

Limerick and the Eucharistic Congress 1932

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Reports in the local newspapers on the Eucharistic Congress of 1932 are quoted and discussed. Evidence from oral history is used to show a widespread belief that tiles were erected on houses to commemorate the event. While these plaques are earlier and for a different purpose, it is argued that folk memory may be correct and that many were indeed erected at that time.

The 50th Eucharistic Congress, held in Ireland in the summer of 2012, was on the eightieth anniversary of the 31st Congress also hosted here in 1932. The first reference to it in the *Limerick Leader* is on 30 January of that year when it carried an advertisement issued by the Committee of the Congress encouraging people to get the Congress Handbook and Hymnbook. It also suggested that Catholics should begin to wear the official Congress badge, which for adults was made from blue enamel with gold gilt, and cost one shilling (Fig. 1). Children could buy their badges, covered in silver gilt, for four

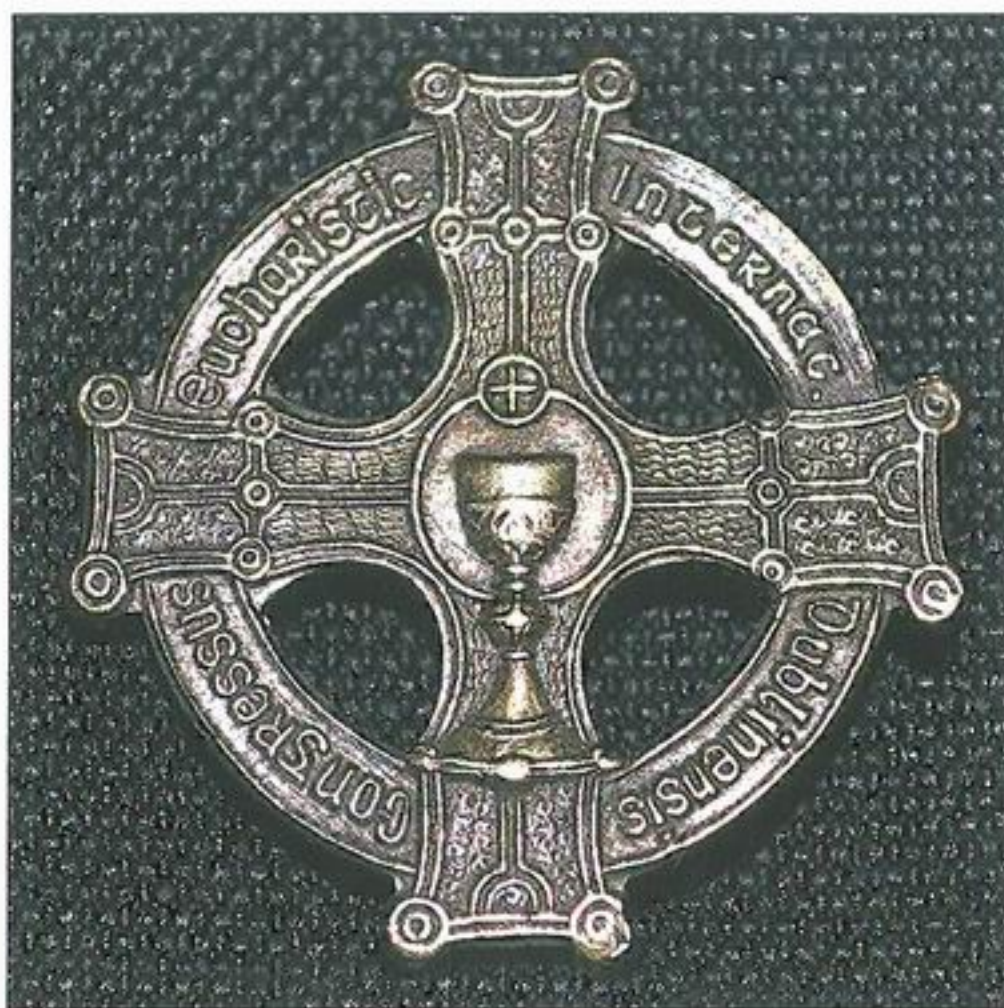


Fig. 1 1932 Eucharistic Congress Badge.

pennies, at their local schools. The advertisement also reminded people that there were a limited number of tickets for the garden party, to be held at Blackrock College on Tuesday, 21 June, in honour of the papal legate. The cost was five shillings.

On 29 February the *Leader* carried as a news item, the fact that a special edition of St. Alphonsus Liguori's book, *Visits to the Most Blessed Sacrament and to the Blessed Virgin Mary*, had been issued as a souvenir of the coming Congress. Archbishop Harty of Cashel,

speaking in St. Michael's church, Tipperary referred to the congresses held in Chicago and Sydney and expressed confidence that the Catholics of Ireland would do all that they could to make the forthcoming celebration a worthy one. Continued devotion to the Blessed Sacrament was, in his opinion, one of the most important forms of preparation.¹

In May the Limerick Development Association, which was actively interested in promoting commerce in the city, requested that the business people of Limerick observe Monday, 27 June, as a general holiday, in connection with the Congress.² The Association decided to put up street decorations in O'Connell Street, and William Street and issued an appeal to the citizens in these and other streets to play their part in marking the great occasion by putting up flags, bunting and other suitable decorations; however, a definition of 'suitable decorations' was not provided. Limerick's three 'Monster Drapery Houses' – Todd's, Cannock's and McBirney's – decided to remain closed on Monday 27 June, the day after the Congress³ as did six coal merchants, Clyde Steam Ship, Co., Despard & Sons, Limerick Steam Ship, Co., P. O'Donovan, Suttons and Tedcastle McCormick & Co.⁴

Possibly in response to the Limerick Development Association's appeal for decorations, Cannock's and Todd's ran large advertisements in the *Leader*.⁵ Cannock's had an impressive stock of Papal banners, Congress flags and bunting. Todd's had an unusual approach which reflected its more affluent customers. It had as souvenirs, Irish linen damask table clothes and napkins, with a design which included a Celtic Cross on which the Ardagh Chalice rested and around which were the words 'Souvenir, Eucharistic Congress, Dublin 1932'. It would be interesting to learn if any of these tablecloths and napkins, remain in existence.

The *Limerick Leader* printed an account of the formal opening of the Congress in the Pro-Cathedral, Dublin and its headline, printed in bold black letters was THE WOMEN'S TURN. This described the fact that a quarter of a million men joined in prayer in the Phoenix Park on the night of 24 June and an even greater number of women were expected to pray before the Congress altar in the Phoenix Park on the night of 25 June, the day that edition was published. It is interesting to note the total lack of photographs dealing with the Congress, even local ones; however the *Leader* used pictures of events very infrequently in this period, possibly because of the cost involved. The lack of photographs may also reflect the fact that the national newspapers gave the event huge coverage, therefore, a pictorial look at Limerick's decoration might seem unnecessarily provincial.

The *Leader* on 29 June ran a headline, again printed in bold, black letters LIMERICK'S NOBLE PART. It was a report on the sermon delivered at a meeting of the Arch-Confraternity of the Most Holy Family, in the Redemptorist church, by Fr. Murray, C.S.S.R. In it he congratulated the citizens of Limerick for their 'edifying behaviour at the ceremonies'; it was estimated that eight thousand men and women from Limerick had travelled to Dublin. He also commented on the decorations of the city, stating that 'all the streets, lanes and alleyways were festooned with flags, bunting, bannerettes and streamers.' At different points, altars and grottoes were erected, which, Fr. Murray declared,

¹ *Limerick Leader*, 25 April 1932.

² *Ibid.*, 30 May 1932.

³ *Ibid.*, 8 June 1932.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25 June 1932.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13 June 1932.

displayed remarkable taste on the part of the people. The Arch-Confraternity went to the Congress as a distinct group and the *Leader*, in the same article, reported this in the following manner: 'Every man wore his ribbon and medal, and at their head a shield, bearing the inscription 'Arch-Confraternity of the Holy Family, Mount St. Alphonsus, Limerick' was borne aloft by Messrs J. O'Connell and F. Murphy. It was a grand sight, an inspiring manifestation of Limerick's undying loyalty to the Church, of Limerick militant.' The reporter continued by referring to the women's confraternities: 'All that is best in the womanhood of Limerick was represented by the Confraternities of St. John's, St. Michael's, and St. Mary's. Rev. Father Rice and Rev. Father Brazzil, accompanied the women of the Cathedral Parish, and Rev. Father Harty, Adm. and Rev. Father O'Connor were in charge of the Confraternities of St. Michael's and St. Mary's.'

The correspondents from around County Limerick made various contributions to the local newspapers. Reporting from Rathkeale, the correspondent commented upon the whitewashing and general decorating being undertaken. He then went on to tell a story, which may be apocryphal, because no names or locations are mentioned, but it summarizes a conflict of attitudes between the Irish believer, and the brash citizen of the New World. A returned Yank who happened on an old woman as she was putting up a little flag to fly from her humble home remarked that no one would see it in that out of the way place. Her response was that it would be seen 'by a very great and noble visitor, God himself will see and admire it'. The item ended 'and the Yank held his peace'.⁶

In Kilmallock almost all cars carried a Papal flag, while big growing palm trees were put in front of houses in Ballylanders and were illuminated at night, like Christmas trees. In Abbeyfeale painters and decorators were busy for months and almost every house had a Papal or Congress flag. Twelve lines of bunting spanned the street in Foynes, while the houses also had flags and bunting. Bruree, proud of its ancient history as the seat of kings of old, also had flags and bunting. A similar report came from Foynes which had 'twelve lines of bunting' spanning the street.⁷

In Tervoe there were Papal flags, and bunting everywhere and the cross at the centre of the village was lavishly decorated and beside it, a beautiful altar had been erected. Mr. O'Neill and Mr. James Murphy, both of Tervoe, were singled out for special because of all of their work, and one family was thanked in lavish terms: 'The writer cannot let this occasion pass without extending to Mr. and Mrs Ruttle and Mr. Ivan Ruttle of the Post Office, Clarina, the heartfelt thanks of the people of the neighbourhood for granting them the use of their wireless to listen in to the Congress celebrations.' There is a feeling of lost innocence and of a lost culture conveyed in the picture of the people of Tervoe surrounding one radio set to listen enthralled to High Mass from Dublin, and to John McCormack singing, *Panis Angelicus*.

There is a tradition in Limerick, and indeed elsewhere in Ireland, that small, and now almost unnoticed, relics of all of these decorations remain in the form of plaques inserted, usually, above the main doors of houses.⁸ They are a glazed tile, measuring, approximately six inches by six inches. There is a green and yellow band running around the periphery of the tile. Into this band are set gold diamonds with red centres. A cross, with

⁶ Denis O'Shaughnessy, *Limerick, 100 Stories of the Century* (Limerick, 2000) pp 182-3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The placing of a mark over a doorway, in order to declare the religious identity of those inside, goes back to the Book of Exodus, Chapter 12, verses 21-23. The blood of the Passover lamb was sprinkled on the doorposts and on the top of the doorframe. 'Because Yahweh will pass through to strike Egypt and when he sees the blood on the lintel and the doorposts, he will pass over the door and not allow the destroyer to enter your houses and kill.'

four, red, short arms, occupies each corner. The background colour is dark blue. Rays of a twelve-pointed star, coloured blue and white, radiate outwards. What are understood to be the first three letters, in the Greek alphabet, for the name of Jesus, IHS, are surrounded by twelve, golden, sun-like, rays. A cross rises from the left vertical of the letter H and there is a stylized nail at each end of the cross-beam. The letters are themselves written in gold upon a dark blue background (Fig. 2).

It is a widely held belief in Limerick that these tiles were put in place for the 1932 Eucharistic Congress. Agnes Devaney (1882-1977), grandmother of the author, and Peter Murphy (1910-2010), father of the author, both from Limerick understood this to be the reason for their existence. Mr. Joseph Hardaker, formerly of Limerick, and now a resident



Fig. 2 IHS Tile.

of County Clare, expressed the opinion that the plaques were put up because of the encouragement of the Franciscan friars in Henry Street, at the time of the Congress.⁹ They had, he noted, 'great devotion to the Holy Name and the Blessed Sacrament'. A ninety-one-year-old, former resident of No. 3 North Strand, Limerick, Mrs. Irene Aherne, née Fitzpatrick, was adamant that the plaques were put up for the Congress. An entire row of houses on the Strand had the plaques erected to honour the event. Her family house was the last to have the plaque put up and she remembers how jealous of the others she felt until it acquired one.¹⁰ Unfortunately, most of these houses have since been demolished. Mr Randel Hodgkinson, of the distinguished Limerick family of church decorators, recalled that his grandfather, Louis, always stated that the plaques were put up for the Congress.¹¹ However the tiles make no reference to the Congress and the design does not echo the official crest for the Congress, which consisted of the four arms of the Cross of Cong with a chalice and host at its centre.¹²

⁹ Telephone conversation, 20 December 2011.

¹⁰ Interview, May 2012.

¹¹ Telephone conversation, 7 May 2012.

¹² Rory O'Dwyer, 'On Show to the World: the Eucharistic Congress 1932,' in *History Ireland*, vol.15, no.6, (2007), pp 42-7.

It is in fact clear that the origin of these tiles predates the Congress. They were the brainchild of a Franciscan priest, Fr Francis Donnelly. In 1913 Fr. Donnelly conducted a retreat for the Poor Clares, in Galway, during which he emphasized the power of the Holy Name and talked about the devotion and zeal of St. Bernardine (1380-1444), a member of the reformed branch of the Order and a distinguished preacher. He had held a board in front of him while preaching on which was painted the sacred monogram, IHS, surrounded by sun-like rays, and he worked tirelessly to spread devotion to the Holy Name. Later that year Fr Donnelly conducted a mission in Foxford, County Mayo, and it occurred to him that something could be done, under the patronage of the Holy Name, to fight the evils of alcohol.

When he returned to the friary in Cork, where he was based, he worked with the Guardian, Fr. Bonaventure to further the cause of temperance. They both understood that people who took the pledge needed encouragement, in the form of regular meetings, sermons, Confession and Communion. Therefore, they sought the help of members of the Third Order, and when the support group was in place, it was dedicated to the Holy Name. The organization grew quickly and was known in Cork as the Total Abstinence Sodality of the Holy Name of Jesus. It had a hall and concert room in Sheares Street.

Encouraged by the success of the Sodality, under the patronage of the Holy Name, Fr. Donnelly turned his attention to spreading the devotion itself, by putting up the monogram IHS, over the doors of houses, as once encouraged by St. Bernardine of Siena. 'Tiles bearing the I.H.S. were found at considerable difficulty and expense – for it was war-time-and the devotion quickly spread amongst the faithful'.¹³ This sentence, while valuable in showing that it was during WW1, is frustrating because there is no mention of the cost, the country of origin or the manufacturer of these tiles. However the last line of the obituary demonstrates that the devotion spread all over Ireland: 'In death the monogram of the Holy Name over the thousands of doors in Cork, Galway, Athlone, Limerick and elsewhere will speak his priestly zeal from generation to generation'.¹⁴

As a consequence, it has been concluded by some historians that the plaques have nothing whatever to do with the 1932 Congress. Their erection in the towns mentioned above, certainly pre-date the Congress by at least fifteen years. However, it seems perfectly plausible that the friars would wish to continue with this Franciscan tradition stretching as it does, beyond Fr. Donnelly and back to St. Bernardine himself. Fr. Donnelly died in November 1929, a little over two years before the Congress. What could be a more fitting acknowledgement of the importance of the Congress, in the religious life of the new Free State, than to continue with the erection of the plaques over as many doors as possible? The folk memory of people in Limerick cannot be dismissed easily, and the evidence of Mrs Aherne, the ninety-one-year-old former resident of the North Strand, who remembers the events with great clarity, is surely of significance. She would have been about ten or eleven years old, in 1932 and therefore at an age when memory is clear and lasting.

The 1932 Eucharistic Congress had an enormous impact upon the minds of people in Ireland. It would be natural to remember every manifestation of devotion as being exclusively connected with it; this may account for the fact that in Limerick, Fr. Donnelly was forgotten, and 'his' plaques were connected solely with the Congress. Perhaps it is time once again to remember Fr. Donnelly and work for the retention of the plaques that remain.

¹³ 'The Late Fr. Francis Donnelly, O.F.M.,' Obituary in *Assisi*, vol. 11 (1930) p. 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

In Limerick city two plaques survive in the parish of St. Mary; one in Church Street and another in Gaol Lane. In the parish of St. Munchin there is one in Thomondgate, one in Castle View Gardens, and one in the North Strand; while eight survive in the parish of St. Michael. There is one in Roche's Street; four in Roche's Row, just off Roche's Street, two in Lower Hartstonge Street, and one in Upper Cecil Street. There are two in the parish of St. Joseph; one in St. Joseph Street and another in Upper St. Joseph Street. There may be more but so far all further searches have proved fruitless. It does not appear that any plaques were erected in the towns of County Limerick, such as Adare, Rathkeale or Newcastlewest. However, one survives in the main street of Pallasgreen.

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