

SEVENTY years ago, Ireland was enraptured for the Eucharist Congress of 1932. John Count McCormack led the bunting and the country celebrated its unity. **DENIS O'SHAUGHNESSY** recalls the effects of the great religious festival on Limerick.



The great triumphal arch erected across Athlunkard Street for the Eucharist Congress in 1932

The faith of our fathers . . .

SEVENTY years ago around this time the nation was en fête. The occasion was the staging of the international Eucharistic Congress in Dublin and with just a decade gone since independence was gained from the British, the joy and pride as the country hosted Catholics from all over the globe was intense. After centuries of subjection the people had emerged with their faith unscathed and were ready at last to take their place among the nations of the earth. Every street and lane in the country vied with one another in professing religious fervour and there was hardly a house that did not have an altar, shrine or holy picture gracing front windows. Limerick city and county was not found wanting when it came to celebrating this festival of faith and the director of the Archconfraternity, Fr Murray, toured the city to inspect the myriad triumphal arches, grottoes and decorations abounding in every street and lane. "Simply magnificent" was his opinion. "The citizens were deserving of all commendation" said in the Limerick Leader.

The climax of the Congress came on Sunday June 26, when 8,000 pilgrims trav-

elled by train from Limerick railway station for the High Mass in the Phoenix Park celebrated by the Papal Nuncio. They were joined by many from the county and the Newcastle West correspondent said 400 had left by train for Dublin. "They faced a tiresome journey but were happy in the thought they would that day be attending the greatest religious function which Ireland has ever seen. Nothing but a strong faith could induce them to make such an arduous trek," the reporter said. Maurice Dillane, Bottomstown, Knocklong, at the age of 70, cycled to Dublin to attend the Congress. This came to light in a court case in Limerick in 1935 when he claimed £10 for the seizure of a bicycle by the Volunteers during the Troubles. Mr Power for the State: "Was that the bicycle you used when cycling to the Eucharistic Congress?" Mr Dillane: "No". When hearing that the claimant at the age of 70 cycled to and from Dublin Judge McElligott was highly impressed and granted £8 10s in compensation to Mr Dillane.

A young boy scout from the city applying first aid in the Phoenix Park that day was

St Mary's Parish man Mattie Sheehan, still going strong. "Myself and Jim Morgan were privileged to be alongside John McCormack and his singing of the Panis Angelicus has remained the most outstanding memory of that day. There was over a million people there and we were kept busy in the first aid station," he recalls. Another young scout at the Congress was Frankie Bourke of Broad Street. "We saw very little, being camped in the grounds of Terenure College. I think the Dublin troops saw most of the action," he says. Frankie recalled the many triumphal arches erected at strategic positions throughout Limerick. "There was one over Baal's Bridge with the legend 'God Bless the Pope and St Mary's Parish'. It was alleged someone painted in an extra word which made the legend read: 'God Bless the Pope and St Mary's Parish only'. There was a shoemaker in Mungret Street who had a banner out O, My God and My All, said Frank, and two pubs in Broad Street were connected with a banner which read Happy We who thus United.

For those who could not make the journey, they packed out houses that had wireless sets and spilled out onto the streets. They thrilled to hear the voice of McCormack, and a special message being relayed from the Pope. Collectively they fell on their knees at the Consecration of the Host and overcome with emotion, many were said to be in tears. The Clarina correspondent thanked profusely Mr and Mrs Ruttle of the post office for granting the villagers the use of their wireless to listen to the Congress. "The reception was wonderful and altogether our little village, with a profusion of altars and decorations, was one of the prettiest in the county," it was reported. The Abbeyfeale correspondent said that the painters and decorators had been busy for a month preparing for the great day. "Never before for any ceremony of national importance have the people been so earnest in showing their zeal to be associated with such an event of religious significance," the report said. In Gleanings from Kilmallock it was noted that the motor car that does not carry the papal flag was the exception: big, growing palm trees were put in front of houses in Ballyanders and were illumi-

nated at night. In Foynes, "12 lines of bunting spanned the street, the beautiful and profuse display from every house made pictures which were striking and convincing manifestations of the great fervour and lively faith."

One teenager who could have been at the Congress but opted for a weekend away camping was Paddy O'Farrell, formerly of Athlunkard Street. "We were young and we had the loan of a motor car for that weekend which at that time was a huge thing. I regretted afterwards that I missed the Congress." Paddy recalls the great triumphal arch which stood at the entrance to St Mary's Church, which his brother Martin helped to erect. The Corporation in their robes attended the Mass in Dublin, led by the Mayor Ald PJ Donnellan. The Leader, commenting on the women's confraternities attending from St Mary's, St John's and St Michael's, said: "They represented all that is best in the womanhood of Limerick." The Rathkeale correspondent said that a returned Yank said to an old woman who was putting up a little flag on her humble abode in a secluded part of the country: "Nobody will see your little flag

in this out of way place". "They mightn't," she replied, "but God Himself will see and admire it," said the woman, and the Yank held his peace.

Not surprisingly, there was a huge input into the celebrations by the members of the Limerick Archconfraternity. Four special trains alone were booked for the men, and all wearing hats, ribbons and medals. The Leader reported they were an inspiring sight, "a manifestation of the faith of the world's largest organised body of Catholic laymen in the world and an example to all of Limerick's undying loyalty to the Church. The report quoted the inspiring words of the Confraternity hymn sung by the men: *Confraternity men to the fight, and raise up you banners on high; Jesus, Mary and Joseph in sight, in our battles their names be the cry. We must on with our banner unfurled; we must on, tis Jesus who leads; we must hasten to conquer the world, with the Sign of the Lamb who bleeds.*

Ringforts, Moats and Fairies