

# Liverpool 1980

## The National Pastoral Congress

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The young couple, both teachers, one at a Catholic school in the city, did not know that the National Pastoral Congress would be taking place that week-end in Liverpool until they agreed three or four days before to put me up. On the Saturday afternoon thousands of people were left outside when the gates were locked at Anfield long before the kick-off: that Liverpool FC retained the First Division championship obviously stirred far more hearts far more deeply, Catholic ones no doubt included, than the NPC's deliberations ever had any chance of doing. With all such qualifications duly noted, however, the Congress was nonetheless the most important event in the history of the Catholic Church in England and Wales since the restoration of diocesan bishops in 1850. On the Sunday afternoon the Liverpool Orange Lodge held a march, with several bands and plenty of Union Jacks, so they at least had an idea of what was going on.

The Congress, in effect, took the form of seven three-day conferences of about 300 people each, dispersed at centres all round the suburbs of Liverpool. The Congress gathered in plenary session only at the beginning and the end, for the inaugural Act of Reconciliation and Renewal in the Cathedral on the Friday evening, and then again on the Tuesday morning, first in the Philharmonic Hall, simply to receive the reports and resolutions of the seven conferences, and finally for the concluding celebration of the Eucharist, again in the Cathedral.

No account could capture the quality of the two principal liturgical celebrations. The concluding Mass, in particular, simply set entirely new standards of beauty and recollection in public worship. With a congregation of about 3000, led by a superb choir and an organ backed by the Liverpool Brass Ensemble, the singing could not have been anything but exuberant. By that time we had learned to sing the splendid but somewhat demanding hymn specially composed for the Congress by Anthony Milner. The settings of the Gloria and the Alleluia by Philip Duffy, Master of Music at Liverpool Cathedral, taken up easily by the whole congregation,

and with the stupendous clangour of the brass ensemble, were of an almost barbaric but utterly disciplined beauty, unprecedented in any English Catholic church in modern times and entirely consonant with the apocalyptic doors and so much else in that great concrete tent pitched on the site of the Brownlow work-house. Holy Communion was given by the bishops, forty or fifty of them. and under both kinds, from the fifty loaves which had been consecrated and from I could not tell how many chalices. The whole congregation finally crossed the street to queue for "scouse" in the University Students' Union, with the bishops in the crowd as they had been throughout the Congress, and the bars busy, with an atmosphere of great hilarity and optimism.

The immediate preparation for the Congress took two years, but the agenda had been shaped very largely by the response to "The Church 2000" and "A Time for Building", the two documents produced in 1973 and 1976 by the Joint Working Party on Pastoral Strategy which was set up by the Bishops' Conference and the National Conference of Priests in 1971, with Bishop Victor Guazzelli as chairman. Although every one, and every group, was invited from the outset to contribute to this process of enquiry and reflection, most Catholics predictably took very little interest. At bottom, no doubt, hardly any one believed that the bishops either wanted or even had the right to go in for "consulting the faithful" (in Newman's phrase).

The quality of participation obviously varied greatly from one area to another but for the past two years each diocese has been preparing delegates to gather at Liverpool in order, in the words of Archbishop Worlock's Memorandum, "to assess the various efforts which (have) been made to implement the call of the Second Vatican Council for renewal and to try to achieve some general pastoral strategy for the future". The delegates had to constitute "a substantial representation of the Church, prepared in mind and spirit", so that they could "reflect together on the developing life and mission of the Church", its always being understood that the gathering was to be "strictly consultative in character, leading to no permanent national consultative structure". Every diocese sent one delegate for every thousand Sunday Mass-goers, and since these number some 1,750,000 (out of an estimated four million baptised Catholics in England and Wales) there were 1,750 diocesan delegates, with laity outnumbering clergy about seven to one. In addition every national organization or pressure group or minority interest had the right to send a delegate, and there was special provision for the representation of religious orders, the Polish community (30 delegates), and so on. In the end there were some 2,100 delegates, over forty bishops, and hundreds of people engaged in the supporting secretarial and suchlike roles. Half the dele-

gates were women; a very high proportion seemed very young. The average age was said to be thirty-seven in one diocesan delegation and this was thought to be typical. The young were certainly in sufficient numbers to have a disco (so I heard) on the Mersey ferry on the Monday evening. Every diocese also brought an observer from the British Council of Churches. One might have expected the bishops to sit apart by themselves as observers, or even to have absented themselves altogether, but they all came as members of their own diocesan delegations, sat in the body of every meeting, and took part like every one else, voting or abstaining on the resolutions, when a show of hands was called for by the chair, again just like every one else. After the initial briefing each of the seven conferences at once broke up into groups of twelve/fifteen to work for the entire first day on some specific part of the agenda. It would not be difficult to imagine how the liberty and frankness of debate might have been inhibited by the presence of a bishop, or anyway of some of our bishops, in such a small circle, but that was not how it turned out. One suspected that certain bishops may have been discreetly encouraged to take part in one or other of the seven conferences in which the agenda might depress or embarrass them less. It was rumoured, and even stated as a fact in the press lounge, that a certain lady with formidable charm had been specially selected to chair the small group to which a certain senior prelate was assigned. Three out of four of the bishops, incidentally, have been appointed since the Vatican Council ended – including Derek Worlock, David Konstant, and Leo McCartie, the three responsible for organizing the NPC, and of course, Cardinal Hume.

The seven conference presidents were the key figures in the production of the Congress resolutions. Depending on how you cut the cake, they comprised three women and four men; two college principals, an inspector of schools, a retired headmaster, an economist, a director of Pilkington Brothers, and a parish priest; or two priests, two religious, two laymen and two lay women. Each had a distinctive style of chairing a meeting, so that this, together of course with the particular agenda, the venue, and the dynamics of the group as developed by its own liturgy and opportunities for meeting and making friends, has resulted in seven documents in seven quite distinctive styles. As already noted, the work began in small groups, their draft observations and recommendations were then filtered through larger groups of about sixty people, and finally, amended and redrafted, they were discussed and passed by the whole conference (thus by about 300 people). The final text was written by the president, but of course it bears the marks of its composition, although some perhaps conceal some of the agony more skilfully than others. The Congress reports were published immediately, and they have also been handed over,

together with much material which could not be incorporated in the final texts, to be studied by an ad hoc group, under the chairmanship of Archbishop Worlock, who has been deputed to draft the response which the Bishops' Conference will consider and amend when they meet for three days in July. Thus, with the publication of the response of the Bishops' Conference to the National Pastoral Congress, to quote the Memorandum again, "it is hoped that ... the pastoral strategy originally asked for, will emerge after due consultation with the local Church".

What are "the signposts set up by this Congress" which, in his concluding Declaration in the Philharmonic Hall, Cardinal Hume pledged that the Church in England and Wales must now intend to follow? Taking the seven final reports in order of presentation, one may underline the following resolutions and mark certain questions that seem to remain open, to the mind of the Congress as a whole, whatever authoritative attempts recently to close them there have been.

Many recommendations would affect the life of the diocese and the parish a great deal. For the most part, to be put into effect, they would need the will, the skills and often the money, and would not have to await the sanction of the local bishop even, far less that of the Bishops' Conference or the Vatican dicasteries. Provision should be made for instruction and training in *prayer*: "the diocese and deanery must develop *adult formation* as a major priority", and "provide as far as possible human and material resources to build up the necessary programmes". Again: "as a consequence of our common participation by baptism in the priesthood of Christ, the maximum involvement and ministry of the laity, both men and women, *without discrimination*, should be encouraged in the preparation and celebration of the liturgy". Far from being the last, and the most reluctant, to enter into local ecumenical and Christian activities, "concern for unity is an essential characteristic of the Catholic Christian", and "Catholic parishes ought to be members of local Councils of Churches, *if necessary taking the initiative to form such a Council*".

On the parish council: "We propose that an active council, open and representative, should be established as an *essential component* in the life and organization of every parish. Such a parish council should have *the right and duty* to discuss with the parish priest all matters affecting the parish as a community and to make recommendations to him. Where the final decision belongs to the parish priest the council is *entitled* to an explanation of any refusal which he may make to its recommendations". That would certainly alter life in many parishes.

Smaller dioceses and far more bishops were called for in more than one of the seven reports, just as several of them urged not

only that "each diocese should maintain in some appropriate form the organization set up for the Congress" but that some "permanent national consultative structure" would indeed be desirable and might now even be essential: "We whole-heartedly recommend and confidently anticipate, in the God-given spirit of joy in this Congress, a continuation, development and extension at all levels in the Church of the processes of genuine shared responsibility and full consultation, which have been initiated in preparation for, and during, this NPC".

The desire for Christian unity, and to see the Catholic Church doing far more to make it possible, came through with somewhat surprising force, and issued in some clear recommendations: "We strongly urge the Bishops to reconsider the question of the entry of the Catholic Church in England and Wales into the British Council of Churches" – a recommendation strongly applauded, against the order of the day, at the final plenary session (it would have lasted twice as long if applause had been permitted). Furthermore, while rejecting any movement towards "indiscriminate intercommunion", the bishops were asked to consider the possibility of making provision for "eucharistic hospitality" in certain cases – "at least on special occasions, always providing that his or her eucharistic faith agrees with that of the Catholic Church" (the case of the devout Anglican parent at his child's first communion and suchlike).

As far as the celebration of the sacraments goes it is recommended that a national liturgical institute be established; that "the reception of holy communion under both kinds should be regarded as the norm", and that as many lay ministers, both men and women, as would thus be necessary should be trained. The conditions for general absolution at a penitential service should be reviewed – but, oddly enough, even with bishops voting enthusiastically in favour, a motion was defeated that would have suggested that this review should be in order to extend the conditions envisaged at present. More than one of the final reports recommends that, quite contrary to recently reaffirmed Vatican policy documents, the sacrament of confirmation for young people should be delayed until they can make "a genuine commitment of faith". What the Orthodox would think of this idea was obviously not considered; but then, in all the ecumenical fervour, and despite the Pope's recent visit to Constantinople, the Congress as a whole, in this no doubt faithfully reflecting the Catholic Church in this country, hardly recognized the existence of the Orthodox Church.

The sector of the Congress concerned with ministry, while urging that "we must have many smaller dioceses" (which would be at least partly achieved if the proposals of "Groundplan" of 1974 were put into effect), also made a number of much more conten-

tious recommendations. For example: "in communicating with his people each bishop should inform them fully of his dialogue with Rome, and in a similar manner the Conference of Bishops should so inform the nation's Catholics" (in other words, people want to know what pressures the Vatican dicasteries exert upon our local Church). Then: "we ask that careful consideration be given to the question whether it be God's will that married men should at this time be called to the priesthood" (what did the Pope say recently?). Furthermore, exploration of the possibility of admitting women to the ordained ministries, and in particular to the permanent diaconate, should be considered. Finally: "The question of the eventual ordination of women was raised in this context, with a plea that the matter be explored seriously at this time" (was the recent declaration from the Holy Office not a serious enough exploration?).

This sector also produced a good statement on the place of the laity, and their role, "guaranteed by baptism, not delegated". What is urgently required is "more trust in lay initiatives": "too many clergy use authority not as a service but to contain lay initiatives". Again: "Free and confident communication and trust between all ministries is needed but, sadly, is frequently absent in the Church's life".

From the delegates concerned with marriage and the family (chaired by a married woman) came first of all the recommendation that the Church "should listen to the experience of married people and appreciate their unique insights into what is contained within a permanent sexual relationship". Much stress was laid on the need for education for marriage. The secular press were firmly informed that the morality of artificial contraception was not the only question at issue in this sector of the Congress, let alone in the NPC as a whole. Perfectly true – but all the same would the process of consulting the faithful ever have got going with such urgency without the bitter experience of the non-reception of the papal encyclical "Humanae Vitae" of 1968? And is it really so mistaken to think that papal reaction to the NPC's recommendations on this question will be the test of how far those who have received the grace of the sacrament of matrimony may ever hope to open the minds of those who have received the grace of the sacrament of holy order?

A large majority called for a fundamental re-examination of the Church's official teaching on marriage, sexuality and contraception – thus plainly stating that the doctrine of "Humanae Vitae" is unacceptable as it stands, and cannot be credibly reaffirmed (for instance in October, at the coming Synod of Bishops in Rome which is committed, prematurely and most unfortunately, to deal with the family and society). But this majority must



certainly have included some, and perhaps many, who would instinctively feel that the *conclusions* of "Humanae Vitae" may well be right, but recognize that the *arguments* are inadequate and ineffective. There is, after all, no reason to exclude the possibility that a good argument may eventually be found for what has been held by a kind of instinct and defended so far only by bad arguments. But, within this large majority (of the sector of 300 people, not of the Congress as a whole, of course, although one may safely regard them as representative), a majority felt that such re-examination of the official line should "leave open the possibility of change and development" – and a substantial minority of the sector were prepared to say that there is *now* a need for change and development. In other words, if the bishops leave Rome at the end of the Synod, confiding a confused dossier to the Pope and leaving it to him to produce an encyclical reiterating the sort of thing he said in his sermons in Ireland (which is much the likeliest outcome: these Roman synods have not so far been genuine exercises in episcopal collegiality), it is already clear that many of the most dedicated Catholics in England and Wales are going to continue in honest dissent from papal teaching on this matter. It was also recognized that "many young people in the Church have moral standards – especially in sexual matters – which differ from elder members of the Church".

The sector concerned with evangelization came out with some very strong statements: "Parishes and individuals must be ready to commit a substantial percentage of their income to missionary and development work and to accept that in the matter of investment Gospel values have priorities over financial returns. Our wealth is a scandal and a stumbling block; it is a denial of Christ's love and it belies the Gospel we profess ... we are members of a Church that concentrates its resources on maintenance rather than evangelization ... The stigma of a dead and lifeless liturgy which is the complaint of so many of the alienated must be erased"; and so on.

In comparison with the others the report dealing with Christian education (unless I fail to see things between the lines) contains no radical proposals or reorientations but makes a large number of very practical recommendations about improving adult catechesis and Catholic schools. There would certainly have to be many more jobs for the boys who fancy themselves as school and university chaplains. As far as the "Catholic schools" question goes, many may even today be encouraged to read these words: "In some cases parents may have real grounds of conscience for sending their children to schools that are not Catholic. The inalienable right of parents to choose a school for their children must be respected in such instances". But even granted that the theme was specifically *Christian* education one might have expected much

more questioning of the education system as a whole, of the involvement of Catholics in private education, and so on.

The sector concerned with Christian Witness, on the other hand, broke quite boldly away from the more personalist and spiritual approach with which we have been familiar and made their first proposal that "the Church should speak out clearly on the grave social injustices of unemployment, and should seek ways and means of contributing to a positive response from those in authority". This was immediately backed with proposals about practical ways in which the Church could use her resources in sponsoring employment schemes, in providing social centres, in offering premises for setting up training workshops and co-operatives. Their recommendations were backed up by the sector dealing with Justice and Peace, whose report, certainly as Ann Forbes delivered it in the Philharmonic Hall at the plenary session, began with a moving confession of sin: "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". This report goes on to quote the Bishops' statement (July 1978) on British Nationality Law – "Britain has become irreversibly a multi-racial, multi-cultural society" – and to call for the Church's condemnation of the National Front and other similar racist organizations. Since of the 45,000 men and women in our prisons at least 10,000 register themselves as Roman Catholics it was felt that the Catholic community in this country must commit resources on an even greater scale than we do to the apostolate of the prisons and the improvement of penal conditions. As regards justice towards the Third World the recommendations all stem from this very bleak and basic truth: "There is no possibility that we, the rich nations, can maintain our present standard of living for much longer". Finally, as regards justice at home, "needless to say, one particular area of concern was Northern Ireland". On this the report reads as follows: "Once again one must look at the deeper causes of this and the delegates made a strong appeal to the Bishops of England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland to convene jointly with other Church leaders a major conference on Northern Ireland in the near future".

On the whole, then, these texts reflect a Church which is ready for some quite radical internal structural changes, eager for much greater ecumenical involvement, but, above all, committed to real effort and real sacrifice for the sake of justice and peace. It is a far more dynamic, outgoing and socially committed community than one might have supposed. It is thus all the more important to notice that, while there were of course many well-known activists for various such causes sprinkled among the delegates, the vast majority were simply those good Catholic men and women who never



miss Mass on a Sunday if they can help it. Many of them admitted to have been reluctant delegates, who came out of duty and certainly not to make propaganda for minority interests. Whatever the arrangements for electing delegates many of them had been virtually the only candidates in their deanery and some had practically been nominated by their parish priest. These texts are not the work of some wild and extremist fringe in the Church; they are essentially the voice of the most loyal and dedicated middle-of-the-road members of the average parish, with of course the great urban areas of Birmingham, Tyneside, London and Liverpool itself most preponderant numerically. These texts are not the product of trendy intellectuals (only one Dominican friar had a hand in them and he is not very famous for being a trendy intellectual – of course it was only as a member of the international press corps that *I* was present); they are the work of bus drivers, parish priests, many housewives, some teachers, the Duke of Norfolk, many engineers and factory workere – if anything, in matters ecclesiastical, rather conservative people.

Things can never be the same again. The direction of church life for years to come will be directly affected by the views and attitudes revealed by the Congress. From the beginning the more cynical among us have wondered whether it was merely a talking shop, a chance for the laity and the lower clergy to let off steam or to be manipulated into conformist platitudes, while in the end the bishops would go off in secret conclave with the documents and take the decisions they would have taken without all this consultation. It was deliberately to combat such cynicism, and to avoid that possibility, that all the bishops took part in the Congress, and not as observers or overseers but as participants on the same footing as every one else. Each bishop, as a member of his own diocesan delegation, shared in the pre-Congress discussions, as well as in the work of the Congress itself, and will now be part of the post-Congress activity in his own diocese. As has been said, although every diocesan delegation has gone home with a great deal to think about, many of the resolutions of the Congress need only the will and the money to put into effect, or no more than the local bishop's initiative or sanction.

On the wider and more contentious proposals, since they have already been published, it is idle to pretend that they do not put some pressure on the Bishops' Conference in July to go much further in certain directions than some bishops might want to go, simply in order not to disappoint the high hopes that the Congress has raised. The most disastrous outcome now would be for the bishops to fail, or for them to be prevented from making a positive response to NPC recommendations. As always when people have been consulted and listened to with such care and attention but

when their advice is finally rejected the disillusionment that follows can be very bitter. But in what Cardinal Hume called "this great enterprise in shared responsibility and spiritual renewal" the risks of failure have been plain from the outset. The bishops who took the decision to have this kind of consultation at all are surely not likely to lose their nerve now. Paradoxically, however, the Congress was such a success that if things do not get much better soon they will only get very much worse. What Cardinal Hume said of Vatican II in his sermon surely applies just as much to the National Pastoral Congress: "We are still working out slowly, at times painfully, the full implications of a Council that was more profound and far reaching than even those present may have realised" – except that most of us present during these days in Liverpool surely realised very well that we were engaged in something that must make or break the Catholic Church in England and Wales. The Congress set standards of open and free debate among us, as well as standards of liturgical worship, that for my part (I don't mind admitting) I never expected to see in England. But the extraordinary feature of the whole atmosphere, finally, was that, although the bishops are plainly under pressure now to make a positive response to this consultation, there was never any sense that they were being manipulated or deprived of their right and duty to take the decisions, either at diocesan level or national level, on the matters which require their sanction or initiative.

At the closing press conference, when asked about the "strong appeal" by the Congress to the bishops to convene "a major conference on Northern Ireland in the near future", Cardinal Hume immediately and very revealingly pooh-poohed the idea, and relaxed some glazed looks only by allowing, ruefully and characteristically, that what seem bad ideas to him one day look a lot better after 24 hours' reflection. Once again Archbishop Worlock took care to emphasize, quietly but firmly, that every recommendation of the Congress would receive serious attention. It is no secret that, but for his drive, the NPC would not have taken the form it did or perhaps even have happened at all. But the drive is not a passion for organization in a vacuum it was not very difficult to perceive that the vision driving this Congress was a profoundly theological vision of a regional or local Church in which consulting the faithful, far from being a fearful risk, is the best hope for reconciliation, renewal and mission.