

Edmonton delegates find positive inspiration at World Meeting of Families

The World Meeting of Families is a chance to recharge the batteries and focus on the family as the engine for strengthening and passing on the Catholic faith to future generations.

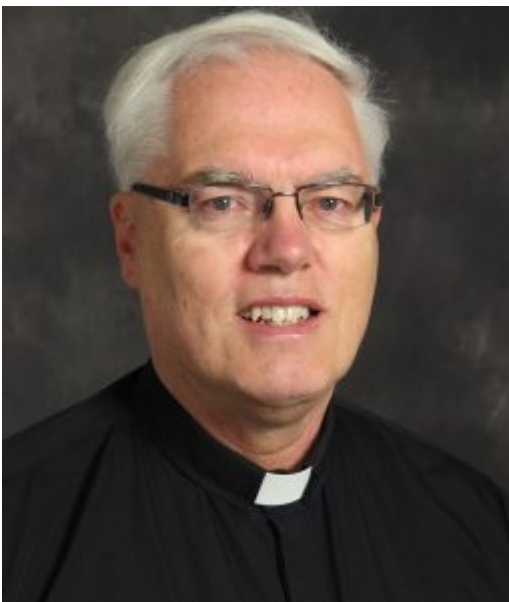
That's the message from some Edmonton delegates attending the Aug. 21-26 event in Dublin, Ireland.

"It's been a great event in many ways, there are a lots of families here – young and old – you can probably hear kids in the background," Deacon Chris Ashdown said in a telephone interview.

A member of St. Thomas More Parish in Edmonton, he is among more than 39,000 people – including 2,000 clergy – at the international Catholic gathering, held every three years. The teen village in Dublin alone has hosted some 1,000 teenagers per day.

"The family is seen as the way to pass on the faith, from parents to children, and there is a vocation for grandparents to do that too," Ashdown said.

There are challenges, however. Chief among them is the Internet and the use of social media.



Deacon Chris Ashdown

“There are so many conflicting things on the Internet that draw children away from the family,” said Ashdown, a retired health and university administrator who was one of three deacons ordained on Aug. 11 at St. Joseph’s Basilica.

“As parents, you face those challenges by being faithful, by attending Mass, and showing your faith.”

Ashdown is attending the World Meeting of Families for the first time with his wife, Jean. A takeaway lesson for her is that families should be responsible in their use of technology.

“Sometimes it means putting away your social media and talking to each other and sharing with family, especially at meal time – and to increase on the Word of God in the home,” Jean said.

The gathering includes speakers, learning sessions, worship and music. Pope Francis is expected to address delegates on Aug. 25 and celebrate Mass the next day at Phoenix Park in Dublin. The Vatican released a three-minute video message from the pope in anticipation of his trip.



Deacon Chris Ashdown of Edmonton is seen in Dublin, Ireland. Chris and Jean Ashdown, Special to Grandin Media

This year’s topics include the role of technology in the family, the impact of conflict on families and children, and building a more sustainable approach to the economy, work and the environment. They draw largely from Pope Francis’ teachings in *Amoris Laetitia* (‘The Joy of Love’), the apostolic exhortation published in 2016.

“It’s been really positive. There have been lots of good speakers,” Jean Ashdown added.

The World Meeting of Families also comes at a time when the Church has been rocked by abuse crises.

In Pennsylvania, a grand jury report that detailed decades of clerical sexual abuse and coverups in six dioceses. The report spoke of credible allegations against 301 priests in cases involving more than 1,000 children.

Pope Francis is expected to meet with abuse survivors when he’s in Ireland. However, delegates say it hasn’t coloured the World Meeting of Families experience for them.

“We’re focused on the importance of family and how to support that. There’s a real sense of that and it’s a good thing,” said Jean Ashdown, who attended the last World Meeting of Families three years ago in Philadelphia.

Bishop Gregory Bittman, the former auxiliary of the Edmonton Archdiocese, agreed.

“It’s in the media here in Ireland, and they are negatively talking about the conference. But at the conference, I don’t get that impression at all. There’s a great spirit here,” said Bishop Bittman, who now leads the Diocese of Nelson, B.C.



Bishop Gregory Bittman

Bishop Bittman said he attended a session on the connection between sports and faith, which included a hurdler and a former professional soccer player for Manchester United, Philip Mulryne, who is now a Catholic priest.

A session on human trafficking, and its reach around the world, made a particular impression on him.

“It’s a billion-dollar industry. During the session you hear from a girl who had been trafficked, but you never saw her. It made you think of it in terms of abuse and of commercial trafficking, the use of domestic help, for example.”

As a result of attending the World Meeting of Families, Chris Ashdown said he’s looking forward to getting involved in the Catholic Grandparents Association – as well as a program that teaches the entire Catholic Catechism – when he’s back in Edmonton next month.

The event, he said, has even helped him a little as he chooses his future ministry as a deacon.

“When I get back, I’ll talk to my pastor and we’ll figure that out!”