

## Convention News

THE recommendations on Religious prepared for the Diocesan Convention went through a difficult period of gestation. Now that they have at length, after great labour, seen the light of day, they find themselves in the unenviable position of being unloved and unwanted.

The preparatory document drawn up by the original drafting committee (the five persons elected by the members of the Pastoral Council way back in 1969) found little favour with the delegates of Working Group 6 and was unceremoniously rejected in May 1970 after only a few meetings. A new committee was formed and its members set to work energetically to write a new draft document following a plan worked out in agreement with the delegates of the Working Group. This second draft was ready by the middle of November last year and was the subject of businesslike debate at the fortnightly meetings that took place between that date and the Easter 1971 deadline. A redrafting committee revised this second draft document and recently picked out some 46 recommendations for voting on by the Convention delegates.

A copy of these recommendations was forwarded to the Steering Committee at the beginning of July. It was not however until nearly two weeks later that a casual enquiry revealed that the letter had apparently gone astray in the post. The Post Office could not trace the envelope in question and at least one untidy desk was searched more than once in the hope of its yielding up the lost recommendations. This exercise proving fruitless, an urgent call went out for a spare copy of the proposals. Then, on the following morning, out of the blue, the missing package arrived. Little time was lost in preparing stencils and sending out the recommendations to the 390-odd delegates. One secretary nursed the hope that after this eventful saga the recommendations would get a sympathetic hearing. Alas for such simplicity!

Perhaps because there were comparatively so few recommendations a larger number of delegates than usual had sufficient stamina to express in general comments their thoughts and emotions (and especially these) on the proposals as a whole. One priest found the recommendations "very good"; but all the other remarks were uncomplimentary — many highly so! "Unsatisfactory", "disappointing", "completely unhelpful", "I just cannot take them too seriously": these were typical of the remarks with which delegates summed up their reactions to the list of recommendations.

A number of people found the proposals irrelevant, but for different reasons: either because they contained nothing that could not equally be applied to any young local Church in the world, or because they referred to the internal renewal of religious and not to their relationship with the diocese, or (on the contrary) because they did not deal with religious as such, but instead were concerned with education, evangelisation, etc. — topics considered in other sets of recommendations.

Quite a few delegates pointed out that many of the recommendations did not contain any practical suggestions to guide religious in their striving towards

the renewal of their life and activity, but were mere statements of fact. Some objected to the language used: it seemed to them redolent of a bygone age. "The pious emphasis turns me off", wrote one nun, who owned to thinking of prayer, chastity, obedience, etc. "in different (more secular?) terms". And one delegate complained that the recommendations failed completely to stress the theology of the religious life.

A religious priest succeeded in putting into words what many others, it seemed, were attempting to say. "These recommendations are unexceptional", he wrote, "but I wonder how effective they will be. I don't feel enthused about them, perhaps because they are too numerous and because they do not indicate how we are to implement them, e.g. how do we 'energetically cultivate the spirit and practice of prayer'?" He then went on to point out that there was a great deal of stress on the individual (his vows, apostolate, etc.), whereas, in the writer's opinion, the really vital question "concerns the possibility of renewing the community spirit — community is not to be confounded with common life: many religious observe common life but fail to form a community". The note ended with an expression of regret that the delegates had not been invited to indicate which recommendation they considered most important and most practical.

The general feeling about the recommendations as a whole gave rise to two different reactions. On the one hand far more people than usual contented themselves with voting yes indiscriminately to all the proposals, while on the other a similar proportion of delegates abstained from voting on a large number of the recommendations, due — as many stated explicitly — to their finding them somewhat less than satisfactory. (A total of 151 delegates returned their voting papers).

In the case of only very few recommendations did delegates in any appreciable number agree to differ in the same way. One of these concerned poverty. Religious were urged to convince themselves "that poverty means being available to others". Many thought this explanation, at the very least, inadequate. "An abuse of language . . . and perhaps also of theology", was the comment of one priest delegate. Said another: "Poverty means the hell of a life for anyone who truly leads it: cut the claptrap!" "Poverty includes availability", was the reasonable amendment suggested by a third.

Still on the question of poverty, a second recommendation exhorted religious "to strive to be poor in fact". "What does this mean", expostulated a nun, "are we being asked to live a life of destitution?" A further recommendation on this same topic urged modesty in the choice of "modern means of transport and communication". "I find this most baffling", confessed another nun, "are we to go back to the carrier pigeon?"

In another recommendation religious were invited "to realise that in Hong Kong as in other oriental countries the local people do not expect religious to be identified with them in the sense that religious have to do away with all external religious signs". Predictably this provoked a certain amount of comment — all the way from

the nun who asked: "Says who?", to her colleague who ventured to hope that this recommendation would be applied not only to religious women but to religious men and secular priests as well. More thoughtful delegates expressed the view that in some cases it is better to omit external signs, depending on the nature of the apostolate of the priest or religious. Others felt religious could be more sensitive in this matter to the wishes of the laity of Hong Kong.

In three separate recommendations the term 'lay colleague' was used. Religious were urged to listen to them, to be more conscious of their rights and to share responsibilities with them. One would have thought from the context ("their salaries should allow them to lead a dignified life") that it was quite clear to whom these proposals referred. So it came as quite a surprise how

many people queried the meaning of the term and wanted to know did it perhaps refer to lay brothers!

To end this brief chronicle on the same tributary note with which it began: delegates were asked to return their voting papers before the end of July; as usual self-addressed envelopes with a five-cent stamp attached were sent in the hope of coaxing the maximum number of delegates to reply. The date was chosen in the knowledge that from August 1st the five-cent concessionary rate for printed matter was to be withdrawn. A ten-cent surcharge tax has had to be paid on voting papers sent since that date bearing only a five-cent stamp. In the most recent case the delegate concerned saw fit to vote on only two of the recommendations. Nonetheless the Post Office exacted its levy of 10 cents — which works out at five cents for each yes vote!