

Comment

Before the National Pastoral Congress began its deliberations in Liverpool at the beginning of May, the Archbishop of Cardiff expressed the fervent hope that it wouldn't be the kind of event at which the tail attempted to wag the dog, (surely not the happiest of cliches to describe the relationship of bishops to laity in the Church of Christ), meaning presumably that the lay delegates ought not to have imagined that they could play anything other than a passive role in reviving the life of the Church in Britain. In the June issue of *New Blackfriars*, our reporter at the Congress, Fergus Kerr, O.P. will be offering a more comprehensive assessment of 'tail wagging' in Liverpool, but we want to say here that the tone of so much of the Congress Reports, the intellectual vigour, the exuberance coupled with a humble Christ-centredness, gives great hope that the time has almost come when any archbishop will have too much confidence in the seriousness of the laity to make that kind of dismal remark.

There were many cynics among us, including some of the delegates, whose expectations for the Congress were no more than that the delegates would enjoy the charm and warmth of Liverpool and Liverpudlians, that there would be a fair amount of letting off steam, some triumphalist drum-beating, followed later this summer by a neutral, platitudinous bishops' report.

However, Liverpudlians will tell you, even the most mildly chauvinistic among us, that the Mersey Ozone often has a remarkable and dramatic effect on people – look what it did for the Beatles and of course continues to do for our amazing football team! But the holy alliance of Mersey Ozone *and* the Spirit blowing in and through it surely must have been irresistible even to the hardest of hearts.

Clearly something quite irreversible has happened to the Church in Britain during the years since the Vatican Council, for it is impossible to imagine some of the sentiments expressed and agreed to at the Congress appearing say twenty years ago. The triumphalist, cocky confidence of a former style of Catholicism has gone, and has been replaced by an honest, humble confidence; that is, a deep belief that the Gospel of Jesus Christ really is liberating for all men and women in every area of their lives, and yet a chastened sense of the ways in which we, the disciples of Jesus, have obscured or

diminished the impact of the Gospel. So, "Each one of us recognises the need for a personal conversion of the heart, so radical as to require a change of lifestyle, of attitudes and structures". (Sector B *The People of God*); and "Sadly many young people feel alienated from the Church because they do not see its relevance to their lives. They have rejected the institutional Church not through conviction but through incomprehension", (Sector C *Marriage and the Family*); and the report of Sector D, *Justice and Peace*, opens with this moving apology, "We . . . feel compelled to begin by placing on record our failure to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all its fullness in this land. We regret our failure as a Church to combat the prevailing national mood of insularity, to identify with the poor in our midst and to work vigorously for a more peaceful world." The pleas for more flexibility in Eucharistic worship, for communion under both kinds as a norm, for more lay ministers both men and women, for wider ecumenical eucharistic hospitality, for a reappraisal of the moral teaching on contraception, for a ban on nuclear weapons, for strong words on the evils of unemployment, injustice, causes of poverty, racial and ethnic prejudice, even if it makes us unpopular, are excellent and heartening.

If the two thousand delegates really are representative of informed Catholic opinion in Britain, then there has been a lot of hard thinking and self-examination going on in the Church since the Vatican Council. The Council itself is owed a great debt of thanks for that of course. But so also are those many groups and institutions that have beavered away over the years, some of them seemingly on the fringes of Catholic life. The pastoral and conference centres like Spode House, Minsteracres and Woodhall; groups like the Catholic Renewal Movement, Young Christian Workers, Catholic Peoples' Weeks, University Chaplaincies and many more; journals like *The Clergy Review* and *The Month*; and of course those who worked so hard to make the Congress happen and the English and Welsh bishops who welcomed, sanctioned and encouraged it.

Alban Weston OP