

Two Years After: Reflections on 'Liverpool 1980' *

Michael P Hornsby-Smith

Two years ago over 2000 delegates from all the dioceses and Catholic national organisations, including 42 bishops, 255 clergy and 150 religious men and women and 36 ecumenical observers attended the National Pastoral Congress in Liverpool. For those of us who were there it was a remarkable experience of an open, sharing, participating, listening, celebrating Church, a veritable conversion experience. Back in our local patches it is difficult to retain the sense of exhilaration and commitment with which we left Liverpool two years ago. Was it, then, all a load of froth, an irrelevant, euphoric interlude to cheer us up? Was it, as I asked before the Congress 'a damp squib or pentecostal fire'? (*New Life*, Winter 1980). Did it represent a new Spring or was it a false dawn? The official report of the Congress provides us with the opportunity to recall the expectations aroused by the Congress and reflect on some of its outcomes. In this article I propose to attempt three tasks: firstly, to review *Liverpool 1980*; secondly, to consider the place of the National Pastoral Congress in the long process of renewal in the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales since the Second Vatican Council; and thirdly, to reflect on the contemporary situation in the light of the Congress, the message from the bishops to the local Church in the light of the Congress (*The Easter People*), and developments which have been stimulated by it since.

The book under review should become a major resource for involved and committed Catholics in England and Wales and find its place alongside their old and battered copies of Abbott's *The Documents of Vatican II* (1966). It comprises four main sections. Firstly, there is a brief outline of the background and history of the Congress which had its roots in the attempts to consider the question of pastoral strategies relevant for the last quarter of the twentieth century in *Church 2000* (1973) and *A Time for Building* (1976), and indeed probably earlier in the deliberations of the provisional Laity Commission from the late 1960s. We are given some details about the representative nature of the delegates (p 5): almost equally divided between men and women, over 300 under 25 years of age including about 100 still in their teens, and includ-

* The official report of the National Pastoral Congress, *Liverpool 1980* (St Paul Publications, Slough, pp 432 £9.00), was published a year ago. Dr Hornsby-Smith, the co-author of the report of *Roman Catholic Opinion*, was a diocesan delegate at the Congress.

ing representation of ethnic groups (e.g. 30 Poles). But we are not told how many black Catholics attended. Estimates based on 1971 Census returns suggest that around 2% of Catholics in this country, including those who are not regular Mass attenders, are *first* generation black immigrants. In terms of their proportions in the Catholic community, therefore, there should have been around 40 black delegates among the diocesan representatives. Nor are we told anything about the social class or educational backgrounds of the delegates. There seems to be little doubt (see, e.g. G Moyser, *The Month*, March 1980, 98) that the delegates were disproportionately articulate, educated and middle class, and indeed, only what one would expect from the active membership of any voluntary organisation.

It is important to stress that delegates represented active and involved Catholics. The report estimates 1,750,000 Catholics attend Mass on an average Sunday. It suggests that, allowing for old age, sickness and other compelling circumstances, these are about 50% of those baptised, including the lapsed (p 4). This is inaccurate and there really is no excuse for this following the evidence in *Roman Catholic Opinion* which indicated that the Catholic population of England and Wales is around 11% or nearly 5½ million. Incidentally, the report of the 1978 survey of Catholics was a major resource available to all the bishops and diocesan co-ordinators and delegates in the months leading up to the Congress. It is not referred to in *Liverpool 1980* yet in practice it served a useful legitimating function in demonstrating that the various diocesan reports filtering up to the Congress organisers in the preparatory period did in fact reflect what Catholics on the whole were thinking.

The question of representativeness is important because the major claim is made that the diocesan reports which preceded the Congress and which clearly represented grass-roots opinion from the parishes demonstrated 'convincingly that the final shape of recommendations from the Congress was not manipulation by an unrepresentative minority' (p 51). But representative of whom? It is important, I believe, to clarify this point because it will determine our interpretation of the Congress deliberations and hence our judgments regarding appropriate pastoral strategies. The report is, I believe, misleading in so far as it claims that the Congress represented the views of the 4 million Catholics known to the parish clergy. *Roman Catholic Opinion* showed that only one in eight Catholics overall and under one fifth of those associated with a parish, that is around two-third million Catholics, were members of parish organisations. These were disproportionately middle class and converts and they reported higher levels of orthodox beliefs and practices than Catholics generally. I think it could reasonably

be admitted that the Congress delegates represented these activist Catholics to a remarkable degree since the various processes of selection would inevitably have drawn on this pool of known and involved people. But such Catholics are not the total membership of the local Church which also includes around one million Mass attenders who do not belong to any parish organisation, one-quarter million unable to attend for health and other reasons, two million lapsed Catholics and the one and a half million nominal Catholics not known by the parish clergy. I know of no evidence to suggest that the Congress *directly* represented the views of these Catholics, yet for pastoral purposes they are a very significant constituency. It seems likely, therefore, that the Congress deliberations can best be interpreted as representing the victory of progressive elites among committed Catholics in the search for relevance on the part of the Church in the modern world (see Bill McSweeney, *Roman Catholicism*, Blackwell, 1980).

The second section of *Liverpool 1980* outlines the preparations leading up to the Congress. The attempt was made to ensure that the Congress agenda grew from the concerns of ordinary Catholics at the grass-roots level. There were two stages in this: the circulation of eight papers for group discussion in the months leading up to the Congress (five of them in the light of priorities expressed in a poll which was estimated to represent the views of 100,000 people [p 6]). Unfortunately several of these discussion papers were circulated too late to involve many discussion-drunk parish groups. For example, the discussion outline 'A Question of Justice' was published in May 1979 (p 16) but issued to parishes in the autumn (p 92) too late for an extensive review of opinions in the dioceses.

The report reproduces the eight discussion papers (pp 21-50). These will, in my view, continue to be very helpful at the parish level. They have been carefully designed to start from descriptions of everyday experiences but the reservation remains that they were planned by progressive Catholics largely with an involved and practising but also largely articulate, middle class readership and group membership in view (see, e.g. the description of the parish in Discussion Paper 4, pp 30-1). My point is not to criticize the attempt to stimulate a post-Vatican orientation in the local Church (which I strongly welcome) but to stress that it was the ideological stance of the Congress organisers and that to some extent, therefore, the Congress outcomes reflected this stance.

The second half of this section substantially reproduces the digest of the diocesan reports given in *Congress Contact* No 1 which was sent to all delegates in February 1980. These reports had been prepared on the basis of the submissions of parish and local groups

mainly on the earlier discussion papers. I confess to a deep disappointment that the diocesan reports are not reproduced in full. These documents will clearly be of considerable historical significance and an interesting indication of the patchiness of Catholicism in England and Wales fifteen years or so after the Vatican Council. But given that some of the reports were 'several hundred pages in length' (p 7) or that 'one was over one hundred pages long' (p 51), this hope was probably unrealistic. All the same it does make the point that there is very little in *Liverpool 1980* which has not been published before.

The third and largest section of *Liverpool 1980* reports on the Congress itself. It includes the two messages of Pope John Paul II, the homilies of Archbishop Worlock and Cardinal Hume, the seven sector reports and the closing declaration, all of which have been published before in full, both in various issues of *Congress Contact* printed during the Congress and in the *Congress Report* published by C T S shortly after the Congress. Practically the only new materials, comprising around one third of *Liverpool 1980*, are the topic reports and some details of the topic and sector voting results. These enable one to get closer to the "feel" of the Congress, place the sector reports in context and make a more informed judgment of the bishops' responses in *The Easter People*. In some cases topic voting has been given (e.g. Sectors A and B), in others sector voting on propositions raised by the topic groups (e.g. Sectors C and G); in Sectors D, E and F no voting details have been reported.

The topic reports sometimes give an indication of the division of opinion among Congress delegates. For example, the request for the ordination of women made in Sector B (pp 154, 156, 158) can be traced to the deliberations in topic groups where support was 3:2 in favour (pp 139, 153). Similarly on the controversial topic of contraception Sector C voting figures on six distinct resolutions have been given to 'explore the degree of support for various positions' (pp 170-1). A number of minority reports have been included to reflect more clearly some of the divisions which were faced at the Congress. Thus a proposal by members of the Latin Mass Society that the 'Old Mass' be given parity with the 1970 Roman Rite was defeated 4:1 in Topic 1 of Sector A (p 114) and a similar plea which was defeated 4:5 in one discussion group, was decisively rejected by its topic group but is reproduced as a Minority Appendix (pp 186-7). In Sector E there are somewhat confusing references to a submission by a group of young people (p 224) and to recommendations relating to Catholic schools which were wholly endorsed by the Sector (p 237) but also that this acceptance only reflected 'the sector's appreciation of the enthusiasm and commitment of the young delegates (and did) not imply that all the

delegates in the sector agreed with the content of the statement' (p 212). The reasons why 18 out of 70 delegates in Topic 2, Sector A did *not* support the proposition that 'priests and people should love one another' (p 117) are intriguing but unexplained! At the end of the Congress a number of delegates in Sector D expressed disappointment in their president's report and suggested that it was platitudinous and did not adequately reflect the important concrete recommendations which had emerged from the topic groups. These recommendations on evangelisation are now reproduced in full (pp 195-208). Finally, those concerned with the 87 recommendations from the topic group on Human Rights and Social Justice can now find them in detail (under 28 headings, pp 273-286).

The fourth and final section of *Liverpool 1980* simply reproduces the 200 paragraphs of the bishops' 'message in the light of the National Pastoral Congress' and the pastoral planning appendix. In this message the bishops emphatically and explicitly affirm a post-Vatican model of a sharing Church with an emphasis on 'the people of God on pilgrimage through history' (para 14), a 'new emphasis on collegiality' and 'the recognition and exercise of legitimate local responsibility' (20), a stress on 'what we possess in common by virtue of our shared baptism in Christ and our citizenship in the people of God' (21), and the favouring of 'the idea of the Church as a family' and 'the domestic Church' (23, 25). There seems little doubt, formally at least, that the bishops of the local Church in England and Wales have legitimated quite unambiguously the search for a fully participating and active lay involvement at every level in the life of the Church. Parish priests please note; passive laity, wake up!

When it comes to their response to the multiplicity of recommendations made at the National Pastoral Congress, the result is less satisfactory and many delegates have expressed their deep disappointment. A recent *Pro Mundi Vita Dossier* (Europe/North America 11 December 1980, Brussels) has helpfully distinguished resolutions which the bishops have endorsed: such as genuine sharing between the laity, religious and clergy (27-31), the value of small groups (122), the central concern for the poor and the powerless (124), and that National Front policies are incompatible with Catholic principles (175); recommendations which are accepted with qualifications or which they will consider further – such as the ordination of married men (95) and the seeking of full membership of the British Council of Churches (74); recommendations rejected – such as allowing non-Catholic spouses and the invalidly married to receive Holy Communion (76-7, 111); and areas where the bishops point to some gaps in Congress resolutions – such as

evangelisation of our own society (82) and the principles of social and economic justice (164).

It is true that it is easy to be against sin in principle but difficult to accept concretely that specific changes have to be made in procedures (e.g. joining the B C C in order to promote the movement towards Christian Unity), policies (e.g. giving 10% of parish income to Third World development) and pastoral practice (e.g. full lay ministries in parish liturgies). It is also true that nasty decisions which might shatter traditional practices (e.g. intercommunion; married clergy) might have unanticipated harmful effects to balance against any supposed advantages. In such circumstances the status quo can be maintained simply by accepting recommendations in principle while leaving actual concrete practices to be determined in the future.

All the same, in the historical context within which we live, I doubt if more could have been expected of the bishops. Critics of *The Easter People* (pp 307-398) seem to me to forget that it was, in fact, a "political" document. The bishops had taken a courageous step in opening up the preparation for the Congress in the way they did and in not only allowing controversial issues to be raised but in being seen to participate in the deliberations of all the faithful at Liverpool. There was no enforced closure on difficult matters (such as the overwhelming disagreement with the official teaching on contraception). In my view, *The Easter People* was written with several different audiences in mind and the bishops had an impossible task to satisfy all of these audiences. In the event I believe they offer substantial encouragement to those who favour the full implementation of the pastoral teaching of Vatican II.

Not surprisingly, a good number of delegates, especially those in the front line in the inner-cities, were disappointed at what they regarded as tentative rather than substantial responses. But the bishops had to take account of other audiences, too. Chief among these must have been a strong, traditionalist and centralist Pope. With the Dutch Synod as a warning against excessive independence on the part of the local Church behind them and the uncertain prospect of the Synod on the Family before them, the questions of contraception, divorce, intercommunion and the pastoral care of the divorced and invalidly married clearly had to be handled with great care. In my view both the Congress delegates with their tact, sensitivity and restraint and Cardinal Hume and Archbishop Worlock in their courageous interventions which they made at the Synod in the light of the Congress resolutions, did all that could reasonably have been expected of them in the circumstances. For the political power of Rome vis-a-vis the local Church remains

enormous. On this the observation of one bishop that 'the local Churches have yet to "take on Rome",' perhaps indicates that the ultramontanist propensities of English Catholicism have been healthily attenuated.

A related point arises out of the experience of the National Pastoral Congress. It is perhaps not realised that among at least some of the delegates there was consternation (rather than enthusiasm) when on Friday evening, 2 May, it was suddenly announced that the deliberations the following morning would commence with a video-taped message from the Pope. This was feared to be a probable attempt to pre-empt some of the controversial issues which were bound to be raised, and to interfere in the careful planning of the sectors. In one sector it was suggested at a meeting of the discussion group leaders that the recording need not be shown. This was sensibly resisted but it does indicate a considerable measure of suspicion *before* the Congress that full participation by the delegates would not be allowed. The genuine openness of the deliberations was, then, all the more remarkable and impressive for its unexpectedness and I believe that this knowledge has resulted in a deepening of mutual trust and respect between the bishops, priests, religious and laity in this country: a strength which is arguably of greater importance than some possibly expedient responses in *The Easter People*.

Apart from the delegates and Rome I would also suggest that the bishops in their response to the Congress had to bear in mind the reaction of the huge mass of relatively passive and uninvolved, and the traditional Catholics in the parishes. It seems at least likely that some of the bishops' responses (e.g. on intercommunion, the admission of invalidly married or divorced Catholics to Holy Communion, or the question of married clergy) were taken with a view to the likely impact on this constituency which I have argued above, was largely unrepresented among the delegates to the Congress. Delegates concerned to implement some of the Congress recommendations in their own parishes are well aware of the extent to which they cannot assume that they share the same attitudes and values as their fellow parishioners. In a real sense there are not just ideological differences of commitment between 'progressives' and 'traditionalists' but also differences of commitment between 'activists' and 'passive' Catholics. Almost by definition the delegates were distinguished from the bulk of Catholics by their involvement and commitment. The bulk of Catholics have not had the sort of conversion experience which resulted in the euphoria of Liverpool and the confidence of the Sector reports. The bishops were aware of the need to consider this vast constituency.

Where does this leave us now, nearly two years after the Congress and the visit of the Pope? I remain fairly optimistic, largely because it seems to me that the policy of 'roots before fruits' was learned at the Congress. In his final homily Cardinal Hume concluded by saying: 'The Congress will be over; and work begins' (p 304). My impression is that this work has indeed commenced at grassroots levels in the dioceses and that there is a careful cultivation of the new Justice and Peace movement and local pastoral initiatives. It is hoped that the visit of the Pope will not have diverted attention from the concrete needs in the dioceses, deaneries and parishes. Rather the visit is intended to be an occasion for further spiritual and pastoral renewal in the light of the Congress and as an opportunity 'to report on what has been done in the dioceses and organisations to help on our becoming the Easter People' (xvii-xviii). In the fulness of time the National Pastoral Congress will come to be seen as possibly a major turning point in the history of the emergence of Roman Catholicism in this country over the past two centuries. It represents, at least potentially, the *rite de passage* from a childlike passive deference and conformity to a mature and responsible adult Christianity. The active laity have become confident in an identity as co-partners with their bishops and each respects and accepts the differences of gifts and ministries in their service to their fellow men, both in this country and abroad, in response to the call to renew the face of the earth and bring the Good News to all men. This work begins at the roots, at the local level. The Congress will also have strengthened the awareness of the bishops of their own proper independence in their relationship with Rome and Catholicism in England and Wales will truly have emerged from its defensive ghetto to play a more proper part in the life of the nation.

One final observation seems relevant. Much of the scepticism before the National Pastoral Congress seems, in retrospect, to have resulted from a misunderstanding. Certainly the idea of the Congress emerged in the context of a search for a national pastoral strategy. It has become clearer that in important respects there is no *national* Church but a closely-knit group of local (diocesan) Churches collaborating to some extent. But there is no *national* collection and distribution of resources (both financial and human), no *national* determination of pastoral priorities. There is no institutionalised mechanism for transferring resources on a *national* scale from an affluent suburbia to the declining inner-cities or from schools to adult education or from parishes to small groups. The uncertainties before the Congress arose, at least in part, because it was clear that the necessary homework for the determination of a *national* pastoral strategy had not been done. Further-

more the necessary political negotiations between dioceses or between the bishops and the religious orders had not taken place. In the event the Congress was not a major occasion for decision-making about pastoral strategies appropriate for England and Wales as a whole but the initiation of a *process* which was to start with personal spiritual renewal and the tilling of the soil at the grass-roots. Only time will tell whether the delegates will remain faithful to this work in the face of considerable apathy, frustration and hostility at the parish level. If they are, and if the bishops continue to give them the support which they need, then truly English Catholicism will have come-of-age.

Religious Celibacy and Sexual Justice *

Roger Ruston O P

It is a foolish thing to make promises about what you intend to do in a year's time; but at the chapter meeting last year I promised the Provincial that I would give a talk on celibacy this year, hoping to provoke some discussion on a topic that is too rarely discussed. I have had plenty of time to regret it. But I have kept to my original proposal because the reasons I had for making it have not gone away.

The first reason was a sense of irritation at the way some of the brethren speak about the problems of celibacy entirely by way of anecdotes: how Father A was nearly seduced in the parlour, how troublesome women plagued the life of Father B, about Father C and his "cousin", about the real reason for Brother D leaving the Order. When I thought about it, I realised that there are two things about this kind of talk that I find unsatisfactory:

1 its privatisation of the vows: that celibacy is mostly a matter of an individual keeping his vow of chastity, like a precious object to be kept intact under threats, especially threats from certain women; and that the available collective wisdom on the matter consists in anecdotal knowledge of how to do this.

2 the failure to take seriously the lives of the women whose attentions cause so much difficulty when it gets out of hand and — it must be added — so much satisfaction when it is under proper ministerial control. It is a failure to look very deeply into what

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