

Ministering In A Multi-Faith World

Welcome to this Conference Report, in which you can read the main papers presented at the NCP this September and from which you can learn about the resolutions passed by Conference. But we hope that you will glean more than these bare bones. We hope that you will pick up some of the atmosphere of a prayerful gathering of committed priests reflecting on their ministry in a rapidly changing world. The multi-faith, globalised and often fractured society in which we live is part of God's gift to us. We hope that you will find in these pages plenty to stimulate and reinvigorate, strengthening the conviction that in this generation, as in every generation, we are all called to life in abundance.

(126 words)

Comparing Notes Across The Pond

Fr. Godric Timney OSB reflects on a year of travels as Chairman of NCP

Last year, after you put me in the hot seat, Tony Wilcox, my predecessor, offered me some advice: Enjoy your three years and accept the invitations. On both accounts, I assured him, I would do my best! To date, despite the inevitable hours on the phone and the innumerable letters and e mails, so far so good. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to meet such a wide range of people, and to view priesthood from beyond the confines of my monastery and the boundaries of my parish.

My travels - on your behalf (I have to keep emphasising that to my parishioners!) - have taken me around the country to, among other things, meetings of the Standing Committee, a regional meeting, the Conference of Religious, and the Bishops' Conference. Again on your behalf, I accepted an invitation from the *National Federation of Priests' Councils of the USA* to attend their convention in Atlanta, Georgia, in April.

I'd like to share with you some reflections on that conference. The theme was '*The Eucharist at the centre of our lives*' and Timothy Radcliffe OP was the keynote speaker. One thing you notice if you travel in the States is that everything is on a different scale. I stayed before the conference in a parish with a Sunday mass attendance of 6,000 – and a weekly collection of more than \$50,000! So, too, at the *NFPCA* conference there were about 250 delegates present. I attended a workshop on '*Alternative Housing for Priests*': in one diocese a quarter of the priests live away from the parish, but they stressed that this did not mean they were less available to their parishes. Again, salaries may seem exorbitant to us but priests in the USA have to provide for their living expenses, housing, health insurance, retirement and so on.

I was particularly concerned to hear of the concerns of US priests. At the top of the list they appear to put lack of confidence in their bishops, and I gained the impression that there is a huge gulf between priests and bishops. The sex abuse scandals rumble on. Bob Silva, their Chairman, spoke about the self-doubt affecting many priests resulting from this; and several seemed resigned to their dioceses being declared bankrupt because of enormous compensation payments to victims. Other issues mentioned were: the polarization of conservatives and liberals in the Church and in American society - far more pronounced than anything we experience in the UK; the gulf between 'Vatican II-generation' priests and those newly ordained; the ways in

which appointments are made to parishes; lack of real empowerment for women (including female religious); the growing number of foreign born priests and the question of how they are inculturated. Priests spoke about burn-out, about ongoing formation, about care of those accused of misdemeanours. Perhaps it is inevitable that one heard more of the negative than the positive. Yet I was heartened by the upbeat sense of commitment of the delegates.

It is interesting to compare situations between countries and continents – and you must judge their relevance to our situation this side of the pond. With regard to the issue of leadership, I would like to put on record that, however much we may puzzle on occasion over our bishops' ideas and actions, we are generally very fortunate to have good leadership from them. Dare I say, though (as one not directly under obedience to a bishop) that what I hear most priests asking for is that their bishops be real pastors and shepherds to their priests - as, of course, many are.

I was asked to address the US convention on the concerns of priests in England and Wales, so I spoke about some of the issues raised in our own meetings in recent years. I did, however, conclude by saying that if I were asked about the main concern of priests over here it is probably the same as that of priests in the USA: that we be worthy and committed ministers of the Gospel. In the early 90's I was given the job of raising over a million pounds for the completion of Douai abbey church. My travels, even then, took me round many parishes and I was uplifted not only by the quality of liturgy and prayer which I found but also by the dedication and goodness of my fellow priests. I have no reason to believe that that has changed over the intervening years.

Our own 2004 conference has confirmed my confidence in those who share in priestly ministry. Over the few days we spent at Digby Stuart College we were inspired, encouraged and uplifted. I would once again like to express my gratitude to the members of the Standing Committee who worked so hard to make the gathering a success. I would also like to express our thanks to Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald and Fr. Phil Sumner for their input and for leading us in our reflections on this very important theme of Life in Abundance; to Fr. Nicholas King SJ for his supportive presence as conference chaplain and for opening up the Scriptures to us; to Bishop Kieran Conry, our liaison bishop, for his presence throughout the week and to all those other bishops who have visited us; to our observers for their support and contributions; and especially to the representatives who gathered at Roehampton and shared so generously in the work of the conference.

I enjoyed those few days by the Thames (though I shall be hesitant about admitting that to my parishioners!). I look forward to our gathering in Leeds next year but please know that if your travels take you up the M6, St Anne's Ormskirk is only 10 minutes off Junction 26 and I would be delighted to welcome you there.

(986 words)