

A Proposal for the Establishment of Diocesan Family Councils

Evangelisation through the family has been a constant theme of Pope John Paul II's message to the Church and the wider world. The practical application of the Holy Father's message has been reflected in many ways.

The first General Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family (PCF) in 1984, reiterated by subsequent assemblies, recommended all dioceses establish Councils for the Family with a focus similar to that of the PCF, namely, evangelising through the family. The concept was also strongly endorsed by Cardinal Lopez Trujillo, President of the PCF, during his 2001 visit to Australia.

The purpose of this document is to propose that each diocese respond to this call by establishing an organisation to pursue these intentions, with a mandate and structure appropriate to local conditions. It is recognised that no one model can fit all needs, given the diversity of compact metropolitan dioceses and sparsely populated extensive rural dioceses.

Background

At the diocesan level there are two complementary dimensions of 'family ministry', broadly understood. One is ministry *to* families, especially those suffering financial distress, bereavement and marriage or family breakdown. The second is the ministry exercised *by* families in evangelising other families, the parish and diocese and the many sectors of society. Whilst there are significant overlaps between these two dimensions, the social imperatives of the former often crowd out the longer term demands of the latter.

The former ministry, *to* families, is well addressed in dioceses. However, in relation to the latter ministry, *by* families, only a few dioceses have formal structures, whilst others have one or two family ministry workers whose time is split between this role and the pressures of ministry to families in need.

In focussing on a body to promote the evangelising role of families, it is recognised that there are gifts intrinsic to all families, and that all families are givers and receivers of support. Families that are often labelled 'strong' also have needs and families often labelled 'broken' are resources for evangelisation.

It is also recognised that in using the expression 'Family Council' there are other mechanisms that might be employed to achieve similar ends, for example, a Family Office. What is important, however, is that each diocese has a structure that promotes evangelisation by and through the family, utilising the family itself. 'As the family goes, so goes the Church, and so goes human society as a whole,' said Pope John Paul II (Angelus 5 Oct 1997, Rio de Janeiro). 'The family is not simply the object of the Church's pastoral care: it is also one of the Church's most effective agents of evangelisation' (Ecclesia in Asia 46).

Role structure and membership

The role, structure and membership of a Family Council (or alternative body) will vary from place to place, depending upon local considerations.

The annexure to this proposal contains some ideas that could be utilised or adapted in the establishment of such a Council.

Recommendation

That the Bishops Committee for the Family and for Life propose that the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference promote the establishment in each diocese of Family Councils whose primary focus is to foster the gifts of families for the evangelising mission of the Church.

Annexure:

GUIDE TO THE ROLE, STRUCTURE & MEMBERSHIP OF DIOCESAN FAMILY COUNCILS

Vision Statement for a Diocesan Council for the Family

In unity with the Bishop and with each member, the Council promotes the evangelising role of Catholic families, the 'Domestic Churches', empowering them to live their Christian mission in society, and encouraging and supporting their ministry in service of other families, the Church and society.

Role of Family Councils

The role of a Diocesan Council for the Family is to foster the gifts of Catholic families for the evangelising role of the Church, and may encompass some or all of the following activities:

- *develop* an understanding of sexuality, marriage and family life in the mystery of salvation and in the life and purpose of the Church;
- *promote* the Church's vision for marriage and family;
- *inspire* activities that encourage all Catholic families to develop their evangelising role;
- *discern and empower* individuals, families, and groups who feel called to work for the Church's vision for marriage and family;
- *cooperate* with comparable bodies in other Christian Churches, other religions and secular organisations, in the promotion of shared marriage and family values.

Important characteristics of Family Councils should be:

- *action-focussed*, not simply a place where members talk about ideas and issues;
- *innovative*, initiating new approaches and not seeking to co-ordinate existing activities of other Church agencies or movements;
- *inclusive*, with special sensitivity to members of families who feel distanced from the Church;

Structure of Family Councils

Organisation:

Family evangelisation is a crucial, ongoing and multi-faceted function within the diocese. It requires continuity of membership and a broad charter. Accordingly, a formal Council, broadly along the lines of the Pontifical Council for the Family model, is strongly recommended.

Such a Council should be empowered by a formal commission from the Bishop, such commission having sufficient breadth to unleash its potential, but also providing a focus on the evangelising role noted above.

The optimum size of the Council should be governed more by the critical importance of the human dynamics, in the building of relationships to work in unity with each other and the Bishop, rather than by the magnitude of the task. Typically, 8 to about 12 members is the desirable range. Geography and logistics may dictate variations from this.

The work of the Council will be enhanced by the availability of formal specialist committees or task forces, comprised of external persons approved by the Bishop and reporting to the Council through nominated Council members. These specialist groups would typically have more narrowly defined responsibilities focussed on Council priority areas. Such structures allow for expert input, spread the workload and provide a valuable avenue for bringing in 'new blood' to the Council, whilst maintaining continuity.

Administrative Support:

Administrative support is important. In general, the job description of one member of diocesan staff should *include* administrative support for the activities of the Diocesan Family Council and that person should be a full member of the Council.

Membership:

The *normative* composition of the members would be a *predominance* of married couples, with the express intention of drawing on the sacramental graces of matrimony. Such a membership would be a significant statement in itself and would follow the lead of the Holy Father in establishing the PCF with a membership consisting *only* of married couples.

Diverse membership models exist. Regardless of the model adopted, care should be taken to avoid any understanding by members that they are delegates of a particular constituency. Once appointed by the Bishop, they are present to offer their particular gifts in service of the Church.

Possible models for selection include a combination of:

- geographic (for example, based on deaneries)
 - this has value especially where a diocese is very large or covers both urban and rural areas.
- expert (for example, theologians, canon lawyers, professionals in sociology, psychology, etc)
 - some technical expertise is obviously important, and *availability* to the Council of expert advisors is desirable.
- Persons drawn from ecclesial movements and organisations active in the diocese in the evangelisation of families
 - such movements and organisations can contribute both of their evangelising experience and their organisational gifts, and the development of a fraternal relationship with such organisations can be of significant value.
- individuals, who, in whatever way, clearly demonstrate significant gifts in support of the Catholic vision for marriage and the family.

Formation:

The Council for the Family, as with all organisational units in a diocese, can only operate effectively if there is 'Jesus in the midst', which requires a profound sense of unity with each other and with the Bishop. This mode of operation, discernment based on Trinitarian love, is alien to management experiences in the world at large.

Accordingly, the formation and commissioning process is critical.

In addition, the magnitude of the task facing the Council has the potential to distract the members from the spiritual dimension of their work. Accordingly, provision must be made for the continual nurturing of the interpersonal relationships and the unity of the group.

Similarly, attention must be given to succession planning to ensure that continuity of spirit is achieved.