

1928 affair

The Eucharistic congress of 1928 was by far the grandest religious spectacle ever seen in Australia to that time. Prelates came from all over the world, led by the papal legate, Cardinal Cerretti, already familiar to Australians as a former Apostolic Delegate and the man who had encouraged the Catholics of Australia to bring forth and nourish their own native priesthood. He opened the congress by opening St Mary's Cathedral, at last ready after so many long years of construction. With a golden key he opened the great south door of the Cathedral and the congress began. Naturally, amid the celebrations which continued for a week, there were many addresses and moments of solemn and moving prayer, but there was a tender moment when thousands of people gathered at St Patrick's, Church Hill, for Mass and Benediction in commemoration of the preservation of the Blessed Sacrament in that place in 1818 by Father O'Flynn before his deportation. The Archbishop of San Francisco, Archbishop Hanna preached on the occasion recalling the marvellous accomplishments of our two lands and the concomitant responsibility to be worthy of them and of the Faith which had been passed on to us. In the brief to Cardinal Cerretti which was read at the opening of the Congress, Pope Pius XI himself made reference to this significant episode in Australian history; "History records that in the year 1817, Father O'Flynn from Ireland, the first duly accredited priest to land on Australian shores, lay hiding in a humble Catholic home in Sydney; that at the time of his deportation, which quickly followed, he left the Blessed Sacrament in a lowly receptacle in that house to the faithful Catholic people till the coming of another priest. It also records that for quite a long time the Blessed Sacrament remained there, the sacred species being wonderfully preserved, and that it received no other honours than those bestowed secretly by a handful of early Catholic settlers."

The Government showed how far the status of the Catholics had improved in Australia by throwing a garden party at Government House to which all the dignitaries of the Congress were invited. While the guest of honour was Cardinal Cerretti, it was significant that the Prime Minister, Mr Bruce was present as were, representatives of our faiths and ethnic groups including the Anglican Archbishop and Rabbi Cohen of the Jewish community.

Without doubt the highlight of the Congress was the Eucharistic procession on Sunday. All week the Catholics of Sydney and of far beyond had been waiting for this unprecedented spectacle and indeed many of the non-Catholic residents of Sydney were just as eager to see the unforgettable sights which passed that day. The festivities began with a solemn Mass at St Patrick's College Manly. Over seven thousand clergy and laity, including over five hundred secular priests alone, assisted at the great Mass on a temporary altar erected in front of the main entrance to the Seminary. As Mass ended, the great procession began which was to dazzle Sydney. Down the hill to the wharf they marched- a relatively modest affair for the time being- only a very few thousand. 1750 men formed a guard of honour which led the clergy and bishops down to the wharf. The centre of attention, of course, was the papal legate himself, Cardinal Cerretti carrying the Sacred Host in a grand jewelled monstrance under a canopy of white and gold embroidery produced by the nuns of St Martha's at Leichhardt. The canopy was itself carried by war heroes in rotating groups, V.C. winners and others taking turns to bear the great canopy above the Blessed Sacrament. At the wharf huge crowds were waiting to witness the transfer of the Eucharistic Lord to a specially prepared barge. The steamer "Burra-Bra" had been redecorated in gold and white for the occasion and a special chapel had been constructed in it to receive the monstrance. When all were aboard Capt O'Connor gave orders and the great steamer together with a flotilla of smaller attendant vessels set off. At a spot between the North and South Heads the little fleet stopped while Cardinal Cerretti gave Benediction to the waters of the city while the eucharistic hymns floated across the water from those in the accompanying boats. Even overhead, five biplanes flew back and forth across the harbour in the formation of the southern cross.

The landing at the harbour

At Circular Quay preparations had already been underway for hours. This was the place that the real procession was to begin. Over 20,000 people marched that day in the procession, and the organisation was a feat of extraordinary technical accomplishment. First came the mounted police in full dress uniform and behind them the cross bearer with attendants, then, vast numbers of Catholic Boy Scouts, all marching in their local bands under their banners. Next came the Children of Mary, for many, the highlight of the day. It was an impressive sight to view the thousands upon thousands of girls in blue cloaks and white veils, marching under their parish banners, representing all the parishes of Sydney and many more beyond. Next

came the old boys of the Christian Brothers Schools, marching under their own banners as well. Occasionally they were led by an old boy priest or even bishop. After them came a colourful contingent of Catholic Maori from New Zealand, forming a guard of honour about their chief. These were followed by the Catholic Returned Servicemen, wearing their decorations, about 2,000 strong. Then the teaching orders and the other religious congregations appeared, followed by the diocesan clergy, wearing, by special permission, amice, surplice and chasuble. These had already waited for two and a half hours at Circular Quay. Then came various high dignitaries, the bishops in cope mitre and crozier and the Archbishops with train bearers and attendants. After this spectacle came a scene of great charm as the flower strewers appeared, dressed all in white and laying rose petals in the way of the Blessed Sacrament. Behind them at last was Cardinal Cerretti, with the monstrance. The canopy was now held up by the V.C. winners and all were surrounded by an honour guard of Papal knights and members of the papal household in their 17th century costumes.

The reaction from the crowd

As the climactic point of the procession passed along the route, most people knelt in reverence, others, perhaps non-Catholics, or those impeded by the crowd, made bows of deep respect and a great hush came over those sections of the crowd. The authorities estimated that at least 500,000 people lined the routes that day, though others gave even higher estimates. The astonishing spectacle was accompanied by music from the organ of St Mary's Cathedral, amplified through great speakers to the outside world. The procession wound up Macquarie street until it reached the Cathedral. Then, while the marching contingents spread out and took up their positions, the Cardinal and his suite mounted the steps of the cathedral where a temporary altar had been erected. There, he gave Benediction to the immense crowd, stretched out before him in every direction, filling the whole of Hyde Park and the adjacent streets. The crowd knelt and the choirmaster for the day led them in an extraordinary rendition of the Benediction hymns and of a few other Catholic favourites. As hundreds of thousands joined in the singing, Cardinal Cerretti surveyed the scene with deep emotion, thanking the crowd profusely for this extraordinary public display of reverence for their Eucharistic Lord and vowing that he would never forget the scenes of devotion he had witnessed that day. It was a moment the Catholic community of Sydney would never forget either. The day the City turned out to celebrate the most cherished teachings of the Catholic Faith. The descendants of the despised and persecuted Catholics of a century before were now confident enough of themselves to stage this extraordinary display and their brothers and sisters of other faiths, not only did not oppose them, but turned out to share their joy. The civil authorities commented on the excellent behaviour of such great crowds.