

In Memory of...

Inside the stone walls of the old cemetery, lay a scattering of stones that originally were the walls of the old country church. There was no historic marker to designate its historical roots. Just huddled pieces of gables and walls marked a past era. Yet, the place is filled with unwritten history and painful memories as well as strong faith and tough times.

One lone tombstone stood by a nave wall. Its words were etched in stone as well as in the hearts and minds of generations past and present generations who still remember a history in action. The words on the tombstone read: "In memory of Michel Joseph and William: Twin Sons of John and Bridget Walsh. Died in 1919 – 6 months old. R.I.P."

As I read the inscription, I wondered about the parents. I researched my memory to try and identify them. As a young person growing up in the area, I remembered the ruins of an old house about a mile from the cemetery. I knew the Walsh family lived there and that somehow we were related to them as a family. I passed the ruins thousands of times and never gave a thought to its history or significance. Now that I had discovered a simple tombstone, I reflected a little more. I wondered what happened to Michael Joseph and William to allow them to die so young. Did they die of some disease at the time? Did their parents have any other children? Who was the person who erected that lone tombstone in an old church cemetery and why? Was it in the hopes that someone would remember that people do not die in vain. Was it a reminder of a historical and often painful era we should never forget?

I had first noticed the lone tombstone during a concelebrated Mass at the ruins of the old church and cemetery. The Mass is a yearly August event which helps us gather to remember, to pray, to reflect on a painful era of history and to celebrate the faith of a people who, in spite of famine, persecution, and painful losses; still held on to the faith so that present generations could enjoy that gift of faith under better circumstances.

Three native sons from the local area concelebrated the Mass. One was ordained in 1971, another in 1972 and a third in 1973. All grew up within a mile of each other. Two serve as priests in Mississippi, the other in Ireland.

Amid the scattered stones strewn around the church yard were stones from family fields. Buried beneath to stones were babies who died shortly after birth. Grieving parents took their dead child, placed it in a makeshift shoebox kind of coffin and, along with a stone from one of their fields, they buried their loved angel. It was ironic that the three concelebrating priests each had their own loved one buried there. Of course, we all wondered if God had used the stones, memories, history, persecution, starvation and faith of generations past to kindle in our hearts the desire to serve his as priests.

Buried in the same graveyard are the starved remains of people who died in the Great Famine of 1845. They were probably buried by family members, friends and even strangers who didn't have the strength to dig a proper grave because of their own hunger.

During the concelebrated Mass, I watched as people sat on stones and wondered if they realized what such stones could say if they could only talk. I looked into the faces of the older people, seasoned by age, conscious of history, grateful for being alive to celebrate their history on the backs of God's angels and starved people. I looked at the young children. Obviously, they were fascinated by the novelty of the situation. Of course, they were not conscious of or schooled in the history of this hallowed ground. I wondered if one day, like with my own situation, one of these young people, might be drawn to this cemetery on a deeper and more historical basis. Maybe, it is the duty of those of us who remember to make sure that no one forgets their roots, this history, their painful past, but especially to remember that our lives today are built on the foundation of little children robbed of life and adults starved in pain. Yet, it is their faith that continues to empower us today.

Now, like that lonely tombstone, we can continue to live and remember and do it "in memory of..."