

## **Celebrating first Christmas in 40 years**

This year, I celebrated my first Christmas in forty years. I always wondered what it would be like and now I know.

This year, I have celebrated many firsts. It was my first year of retirement after serving as a priest in Mississippi for the past forty years. It was my first year experiencing the changing seasons in Ireland in forty years. It was the first time I never had to go back to Mississippi at the end of August, at the end of my annual vacation. It was the first time I experienced the long summer days in Ireland when it got dark around 11 p.m. and it was the first time I experienced the short, winter days in Ireland when it got dark just after 4 p.m. It was the first in over forty years that I was able to celebrate, as a priest, my first ever Holy Week and Easter ceremonies in my own home parish. It was the first time in forty years that I experienced Halloween in Ireland. Ironically, it was the first time in forty years that I didn't celebrate Thanksgiving because Ireland does not have such a celebration. We don't have any official pilgrims or turkeys. Obviously, Black Friday will just become a memory also.

I asked my fifteen year old niece and godchild, a simple question as different celebrations rolled around. I would ask, "How do people celebrate...?" She really did not know how to answer simply because whatever way or however they celebrated, it had become second nature to her.

As it got closer to Christmas, she would ask, "Are you going to decorate your house for Christmas?" Obviously, there was not a simple answer to her question. Like the proverbial Irish trait, I answered her with another question: "How do people decorate their homes for Christmas?" In the end, I defaulted to her memory and experience as she helped me to decorate.

For the past forty years, I celebrated Christmas with good friends in the various parishes in which I ministered as a priest. At the end of each celebration, I headed home to my then rectory with one mission in mind – to call my family in Ireland and connect again at this special time. Of course, this time, there was no need for a transatlantic phone call because the gap and space was bridged. I was home.

So, the big question still remained: How do you celebrate your first Christmas in forty years? First of all, I celebrated it with my own community, in my own home parish, with my own family by celebrating Christmas Mass for and with them.

I remembered the final Christmas Mass I celebrated in Bay St. Louis before I left to retire. At the end of Mass, my Christmas greeting was old and in the Irish language. I simply said, "Go mbeire muid beo ar an am seo arís!" For the language purists, this is translated, May we be alive this time next year."

I am glad that I am alive to celebrate my first Christmas with family, friends, neighbors and community in my home parish for the first time in forty years.