

A Deep Sense of Gratitude

In late March, I spent a few days in Johannesburg. There I met Fr Patrick, a Salesian priest and a native of Soweto. 'Oh, you're from Ireland' he said. 'I went there last year for the Eucharistic Congress. What a wonderful week!' I was very encouraged to hear his impressions of the Congress and how it had touched him and his fellow pilgrims. During the Summer and Autumn of 2012, we received large numbers of letters cards and emails, from people in Ireland and further afield who described how much they were encouraged by their participation in the Congress, whether 'in the flesh' or via Television and Internet. In the past twelve months, I personally have moved from the initial feeling of relief to a deep sense of gratitude.

In the run up to the Congress, many people expressed the hope that it would make an important contribution to renewal in the Irish Church. Those of us who were directly involved shared that hope, but we consistently argued that the real fruit of the Congress would depend on its being understood as a journey rather than simply an event. This was the focus of the pastoral preparation programme which reached out to parish communities all over Ireland in the two years leading up to the Congress. It was spearheaded by a handful of people who worked very hard because they believed in what they were doing. It would have made excellent sense, I think, to invite a similar small team to guide us on the next stage of the journey, once the Congress itself was over.

It is in the local community, of course, that people normally gather to share faith and to minister to one another. I think the events of June 2012, as well as strengthening people's faith in God, have helped to restore their confidence in the fact that the Church can do things really well. The Congress



Photo: John McElroy

liturgies were well prepared and celebrated. The workshops and talks provided real spiritual nourishment. The exhibitions demonstrated the extent of the contribution that the Church is making on a daily basis to Irish society. It is my hope that many people will be encouraged by the experience of the Congress to invest their energy in local initiatives which will renew faith and build up the Christian community. Some very successful local events have already taken place in recent months.

Many people really struggled with the idea that the Congress would cost money. As it happens, it was delivered substantially under budget and there was no legacy of debt. There were two crucial factors in achieving this. One was the careful financial management of Anne Griffin. The other was the fact that, under very difficult financial conditions, Irish people generously contributed more than half the total cost of the Congress. There are lessons to be learnt from this for the future. One lesson is that, while faith itself is a free gift, the 'infrastructure of faith' costs money. The other is that the Church, like every other organisation, needs to get better value for money.

It is important to recognise that the Congress didn't just 'happen'. The crucial contribution of the volunteers has been duly acknowledged. While the

majority of them were active over a fifteen day period, they also came from far and wide for training days in the months before the Congress. At least three hundred volunteers were actively involved throughout the two year period of preparation, taking on substantial additional responsibilities alongside their 'day jobs'. By September, when we held our volunteer reunion, the big question from many of them was what we wanted them to do next. Many volunteers specifically indicated when registering that, after the Congress, they

wished to make themselves available for 'future activities of the Catholic Church in Ireland'. The Congress organisation has now been wound up but contact details of consenting volunteers have now been passed to their home dioceses. I hope that their enthusiasm will be harnessed before it fades.

While the volunteers had a very high profile, the Congress staff for the most part worked behind the scenes. In June 2010 there were only three staff members, but by June 2012 that number had reached over fifty. Their responsibilities ranged from communications to logistics and event services, office administration and volunteer management. Their generosity in giving of themselves and their commitment to the project was matched only by their good humour and their support for one another. Working with them was a real privilege. While some of them, unfortunately, have yet to find employment that adequately reflects their skills and their commitment, I am delighted that many of them have secured jobs in which their experience can continue to benefit the Church. Their experience, honed during the Congress, should not be lost.

Fr Kevin Doran
Secretary General IEC2012



Looking back in order to look forward

Several times over the past year I have paused for thought in gratitude, remembering the two year journey towards IEC2012 and that extraordinary week in June last year. My involvement began first as a volunteer and continued then as Pastoral Services Manager. I recall fondly the care of the committee with whom I worked as we struggled to craft a programme of reflection on the Eucharist that would prepare us to engage in becoming communion with Christ and with one another. I remember travelling from diocese to diocese to groups of clergy and laity who were in the midst of dealing with the fall out following the various reports, presenting the 'good news' of the Congress. As I recall, I smile at the question regarding the timing and how as far back as 2010 acknowledging that perhaps the timing was the Lord's, rather than ours. How true that turned out to be.



Looking back now, a year later, I would say that the Congress took us all by surprise in the end, surprise at the numbers who did volunteer, and did

attend, surprise at the openness, the atmosphere of goodwill and camaraderie that prevailed. The stories I have come across since of how individuals decided to travel, workshops they did or didn't get to, others they met, helped or were helped by and ultimately the positive experience they had of being a member of the Church, of belonging with this huge crowd

gathered from every part of the globe and how in it they encountered Christ alive have at times left me speechless or even tearful with gladness – the

gladness that the Lord had indeed visited his people. Many have told me how their experience at the Congress awakened something in them, a hunger for a better or deeper understanding of their faith. Initiatives held for the Year of Faith have been nicely timed, and as for the election of Pope Francis, all I can say is that in the Lord's time we have been offered the opportunity to see that we have options in how we do and are Church.

Some of the options explored and

experienced during the lead into the Congress have become something of a springboard for confidence and vision in catechetical outreach. Among them:

Nothing is impossible, no, really! Long term goals and short term plans go a long way to making even the most unbelievably ambitious proposal come to fruition.

Believe in what you're planning. This

applies to everything – if I am not convinced that this is a good thing then I will convince no one else.

Action your plans! How often on parish level do we greet a good idea by putting it on the agenda for the 'next' meeting, and the next one ... This is the Lord's Church, as Pope Francis reminded us, and if the Spirit of the Lord has inspired an idea, or offered an opportunity we owe it to the Spirit to at least discern its value. Dangerous and risky talk? So was the Second Vatican Council, and so is the Gospel!

Adult Faith development really matters. Its not an optional extra for the super holy of the parish, or to be pitched only at those involved in liturgical ministry – it is the call to all the Baptised. Catechesis should be available to all who want it. Yes it's true what they say: we put things on and no one shows up. But as Church, responding still to the call to new evangelisation, catechesis is what we are for, sharing the good news. To those who felt no need of it yesterday it should still be on offer today – in season and out.

To be able to celebrate the Eucharist we who are the assembly, need to know it. Liturgical catechesis is key to maturing into the kind of Church we



aspired to be during the Congress days – alert to the needs of others, going out of our way to become better informed, indeed formed in faith, seeking new insights into our identity as the Body of Christ in the Ireland of today – connection and compassion being real

fruits of communion. All are called to become what they celebrate, but all need support to do so – pastoral and liturgical catechesis are indispensable.

Do not be afraid to be enthusiastic or to dare believe that we as a community of faith have a positive contribution to make to Ireland today.

Our self-image as Church is changing. At the Congress there was a sense that in the actions and attitudes of many we saw what Christianity looks like. Everyone was a pilgrim and on the road together, some coming from farther, some more burdened, but all sharers of faith and hope, and indeed love. This has been helped hugely by the choices being made by Pope Francis, but the surprise that was the experience of the Congress opened our eyes to the fact that as Christians we have choices regarding how we live the gospel. Whilst the legacy of IEC2012 is a work in progress, a year later we as Church are in a better space, but with much to do before the authenticity we long for becomes our reality.

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Photo: John McElroy

One year on Navan Parish looks back on IEC 2012

Fr Declan Hurley Adm, Navan

One year on, I look back at the Eucharistic Congress with a mixture of joy and pride, but also with some regret.

It is with joy and pride that I recall the great efforts made by many parishioners of Navan to make the Congress an important moment in the life of our Parish. The Parish Council gave itself the motto, *Bringing Navan to the Congress, and the Congress to Navan* – and the members certainly worked hard to achieve that. One of the many events and activities organised in preparation for the Congress was an exhibition of memorabilia from the 1932 Congress. Included in the exhibition was a video recording of some elderly parishioners who had attended in 1932. They spoke with such joy! And I remarked to myself that we would have to ensure that in 80 years time there would be people to speak with the same joy of the 2012 Congress. The opportunity to ensure that was presented to us when we were asked to host the Austrian Youth Choir KISI-KIDS. They teamed up with our children's choir and a wonderful exchange – indeed, a wonderful *communion* – took place.

Many parishioners travelled to the RDS and Croke Park on the buses organised daily by the Parish Council. Our 'Booking Office' facilitated parishioners in negotiating the complex registration process. Many parishioners also acted as volunteers in Dublin or played roles in the liturgies or spoke at workshops. There was pride too on seeing the Congress flag flying outside the two GAA grounds in the town.

Feelings of regret arise in me when I think of the majority of parishioners who did not experience the joy and uplift of the Congress, and for whom the Congress seemed to just pass by. What a lost opportunity to experience again a forgotten joy! For sure, we can blame the media again, but was there not a deeper malaise evident in our communities and among the clergy? Regret too at the lack of any follow-up to help parish communities to build on the experience of what was a wonderful week in June 2012.

Siobhán Brady

As Secretary of the Parish Council I was asked to give a daily report each evening at a prayer service held in our Parish Church. This was part of our efforts 'to bring the Congress to Navan' so that



parishioners who were unable to attend the Congress in Dublin could reflect on the theme of each day of the Congress.

The first evening service was on Monday and by 4pm I still had a blank page until the phone calls started coming from parishioners attending the Congress that day. So I was able to put together a report of the day's events based on what had been reported to me. Father Declan then told me that there would be a French TV crew filming the event and that they also wanted to interview me for their report on what the Congress meant for our Parish. After the pressure of that first day the rest of the week went smoothly with constant phone calls from the RDS. It was wonderful to hear the enthusiasm and excitement from those attending the Congress and to be able to relay that joy to fellow parishioners in Navan.

Many parishioners commented that coming to St Mary's each evening helped them to feel part of the Congress.

Marie Keegan-Finn

Saint Mary's Parish, Navan, was asked to host the Austrian youth choir KISI KIDS and our St Oliver's Children's choir was invited to join with them to perform *Paul – Called By God*, a musical about the life of St Paul, at the Eucharistic Congress. This involved a week of rehearsals prior to the performance. During this time the children learned so much from the older KISI kids; how spiritual they were, how giving and patient they were with the younger children and their wonderful enthusiasm and love of the Lord.

One year on, we now include many of the songs the choir learned from the KISI KIDS. We realise that our choir practices are not just about singing but also a time for praising God. We start our sessions with a short prayer, asking God to bless all of us and we try to make it a spiritual time as well as a joyful time. The

children certainly know about St Paul and become more attentive when the Sunday reading is from one of Paul's letters.

Our group of thirty children has been consolidated through this experience of being directly involved in the Congress. They are already excited about the next Congress!

Nessa Farrelly

On 12 June 2012 I went to the Eucharistic Congress as part of a youth group from Navan Parish. I decided to go because I wanted to

find out more about my faith and develop a greater understanding of what it means to me. I went with an open mind and was curious to meet other believers and see what it was like.

The KISI KIDS were very enjoyable and I loved how they told the story of St Paul through song. The talks on family and relationships were interesting and the atmosphere around the RDS was very welcoming. I never believed that I could have so much fun and enjoyment in learning about my own religion. The Youth Space showed me how my love of music could be the same as my natural love and hope in God. The rock band and gospel choir were brilliant and the Mass was very spiritual.

Before, I had no idea of the impact the Congress would have on me. It strengthened and enforced my belief in God and helped me understand the importance of my faith to me. I will never forget my fond memories of the Eucharistic Congress.

Some comments from Navan parishioners

- 'it showed the vitality of our Church and gave hope'.
- 'a great privilege to be part of such an international event'.
- 'a celebration of unity of hearts and spirit that we will never forget'.
- 'it dispelled the gloom and lack of hope that had begun to settle on the Church'.
- 'so proud of the volunteers!'
- 'the theme – *Communion with Christ and with one another* – was so much in evidence!'
- 'for other young people like me, there is hope to be found in the worldwide Catholic faith'.
- 'I was there in 1932 and am so thankful to have been able to go again in 2012'.
- 'a life-changing and life-giving experience'.