

How is your Irish?

“How is your Irish?” asked a priest friend. When he asked, I knew exactly what he meant. He really wanted to know if I had some working knowledge about the Irish language and how was I at conversing in it?

You see, the priest was pastor of an Irish language speaking area not far from my home. In fact, his parish had three churches in the Irish speaking area. Obviously, his question had a deeper motive. He wished to take a vacation and was looking for a priest to take his place for a month while he visited some friends in the United States.

Even though I grew up on the border of an Irish speaking area, my fluency in speaking the language was minimal. There was no need to really practice it as I was destined to minister in the Deep South and not in some Irish speaking area.

I informed the priest that I could pray certain parts of the Mass in Irish; parts like the Lord’s prayer or the Sign of the Cross, that we had learned as children. Other responses such as the Gloria, the Holy! Holy! as well as the Lamb of God, I could read from a booklet. I remembered a few more phrases in Irish that were part of the Mass as well. As regards preaching in the Irish language, that would be a non-runner. Even the pastor himself told me that he preaches in English. So, that was a relief.

During the days before my first encounter with the parish, I began to think of some Irish words that might be appropriate for more parts of the Mass. The words would have to be couched in sentences that made sense in the Irish language. Of course, I would have to introduce myself in the Irish language, letting the folks know my name, where I lived and where I ministered as a priest as well as informing the people that their pastor was taking a well-earned vacation.

I arrived at my first church on my first weekend to see people climbing the steps into church for Mass. As they moved toward the church, I picked up the distinctive dialect as volumes of the Irish language flowed freely from young and old. Seeing me as the non Irish-speaking priest, they welcomed me in English. Then, they reverted back to speaking in the Irish language. I was impressed at how easily they could fade from one language to the other so easily. But I didn’t panic. We would still go ahead with Mass celebrated with a mixture of the Irish and English language.

I floundered and survived my first weekend and became braver and more comfortable as the weekends passed. People did try to understand my limited knowledge and accept it which was reassuring.

I found myself reflecting on how living in Mississippi for forty years was still ingrained in me. In retirement, I often find myself using certain Southern expressions and words, like “preciate it!,” “Come, see us,” “How are y’all,” I also realised that certain Mass responses learned as a child, needed to be dusted off. Now, I found myself having to translate certain English words into the Irish language as well as put them into sentences and a context.

I did survive my month subjecting people to being patient with a priest as he blundered his way through certain parts of the Mass in the Irish language. I may even have the courage to accept the same opportunity to do it again if the priest ever invites me

The whole experience reminded me that, in an age of frequent travel and openness to multi-cultures, one can attend Mass in any language in any part of the world and still feel that one attended Mass even if one didn’t know or understand the language Mass was being prayed in.

I suppose Catholic callisthenics helps. Obviously, Catholics know instinctively when to, kneel, sit, stand, what to answer and when. Because of such callisthenics, no matter where in the world one attends Mass or what language it is being celebrated in, one knows how best to participate without a knowledge of the language being used.

Through my feeble attempts to celebrate the Mass in the Irish language, I have learned that the Irish phrases for certain parts of the Mass as well as their cadence, gives me a new appreciation of my mother tongue.

So, the next time the Irish speaking priest asks me “How’s your Irish?” I will be able to say, it is improving more and is a work in progress.