

## THE PARISH RECORD CARD

*Reflections on a Survey of the  
Catholic Population of Aberystwyth*

MICHAEL P. FOGARTY

THE Newman Demographic Survey in Wales started, unlike that in England, with a direct poll of the people of a Catholic parish. It had been hoped to parallel the work done in England on the records of parishes, dioceses, and certain public services. But it turned out that Catholics can be traced, when the public service records in question are kept in the form usual in South Wales, only by digging so far into the files as to violate professional secrecy. And there are many small parishes, above all in Menevia, where the danger that even the most discreet digger into ecclesiastical records may stir up gossip is greater than in, say, Westminster. So a direct poll it had to be, and last winter a pilot poll was duly taken in the parish of Aberystwyth. Aberystwyth was chosen because it was isolated and with a small Catholic population; a manageable first sample, and with the advantage of containing a University College with an active and enthusiastic Catholic Society. The Bishop of Menevia gave his consent, and the survey was duly carried out by the Catholic students, led by Dr E. T. Nevin, Lecturer in Economics in the University, and with aid and comfort from the Very Rev. Fr Maguire, O.C.A.R.M., Chaplain to the University Catholic Society. The survey forms were drafted at Cardiff in collaboration with Dr Nevin, and were duplicated at Cardiff. They were given out after Mass on Sunday, January 23rd, 1955, accompanied by a letter from Fr Maguire, at each of the Mass centres in the parish. Parishioners were asked to return them the following Sunday. In addition, other known Catholics were contacted at home. This was simple enough in Aberystwyth itself and the other small towns. In the open country, in the weather of February 1955, it was often a case of Dr Nevin leading his merry men (and girls) in a Good King Wenceslaus act up the snows of Plynlimmon. 'You see that corner?' said one farmer as the enumerators' car turned for home. 'I'll be interested to see if you get round it.

I've been trying for three days.' But Dr Nevin always did get round. On March 9th a final meeting was held to tabulate the results.

The poll produced not merely an interesting body of statistical and qualitative findings—confidential, since it is on that basis that questionnaires were filled up, but available to those who have good reason to use them—but also, as a pilot survey should, a good many ideas about what should be done next, and how such surveys might be made easier and more useful in future. For one thing, the fact that the Aberystwyth survey was single and isolated did certainly deprive it of much of its value. A survey of this kind is, ideally, a record of all the baptized Catholics in a parish, that is of all who in fact belong to the Church, even when from their point of view the connection with the Church is only a loose one. It is also, a much easier objective, a means of counting and classifying the active Catholics of the parish and so of judging how they are and might be organized for parish work and Catholic Action. But it is unlikely to be much use for either purpose unless it is repeated after a time, and is supported with similar surveys in other areas. It is comparisons over the years, or with other places, which put statistics of the organized or organizable strength of the Catholics of a parish into their right perspective. And, as a census of all baptized Catholics, a parish survey is unlikely to be accurate at the start, and can become so only through repetition. It is reckoned that parish statistics in Germany, based on a census and card index kept regularly up to date, now differ from those collected by the Government Census authorities, who take in everyone in the entire population who is Catholic enough to tick 'Catholic' on the census form, by only about two per cent. There may be slackness among German Catholics, but there is not—now—much margin for leakage in the sense of complete loss of contact with the Church. But a generation ago, when the annual collection of statistics was first begun, the Census often showed the parish records to be out by ten per cent or more. And so too was it probably the case at Aberystwyth.

So surveys of this kind, if they are to be put to their best use, need to be made regularly and all over the country. But in that case they must be simple: and much simpler, looking back, than we made the one at Aberystwyth. One cannot expect always and everywhere to find enthusiastic groups of students led by highly

qualified social scientists. The job must be got into a form in which it can be done and kept up to date without too much effort by the ordinary lay societies of a parish, helped by such individual volunteers as the place may offer; and, of course, with a minimum of fuss and bother for the clergy. The survey form must be straightforward, preferably of the kind which can be filled up on the doorstep or at the church door. The Archbishop of Cambrai last year cancelled all sermons one Sunday and told his clergy to get census forms filled up after the Gospel, with directions from the pulpit: but it is a bit early for that here yet! The Aberystwyth form was a bad failure in this respect. It was cumbersome, cyclostyled, with several pages, messy, and rather difficult to read. It also provoked resistance by including questions which people turned out to be reluctant to answer. They were for instance often unwilling to say (even when they knew it) where their parents or grandparents came from, or what jobs they had had. The purpose of these questions was to trace Catholics' migration into and through the country and their rise or fall in the social scale; but this purpose was not as obvious or as immediately useful as that, for instance, of questions about schools. And sometimes people who had come up in the world were not too willing to say where they had come from. Questions of this kind are certainly not worth insisting on if they are likely to cause resistance and delay. There are other questions, about Mass attendance or Easter duties for instance, which could properly be asked by a priest, but do not belong in a survey conducted by laymen among their neighbours. We were careful on this point at Aberystwyth, but may even so have gone too far. And a survey form needs to be such as to make it easy to tabulate results. In this respect also the Aberystwyth survey form was such as to cause alarm and despondency in the enumerator's breast. To track down a mixed marriage, for example, called for quite a complicated cross-checking of dates filled in at different ends of the document: the kind of thing with which it would be unfair to try the zeal or skill of the general run of parish volunteers.

Where does this lead? To the use, I think, of ordinary Cope-Chat cards (with questions as indicated at the end of the article) operating on the knitting-needle system, that is to say, cards each of which is perforated round the edges with a number of holes—to be precise, 106—so that it may be lifted by placing a

knitting-needle through any one of these holes. Then to code, say, 'man' or 'woman', the top of the corresponding hole is punched out, so that when a pack of such cards is stacked together and the knitting-needle is run through the hole corresponding to the appropriate code number, and lifted, those cards which do *not* carry that code number will come up with the needle, those which do carry it will drop down ready for counting. The questions on this card do not include any to which we found it hard at Aberystwyth to get answers. On matters of Mass attendance and so on the card avoids the sort of question which amounts to asking the neighbours whether they are in mortal sin. And there are enough holes on the card (there is nothing to stop one using a bigger card if needed) to provide for adequate coding on the following lines. Classifications correspond where necessary to those used in Government statistics.

<i>Heading</i>	<i>Classifications</i>	<i>Total codings</i>
Sex	Male and female	2
Marital status	Married, single, widowed	3
Place born	Parish—Wales—rest of Britain—Ireland—rest of Europe—other	6
Age	0-14, 15-44, 45-64, 65+	4
Age ceased full-time education	15 or under, 16-19, 20+	3
Age at marriage	24 or less, 25-34, 35+	3
Number of children (including any who have died)	0, 1-2, 3-4, 5-8, 9+	5
Occupation	Registrar-General's 27 groups	27
Industry	Registrar-General's 24 groups	24
Social class	Registrar-General's 5 groups, plus sub-division of Class III into Supervisory, Clerical, Skilled	8
Societies of which a member	As on card, plus sub-division of Catholic societies into 'Catholic Action' and 'other'	6

Language spoken at home	English, other	2
Convert		1
Mixed marriage, Catholic marriage		2
Place normally attends Mass	Parish church, other	2
		—
		98
<i>Total perforations on card</i>		106

It would probably be best to have a separate and differently coloured card for those who have not yet left school. The section on 'societies' could be reduced on this card to 'Catholic' and 'other', and the space used to add an entry on 'school now attended', to be coded nursery, primary, all-age, secondary modern, grammar, private, and 'Catholic' or 'other'. The card will just take these additional codes. The questionee or victim of the survey is of course not expected to do his own coding. He simply answers the questions on the body of the card. Coding is then done by the volunteers carrying out the survey. They must of course have adequate instruction sheets, and rehearse the job enough to do it with confidence.

Cards coded in this way are easy to file in an ordinary card-index, and to sort and re-sort. From them can be prepared, quickly and accurately, standardized parish statistics, from which (as in Germany) diocesan and national statistics can be built up. We shall be a good step forward in the Church's work when the action of both the clergy and Catholic lay organizations are based on a comprehensive, flexible, standardized, and regularly revised and accurate record of this kind. But is this particular card, even yet, the right model? It remains to try it on the dog. The last dog was rural and academic. The next should probably therefore be urban, industrial and (if that is the right contrast to 'academic') earthy. I think I know a place. But more on that in due course when the experiment has been made.

*Catholic Census of Wales*—Fill in a form for each person who has left school.

Name ..... Address .....

