

The Eucharistic Congress 1932 in the Diocese of Meath.

The Dublin International Eucharist Congress held in June 1932 was by far the most important event in the young Irish State. In the previous ten years the Government organised motor racing in the Phoenix Park, the GAA organised the Tailteann games and the Catholic Church celebrated the centenary of Catholic Emancipation but these events were of interest to a national audience but the forthcoming congress was to be the first truly international event for the nascent state. Organisation began in the previous year but early in 1932 there was a general Election followed by a change of Government. The new administration led by Fianna Fail, many of whose members were recently at odds with the Catholic Church but the President Eamon DeValera rose to the occasion and all was well.

The Westmeath Examiner as early as August 1930 printed an article explaining the purpose of the Eucharist Congress and in 1931 an article described the Altar cloth manufactured and embroidered in Belfast. The paper also described both the Papal and Congress logos but there were no pictures in the Examiner in those days. At the end of December 1931 the Irish Hierarchy issued a Pastoral Letter to be read in all churches welcoming the forthcoming congress and linking it to the 1500th anniversary of the coming of St Patrick to Ireland. In February, the Bishop of Meath Most Rev Thomas Mulvany, issued his pastoral welcoming the event that he described as a landmark in the ecclesiastical history of our country. He asked his people to pray earnestly to Patrick, Brigid, Colmcille, Finian and all the saints of Ireland for good weather and also for the success of the Congress. He also referred to St Patrick who began his mission in the Meath diocese by lighting his fire on the Hill of Slane, a light that had never failed to shine through all the cycles of Ireland's troubled history. He counselled that people could repay God by living good Christian lives and being true to the teachings of the church.

Preparing for the crowds expected it was calculated that two thousand cattle and twelve hundred and fifty sheep would be needed and market gardeners were asked to ensure that earlier than usual supplies of new potatoes early cabbage, broccoli and salads of all kind were ready. Most towns in the diocese made arrangements to decorate their town with Papal flags and yellow and white bunting in Papal colours. The local papers make special mention of the decorations in Kingscourt, Kells, Navan and Trim. A committee was set up in Mullingar to organise the decorations but no description of the efforts survives. Travel arrangements were announced and special notices concerning routes and parking were announced. A huge altar was erected in the Fifteen Acres in the Phoenix Park for the celebration of Pontifical High Mass on the closing Day of the Congress. A special loudspeaker system was installed so that the million people expected could hear everything. The Department of Education granted five special days holidays so that teachers could attend the celebrations and the Minister for Justice released thirty prisoners whose sentences were nearing their end.

The Papal Legate Cardinal Lorenzo Lauri arrived to a great welcome at Folkstone and travelled to London where he was to change trains. He was delayed by a large crowd wishing to see him. He stayed overnight at Chester and travel on to Holyhead and again a large crowd greeted him. His Excellency walked to the end of the platform to greet and bless the crowd before boarding the special steamer for Dun Laoighaire. The Archbishop of Dublin, President De Valera and Cardinal Logue greeted him. At the city boundary Alfie Byrne, Dublin's perennial Lord Mayor, accorded him a fulsome welcome. His final welcome was the Liturgical on in the Pro Cathedral

In most towns a Eucharist Procession was arranged in preparation for the Congress. The Mullingar procession was held on June 19th and was led by the Men's Confraternity and the Confraternity Band. They were followed by The Woman's Sodality of the Sacred Heart, The Pioneers, children from all the parish schools, priests and the Blessed Sacrament escorted by canopy bearers and a military Guard of Honour. Those taking part were instructed to observe strictest silence and deepest reverence during the procession and those watching on the footpath were told they should kneel when the Blessed Sacrament was passing. Trim, described in the Meath Chronicle as the "Ancient Capital" of the diocese was decorated in great style, every house had a flag and many had an altar or holy picture displayed. Pictures of St Patrick were a feature of many of the displays.. A special feature of the decorations was a display of Papal flags floating on the Boyne. A procession of the Blessed Sacrament led by Fr Thomas Donnellan was held and a large crowd took part.

Navan also displayed their faith by decorating every available surface with flowers, altar, bunting and flags. Even the railway stations were decorated for the week. The glorious weather gave rise to a saying - *it is Congress weather*. The Blessed Sacrament attracted a crowd of six thousand and was led by the CYMS band and Benediction was imparted by Fr. John Kilmartin on the Fairgreen. Such was the crowd taking part that when the head of the procession taking part reached the Fairgreen those at the end of the procession hadn't started to move. Kells too was decorated, every house *robed with laurels*, flags, national, Papal and Congress appeared on every Catholic house and scrolls bearing quotations from Sacred Scripture were strung across the roads at vital points. The Blessed Sacrament procession, held in bright sunshine, was led by Fr. Michael O'Farrell CC through the streets, and ended with Benediction at the Convent. The choir and St Colmcille's Brass and Reed Band provided the music during the procession.

In Dublin the week was filled with the usual events of a Congress, - meetings, workshops and Masses celebrated in the various rites of the visitors. In Kingscourt the parish priest, Fr Stephen Kelly, led a Blessed Sacrament Procession through the streets of the town He was accompanied by a large number of priests from surrounding parishes in counties Cavan, Meath and Monaghan. About 5000 people led by the Brass Band and church choir took part.

On Thursday 24 June there was a men's day in the Phoenix Park attended by over 250,000. Benediction was given by the Papal Legate and the native of Kinnegad, John Glennon, Archbishop of St Louis, addressed the gathering. He spoke on - *The Blessed Eucharist The Sacrament of Charity and Peace*. He had previously preached at the digging of the first sod ceremony for the new Cathedral of Christ the King, Mullingar on 31 March. He would subsequently return for its opening in 1936 and its consecration in 1939. On Friday it was the women's turn and a similar sized crowd attended. Saturday was children's day: it began at 8.30 as the children began to gather and Mass was celebrated at 12 noon. After the Mass the Papal Legate addressed the children and told them that he looked forward to telling the Pope that the faith was safe with the children of Ireland. The various addresses by visiting prelates were delivered in the Theatre Royal and the Savoy cinema. These great venues were placed at the disposal of the Congress committee free of charge. Many business firms advertised that they would be closed on Friday and Saturday to allow staff to attend ceremonies.

Sunday was the big day; everything was ready for the largest gathering ever seen in Ireland. People came from North, South, East, and West. Those coming from parts of the North had to suffer stone throwing attacks and attempts to derail their trains. All forms of transport was pressed into service. People from counties Meath, Louth Kildare and as far away as Cavan travelled by bicycle and there was a report of a group from Tipperary walking to Dublin. Cars, buses, lorries were all pressed into service and parking regulations in and near the Park were strictly imposed. A train left Mullingar at 6am on Sunday morning with 900 on board, 500 travelled from Kingscourt, 1200 from Athboy, 1500 from Navan, 510 from Oldcastle and 418 from Trim. The Great Northern Railway ran sixty buses from all over the Northern half of the country. Between rail and bus 1,200 travelled from Kells. We get an indication of the cost from an advertisement placed in the Anglo-Celt by the Crosserlough Pioneer Society. Fare on a bus from Kilnaleck to Oldcastle was three shillings and the train fare from Oldcastle was five shillings and sixpence.

The Pontifical High Mass due to begin at one o'clock was postponed due to a delay in the radio broadcast from Rome by Pope Pius XI. The celebrant of the Mass was Archbishop Michael Curley, of Baltimore and a native of Athlone. Count John McCormack a life long friend of Archbishop Curley sang *Panis Angelicus* and at the consecration St Patrick's Bell rang at Mass for the first time in centuries. The Papal Legate delivered the sermon and the Mass was broadcast by the young Radio Eireann from its new station in Athlone and by the BBC. At the end of the Mass the procession to O'Connell Bridge formed and took four hours to reach the city centre. Among the canopy bearers of the Blessed Sacrament were President DeValera and his predecessor William T. Cosgrove. Solemn Benediction took place at a special altar on O'Connell Bridge and then the rush for the train's home began. Many of the travellers had nothing to eat all day and seats in restaurants were all filled, as was any hope of a place to sleep for the night. The lucky ones found a bed in Garda stations around the city but many had to spend the night on the streets.

In spite of nearly half the population of the country on the move there were very few accidents. Outside Cavan town Michael Mulligan from Clones was in a car involved in a collision and died in Cavan Surgical Hospital. His wife was travelling in a car in front of the car in which her husband was travelling and was unaware of the accident until some hours later. Thomas Jones died in Wicklow Hospital from injuries received in a collision while returning from Dublin. The most serious accident occurred at the Liffey Bridge in Leixlip. A lorry owned by D.E. Williams, Tullamore with thirty passengers on board crashed into the bridge at 3am. Twenty-seven of the men were thrown from the lorry and a number of them fell into the river. The injured were treated on the spot by local doctors and taken by ambulance to St. Stevens' Hospital and Jervis St Hospital. Two men died, both from Tullamore; Patrick Kenaney was killed on the scene and Edward Daly died in Jervis St Hospital. His funeral cortege from the hospital joined with that of Patrick Kenaney at Leixlip and both proceeded to Tullamore. The funeral was met by a large crowd in Tullamore and the funeral procession was led by the members of Tullamore Urban District Council and the coffins were borne by members of local football clubs. Among the injured was Christopher Cully from Rochfordbridge; all the others were from Tullamore. The driver was injured and later arrested and charged with dangerous driving.

Despite strict supervision of parents, teachers and stewards about forty children got lost in the exodus from the Park. The majority of them were brought to the Parkgate Garda Station where they were handed over to stewards and boy scouts, who took them to their homes and to different railway stations. On Monday evening one boy William McGibney aged fourteen from north Westmeath was still unclaimed.

In the week following, many of the prelates visited various parts of Ireland, Archbishop Curley left Dublin immediately at the end of the Mass for the bedside of his mother who was near death. Cardinal O'Connell, Archbishop of Boston, who led the American pilgrimage, came to his native Virginia and was although the visit was intended to be private he was greeted by a large and enthusiastic crowd. Archbishop Glennon came to visit his brother and sister in County Westmeath but there is no record of a public welcome. Francis Tief, Bishop of Concordia, USA whose parents were both Irish and John McNulty, recently appointed as bishop of Nottingham, were guests of Bishop Thomas Mulvany in Mullingar. Dr Tief celebrated Mass in the Cathedral and expressed joy at celebrating Mass in his native County. Most Rev Kar Ivanios, Archbishop of Bethany South India visited Kells. He was met by a large crowd at the town boundary by a large crowd and escorted into the town by the Kells Brass and Reed band. He was greeted at the church gates by the members of the Urban District Council and presented with an address of welcome. He celebrated Mass according to the Syrian-Antiochan rite. Following Mass he was the guest of a representative group of townspeople and then paid a private visit to Mr Michael Clarke, Cannon St., a life long friend. In Cavan, Count Edward O'Rourke, Bishop of Danzig and a descendent of the Princes of Breffnie was a guest of the Bishop of Kilmore.

The Congress was spoken of as the greatest gathering Ireland had ever seen and it left its mark on that generation of Irish men and women who were privileged as they saw it, to be present. In future years *the year of the Congress* was looked back on with pride and like most pivotal events in peoples lives as a measurement of time.

The above article was written using sources drawn mainly from local and national newspapers available in the the diocese of Meath, especially – the Westmeath Examiner, the Westmeath Independent, the Meath Chronicle, and the Anglo-Celt along with the Irish Press and Irish Independent.

Phil Tierney May 2012.