

# Limerick and the 1932 Eucharistic Congress



On Sunday 26 June 1932, over 8,000 Limerick pilgrims converged on the Phoenix Park in Dublin, for the final Mass of the 31st International Eucharistic Congress.<sup>1</sup> The weeklong event began with the arrival of the special Papal Legate, Cardinal Lorenzo Lauri at Dún Laoghaire at the beginning of Congress Week. This sparked off incredible scenes of devotion for the week and culminated with Mass in the Phoenix Park six days later. The Congress was hugely significant, as it became a showcase event and was also perceived to assert the identity of the Irish Free State internationally as a Catholic nation.<sup>2</sup> While the Congress received widespread coverage in the national media, the build up to the event in Limerick newspapers did not seem to match the excitement generated by their colleagues in the national press and the fledgling radio station, established in Athlone in 1932 to coincide with the staging of the Eucharistic Congress.

The Eucharistic Congress would have been a far more popular affair in rural Ireland had it not been for the impending doom facing Irish agriculture and the stand off between the British and Free State governments, which became known as the Economic War. Earlier that year Eamon de Valera had swept to power and immediately announced that he intended withholding any further payments of land annuities to the British Government. These annuities were based on money loaned by the British Government to Irish farmers to buy their farms, prior to Ireland gaining Independence. Under the Anglo-Irish Treaty the Free State government agreed to collect these debts and return the money to Britain. The stand off began when Britain retaliated with the imposition of 40% duty on cattle and 30% on other Irish agricultural produce, which meant that Irish farmers could no longer sell beef to Britain or Northern Ireland.<sup>3</sup> The Irish government retaliated by imposing a tariff on imports from Britain and thus prevented Britain selling coal to Ireland. The Economic War had a more drastic effect on the Irish economy, which lasted until 1938 when the two countries signed an agreement to end the trade war.

## County Towns en fête

From the middle of June a sense of anticipation began to develop in Ireland generally and also in Limerick city and county. Towns around the county were busily preparing and decorating for the great event. Despite the enthusiastic prep-

by Tom Donovan

arations, the Rathkeale local correspondent for the *Limerick Leader* reported that 'the OC in charge of whitewashing painting and decorating' informed him that in the town 'the work was somewhat in arrears.'<sup>4</sup> A week later he was able to report<sup>5</sup> that 'the town was a blaze of colour and had decorations both artistic and lavish from one end to the other, a distance of a mile.' Every Catholic home in the town has hoisted a flag or displayed an emblem of the Faith as was the cases with houses in rural areas. Shops were closed on Monday 27 June the day after the final day of Congress to cater for workers attending the ceremonies. Two hundred people had booked places on a special charter train, which was leaving Rathkeale at 3.50 a.m. Sunday morning and was returning to Rathkeale at 5 a.m. on Monday morning. Several more people had travelled to Dublin by road earlier in the week. In Adare, shops were also closed on the Monday following Congress and tickets for the special excursion train, leaving at 4.15 a.m., could be bought from Mr Geoghegan, Station Master, for 10s 9d. Kilfinane was decorated with bann-

ers and bunting. Congress and Papal flags were much in evidence and people travelling to Dublin were accommodated with Mass at Ardpatrick at 3 a.m. on Sunday.

The Glin local correspondent of the *Limerick Leader*<sup>6</sup> reported that the village was 'en fête for the greatest religious event ever to take place in our country.' Streamers containing religious mottoes spanned the streets, while the Papal colours and other flags were displayed from every house. Locals and emigrants, some returning after 45 years, were planning to attend the final ceremonies on Sunday. Tervoe, near Clarina, was also described as being en fête for Congress. Decorations were colourful and abundant and Mr O'Neill lent an altar for the occasion. The Rosary was recited each night at the foot of Tervoe Cross. The Ruttle family were thanked for allowing the local community access to their wireless to listen to the Pontifical Mass and devotions.<sup>7</sup>

A large contingent from the village of Hospital planned to travel to the Papal Legate's High Mass in the Phoenix Park on the final Sunday of Congress week and Fr Hammersley C C hoped that everybody in the parish, except those incapacitated by old age or physical inability, would make a sacrifice to go.<sup>8</sup>

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Advertisement for radios, in advance of the Eucharistic Congress, in the *Limerick Leader*, 4 June 1932

## Limerick Men and Women at the Congress

The *Limerick Leader* carried a full report of the Limerick city representation at the Congress.<sup>9</sup> Five thousand men and three thousand women from Limerick were reported to have attended the Eucharistic Congress on Sunday 26 June for the celebration of High Mass, by the Papal Legate, in the Phoenix Park. Father Murray CSSR gave his reaction to the contribution made by Limerick people, when he addressed the meetings of the Arch Confraternity of the Holy Family on the following Monday and Tuesday night. He 'paid a glowing tribute to the men for their edifying behaviour at the ceremonies' and having 'made a tour of the city to see the decorations and congratulated the citizens for their elaborate scheme of ornamentation'. He went on to recall that:

In the early hours of Sunday morning four special trains conveyed thousands representing the Arch Confraternity of the Holy Family attached to the Redemptorist Church and the Women's Confraternities of the parishes of St John's, St Michael's and St Mary's. Hundreds had already made the journey by ordinary trains on Friday and Saturday and it is estimated that some five thousand Limerick men and three thousand Limerick women marched in the Congress procession from the Phoenix Park to O'Connell Bridge on Sunday.

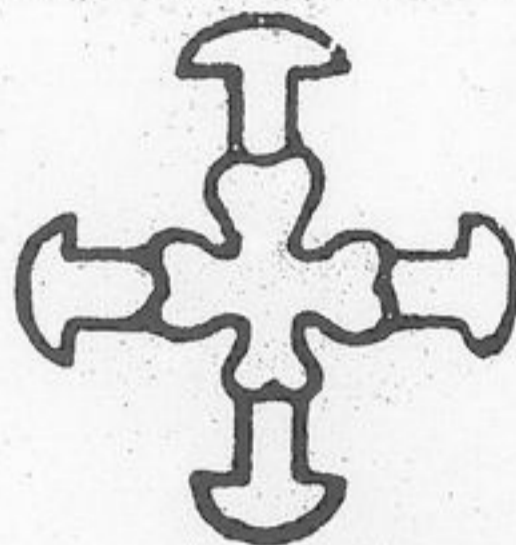
The members of the Confraternities were accompanied by Orderlies and Secretaries and were met at Kingsbridge Station<sup>10</sup> by Rev Murray and Rev O'Shea.

The Orderlies who travelled were M Doyle, T Madigan, M Hickey, P Carter, J Clancy, T Mulqueen, M Fennell, F Murphy and T McMahon. The Secretaries were J O'Brien, J Cantillon, T Long, J Hayes, P O'Connor, Wm Mulcahy, D McNamara, J Smyth and T Duggan. The Confraternity group was given a position of prominence near the High Altar in the Phoenix Park, which was 'befitting the largest organised body of Catholic lay men in the world.'

It was indeed 'a place of honour' as the Papal Legate and all the Dignitaries of the Church had to pass the serried ranks of the Confraternity men to reach the High Altar. 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'. The men were not alone as 'all that is best in the womanhood of Limerick was represented' and Rev Fr Rice and Rev Fr Brazil accompanied the women of the Cathedral parish of St John's and Rev Fr Harty, Adm and Rev Fr O'Connor were in charge of the women of St Michael's and St Mary's. Six hundred members of the Boy's Confraternity attended the Children's Mass on Saturday and returned home on Saturday night while Limerick Catholic Boy Scouts were on duty at Kingsbridge

## ΣΥΝΟΛΑ ΚΑΤΟΛΙΧΙΩΝ ΝΑ ΗΕΙΡΕΑΝΝ

### CONGRESS ORDERS.



All officers and scouts detailed for duty at the Eucharistic Congress must appear in the official uniform. Non-regulations items of dress are strictly prohibited.

Officers must carry walking sticks and scouts must carry staves (unless where otherwise directed by the camp chief or his deputies).

No officer or scout will be permitted to enter the official camp or take part in any duty unless in possession of his membership certificate, duly stamped for the year 1932. (The certificate must be carried on the person at all times.)

(Signed) CONOR MARTIN, M.B.,  
National Commissioner.

Strict notice to officers and scouts attending Congress,  
published in the *Limerick Leader*, 4 June 1932

Railway Station and supplying drinks of water in the Phoenix Park. Members of Limerick Corporation attended the ceremonies as a body. As the Mayor Ald P J Donnellan was a canopy bearer, he was unable to join them.

Limerick people who were unable to travel were reported to have listened to the ceremonies 'over the ether'.<sup>11</sup> People listening in were witnessed falling on their knees during the Consecration of the Mass and later when the Legate gave the Benediction.

Despite the gloom and despair caused by the Economic War the country received a great boost from the success of the Eucharistic Congress and just over a month after the conclusion of the Congress, Ireland had another great event to celebrate, because on Monday 1 August 1932, within the short space of an hour, Ireland won two Olympic gold medals at Los Angeles. The two medalists were Bob

Tisdall in the Men's 400 metres hurdles and Pat O'Callaghan in the Men's hammer throw.

#### References

- 1 The Congress was held in Dublin from 21 to 26 June 1932, just over fifty years after the first congress was held in 1881 under Pope Leo XIII.
- 2 There was an act passed by the Government specifically for the event, called the Eucharistic Congress (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1932.
- 3 <http://www.revenue.ie/en/about/history/1932-1940.html>
- 4 *Limerick Leader* Saturday 18 June 1932.
- 5 *Limerick Leader* Saturday 25 June 1932.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 *Limerick Leader* Wednesday 29 June 1932.
- 8 *Limerick Leader* Saturday 4 June 1932.
- 9 *Limerick Leader* Wednesday 29 June 1932.
- 10 Kingsbridge Station is now known as Heuston Station.
- 11 The phrase 'over the ether', was used in the early days of radio to describe a transmission.