

From Dublin to Capernaum

From Dublin to Capernaum

I'm just back from the International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin. Eighteen of us went to represent the seminary, and we had a fantastic week – despite the patchy weather. They talk about the rain in Ireland being 'soft', but for the two hours of the Mass for Reconciliation on Thursday afternoon it got distinctly hard. I've never worn my alb over two jackets before, and under a liturgical rain-repelling poncho, but every inch of extra clothing – whether liturgical or not – was welcome. I bumped into lots of old friends, and had some wonderful conversations with other visitors and pilgrims.



The exhibition “Through the Eyes of the Apostles” at the IEC

We arrived for the Eucharistic procession on Wednesday, and stayed on until yesterday morning. The main Congress events took place at the RDS – a big stadium surrounded by conference halls, meeting rooms, hotels and restaurants. It managed to combine the feel of a village fete and an international festival. On the one hand, people wandering round the central green with hot-dogs and ice creams, working out which stalls to visit and whether this particular shower warrants taking the back-pack off and getting the umbrella out or not. On the other hand, for the final Statio Orbis Mass at Croke Park stadium, about 70,000 people gathered from possibly every nation in the world, celebrating both the

Irishness of the Irish Church, and the catholicity of vision and culture that come from belonging to a Church that is not just a national body.

What made it such a great week for us was the hospitality we received in the parish of Ratoath, just north of Dublin. They put up the whole seminary group in families around the town, fed us royally, and even gave us the time and space to watch the England/Sweden game. It was much more than just an International Congress for us, it was an experience of the goodness and kindness of ordinary Irish people, and a glimpse of how important the faith still is for many Catholics in Ireland, despite the difficulties.

Breda O'Brien, one of the speakers at the Congress, gives a flavour of the event:

This week's Eucharistic Congress in Dublin was a fantastic, life-giving experience for many

'THEY HAVE brought purgatory to the International Eucharistic Congress,' my friend muttered, looking at the long queues for the various workshops. He had come along five minutes before a talk was due to start, bless him.

He had probably been lulled into a false sense of security by the headlines about empty seats at the congress. Yes, there were empty arena seats, but it holds 25,000. The 160 workshops have all been packed, and some people queued patiently for up to two hours to hear their chosen speaker.

Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP, ever benign and obliging, gave his talk twice with only a 15-minute break between, in order not to disappoint pilgrims. The organisers showed his recorded talk later as well. It was amazing to see people standing on sodden grass in the pouring rain in front of a screen, just to hear him.

There was no favouritism regarding those who were turned away from full-up workshops, because they included a former taoiseach, a Senator, several bishops, and one speaker's mother. In fact, the Senator got turned away from three different talks in a row.

I began to feel that if Pope Benedict turned up after the number mandated by health and safety regulations had taken their seats, he would have been turned away, too.

The workshops are one of the real lessons of the congress. The demand for them shows there is a real hunger for spiritual and intellectual nourishment among Catholics. Milton's line, The hungry sheep look up and are not fed, has often run through my head regarding the Irish Catholic Church, but they were fed royally at the congress.

There was a bewildering array of topics on offer, everything from reaching lapsed Catholics to justice for the developing world.

O'Brien goes on to write about the profile of the participants:

There were 2,000 volunteers, of which a significant minority were young. The majority of the people attending the congress were a similar age profile to the 1,000 who gathered for the Association of Catholic Priests' meeting; that is, the so-called grey brigade.

There was one difference. There were only a handful of young people at the priests' meeting. I'm not saying it in a point-scoring way, but there were hundreds of Irish people in their late teens and early 20s at the congress. In fact, there were even several hundred who came to a youth session that included confession on the night of the Ireland v Spain match.

The 30- and 40-somethings were the biggest missing group. The reasons why would probably make for an interesting sociological study.

Survivors of child abuse were not forgotten, either. The media queried the lack of an Irish speaker on clerical abuse, but it may have been evidence of a new humility, an awareness of needing to listen to and learn from people outside the country.

My friend might have declared the queues to be purgatory, but I think for most people, the congress has been unforgettable in a good way.

Sarah MacDonald gives the youth perspective here:

Many of those young people attending or volunteering at the International Eucharistic Congress cite World Youth Day as a primary influence in the development of their faith. Many are affiliated with groups such as Youth 2000, Catholic Youth Care, Taize or gospel choirs.

Eimear Felle, a 27-year-old Dubliner volunteering at the Congress, told Catholic News Service she was at World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany, in 2005 and in Sydney in 2008.

"I received so much from these. That's why I decided to volunteer at the Congress," she said. "I wanted to give something back instead of always receiving. I felt it was time to reverse the roles."

She said she believes that, for Ireland, the 50th International Eucharistic Congress is "a huge opportunity which we may never see again."

She links her decision to volunteer to her understanding of the Eucharist.

"When a man came to my parish to talk about the Congress and the need for volunteers, I didn't have to think twice about volunteering — after all, the Eucharist is about sharing," she said.

Felle works in the family business and so was able to take off June 10-17 to help pilgrims at an

information stand in the mornings before spending each afternoon volunteering at the hotel where most of the visiting prelates stayed. This latter role gave her “a new insight into the cardinals and bishops. I see their human side, and they are just like the rest of us,” she said, laughing.

But the eucharistic congress is being held against a backdrop of anger over the clerical abuse scandals in Ireland as well as declining Mass attendance and a more aggressively secular culture. Felle said many people in Ireland “are letting their anger overshadow the positive aspects” of the church’s work.

“It is very easy to do, but if they could just open their minds a little bit and see what is going on ...,” she said, adding, “I really feel something good is going to come out of this — Ireland really needs this.”

Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, had just finished celebrating Mass in the main arena of the Royal Dublin Society. One of his altar servers was Joseph Merrick, a 25-year-old schoolteacher from Dublin.

“There is a great vibe around the campus,” he said, remarking on how it reminded him of World Youth Day in Madrid and Sydney.

“I chose to become a volunteer for the week because the church has done an awful lot for me, and this is one small way of giving something back.” He added that having attended two World Youth Day events, “It’s an opportunity to give a little back to the people who hosted me in their countries.”

Merrick is involved with a number of faith-based groups, including Youth 2000 and the Knights of the Holy Sepulcher, an order that raises money for Christians in the Holy Land. He also has been a spokesman for St. Joseph’s Young Priests Society, a lay-run organization that promotes priesthood and support for seminarians; it is Eucharist-centered.

The 25-year-old said it can be difficult to explain to his peers what his faith means to him.

“All you can do is be patient and explain as best you can to your peers why you believe this or do that. Maybe in some small way seeds might be sown,” he said.

And one of my own highlights was an exhibition organised by Communion and Liberation about Capernaum, and in particular about the house of St Peter there; it was called Through the Eyes of the Apostles. I’d never thought about the significance of this house – which would have been a base for the whole Galilean mission of Jesus and his disciples, and the place where much of the work of the early church was developed. This summary is from David Couchman:

At Capernaum, there are the remains of an octagonal church which was built in the fifth century (Byzantine period), and remained in use until the 7th century.

In 1968, archaeologists re-discovered the remains of a much earlier church underneath the 5th century church.

This earlier church had been built around what was originally a private house. One room of the house showed signs that it had been used as a meeting place from very early in the Christian era – during the

second half of the first century. From the earliest times, followers of Jesus Christ believed that this house was the home of Simon Peter, the leader of Jesus's disciples. It was pointed out as such to early pilgrims such as Egeria, the mother of emperor Constantine.

The walls of this room had been plastered, and visitors had scratched prayers mentioning the name of Jesus on the plaster. The name of Peter is also mentioned in the inscriptions. In the fourth century AD this 'house church' was enlarged and enclosed within the walls of its own compound, separating it from the rest of the town.

So it seems clear that, from the earliest times, followers of Christ preserved a memory that this was Peter's house. There is no reason to doubt this tradition. The remains that can still be seen today may be the exact place where Jesus lived.

A modern Franciscan church has been built over the earlier remains.

Fr. Stephen Wang