

Reeducating my brain

I didn't realize how Americanized I had become after my forty years there as a priest. It is only now that I am learning the things I need to unlearn and rediscover the things I learned as a young person growing up in Ireland. Let me explain.

My first big unlearning experience, which is ongoing, is to remember that Ireland adopted the metric system many years ago. In America, I thought in terms of miles. In Ireland, I am trying to think in terms of kilometers. I keep asking myself what is the formula for translating one measurement into another. In America, road signs are in miles. In Ireland, they are in kilometers. In America, you try to decide how many miles to the gallon of gas, you get with your car. In Ireland, you try to decide how many kilometers you get from a litre of petrol. Then, I have to try and translate how many liters make up a gallon. When I go to pay the attendant for gas, Irish petrol, I find myself saying, "I got 40 dollars worth of gas." Then, I have to correct myself and rephrase it by saying that "I got 40 Euros worth of petrol." Gas is really natural gas, something you cook with rather than put it in your car. It can be all so confusing but fear not, of course, I found a handy app. that makes the conversion for me.

Another problem is language. Instead of two weeks, now I have to get used to a fortnight. When my bills come in for electricity, phone and utilities, my family may ask how much they are. Invariably, I catch myself saying the amount in dollars. Again, a mid-course correction is needed.

Then, spelling can be a bit of a problem. Even if one has a spellchecker, it has a bias to the American ways of spelling words; whereas, obviously, some of the words are spelled differently. Some American words are shortened like "labor," whereas in Ireland, many American words ending in "or," end in "our" in Ireland. Words like, "labor" become "labour" and "neighbor" becomes "neighbour." In fact, my American spellchecker flags "labour," and "neighbour."

This summer, we experienced a "heat wave" of sorts in Ireland. At least, such phenomena are all relative, depending on where one resides. In America, temperature is measured in Fahrenheit whereas in Ireland it is measured in Celsius. Again, my challenge is in the translation. When emailing friends in America, I have to translate the Celsius temperature into their Fahrenheit. Recently, following one of our Masses, a neighbor said, "You must feel right at home in this kind of weather. You are used to it." I had to agree.

Driving a car in Ireland also takes getting used to. Of course, we drive on the left side of road, which is the wrong side, and, to make matters even more complicated, the driver's seat is really the American passenger seat. Ironically, I often find myself getting into my car on the wrong side which is the right side for Americans but the wrong side for an Irish person. Even though, we are on the right side of the American continent, we like the left side better.

Another big adjustment for me is dates. In the States, for example, I first arrived there on August 22nd 1972. But in Ireland, I arrived there on the 22nd of August, 1972. Now, when people ask for date of birth, I give it in the American format which totally confuses them because they don't know how to write it down.

Of course, during my forty years in Mississippi, I not only became Americanized but I also became Southernized., I found myself saying to the first group of people I met this morning, "Good morning, y'all!" They looked at me as if I dropped in from another planet. I even catch myself saying "appreciate it!" instead of a simple "thank you." I even slip up and say, "Come, see us!" instead of "drop in for a visit anytime." I also have to be careful about "fixin" to do things, even if I am retired.

At Mass, I listen to the people's responses and often have to chuckle. Many are stuck in the old responses, especially at the beginning of the Preface. Then, there is the tradition of saying the Our Father in the Irish language. Being out of practice, such takes some getting used to again.

Still, old habits die hard. Many experiences and words are lost in the translation from culture to culture and even spellcheckers have a hard time adjusting.

You may find a few misspelled words in this column, depending on country and culture. Don't panic! Blame the dictionary!

Gulf Pine Catholic is discontinuing my columns. All future columns will be posted on my blog: www.traveling-companion.blogspot.com.