

Pupils explore the experience of married life

Catholic schoolboys are soaking up the wisdom of married couples, writes **Bess Twiston Davies**

It is 11.30am on a damp January day in Tower Hamlets. A hop, skip and a jump from Shadwell DLR station in east London, Maria and Daniel talk through their marriage in a room full of teenage boys. "I always said I didn't want to marry and that if someone proposes to me with a ring, I am going to punch him in his face," Maria says, smiling. So Daniel gave Maria a pair of boxing gloves, saying, as he went down on one knee: "If you are going to punch me, I don't want you to hurt your fingers."

Both 25 and from Caracas, Venezuela, Daniel and Maria are volunteers for Explore, an educational charity with an unusual mission: to bring the happily married into secondary schools to be quizzed by pupils. For most, this is a rare chance, says Chris Ford, CEO of Explore: "This is an attempt to give young people the opportunity to have a dialogue with married couples about that relationship, because they very often don't have a chance due to home circumstances."

So for half an hour students can ask the couples "any question you like", Edmund Adamus of Explore explains to the Year 10 boys of Bishop Challoner Catholic Collegiate School.

Adamus is the director for marriage and family life at the Roman Catholic Diocese of Westminster, which for the first time has appointed an Explore local development officer to work with diocesan schools. Mary McGhee, a lively, efficient New Zealander, gathers the couples in the school hall for a pre-session briefing, and says: "We pray for God's blessing on this morning's sessions."

To start them off, Adamus asks the boys to shout out their hopes — and then fears — about marriage. "You've

got 90 seconds," he says. Top of the hope list comes "a wife who knows how to cook", while for fears, one boy wants a wife who "treats me right". "Respect" writes Adamus on a whiteboard. "That's very important." Then the floor is open to questions. Inevitably, sex crops up: did Maria and Daniel sleep together before marriage? No. They didn't live together either. "It was a bit risky," admits Maria, "but the first day after the marriage when we were in our home together was so exciting," she says.

"Are arguments frequent?" asks a boy in the front row. The main disagreement is whether — eventually — to go home. "Our country is dangerous," Maria says. "At 4am in the morning I wake up and have to call my parents. There are shootings, kidnappings. Our city has the world's second-highest murder rate."

Maria and Daniel's story couldn't be more different to that told in the classroom next door: Edward and Angela, who are now grandparents, grew up during the Second World War. They met at

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16, were separated when Edward did National Service, and after marrying at 23 lived initially off Edward's salary, saving Angela's for the big expenses. "We didn't really have holidays," Edward says, "but it didn't seem to matter."

Questions come thick and fast: what, ask the boys, makes a marriage last? "Trust," Angela says, adding: "It is important to keep the romance alive. You can get into a rut when you are in a relationship. First of all you think of pleasing your partner, with surprises. That can be forgotten when you have a baby."

Like all the Explore couples, Angela and Edward are volunteers and are practising Christians: "We're recruited two or three other couples as well," they say. "You get a sense of whether people can do this." They are Methodists, the



Maria and Daniel talk about the realities of their marriage with Year 10 boys at Bishop Challoner Catholic Collegiate School

Venezuelans are Roman Catholics and a third couple, Jeremy and Estela, from Yorkshire and Uruguay, are Anglican and Roman Catholic. None is here to push a religious point of view, just to speak of their own marriage; Explore visits schools of all faiths and none.

Yet do they speak to the converted? Catholic belief that marriage is holy, and hopefully lifelong, is well known. And this, after all, is a Roman Catholic school: crucifixes hang in classrooms, and glass cases contain a photo of Pope Francis and some of his quotes, notably on football. In such a setting, surely presenting Christian belief in marriage is simple?

For many pupils, whether Roman Catholic (57 per cent of the 1,000-odd intake are), Muslim, Anglican or Pentecostal Christian, family breakdown is

simply a fact. In 2002, the year in which most of Year 10 were born, only 10,044 marriages in England and Wales took place in a Catholic church. Within a decade that number had fallen to 8,440, according to the Office for National Statistics. Anglicans fared better, with 56,000 weddings occurring in church in 2012, but these and other faith weddings account for a fraction of the 262,240 British weddings that year. Little wonder that marriage and the Catholic family is the pressing topic for part two of the Vatican's Synod on the Family in October.

Hearing of a marriage that has lasted more than 40 years is novel for many pupils. "The couples were open with us. They talked about their financial struggles, and raising children, but it was inspiring how they stayed together,

loving together," one student, Ermal, aged 15, says after the morning sessions, which are part of the personal, social and health and economic education stream of the curriculum.

Mohammed, also 15, was surprised to hear "how hard marriage can be". He says: "I thought it was simple." Giovanni, in contrast, feels the media "exaggerates" marital problems and that films give "a warped view" of what marriage is about. "They take away the true meaning of marriage," Ermal concurs. "It is about sharing a journey with someone until you die." He concludes: "We don't know anything about marriage. Today has given us a bigger picture."

And perhaps, a smidgeon of hope. Names of pupils have been changed. More details: theexploreexperience.co.uk