

Looking for an accent

The other day, I went to my local town in Ireland to do some grocery shopping and with the intention of purchasing a gift for a friend. The town, itself, is well known as a tourist destination because of the unspoiled beauty of the area that nestles along the Atlantic Coast.

Along with my niece, Malia, we finally found a store that sold both giftware and souvenirs. We went in, browsed around and were about to leave when we spotted what we were looking for on a shelf just below the window. We both agreed that it fitted our expectation and the price seemed reasonable.

So, we took our purchase-to-be to the counter, where a middle-aged man was chatting with a young woman who seemed to also work at the shop. I placed my gift on the counter and got my money ready for the purchase. As the man acknowledged me, I simply said, "Good morning." Immediately he became curious and said, "You are not from around here?" I told him that I lived in the area, without giving him any more ammunition for curiosity. He became very chatty and I could see that he was not too happy with my response, wondering who this guy was who was trying to be so evasive in his answers. He kept sizing me up and still was not satisfied. "So, where do you live around here?" he asked. "Oh, just a few miles out the road," I answered. "That accent," he said, with a puzzled look on his face, "is not from around here." Then my niece burst my evasive bubble by blurting out, "Oh! He spent forty years in the States." "That explains it," he concluded.

"What is your name?" he asked as his curiosity kicked in again. I gave him my last name. then he said, "are you related to Tom?" Even though I had a brother, Tom, I sensed that he was thinking of someone else. He was thinking of the local chemist, Tom, who was well known in the area. "Oh! Probably distant cousins."

We chatted some more about how the tourist business was doing. He said. "people walk in and look around here. Some buy something and some don't. If they buy something; that puts bread on the table for me."

We walked out onto the crowded street, brushing up against window-shopping visitors. I was amazed to listen to the various accents as we passed by the strolling people. I tried to figure out what part of the country some may be from. Obviously, it was easy to discern the French and German accents. Finally, shopping completed, we headed for home.

The experience reminded me of comments my former secretary, Jo, would make at certain times. She would say, "I know when you, Irish priests, have gotten together." "How do you know," I would ask. She would say, "you talk faster when you come back." She mentioned the same scenario when I would come back from vacation."

I recalled that, on occasions, when I went to some stores on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and was ready to check out; cashiers would ask where I was from. My stock answer was always, "I live here." Obviously, it didn't satisfy them and they would indicate that I did not talk like the folks who lived in the area. "So, where do you think I am from?" I would ask. They would guess the mid-west, the east coast of the US, maybe even Canada. I would always leave them with their curiosity intact.

So, I am in a bit of a quandary. I seem to be misunderstood both in the United States and in Ireland. In the United States, I didn't have an Irish accent with a Southern drawl and, in Ireland, I didn't have a flatter, yet faster accent, Oh! To be both misunderstood in one's own country and one's adopted country. If I ever return to the States for a visit, I will have to slow down my accent in order to be understood. If I continue to live in Ireland, I will have to speed up my accent.

Yet, I shouldn't feel too bad. After all, Jesus didn't have a place to lay his head. I do! Jesus had an accent probably. I don't, it seems.

In the meantime, I will enjoy the confusion I create. I may be a man with a country but I am still a man without an accent. No matter where I go, I will have to accept the idea that I have been blessed with a "foreign" accent.