

## What was the Significance of the Eucharistic Congress of 1932?

The Eucharistic Congress of 1932, held in Dublin had significance for a number of reasons. First of all as a newly founded, semi-independent state it was the Irish Free State's first opportunity to prove its capability in handling such an enormous event and show its identity. As it happens this identity was inherently Catholic. As well as this the Congress was a source of enormous pride for all of those who helped in the organisation and carrying out of the event.

Portraying Irish cultural identity was one area in which the congress was significant. Previous to the congress, Ireland was an extremely Catholic state. The church at enormous power over the government, as was evidenced by a number of acts brought in to prevent the deterioration of moral standards. Examples of these were the Censorship of Films Act in 1923 and the Intoxicating Liquor Act in 1924 which had reduced the opening hours of pubs. The Congress so was an opportunity for the Irish to celebrate their Catholicism as well as make clear to the rest of the world that they were entirely separate from Protestant Britain. Throughout the week of the Congress speeches made reference to national independence and British oppression of the Irish. The celebration of the Congress was widespread. A number of different masses were held, such as the men's and women's masses on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of June. The High Mass in Phoenix Park on the 26<sup>th</sup>, followed by the Benediction on O'Connell bridge was attended by an estimated 1 million people. Many people remember the Benediction was clearly, which included the ringing of St. Patrick's bell and the performance of Pan Angelicus by the world famous Irish tenor, John McCormack. People arrived in droves to witness the Papal legate Lorenzo Lauri, carried down the street on a float. De Valera also used the opportunity to reaffirm his Catholic faith and ingratiate himself once again with the Catholic church after his excommunication during the civil war. These aspects were all highly significant as they gave conflicting political parties a common cause to unite under, as well as providing De Valera the chance to strengthen his support from Catholic voters. However mainly it was an opportunity for Catholics to express their devotion. This also had the negative effect of isolating the small Protestant Irish minority.

Another way which the congress was very significant was the sense of pride it gave the Irish, that such a huge event could be organised and carried out without a hitch. Huge amount of money, work and planning went into the event to make it such a success. Overall it cost £75,000, with £2,000 of this going to a cavalry escort of Lorenzo Lauri. Everyone was involved in some small way with the organisation. Even the poorest people in slum areas were spending their scarce money on bunting and statues to decorate the city. Every street was cleaned up and decorated. 12 miles of bunting overall were used. Major buildings were floodlit. A radio transmitter was built in Athlone to broadcast the Pope's address, despite the fact that there were only 30,000 radios in Ireland at the time. The fact that McElligott, Secretary of Finance was put in charge of the organisation shows the importance placed on the event. As well as this Eoin O'Duffy, head of the gardai was put in charge of marshalling and security. The Eucharistic Congress therefore was a huge success and a massive morale booster for the public, especially in a time of poverty in Ireland. One might question the expense of £75,000 in a time when 63,000 were unemployed. But every effort was made to portray Ireland in a positive light, and this undoubtedly was achieved.

Overall the significance of the Eucharistic Congress was largely to do with the image conveyed to the rest of the world. This was Ireland telling the global community that they were their own country, Catholic and separate to Britain, and capable of pulling off an enormous event such as this. This also proved that Ireland was in fact well able to govern itself.