

Convention News

Religious Instruction

AS the list of recommendations prepared by Working Group 2 was uncommonly long, it was broken up into two parts which were sent separately to the delegates of the Diocesan Convention. Following what has by now established itself as the normal pattern, somewhat less than half of the voting papers were returned.

In a number of general comments some delegates expressed their satisfaction with the recommendations as a whole. "Congratulations", wrote one enthusiast, "if these recommendations are put into practice, the diocese will soon be renewed".

"Most of the recommendations are excellent statements of what we know should be done", declared another delegate, "the problem is how to implement them in a down-to-earth way". There were only two slight criticisms of the list of proposals: one respondent considered that there was too much matter included in many of the recommendations and this made voting difficult; another felt that not all the recommendations were strictly relevant: some seemed more directly concerned with matter consigned to other Working Groups.

The 99 recommendations were divided into a number of sections dealing in turn with religious instruction in the parish, in the family and at school (primary and secondary). Two final proposals offered suggestions in the field of "higher religious instruction".

In general delegates were very generous with *yes* votes. Abstentions were comparatively few; negative votes fewer still. However, two results departed rather sharply from the general picture of unanimity. One concerned a topic that came up again and again in the discussions of more than one Working Group: the question of compulsory attendance at RK lessons. The recommendation (from the section on primary schools) read: "To show that we respect their right to educate their children according to their beliefs, every child's parents should be asked at the beginning of the school year if they wish their child to attend religion classes". To this proposal 38 delegates voted *no*, while 11 were apparently undecided and preferred to abstain on this issue.

Many of those who disagreed with the proposal were not opposed to respecting the wishes of parents, but they felt that the parents, in choosing to send their children to a Catholic (primary) school — when there were so many vacant places in Government schools — had already implicitly expressed the wish that their children receive the total education provided in a Catholic school; it is up to those parents who object to their children attending RK classes to take the initiative and make their wishes known in the matter; if and when they do so, these wishes must, of course, be scrupulously respected.

Other delegates thought that this soliciting of the views of parents should be confined to the parents of non-Catholic children. A priest-delegate cautioned against the school authorities giving the impression that they are indifferent to which religion the parents choose.

The other recommendation which received a relatively high number of negative votes urged the participation of 'qualified'

laymen in the Sunday sermon, "sharing in its preparation and delivering it wherever possible and desirable . . . When there is a necessity women should also be given opportunities to give the homily". Twenty-eight delegates opposed this suggestion, 9 abstained and 13 had various reservations.

Some of the delegates were ready to accept lay help in the preparation of the Sunday sermon but drew the line at lay preachers; others showed themselves slightly more tolerant and were prepared to put up with laymen's sermons but only on very special occasions. These delegates thought that the homily, as an integral part of the Mass, should be left to the priest — unless, as one person put it, he is a notoriously bad preacher! A number of respondents expressed themselves willing to tolerate the male of the (lay) species, but balked at the thought of women in the pulpit.

"Except for extraordinary cases children at primary school should not be baptised when parents are not". A number of delegates were unable to agree with this proposal as it stood, but for different reasons. Some felt that no exceptions should be allowed, ever; others took the view that if an adult (one of the immediate family, preferably) were prepared to make himself responsible for the continued spiritual progress of the baptised child, it would be quite acceptable to baptise a boy or girl of primary school age. One delegate pointed out that whatever practical solution is adopted in an individual case, the decision should not be made at the expense of the child's natural right to choose his own religion.

As a help towards a renewal of religious instruction in the parish, proposals were made for the setting up of "several experimental parishes of different natures", and also for "a certain freedom (of parishes) to celebrate liturgy that is suited to the life and needs of the parishioners . . . Whenever it is possible and feasible the people should be given the opportunity to receive Holy Communion under both species". Some delegates were of the opinion that in these recommendations Working Group 2 had gone beyond its terms of reference and was encroaching on the preserves of other Groups. (The Liturgy Working Group was rather more modest in its proposal for Communion under both species, suggesting that "the bishop seek permission to enable the faithful to receive under both species on some great occasions, e.g. Holy Thursday, Paschal Vigil, Patronal Feast of the parish".)

Some opposition to these two proposals came from delegates who felt that too much experimentation would lead to too much variety in the diocese, which in turn would cause disunity and might give rise to warring factions, which — as one delegate pointed out — had had unhappy consequences in Corinth long ago. Another delegate thought that the criterion proposed for experimentation, "the life and needs of the parishioners", would very quickly come to mean "the needs of the priest to impose his own infatuations on the long-suffering faithful".

"Mothers should realise their vital role in the growth and development of their children and avoid going out to work so that more time can be given

to the care and supervision of their children". One delegate agreed with this recommendation "with all her heart". Others, however, pointed out that economic necessity often forces mothers to go to work in order to supplement the husband's meagre pay packet. Hence, as one person put it, this recommendation cannot be implemented until husbands are first guaranteed a decent family living wage. The most thoughtful comment on this proposal came from a priest who wrote: "Let's be realistic! Most modern women feel the need to do more than housework. Society therefore through legislation, etc. should provide more opportunities for married women to take part-time jobs. Mothers of small children should be encouraged not to take employment until the children are all in school — many do not realise the tremendous influence on a person of the first 3 or 4 years of formation".

Should Cantonese always be the language of RK classes in secondary schools? A number of delegates, while agreeing with the principle behind a recommendation in these terms, had nevertheless certain reservations to make. Some would confine the proposal to Chinese schools; others thought the word *always* in the recommendation excessive: what about non-Chinese students?, one delegate asked.

"The suggestion seems reasonable", commented another delegate, "but if examinations have to be taken in English, the issue becomes slightly more complicated". "Yes", wrote a school principal, "but not in Forms 4 and 5". A nun who voted against the recommendation made the observation: "You would be surprised to hear how many who studied in an English school prefer to pray in English". Another nun felt that if the recommendation were universally adopted there would probably be (at least for the immediate future) a teacher problem.

A priest delegate queried the accuracy of a statement in this same recommendation which referred to "the unsatisfactoriness(sic) of the present situation in which much of a religion lesson may mean nothing but words to the students". Another remarked that it was surely retrograde in this era of permissiveness to impose uniformity throughout the diocese by means of a legal enactment. "Sure", he said, "it is more in keeping with the temper of the time to allow each teacher to use the language he feels will best help him to establish a meaningful rapport with his students and preach the good news to them most effectively".