

NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF PRIESTS OF ENGLAND AND WALES
ANNUAL CONFERENCE : LEEDS - TRINITY & ALL SAINTS COLLEGE

SEPT 4th—11th 2005

Conference Narrative Report

Monday 5th September

OPENING SESSION

Fr Michael McCarthy of the Leeds diocese opened the conference with a liturgy in which he spoke to the text “where two or three are gathered”, and invoked quotations from G M Hopkins, T Ratcliffe (“hope kicks in when there isn’t much to be optimistic about”) and St Francis and the Sow in urging a time of priestly renewal that week.

After the liturgy, conference moved to the auditorium for the Opening Session. Fr Godric Timney OSB spoke to the assembly to welcome them as priests together. He reminded conference of the second paragraph of the NCP constitution in which the mutually-supportive fraternity of the clergy was highlighted. “Life in Abundance . . .” was the three-year theme of the conference; “. . . In a Faithless Society” was this year’s accent. He presaged the input from Fr Michael Paul Gallagher, and informative notes from various ecclesial societies. He assured the conference of the support and interest of the Apostolic Nuncio and the Cardinal. He concluded by expressing the hope that the priests present would enthral each other and bring each other joy in abundance.

Bishop Kieran Conry (the Bishops’ Conference representative) welcomed the delegates. He spoke of the BCEW’s need to restructure itself in order the better to attend on the needs of the priests. In commenting generally of episcopal attitudes, he noted the autonomy of each diocese and its bishop in particular matters (eg pension provision). He recalled that at its latest gathering the BCEW had instituted a new commission: “Evangelisation and Adult Catechesis” with Bishop Malcolm at its head. He looked forward to the presentation, later in the week, of the newly-formed CASE department.

Fr. Peter Jenner (Executive Secretary of the NCP) joined the speakers and spoke briefly about his and the Chairman’s visit to the US National Federation of Priests’ Councils. He then advised conference on matters of procedure to determine ‘areas for exploration’.

After a short ‘buzz-session’, delegates wrote down topics of interest and concern to them and the presbyterate. These were collated by the steering committee.

All adjourned to the bar.

Tuesday 6th September

KEYNOTE ADDRESS By Fr Michael Paul Gallagher SJ “Reading the Cultural Changes”

MPG told us briefly that he had worked in English Literature at UCD for 20 years before moving to the Pontifical council for Culture where he spent 5 years. Now he was at the Gregorian University in Rome, most recently appointed Dean.

He began his Power-Point Presentation with an Evocation of the Big History. Life is beautiful, but it doesn’t last. With powerful images of Stonehenge and Newgrange, he recalled the depth of wisdom in our ancestors in searching for deeper realities. In these places

questions of time, life, death and suffering were `answered` two millennia before Abraham. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition we find more developed answers which name God, and talk of covenant, of land and empire. In the Incarnation of Christ God steps into history, into culture and The Son of God establishes God's presence in a historical time and place.

Christianity always developed according to the prevailing cultural norms and historical contingencies. In many places Christianity became the formative cultural base, and all of human development grew out of it. He noted that at the same time as the monasteries in England were being dissolved, St Mary Major basilica was being fashioned in Rome. Coming closer to the present day, JP II had spoken much on the Dominant Culture of the age.

In modern times there were two identifiable pillars of culture:

- Empiricism as the only path to understanding;
- The sense of self expressed in individuality

Universities had been founded primarily as schools of Divinity; now they were secularised. The church was seen to exist and thrive as the foundation of rural life; now it found principally in an urban setting. De Lubac had noted that `humanity without God will soon become anti-human`.

In the post-Modern era we have witnessed a fragmentation of the human family. We belong in bits, yearning for togetherness yet fragmenting in loneliness. There is about us a narcissism in which we long to be trusted.

Yet in the post-secular age, there is a quest for the Mystery within. People seek consolation in palmistry and seers. There is a quest for the spiritual, but not the religious. We find ourselves part of the global village where every European cow gets 2 euros a day!

As Northern Europe is becoming faithless, we note that in other parts of the world faith and religious conviction deepen, often in confusing and tiny-sect ways. Yet we are not to regret the culture, the time in which we live. As JP II has put it: `Do not lament the moment in which you are chosen to live: its is the only one you will have.`

Faith, as Hans Urs von Balthasar has noted, is seen in that moment when an infant first recognises it is loved: it smiles for the first time. Our faith should be of that water. This is lone before the `sterilisation` of religion.

Retrieving our Roots

The doors to religion are not the Sacraments but:

- Community (cf World Youth Day)
- Service
- Choice
- As Pope Benedict has put it: `church is the place where the art of loving is learnt`
- The harvest is not our own: it is the Spirit`s.

GROUP DISCUSSIONS took place after coffee, with delegates invites to comment on the images which MPG had used during his presentation. The influence of post-modernity in our areas. Our disposition

PLENARY SESSION

Delegates had the chance after lunch to join MPG for a Q&A session, during which the following topics were addressed:

- "I'm not religious but I am spiritual". MPG reflected that Paul had accepted that even in decadent Athens there was spirituality which he applauded.

- “how does faith `enter in`?” The Emmaus story helps us discover God’s process in planting faith. The steps discernable are : Presence—Listening—Challenging—Giving choice—Sacramental moment—Return with joy to the community.
- “Why bother with catechesis and conversion if Salvation is universal?”: MPG referred to a Heythrop publication “The Way to Life” in which issues of secularisation and education are addressed. Further he noted that religious radio broadcasting in UK was never so popular. He quoted TS Elliott who said : “The trouble with the modern age isn’t that people don’t believe in God and man in the way of our forefathers, rather that they don’t feel about God and man in the same way.”
- “How can we deal with people’s restlessness?” The quest for change, novelty, difference; the need to be partying; the gift of a sun-tan parlour booking as preparation for 1st HC—these are contemporary signs. We need sharp critical faculties sensitively to clear the rubble before reconstituting the foundations.
- “How do we clear the Catholic rubble?” The church as been in crisis ever since the cock crew the third time! MPG invited the clergy to clear the rubble of disconnection of body and spirit from their own lives.

MPG went on to identify three wounds which damage the community of the human family:

- The wound to our belonging;
- The wound to our memory;
- The wound to our imagination

The assault of big business determined to `create` a culture for young people and then demands money to belong to it. “Religion” is not so much being shackled, as being connected to the Divine and through that, to each other.

FORUM

In the evening delegates met with representatives of three new ecclesial realities within the church.

1. THE FOCOLARE MOVEMENT was represented by Margaret Lock, with the assistance of recently-ordained Fr x.

She traced the birth and growth of the movement to the charism of Chiara Lubich during WWII. Focolare (meaning hearth) grew from the hatred engendered during that conflict. The movement stresses a community of faith and life. Its headquarters is found in Mariapolis in N Italy. Membership is open to all religions and none, but loyalty to the church and the Holy Father are key principles. It flourishes in 198 nations. Its membership includes ordained and lay. Relying on the biblical injunction `Father may they all be one`, I, but the movement *does* unity.

2. OPUS DEI was represented by the UK Regional Vicar, Mgr Morrish.

He told delegates that this movement had attracted considerable interest by reason of the publication of “The Da Vinci Code”.

Opus Dei (work of God) is prelature personal to the Holy Father, and exists to sanctify the members in their daily lives. It recognised that all are called to holiness. It seeks through prayer, sacraments and evangelisation to fashion its members in holiness. Members pursue a course of instruction in the faith, and seek, especially through the sacrament of penance, to lead holy lives. It is an open and friendly society, existing along side universities and places of tertiary education. It has retreat houses and hostels for students.

3. THE NEO-CATECUMENATE was represented by Fr x and Mr y.

This is a movement that exists within parishes. It was founded by Kiko Arguello in the early '60s. He and Carmen Hernandez were inspired by Charles de Foucauld to found this movement based on their experience of living in slums in Spain. Its essence is in allowing Catholics to live up to their baptismal calling. It proposes a post-baptismal catechesis, since many baptised Catholics have no connection with their church except in name. There is a programme of faith-instruction and pattern of liturgical worship which leads to a new commitment within the church. This culminates finally in a solemn renewal of Baptismal vows. All members are free to come and go.

All three movements stressed that membership is a vocation, and that people are encouraged to join the movements by personal example.

Later in the evening, the 'areas for discussion' groups met with a view to formulating any propositions to conference later.

Wednesday 7th September

KEYNOTE ADDRESS By Fr Michael Paul Gallagher SJ "The Pride and Humility of Faith"

As frequently noted by Joseph Ratzinger, difficulties in faith are not new. JR spoke of the circus clown shouting "Fire!" with ever increasing frenzy; the more he shouted, the more his listeners laughed.

There are three perennial blocks to faith:

- **SIN** : wilfulness in man shuts the ears of his heart to faith. Too little is spoken about sin, especially in *Gaudium et Spes*.
- **SILENCE** : Faith is mystery and numinosity. It is not easy to manage this hidden God. The OT people couldn't cope with this distance, so they built a golden calf instead.
- **SUFFERING** : the cry of Job is repeated every day in a multitude of hearts.

Pope Benedict has published a book since his springtime 05 election. In this new book he declares: "There is a buried memory of God in every heart". This reflection is set against the perceived decline in 'church presence': the decline in vocations, the alienation of the young, the decline in church attendance. There is an aspiritual vacuum in a society that has been culturally-shaped by religion over millennia. The familiar anchors that bonded family and society have been cast off. This is a crisis for civilisation, not just the church.

The time is ripe now for forthright preaching against this void. We should avoid the "grumpy old man" approach that denounces every modernity and vacuity. Our culture (or the perceived lack of it) is the only one we have. We must critique it on its own terms. We must be confident of Christ's perennial message and its validity and proudly present it, even as a contrast to prevailing apathy. Vat II saw modernity as a friend, even in a paradoxical way, and engaged with it. Tertullian asked "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?". Our answer is that of St Thomas Aquinas who embraced classical Greek culture and transformed it.

Paul VI in "Evangelii Nuntiandi" faced contemporary culture and challenged it more than Vat II. During recent times the challenge to culture has been more pronounced.

There have been two tendencies in Catholic theology vis-à-vis faith and culture:

- **Dialectical** : the Word of God is a total surprise, an interruption into history that challenges us. Christianity in this model is a difference, a challenge;
- **Co-relational** : in which grace is seen every where, waiting to be discovered.

Both these approaches are true. All heresies are true, but are based on a truth that has lost its friendliness. Luther was right about scripture, but wrong about sola! JR has pronounced a third way. There is a prophetic meaning buried in our practices. Practices are the key to community, and they identify us.

It is time to challenge unbelief as the prevalent model for life, especially in N Europe. We need to be gentle on unbelievers and tough on unbelief. With the illusion of self-made meaning, we become incapable of recognising Love. It is only love that can recognise and embrace the Resurrection. But we must beware the fragility and often obstructivity of ecclesiastical structures, and the limitations of our preaching.

Pre-evangelisation is necessary to help people discern the empty rubble of faith-less-ness. We then move to heal the wounds. Only then can evangelisation begin. Evangelisation is surprising people with a gift they never knew they needed. Faith then offers a freshness that disturbs, fulfils, but always seeks more. Faith is a slow exodus, a going-out-of-oneself with Christ. But the journey is never complete in this life: it yearns for completion in the hereafter.

Faith offers lightness, joy and costly transformation.

After Fr MPG`s talk, discussions took place briefly in groups before delegates returned for the Plenary Session.

PLENARY SESSION

In this Q&A session, MPG commented on questions from delegates:

- Is not society actually full of faith? Explicit Christian faith is now a foreign language. Many do not know Christ. However, affectivity can lead us from where we are to the Divine.
- What is specific to Christianity? We share in Jesus` knowledge of his Father; we discover faith through the “abba” experience.
- How do we evangelise the Imagination? Newman spoke of the difference between real and notional assent. Beneath intellect, and beneath will there lies the deepest level of human apprehension: imagination. We reach heart and therefore faith through the deepest level: imagination. Rowan Williams spoke of the need “to make the gospel real to the collective imagination of the country.”
- How do we cope with such an alien culture as today`s? Cf MPG`s new book, “Clashing Cymbals”: we need to sort the good, the bad and the ugly in contemporary societal trends.
- How can we confront an unbelief that aggressively sees religion as destructive? We must be convinced that religion offers true answer to life issues; religion is natural; unbelief is unnatural.
- Are we too nostalgic for a rosy past that we are effectively inventing as some remembered dummy that never really existed? The foundations and support that were definitely there in yesteryear have disappeared; the background of our decision-making has radically altered. As Cardinal Lercaro said at the Vat II, we could not repeat the culture of an earlier `golden?` age; we should be ready to embrace cultural poverty.

At the end of this session, Fr MPG was warmly thanked for his contribution to the conference

ADDRESS By Philip Knights of Catholic Evangelisation Services

CASE (Catholic Agency to Support Evangelisation) is an agency of the Bishops' Conference. It is distinct from Maryvale and Café. It works to promote and sustain evangelisation initiatives throughout the country. Mgr Keith Barltrop is the director. The agency taken on the mantle of the CEC (Catholic Enquiry Centre), and also the Home Mission office. Its two websites offer direction for Catholics and non-Catholics.

CASE had a busy time after the springtime showing of C4's 'The Monastery'. 1 in 4 people living in London was born outside the UK.

CASE is seeking to produce a Catholic Directory which would give an introduction to evangelisation based on Evangelii Nuntiandi. A thumb-nail sketch of the workings of CASE. A directory of resources throughout the country : prayergroups; New Movements; pastoral centres. A Catholic telephone directory. Details of courses and training available through CASE.

ADDRESS By Sarah Lindsell of CARITAS

CARITAS is an official agency of CBEW. It has sister-agencies in CAFOD and Caritas-Europe. CARITAS' concerns are for the mentally-ill (1 in 4); the functionally illiterate; marginalised families; vulnerable elderly; and children in need (adoption/fostering).

The difficulties faced by CARITAS: Indifference; apathy; commitment to overseas' needs, not domestic; and bewildering variety of competing charities.

What it seeks to do: Confront government with the issues of concern; ensure that all legislation is 'family-proof'; and continue with the work on the Mental Health Bill.

Delegates were invited to take a blizzard of publicity material and CDs, and to visit the website for further info.

Thursday 8th September

AREAS FOR EXPLORATION : PROPOSITIONS AND DEBATE.

During two morning sessions, the propositions which had emerged from group discussions were presented for debate before conference.

However, the Chairman, Fr Godric invited conference to a more considered and extensive review of the fate of last year's propositions presented to the Cardinal and Archbishop Kelly at the Autumn meeting of the Bishops' Conference.

- Proposition 1 : on the publication of guidelines for placing and caring for a priest in administrative leave. Bishop Kieran Conry spoke on this. He revisited the difficult dilemmas faced by bishops in this sensitive matter: care for the alleged victim; care for the alleged perpetrator. The difficulties of where to place a priest: in a presbytery, in the Bishop's house? Fr Francis Marsden spoke about possible conflicts between civil and canon law. However, the chairman stated that the guidelines established by COPCA already in place were CDF-approved. There was no perceived conflict. Fr Jonathan Mitchell, the steering-committee-delegate to COPCA spoke of the slow progress in establishing published guidelines. He agreed to raise the conference's continuing concern to COPCA's attention at its late-September meeting. The chairman invited conference to vote on sustaining the proposition as enunciated at Roehampton in 2004. This was overwhelmingly agreed.

- Proposition 2 : the NCP study-day on new forms of ministry. This had taken place at Oscott early 05 very successfully as planned.
- Proposition 3 : regarding confusions over ministering to Catholics in hospitals. Bishop Tom Williams is pursuing with vigour a satisfactory solution to this `patient-confidentiality` issue.
- Proposition 5 : Racial equality and inter-faith dialogue. This had been passed convincingly.
- Proposition 7 : regarding the establishment of a therapeutic centre for priests. Fr G Byrne, a Salford priest, had been charged with this matter. St Luke`s Association (USA) had accepted to manage and run a Therapeutic Assessment centre in Salford. Fr. Paul Madison will send an updating report to priests soon.
- Proposition 8 : Human Life legislation. Conference noted that BCEW was actively involved in this matter.

The conference then began debating the conference propositions for 2005, which are available as a separate report.

STANDING COMMITTEE ELECTIONS:

Fr John Tavares joined the Standing Committee representing Special Ministries, taking the place of Fr James Caulfield;

Fr Andrew Brown was voted to take the place of the retiring Fr Don Bowdren;

Fr Tony Sligo was voted to take the place of the retiring Fr Robert Kinlen;

TREASURER`S REPORT

Fr Robert Kinlen presented his report, indicating a healthy state of finances for NCP. In the year to 31.12.04, there was a surplus of income over expenditure of £3400. At the same date the NCP was in funds to the extent of £14,100.

BISHOP KEIRAN CONRY spoke briefly to conference, confirming his on-going support as Bishops`-Conference Representative. He told conference that he has been greatly uplifted by the support of delegates. The chairman thanked him enthusiastically for his presence and contribution.

OBSERVERS` REMARKS

Patrick Olivier spoke on behalf of observers and thanked conference for the welcome he received. He and his fellow-Advent members pledged support for the ministry, and continued to offer their services in ministry if ever circumstances would permit. He expressed surprise that the Propositions did not include any reference to MPG`s input, which he had found fascinating.

The Venerable Jonathan Greener, representing the Anglican church, spoke of his enjoyment pf the conference, and his delight at MPG`s input. He wondered however at the anodyne nature of the propositions.

CHAIRMAN`S ADDRESS

Fr Godric Timney invited conference to suggest speakers for NCP 06, and mentioned various `runners`, many of whom were already bespoke.

He then went on to give thanks to Fr Michael Paul Gallagher, to the chaplain, to Bishop Kieran, observers and especially to the Standing Committee.

He spoke of his and other SC members` travels on behalf of NCP: to Rome, to Vienna, to USA and elsewhere. The challenges of fewer priests and wider responsibilities were everywhere he went.

He listed the needs as he perceived them these days for priests to work together and mutually to support each other. The need for holiness was paramount, and the challenge to renew the institutional church of which we are a part.

He looked forward to returning to his parish to tell not of the challenges and problems of priestly life, but the great joy in fraternity and commitment he had experienced at Conference that week.