

Mixed Marriages

FORMATION OF ENGAGED COUPLES AND SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT OF MARRIED COUPLES

Annual Meeting of the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences of South-East Europe

Sofia (Bulgaria), 28th February to 2nd March 2008

The eighth meeting of the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences of South-East Europe, along with a group of specialists, took place from 28th February to 2nd March 2008 in Sofia (Bulgaria). The following seven Conferences were represented: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, the International Bishops' Conference of SS. Cyril and Methodius and Turkey. The Apostolic Nuncio to Bulgaria, H.E. Mgr Giuseppe Leanza and the Bishops of the Bulgarian Bishops' Conference also attended. The meeting was organised by the Council of Bishops' Conferences of Europe (CCEE), and was hosted with a sense of joy and fraternity by H.E. Christo Proykov, the Apostolic Exarch of Sofia and President of the Bulgarian Bishops' Conference, as well as by the local Catholic Church.

Bulgaria lies in the heart of the Balkans on the border with Asia, with a population of 7.7 million inhabitants. The country was founded in the year 681 and is one of the most ancient nations of Europe. It became part of the European Union in 2007. The great majority of the population is Orthodox and 13% is Muslim. Catholics represent 1% of the population with a Greek Catholic Rite Exarchate and two Latin dioceses. The Protestant population is also 1%. The mark of SS. Cyril and Methodius is particularly prominent in this country.

The meeting of European Bishops represented a major event for the local Catholic Church. The working sessions were chaired by Cardinal Vinko Puljic, Archbishop of Sarajevo and by Mgr. Ioan Robu, Archbishop of Bucharest.

The meeting centred on a theme of topical interest: **The formation of engaged couples and spiritual accompaniment of married couples**, particularly in 'mixed' marriages (between a Catholic and a baptised non-Catholic faithful) and marriages where disparity of worship is exists (between a Catholic and a non-baptised person). The theme of the 2008 meeting follows on from the reflections undertaken last year in Oradea (Romania) on the theme *Mixed marriages and the family in Europe*. The issue of the family is one of the priorities for the Bishops throughout Europe. Mixed marriages represent the majority of cases in South-East Europe, and this trend is spreading throughout the continent due to migration flows. They are a special opportunity for ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, but also a problem area which needs to be tackled seriously. The common basis of Christian faith is present in marriages between Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants, though an identical theological vision on the Sacramental value of matrimony is lacking. For what concerns marriages between Catholics and non-Christians, especially Muslims, there is a risk of loss of faith in the Christian party, as well as religious indifference, separation, dependency from families, burdens often imposed on women, isolation from one's ethnic group, loss of identity and disorientation concerning the upbringing of children.

The formation of engaged couples and the accompaniment of married couples, according to the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences, represent the most competent response to the issues affecting the family and mixed marriages today. The fact that the Catholic Church in

South-East Europe is in diaspora, and that in most cases the effects of the Communist regimes who tried to eradicate religion are still present, explains the reason why the pastoral care of families is still at an embryonic stage, and why interest is more in the direction of possible and realistic research rather than great structures or projects. The countries of South-East Europe may well become a significant test bed for the other Churches of the continent regarding these issues.

The formation of engaged couples.

- ❖ The challenges in this area are:
 - Helping couples in civil unions to discover the value of celebrating ecclesial marriage.
 - Explaining the importance of thorough formation.
 - To bear in mind the high mobility in the young population. Such people often work abroad and only devote a few days to the preparation of marriage.
 - Tackling the tendency to put off the time of marriage.
 - To bear in mind that most young people wishing to marry are usually not active in the life of the Church.
 - To consider the variety of contexts in mixed marriages: in some cases the non-Catholic party wishes to become Catholic, and in others the Catholic party feels obliged to renounce Catholicism.
 - One specific problem is represented by the case of one divorced Orthodox partner requesting Catholic marriage.

- ❖ Existing practices:
 - Personalised itineraries for young couples.
 - Diocesan group meetings.
 - Diocesan centres with the help of specialists.
 - The importance of witness of other families and the need to rediscover an itinerary of formation and catechesis was highlighted. These however should not be limited to the time of marriage, but are to be permanent, and should accompany every step of human existence.

- ❖ In his address, Mgr. Nikolaus Printezis highlighted the importance for engaged couples to consider the Sacraments of Reconciliation, the Eucharist and Matrimony and the indissoluble link that exists between them. This journey of discovery is complicated by ecumenical misunderstandings there is a risk of burdening young married couples with the difficulties born out of delays in the path to reconciliation among Christians and the difficulties in cooperation and dialogue among the Churches and Christian communities.

- ❖ In his highly appreciated paper, Prof. Miron Sikiric of Bosnia and Herzegovina presented the current Catholic legal framework concerning mixed marriages which was inspired by the Vatican Council II and formulated from a pastoral and ecumenical perspective. The issues considered were: impediments to matrimony, the conditions to carry out Catholic marriage and the canonical form of celebration. The difficult issue vis-à-vis the Orthodox perspective and that of a different conception of indissolubility, divorce and new marriage. It is crucial to instruct future

married couples on the aims and essential properties of Christian marriage so that neither is excluded. The religious education of children is a more complex and delicate problem: one positive step would be that the engaged couple make a decision before marriage. Mixed marriages are a challenge to be taken seriously.

Accompaniment of married couples. This is of paramount importance, as emerges from the reports of the Bishops' Conferences, especially those of Romania and Turkey.

We must:

- Be aware of the fact that the future of the Church also depends on the family.
- Help families to meet Christ. The Church does not available Herself of a magic formula or special programmes but of the person of the Lord and the Gospel. These are Her programme, content and methods.
- Promote communion and friendships among families. Place the spirit of communion above every practical initiative; overcome solitude and diffidence, a legacy of communism.
- Give space to movements in new communities whose charisma is able to bring families together.
- Exploit given opportunities: baptisms, anniversaries...
- Take advantage of places such as shrines, which offer the opportunity for pilgrimage, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Eucharist, the Rosary, spiritual direction, meetings... this living tradition keeps the family alive.
- Give importance to Eucharistic adoration. This bears fruits of conversion and it is the opportunity to rediscover the central role of Christ.
- Discuss the theme of fatherhood and motherhood.
- Encourage witness in the Catholic partner.
- Encourage visits to families by priests: blessing of families...
- Walk alongside couples undergoing a crisis.
- Set up permanent itineraries of catechesis.
- Organise pastoral years devoted to families in Bishops' Conferences and dioceses.

The participation of representatives of the Orthodox Church was an important ecumenical witness. Prof. Kalin Yanakiev, Director of the Christianity and Culture magazine, spoke about the anthropological and theological foundation of the family.

The Vice-grand Mufti was also present representing the Muslim world. He spoke about marriage from a Muslim point of view. Looking at marriage from both a Christian and a Muslim point of view was considered extremely helpful.

Guidelines or pastoral handbook for mixed marriages. Faced with the complexity of mixed marriages, the President of the Bishops' Conferences have decided to draft a brief text for priests, pastoral officers and couples, containing the basic guidelines at an ecclesial, legal and pastoral level. A specialist will write the first draft on the basis of pre-existing texts in Albania and Bosnia. It will then undergo assessment on the part of the Bishops' Conferences and then be developed further in order that the final version may be presented to the meeting of the Presidents of South-East Europe in 2009.

Sofia, 2nd March 2008

Aldo Giordano, CCEE General Secretary

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