

Convention News

LAST week was a disappointing one for the Diocesan Convention. On the Monday (it was September 14, the day typhoon Georgia was at its nearest to Hong Kong) there was no quorum at the Liturgy Group meeting. Those who did come to the Catholic Centre that evening held an informal discussion. As the next evening was the evening for mooncakes, the meeting of the Religious Instruction Group was cancelled. On the Wednesday only 14 of the 55 members attached to the Education Group turned up. As this was insufficient to form a quorum, no meeting could be held. This is the second time this has happened to the Education Group: the previous meeting, due to be held on September 2, had to be abandoned for the same reason. The secretary of Group 3 has decided to write to the 55 members to ask whether they intend to come to subsequent meetings. The names of those who intend not to come to further meetings and of those who in fact are absent from the next two meetings will be forwarded to the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee may well decide to inform these persons that they should no longer consider themselves delegates of the Convention.

The preparation of a new draft of the document on Religious to serve as a basis for discussion has not yet been completed. The new document will comprise four sections: the writing of these sections has been entrusted to a committee of four, who have not, however, been able to find sufficient time to finish this work. The latest word is that the job will be done by the middle of next month.

PRIESTLY LIFE

At its last meeting (September 18) Group 5 discussed the section of the draft document in which reference is made to celibacy. In view of the interest raised by this issue in the Church today, it was a pity that so few priests (eight, of whom three were religious) came to the discussion to contribute their views.

Exception was taken to the heading of the section (n. 17): The Spiritual Life of the Priest; it was pointed out that a title such as "Celibacy and Priests" would be a more accurate description of a section which deals exclusively with celibacy. One speaker proposed that instead of discussing whether or not celibacy should be optional, we should discuss how priests may be helped to be more faithful to their promise of celibacy in an age when they are being encouraged to live closer to the people and to involve themselves more intimately in the daily life of their parishioners. A nun suggested that the commitment to celibacy should be made at a later age than at present, and that this was particularly important in a place like Hong Kong where there was a fairly strict segregation of the sexes among the school-going population.

A layman thought that seminarians ought to be given ample opportunity through involvement in social work of mixing with girls and becoming acquainted with them. Before ordination, he said, it should be made quite clear to candidates that celibacy is a requirement of the priesthood. There are many very strong reasons in favour of a celibate priesthood, he added; a priest is called to a life of sacrifice which is symbolised by his commitment to celibacy; moreover in times of political upheaval the unmarried priest will feel freer to remain completely at the service of his flock.

Another speaker returned to the question of the need for maturity in candidates for ordination, stating that the opinion was frequently expressed nowadays that no one under the age of 30 can be expected to commit himself irrevocably to anything. Another delegate felt that, in Europe at least, many of the present difficulties in the matter of celibacy spring from ignorance of the fact that it is in the lack of companionship that the celibate will find the greatest hardship. Another speaker thought that, though sufficient maturity is very necessary, the quality of the priest's spiritual life is more important. Men of over 60 have renounced their commitment to celibacy, he said, adding that in these cases it could not be a question of lack of understanding but rather of neglect of the spiritual life.

A lay person criticised the section under discussion for saying nothing positive about the value of priestly celibacy, and stated that in a subtle way the section seemed slanted towards attaching positive value to optional celibacy.

A priest connected with the diocesan seminary stated that there is a crisis with regard to poverty and obedience as well as celibacy and that in the weekly talks given to the seminarians equal emphasis is placed on these three aspects of the priestly life. A religious priest pointed out that religious who take a vow of chastity live in communities and are thereby helped to live a celibate life; diocesan priests who often live on their own have not the same compensation. In many parts of the world, he said, a diocesan priest would really need the vocation of a Trappist! He therefore suggested recommending to priests the need for cultivating strong bonds of companionship with their own colleagues and with their parishioners. Another religious priest urged that this aspect should be stressed in the seminary and more emphasis should be given to building up a community life among the seminarians. A priest-delegate pointed out that while prayer and a deep spiritual life are very important for the celibate priest, they are not enough. The young priest needs much help in the early years of his ministry; he needs to be helped to overcome the inevitable feeling of loneliness;

diocesan priests must remember they are not religious but are called to live in the midst of their people: hence it is chiefly with these that they must develop bonds of companionship; they must also learn to find in apostolic work the source of their greatest joy and contentment.

Another priest-delegate thought that previous speakers had been taking too narrow a view of the question: we should not feel that we have to defend celibacy at all costs, he said; we should look at the problem from the point of view of the evolving priesthood, of the role of the priest in the Church today and the concrete needs of Hong Kong, not only today but more especially in the future.

As a result of a vote it was decided to request the redrafting committee to revise the whole section in the light of what had been said during the debate, taking special care to stress the positive aspects of priestly celibacy.

In the closing minutes of the meeting the discussion moved on to the next section (Section 18) which sets out to give some practical suggestions regarding the poverty that all priests should aspire to; hence it is not fair, as one delegate pointed out, to criticise the section for dealing only with the external aspects of poverty. Another speaker suggested that something should be added about the practice of spiritual poverty, e.g. humility and kindness towards the uneducated poor. The observations made in this paragraph, it was stated, were inspired by the letters sent to the Convention last year and also by the questionnaire sent to priests. In this connection a delegate asked what precisely are the things in a priest's everyday life that the faithful feel are in conflict with priestly poverty. He also wanted to know what exactly we mean when we speak of the Church of the Poor. It is only in the light of the answer to this latter question, he said, that we can discuss the problem intelligently. The debate will continue at the next meeting (October 2).

Programme of Working Group Meetings during coming week

Place: Catholic Centre, Hong Kong		Time: 8 p.m.-10 p.m.
Liturgy and Sacraments	Monday, September 28th	
Religious Instruction	Tuesday, September 29th	
Education	Wednesday, September 30th	
Place: Caritas Social Centre, Boundary St., Kln.		Time: 8 p.m.-10 p.m.
Laité	Thursday, October 1st	
Priestly Life	Friday, October 2nd	