

NATIONAL CATHOLIC CONGRESSES—SOME CRITICISMS AND A SUGGESTION

THE first National Catholic Congress in England was held at Norwich in 1912. It was a development of the 'Conferences' which had been organised by the Catholic Truth Society for many successive years, and it was announced that the Congress was to be an annual event. There was a Congress at Plymouth in 1913, and another at Cardiff on the eve of the Great War in 1914. Then the series was interrupted for years. When the fourth Congress met at Liverpool in 1920, there was some talk of its being followed by a fifth in the following year. Current report even said that Leeds had been definitely selected as the place of meeting. But for some reason the idea was abandoned. It is now announced that in the coming year there will be a Catholic Congress at Birmingham, the first of a new series, meeting, not annually, but every third year.

I was present at and took some part in the proceedings of two out of the four Congresses that have been already held. During and after these gatherings I heard from not a few of my friends—both clerics and laymen—the criticism that these meetings did not give results of sufficient value in comparison with the expenditure of time, money and effort required for their organisation. It was argued that they were to a great extent something like oratorical field-days, in which there was a good deal of mutual self-congratulation, and very little opportunity for helpful debate on practical matters.

Blackfriars

If I urged that useful work was done in the sectional meetings held under the auspices of the various Catholic societies, the reply was made that most of what was done in the sectional meetings could be equally well done at ordinary annual meetings of the societies concerned, and it was not necessary to organise a National Congress to facilitate the routine working of particular associations; that indeed the sectional meetings were often far too 'sectional'; that they were narrowed down to the special interests of the organisation that occupied the platform; and it was noted that in one instance the time of the meeting was occupied almost entirely by an animated debate as to the election of a committee. I heard from more than one critic of the Congresses the suggestion that although it was inevitable that, at the general meetings, there should be a fixed programme of somewhat formal speeches from well-known Catholic speakers, with cut and dried resolutions drafted so as to ensure general agreement, and no scope for any real discussion, it was a pity that the same kind of thing should be characteristic of most of the sectional meetings. As one of these critics put it:— 'The programme of the average sectional meeting was something like this—speech by the Chairman—reading of a long paper—one or two questions—vote of thanks to the author of the paper—vote of thanks to the Chairman. There was no discussion, no opening for anything of the kind. I was present at one real live debate, in which I heard many interesting facts on a matter of first-rate importance, facts stated by men who had practical knowledge of the points under discussion. But it was not at a Congress meeting, either general or sectional. It was in the smoking room of a hotel where a number of us sat up late talking over a problem that keenly interested us all.'

I note these criticisms without attempting to ap-

National Catholic Congresses

praise their value. I think, however, they do suggest that there is in the minds of not a few of us a desire that the Congress should afford more opportunity for the frank discussion of matters of practical interest to the Catholic body.

I grant at once that the general meetings of the Congress must preserve their formal character. They are 'demonstrations' that leave no scope for debate. But I venture to suggest that the procedure of the sectional meetings might be modified with useful results.

Judging from what has been done at the four Congresses already held, I believe it has been the practice of the Congress Committee of Organisation to allot each sectional meeting to one or other of our Catholic Associations, leaving it to the society concerned to arrange the proceedings. Usually most of the time is taken up with the reading of a paper or the delivery of an address on the claims of the society for support, and on its work or some aspect of it. Incidentally there is perhaps an enrollment of new members, and also the sale or distribution of literature and the like.

I would suggest that instead of the sectional meeting hours being thus divided up among our various societies, each section should be a meeting convened to discuss some aspect of the Catholic position in England. The Organising Committee would select the topics for discussion, giving of course due prominence to the questions of the day. Thus—for instance—there would be under present circumstances, a distinctly practical value in a discussion by experts of the bearing of recent official action and semi-official projects on the position of our primary and secondary schools. For other sections there might be chosen questions bearing on Catholic propaganda at home—co-operation with the foreign missions—Catholic literature, journalism, art, social science and the rest.

Blackfriars

Our Catholic societies would of course be represented on the platform of those sections which dealt with topics connected with their special work, but the section would not be a mere meeting of any one society. There should be no long papers, but the proceedings would begin with a brief statement of the leading points for discussion, a kind of '*status quaestionis*.' Those who wished to speak would send their names to the chairman and all speeches would have to be kept within moderate limits of time. There should be free debate, and as a help to securing this, I would suggest that the Press should not be invited to these deliberative sectional meetings. The presence of reporters is an inducement to oratory, and a check on a frank exchange of views.

But steps should be taken to secure that these meetings should not end in mere talk. It would be possible for any section to arrange that a summary of its recommendations for practical action should be forwarded to the societies that deal with the matters it had considered. Of course, such recommendations would be entirely advisory. Again, a section might entrust to a small representative sub-committee the drafting of a report summing up the facts brought out in the discussion to be submitted to the proper authorities or the agency best fitted to make use of this information. It will sometimes happen that the discussion reveals the need of further investigation. Steps would be taken to provide for this before completing the report.

I further suggest that it would be useful to devote some part of the funds available for the expenses of the Congress to the preparation and publication of a report of its proceedings, in which some pages would be devoted, not to a record of the sectional debates, but to a record of their results.

A. HILLIARD ATTERIDGE.