

## **NCP 2003 - Narrative Report**

*To those who have never been to the Conference, its workings may seem a little arcane. But the week has its own well-established rhythm and ways of working, from representatives' arrival on the Monday through to the conference "Banquet" on the Thursday night. Fr. Rob Esdaile here chronicles events at Leeds.*

### **Monday Evening – Being Aligned To Christ**

The Conference began its work in the chapel of Trinity & All Saints' College, with a liturgy of light in which all the dioceses of England & Wales were prayed for. Fr. Tony Philpot, conference chaplain, set the scene for our endeavours in his homily: to talk of the priest as acting "*in persona Christi*" is to acknowledge that we are on a journey, a process of being aligned to Christ. That is what formation is: "Leave Christ out of the equation, and all formation is reduced to tinkering with techniques". The conference theme invites us all to look at ourselves – our spirituality, our intellectual curiosity, where we find refreshment.

Bishop David Konstant welcomed the conference on behalf of the diocese and of the college (as its chair of governors). Building on the theme of the day's feast, of Our Lady's Birthday, he reminded the assembly that the specific task of priesthood is to help to bring God to birth in people's lives, helping them to recognise the presence of the divine.

### **A Review Of The Year**

Father Tony Wilcox, NCP's Chairman, reported on the work of the Standing Committee during the previous year. He picked out the Study Day on Priests and the Protection of Children – attended by 150 priests from around the country – and suggested this could be a valuable method of working in the future. In that connection he was glad to report that Brian McGinley sat on the management committee of *CoPCA*, offering "the voice of a working priest" in their deliberations. He also referred to the joint working party on "*Boundaries In Pastoral Ministry*" which, in cooperation with the *National Board of Catholic Women*, is producing a discussion document on professional relationships; and he thanked Angela Perkins for her work in producing, "*Healing Priesthood*", itself indirectly the fruit of the 2001 NCP.

### **NCP International Inc.**

Tony thanked members of the Standing Committee for the particular roles they had taken on during the year, but thanked especially John Paul Leonard who had transformed our finances in the last three years. NCP had been represented not only at the conference of the *US National Federation of Priests' Councils* in Kansas City but also at the recent international conference of English-speaking conferences of priests in Dublin, as well as being involved in the European Council of Conference of Priests [see reports elsewhere in this paper – Ed.]. And, in response to the unsatisfactory *ICM* opinion poll of clergy views on child abuse, talks were under way concerning the possibility of undertaking more balanced study of priests' opinions.

### **The Chairman's Stances**

Turning to personal observations, Tony offered comments on four particular issues that seem to face NCP.

- Firstly, many had been disappointed by the outcome (or lack of it) of the Bishops' committee looking at seminary provision. Some felt that the bishops had sat on their hands over the issue of over-provision. But he believed the debate had been stymied by being "buildings-driven". Now, beginning with this conference, we must have a new, "Content-driven" debate, asking: what is formation for? The NCP has an essential role to play in this.
- Secondly, with regard to child-protection, he noted the danger of duplicated effort and confusion if each diocese developed its own protocols and procedures. Individual bishops must pool their authority and seek a common policy.
- Thirdly, he regretted the lack of progress on a national pension scheme – despite the hard work and the motion passed at the 2002 conference. Perhaps it would be necessary to pursue this question at local, rather than national level, but the task remains outstanding.
- Lastly, Tony spoke about NCP itself. It was fair to say that the Conference had "come of age", seeming less "wild" in its views and proposals, and better representing the views of fellow priests. Yet the time was perhaps now ripe for a radical overhaul of our constitution and procedures. Arguably, the current arrangements involve too big a meeting at the wrong time of year. A smaller body, of perhaps 50, meeting in late January or early February would – he suggested – fit better with the rhythms of the Bishops' Conference (and therefore be more effective in influencing the latter).

### **Tuesday – Appraisal And In-Service Training**

Tuesday morning was given over to discussion of Archbishop Vincent Nichol's paper on on-going formation [*see pp. 1-3*]. In the afternoon plenary session, questions covered a very wide area, including In-Service Training, the question of policy on sabbaticals (and their funding), how to keep the focus in priestly ministry when we risk being overwhelmed by demands on our time and energy; how to re-energise the idea of peer appraisal among the clergy (when the *Supporting Ministry* document seems to have become a dead letter in many dioceses).

Regarding appraisal, Archbishop Nichols underlined the need for this to be kept separate from the "supervisory" role of the Bishop. The real question is how clergy can get to hear the opinions of peers and parishioners regarding their skills and gifts. It was also important to insist that it's never too late to recover "untapped potential" and neglected talents. Indeed, that is a major part of the business of later life for all people. Moreover, we can all take steps to feed our inner life: he mentioned one reading group in Birmingham Archdiocese which meets every month to discuss what their chosen book and (on the individual level) the practice of daily *lectio divina*.

### **Time For Another Look at Ongoing Formation**

In fact, if we look back over the last twenty years or so there have been many initiatives to stimulate and support the life of the clergy. Some have prospered and others withered. But this may be an opportune moment to "sift" these various initiatives, reflecting on what constitutes best practice and what is essential: we need to set good structures in place in our lives if we are to flourish in ministry (and what is appropriate in a large urban diocese is inevitably different from what is required in a

more scattered rural diocese). Inevitably, we are all affected by the culture in which we live – and which exalts the individual at the expense of the collective. But we must reflect on whether we have got the balance right between our personal ministry and our collective identity as members of the presbyterium and of the People of God.

### **The Views Of Seminary Rectors**

Mgr Rod Strange, as Rector of the Beda College in Rome, then addressed the conference on behalf of the Seminary Rectors' group. They were grateful that NCP had decided to make "*Forming Priesthood*" the theme of the 2003 conference. The points he made are simple but important ones if we wish to have a useful discussion of the issues regarding the future of seminaries. Firstly we need to take seriously the professionalism required of modern clergy (which in no way downgrades the vocational roots of priesthood), and that requires an extended period of formation, properly resourced. The question of clergy numbers must not alone dictate policy on provision. The different seminaries with their different histories and profiles each supply different things to their students. We need to look forward to envisage how the Church in these islands is going to develop and to offer the kind of formation which best corresponds to that future. And better links with the local Church must be forged, creating more of a sense of continuity between initial and ongoing formation.

### **A Culture Of Vocation**

Fr. Kevin Dring, as Director of the National Office for Vocation, spoke movingly about his work [*see his article on p.4 – and the Motion printed below, which was provoked by his talk – Ed.*]. But his presentation put across two things which an article cannot so easily convey – both the energy and dedication which he and his small team have brought to the launch of the *NOV* and the sheer variety of tasks and projects which have already been established. These all focus on creating within the Church a "Culture of Vocation" within which, as a matter of course, all members of the Church affirm the fundamental truth that they have a unique calling to be lived out day by day and in which all reflect upon that calling. Building that culture is the work of all members of the Church, but the priest has a key role to play – and that challenges each of us to reflect on how wholeheartedly and joyfully we live our own calling.

### **More Meetings!**

In the evening representatives took part in two further groups – the initial discussion of the *Areas For Exploration* which had been brought to Conference [*see the Motions printed below*] and the Regional Meetings, at which new representatives for the Standing Committee were chosen by Group C (Tim Nurse) and Group F (David Elder).

### **Wednesday – The Bit Before On-going Formation**

Once again, Archbishop Nichols gave a presentation to begin the day's work – this time on initial formation for ordination. Again, the text is reproduced elsewhere [*pp.10-11*]. In the afternoon there was an opportunity for feedback from the reflection groups which occupied the second half of the morning. A certain tension between the dialogical theology of vocation as "call-and-response" and the more fixed image (borrowed from Michelangelo!) of "releasing the figure in the marble" was commented on, with the suggestion that the former corresponds more to the pattern of secular priesthood. We find our vocation in the demands of ministry itself. Another

recurrent theme was the need for alternative models of formation alongside the existing seminary structures. One delegate underlined the other strand of *Pastores Dabo Vobis* which had not been picked up on by the Archbishop in his presentation: the ordinand is the principal agent of his own formation (and by extension the priest is principal agent of his own on-going formation).

### **The End Of The Long Vacation?**

Archbishop Nichols was insistent on the need for stability in community life in order for effective formation to be undertaken – although the experience of the training of permanent deacons was offered as an instance of non-residential-community-based formation. He pointed out the opportunity to offer very different formational experiences during the vacation periods (which could constitute up to a third of the seminary year) – including, possibly, visits to the Church in other countries. He also made the important distinction between the Church’s aim of conforming people to Christ and the very different goal of conforming them to a particular model of priesthood.

The problem of finding appropriate staff to teach in seminaries today was raised. Staff must be people with appropriate character and the seminary must never be used to “contain” a problematic priest. There is a need to “rotate” the staff of seminaries, to keep freshness in approach, but at the same time this requires careful preparation and training (especially for spiritual directors and others with a direct role in formation). Moreover, it is not enough to attend to the four areas of formation identified by *Pastores Dabo Vobis*: We must also help candidates to see the links between the intellectual, pastoral, spiritual and personal dimensions.

In response to comments from the floor about candidates for ordination with a more traditionalist approach, Archbishop Nichols said that it was necessary to acknowledge that whereas much of the effort of previous generations of Catholics had been to find acceptance in society, there were many younger people now making the opposite journey – seeing their faith as demanding a life that was in evident contrast with the lifestyle of their non-Christian contemporaries. It was necessary to respond to and nurture this desire to be different among the young and to affirm the “Romantic” view of the call to priesthood that many have as they explore this possibility.

### **Learning From Other Churches, Avoiding Cynicism and Seeking Good Beer**

The session ended with comments from two observers. Canon Annette Cooper, representing the Anglican Church, noted that several priests had shared with her the pain of their own experience of seminary formation – including the frustration of not being trusted as responsible adults. She also reminded the Conference that CofE “training colleges” are as much engaged in the work of formation as are Catholic seminaries. We face many of the same issues. However, in the CofE there is both experience of other (non-residential) models of initial formation and proven commitment to “Post-Ordination Training” in the early years of a priest’s ministry. We might learn from this experience.

The second observer to offer reflections was Fr. Bob Silva, from the *National Association of Conferences of Priests* of the USA. He underlined in particular the sad phenomenon of seminaries becoming breeding grounds of cynicism – which could

only be countered by focussing on inculcating a faith which was strongly relational, rooted in Jesus' praxis.

While some gathered to finalise resolutions after supper, others took part in a mass walk-out ... to the nearest Real Ale pub: the bar manager at TASC had refused to believe that the company would be able to manage 2 casks of *Old Speckled Hen* in four nights. They actually knocked them back in under two!

### **Thursday**

A total of ten resolutions were debated on Thursday and nine of these were adopted as conference policy [see below]. A tenth, suggesting a gathering of Former Anglican Clergy to reflect on their experience of life as Catholic Priests failed to achieve the necessary two-thirds majority.

After lunch elections were held for Chairman – with Fr. Godric Timney elected in a tight, three-way contest – and the three nominations for membership of the Standing Committee were adopted unopposed (Don Bowdren, Tom Jordan, Andrew Stringfellow). During the vote-counting the book, *Healing Priesthood* was presented by its publisher, Brendan Walsh of DLT, and editors, Angela Perkins and Verena Wright.

### **Endings & Beginnings**

Then Conference moved into its final stages: the Treasurer's Report was tabled and remarks were offered by Bp Kieran Conry (Episcopal liaison), Dr. David Spurrell of the Catholic Union (on behalf of the observers), and Tony Wilcox, as outgoing chairman [*see back page*]. The work of the conference then concluded with evening prayer, followed by the conference Banquet, at which John Wilkins, retiring editor of the Tablet, was an entertaining and moving after-dinner speaker, giving a stimulating account of his 22 years at the helm, drawing on his vast knowledge of the contemporary Church ... And the following morning the new Standing Committee began preparations for the next conference – at Roehampton, September 6<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>, 2004. Be there!

(2470 words – including headings)