me at all no ... So, this year we decided that ... they didn't seem to do God in it really, you know? There was nothing much on the sacraments ... we started this course ourselves, along with the Marriage Care ... dealing with marriage from ... this Old Testament, the scriptures, the teaching of the Catholic Church ...'*

What also became clear is that the facilitators themselves were aware of perhaps offering a slightly different vision of ‘Catholic’ preparation from their clerical colleagues:

FF1 – p.13: *‘I don’t know whether the bishops think we’re Catholic enough (chuckles), but I’m sure we are! Catholic with a small ‘c’ as well? Universal, you know? Reaching out um, being open.’*

All this raises the point as to what extent marriage preparation should be a church-based catechesis, and who should have ultimate responsibility for this? Occasionally clergy lament the lack of theology in the marriage preparation day; but at the same time, as pointed out by one facilitator, this can look as if the priests are abdicating their responsibility by expecting Marriage Care to cover all the faith and theological material that in their course.

FF3 – p. 13: *‘I mean I feel are almost wanting to relinquish part of their role in a way!’*

Interestingly this position seems to collude with the secular/church division of labour assumption. This leads to the raising of another question from the reflectors, relating to recognition of the particular expertise offered in the Marriage Care day: do the priests always have the relationship skills, and the sense of solidarity the couple which characterises the marriage preparation day?

The team recognised that many priests are becoming overwhelmed by the amount of work they have before them, but at the same time they may experience difficulty in handing theological and catechetical responsibility over to the laity. This is a serious problem, which can result in rich opportunities being missed through a failure in the church to embrace and embed lay activity and expertise the church life and service. It was noted Vatican II’s vision of the ‘secular’ and properly graced vocation of laity does not seem to have percolated down. The reflectors felt that we are currently suffering from a lack of catechetical culture, and that something needs to be addressed in the area of training and formation for both clergy and laity – in the response to the increasing shortage of priests in this country. This does, of course have implications for facilitators and their own levels of understanding, as they themselves recognised:

FF1 – p. 10: *‘... I think it is very important to convey the sacred ... God is in all things and ... as long as the vows are focused on, and the sacred ... also the people who deliver it, you know, they need to be coming from that place. (...) you want the couple to just absorb something intangible, because even, you know, the Catholic person, they want a Church wedding, they’re instinctively wanting that, but it might not be that ... they’re very practising?’*

The conclusion which arose from this particular discussion was that by offering appropriate catechetical opportunities, facilitators and couples will be able to engage with their faith a little more deeply. Celebrating and embracing lay formation and training reshapes catechesis itself, as increasingly ‘the world’ becomes the primary locus for the working out of a religious vocation – a concept very much in tune with Catholic Social Teaching. Indeed, the CST theological lense reinforces the idea that the normal primary function of the Church is to live in holiness in the world. In equipping Marriage Care to make a difference in this area, the reflectors were aware that this might involve communicating **a greater sense of the significance of lay spirituality and the role of lay theology, together with the de-clericalisation of the theological task.** In this sense, theology, mission and handing on the faith is more clearly demonstrated as a ‘whole-church’ vocation. This sense of the importance of the lay contribution was clear in our data:

FF1 – p. 5: *'Um, a failure to listen to the laity and a real reluctance to listen – I think – to the Holy Spirit, that with the decline in vocations is, I think, God is showing us we need to grow and expand and develop, not stay stuck; married priests would be wonderful ...'*

P1 – pp. 14-15: *'... unless we build ourselves, a base of support in the catechetical area, then we cannot continue in ... this deanery where we are invited now to see if we could deal with 1 or 2 priests less ... in the end I think we have to spend a bit of money, and recruit. Recruit people, have even separate colleges for catechists: catechist training colleges, and develop that ministry as a serious ministry; at the moment it's just a joke! You know, a bunch of volunteers who are really lovely people, but themselves, don't have ... much knowledge.'*

It was acknowledged that this project has significant potential for contributing to the development of such a whole-church approach to the care of marriage and family, enabling a more informed dialogue about marriage ministry and rooted in the experience and practical expertise of Marriage Care. The team were struck by the way in which Fr Adams struggled with the language of *communion* as a way of understanding this whole-church vocation for marriage preparation and care. He spoke of wanting better catechesis for the couple, yet not wanting it to be heavy or inappropriate, and not being fully able to articulate clearly this vision for him. *Communio* is the key, but it's also a theme variously interpreted within the church: does communion speak of relationship primarily? Or shared belief?

P2 – pp. 9-10: *'... traditionally we've been brought up to believe or to understand that Jesus died ... the act of redemption was all about taking away our sins ... fair enough! But ... "the act of redemption is about reconciliation, healing, connectivity" ... which is of course where marriage comes in and where the Church comes in ... It is about taking away sins, but what does that mean? ... it's more about addressing division and disunity and brokenness, and that's where the healing aspect comes in ... so it's a different way of seeing the central tenets of Christian faith, which is basically the work of Christ as something positive and that something changes, the business of being human positively; which is about taking away sin but you've got to make it mean something ... to human beings ... and people know instinctively that it's right, because they know that unity and reconciliation and being at peace with one another and so on is the right thing ... all that flows from that model and that theology ... I think sacramental theology is all that's needed really and made accessible to them, and they can fit what (Marriage Care) are doing within that context. But it needs to be well thought through I would say. Otherwise you are going to end up doing more damage than good!'*

2. Lack of CPD within clergy education and formation.

It was suggested that if CPD (Continuing Professional Development) for clergy and lay leaders was more widely and effectively practised within the Church, then perhaps there would be more priests and also fewer relational problems between themselves and laity whose lives are more consistently shaped by societal culture, largely through family life and experience:

C5b: *'I wonder, do priests get any training post-qualifications? ... I'd be surprised that they don't get like on-going counselling training because that's their job, because they're the first person there in a lot of situations'*

C5a: *'If, if ... as you said Shannon, if you're in like a small community, rural community, a lot of the time the Church is your first point of call if there's any issues, um ... And I would have'*

thought that the priest is going to try and counsel you, they bloody well better know what they're talking about! (Chuckles) Um and yah, certainly we saw a priest who wasn't a great representation of the majority, but he was definitely you know, I wouldn't necessarily feel comfortable talking to that particular priest ... But if you think about other professions, doctors um, actual mental health professionals, they have to do constant training! Like I'm training to be a lawyer and one of the things is we have to do a minimum of 12 hours of training a year, um, and why shouldn't the same be for priests?! You wonder why certain professions and probably the more important professions or callings, like the priesthood, why they aren't subject to the same sort of training and supervision ... surely the theology between when you join the priesthood and when you're still practising at 60 is going to be different?! ... like the world has changed, so they have to change with it!"

Both teams acknowledged a certain lack of confidence among the clergy in their ability to see exactly how Marriage Care offers a good Catholic formation and teaching of the sacrament of matrimony for couples getting married in their churches. Whilst this may in part be due to the sense of a weak catechetical and didactic approach to church teaching, it may also be a result of a theological assumption that, for example, relationship skills are not 'church business'. The reflectors' response to this would be to call to mind the Marriage Care sense of the alleviation and prevention of relationship poverty – surely a church business, particularly when our ecclesiological sense is shaped by CST.

The complexity of relationships of trust, dependence, and some suspicion are evident between many clergy and Marriage Care facilitators. Yet the theology of 'whole church mission' to those in relationship need call for a greater working together, and intentional sharing of this important work between laity and clergy. Both sides need to realise their shared and complementary responsibilities and abilities and the opportunities that lie ahead if a good relationship between these two parties of the Church is forged.

One of the reflectors felt it important to stress that it should not be about needing permission from the clergy for facilitators to talk about doctrine to the couples; rather our shared concern should be about appropriate pedagogy and the identification of gifts that are needed for this flourish. Increasingly theological and teaching expertise is not only to be found among the clergy. There does seem to be a generation barrier which will need to be broken down in order to allow facilitators to grow in that confidence that they can take on some greater responsibility around catechesis, and that it is indeed necessary that the laity now take on more of a role of formation alongside the clergy. It was felt that a younger generation of volunteers may have more confidence in working in this collaborative way; though such a confidence needs to be met with a similarly trusting and open response from the clergy.

3. Fear and responsibility

The reflectors also recognised that there may be a fear among facilitators which fuelled the apparent lack of confidence. There seems to be a concern that facilitators may feel that 'it is not their place to talk about co-habitation and other tricky matters, of the kind that would be bound to come up if the day was opened up for questions round Catholic teaching. At the same time, they do question whether they are being unfaithful to the Church by avoiding those types of questions. Added to this doctrinal sense of anxiety, and perhaps fuelled by it, it

was also felt that there is a current lack within the existing facilitators to have the confidence to bring in enough of their own testimonies and faith to the preparation day.

One of our non-Catholic reflectors raised the interesting question whether the Catholic liturgical practices also discouraged lay participation: it is almost as if the laity do not have to take part in the liturgy as the priest is there to do everything for you. Whilst others were quick to state that this was not the liturgical theology of the Catholic church, it is also significant that, to an outside on-looker, it is this sense of a dependency on the priest and a certain lay passivity that is striking. Might this liturgical *practice* (as distinct from abstract *theology*) be part of that subtle but powerful formation of laity and clergy into particular roles and relationships? The idea of speaking publicly about faith or theology is seen the priest's job and has not emerged very strongly from the particular experience and culture of laity, in contrast to many more evangelical expressions of Christianity.

4. Responsibility and Opportunity

The team were struck by the poor experiences couples often report in their experience of Catholic priests. When these couples approached the priest in order to book their wedding, the overall reception was frequently negative: these priests often showed little real interest in the couple, whilst some were reported as judgemental, patronising, or un-welcoming. The team observed that these couples were generally not attending Sunday Mass and had very little knowledge of their own or their partner's faith; hence the day they decided to approach a Catholic priest to book their wedding was the first time in possibly several years that they have made contact again with the Church, and it was saddening to hear that many had these negative experiences of priests at a time of vulnerability and opportunity. The team acknowledged the sad reality of how the Pope and his 'Francis Effect' of compassion, love, respect, welcome, mercy, understanding, is making an entirely different (and opposite) impression on the people to the current 'priest effect' of disinterest, alienation, impatience. There was a major concern among the team that this 'priest effect' is currently very damaging.

C5a – pp. 8-9: *'Yah, he said birth control is a form of murder! ... The whole thing though, it didn't feel like a dialogue.'*

C5b – p. 9: *'It was a bit of a sermon'*

C6a – p. 14: *'A lot of people you speak to are not interested (in the Church), they've been put off by something that has happened or the attitudes of people in the Church ... So I think it's peoples' bad experiences that put them off and then they just don't go back!'*

C7b – p. 9: *'... I mean the church here is like 5 minutes' walk, but we'd probably still – if we were to go to church – we would make that extra trip into central London ... We were pulled in by the location and the prettiness, that's not a lie! But the actual attitude and approach would keep us there ... it's like basic marketing! It's pulling you in and making you ... making the connection.'*

MP1 – p. 11: *'We didn't have to have marriage preparation beyond talking to the priest, and quite frankly what he knew about relationships would have fitted on the head of a pin, bless him!'*

FF1 – p. 5: *'... my husband has had a feeling of alienation for quite a long time ... it is the institution of the Church, the abuse, the centralisation which ... this pope has been like a light going on for Malcolm and I feel it too ... it's this disconnect between Jesus and His teaching and the way he experiences the Church.'*

FF2 – p. 8: *'... again, this comes back to what I was saying earlier with Basil Hume: is teaching that love is the most important thing um, we are here ... not to preach ... And I feel that very strongly ... as a result I've fallen out with one or two of the clergy.'*

Moreover, it was acknowledged that it wasn't simply the priests who were affecting these couples' perception of the Church; 'official' laypeople – for example parish secretaries – could also be rather unwelcoming.

C7a – p. 7: *'And I spoke to a lady who works in the office and she said "Yah, well I'll have to, you know, you've left it really late and I'm going to have to speak to Fr William ... you'll probably have to come and do the paperwork here ..." So she sort of made it sound quite bad ...*

C7b – *... she gave the impression of what I would typically ... the first impression of what I thought it would be like, she kind of reinforced what I was expecting from the Church ...*

C7a – *She made it sound quite difficult.'*

The team saw these incidents as missed opportunities to respond to what Pope Benedict XVI's call to engage in a 'Courtyard of the Gentiles'. The 'Courtyard of the Gentiles' has historic roots about places where there are opportunities for people to hear about the faith; and this moment of marriage enquiry can be seen as one such 'place' and it seems that the wider church is often simply missing it.

In contrast, many couples' experience suggested that the 'open door' so often missing from the parish experiences was to be found instead by Marriage Care and that the organisation has become the 'smiling ace of the Church'. Marriage Care now has the responsibility to respond to the opportunity given here, building on their current practices. Couples were not hesitant in declaring that their experience with the organisation had changed their view of the Church for the better.

MP1 – p. 17: *'... it's almost like us opening a door that they may decide they want to come through later.'*

C1b – pp. 22-23: *'I was expecting to be told off to be honest. The priest actually said they're a little old fashioned ... I certainly ... I don't think I was looking forward to it ... Incredibly friendly! Um, welcoming, and they actually listened to what you had to say ... I actually completely flipped my position and really enjoyed it ...'*

C6b – p. 12: *'... they were lovely people ... I can't fault the ladies, they paid attention to us, um, the room itself was quite comfortable and warm and the lunch facilities were great ... They put all the effort in and made it all as enjoyable as possible.'*

FF1 – p. 9: *'... to listen without judgement ... building a relationship with them, just getting to know them, being with them in the room ... welcoming them ...'*

p. 12: *'... the Church needs to be very open and welcoming and invite experience (...) as we do need to be open and accessible and welcoming ...'*

These observations lead the reflectors to consider how, in practice, Marriage Care can become the only point of interpersonal dialogue between couples and 'the Church'. Jeremy and Alice make that point – it's a moment of huge opportunity for the marriage preparation work, as it seeks to more deeply represent and embody 'church' for the participants. And it is clear that, for many at a distance from church life, 'the church' has a lot of ground to make up, with its public profile marred by scandal, and suspicions of intolerance, misogyny, and a rule-bound sense of things. So the preparation day is about peace and reconciliation for the couple, one on one, but also for the couple and the Church.

C3a – p. 10: *'... there isn't really any other outlet that the Church can use to communicate to people getting married in the Church ... so it's the only opportunity the Church has got to speak to a couple ... about its teachings ... so the preparation is the only opportunity you've got to speak to two people coming before you and telling them about Catholic marriage. So I think they should have a bit more.'*

C1a – p. 12: *' ... people want to get married in the Church but they don't want to go to Mass ... But they have this idea of marriage in the Church ... that is the next time I guess that you kind of reconnect with the Church in, in many ways, unless you're part of some broader community ... you just have questions about the faith and you certainly challenge it'*

FF2 – p. 8: *'Now, if I wag my finger at them, they go away from their experience of the contact with the Catholic Church as a finger-wagging exercise. If I show them that the Catholic Church cares about them ... then hopefully when perhaps, God-willing, they have children, they will want them to be educated in the Catholic Church and they might think of, you know, going to Church again.'*

P1 – p. 6: *'That's right! Yah its another start. And then we get another crack at that at Baptism, another one at First Communion. So the opportunities are out before you, there is no excuse for us messing up on our welcome and making people feel at home in their own Church.'*

5. Disconnections and Separation

The persisting division of responsibility between laity and clergy feeds then a lack of connection. This does not, a number of reflectors wished to make clear, simply mean that laity and clergy can 'do each other's jobs'; there may well be some practical sense in a priest clearly taking a lead on theological formation and laity on more practical aspects of relationship. But even when circumstances suggest this is the most sensible and realistic part this need not (and should not, the reflectors believe) lead to disconnection, or a simple division of labour. This leads to a lack of integration and affects working and ecclesial relations through the risk of a lack of recognition of mutual giftedness and implications of a certain hierarchy of gift, expertise and which area of learning is more 'holy'.

The reflectors drew attention to the more 'whole-church' or collaborative vision of Vatican II's ecclesiology in which the work of mission and ministry is shared, all be it with a hierarchically structured church. The key themes here are about partnership in the common work towards the common good, informed by the key CST notions of subsidiarity and solidarity in service of the poor – what ever kind of impoverishment is being suffered. The evidence suggests we are still some way from making this vision a reality:

MP1 – p.13: *'... my priest doesn't like me doing anything to do with religion on that course. He prepares his couples very thoroughly for marriage and his view is that the religious side is his job, the relationship side is mine.'*

P3 – p.7: *'... I had a lot of priests in our deanery ... and the priests seemed very unhappy with the Marriage Care, they felt there was something lacking ... but they never came! They're always criticising it, of course, but they never came to the course.'*

FF2 – p.7: *'I am not here to preach the dogma of the Catholic Church and will not do so.'*
p.11: *'That's their problem! They're prerogative I should say, they have responsibility, I don't have the ... Canon Law: the parish priest has the responsibility for training a couple for marriage. I don't have that responsibility'*

6. Welcome

The reflectors recognised the ways in which the data testified to the the welcome and non-judgemental attitude that is woven throughout Marriage Care processes and the content of the courses This work as 'the smiling face of the Church' has the potential to create bridges back to the Church where there is experience immediately prior to Marriage Care or historically, which was not necessarily positive.

This suggests 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. The key idea is that the seeds are already there, we are just facilitating, we are watering those seeds and the plant will continue to grow. In this context the welcoming and non-judgemental attitude at Marriage Care can be seen as an essential initial watering.

It's not just the small, domestic church that we are watering, it's not just the couple, it's not just the marriage, it's the greater Church. It's for our children's grandchildren and so on.

MP1 – p.17: *'... couples who've not been at the Church for a long time, I see it as ... we're there to show that they're welcome and it doesn't matter where they are at the moment, that, that we're just glad that, that they're coming back now; even if it's only temporary, and I think if, if we're welcoming enough and we don't do anything to, you know, put them off, then maybe later – perhaps when they have kids – they might come back, wanting them baptised and they might then ... feel more open to, to getting involved!*

FF1 – p.12: *'... welcoming them, you know, giving them tea, maybe a sandwich if they're starving, they've often rushed from work ...'*

C7a and C7b – p.14:

Interviewer: *'So do you think it left you with a positive view of the Church afterwards for you?'*

C7b: *Yah I think it certainly made ... with the right um priest and Marriage Care, has certainly put it in a more positive light for me in the end. I think that's, you know, as much as it could have been at this point and you know, who knows what will happen next type-thing?'*

P2 – p.4: *'I've always been supportive ... of the kind of therapeutic work – in inverted commas – that they do ... which is done very well, um, in terms of welcoming the couples, making the couples feel comfortable, it's a very professional approach.*

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