

Mass in mother tongue

Back in September 2014, a priest in a neighbouring parish asked me to celebrate Mass for him during the weekend. I obliged and allowed him to take a weekend vacation. Then, I realised that the parish was part of the Gaeltacht, an Irish speaking area of the countryside.

As one who had become very rusty at speaking the Irish language, following celebrating Mass in English according to southern style in Mississippi for forty years. I felt a certain trepidation.

I decided, whether the folks liked it or not, I would celebrate the Masses in English. After all, it could determine whether or not I might be invited back to the parish ever again. I was prepared to take such a risk.

Without any further thought, I showed up for Mass on Saturday evening and again on Sunday morning. True to form, I celebrated the entire Mass on both occasions in English.

Following Mass, I was not prepared for the visitors and comments I received. Obviously, the comments were not about my thoughtful homily or any indication of the way I celebrated the Mass. Instead, the comments were rather blunt and I was informed that the parishioners were treated to Mass in the Irish language always and wanted to know why I did not do the same. There was no point in arguing with their comments. There was no point in telling them that my Irish was rather rusty after spending decades in Mississippi. I was guilty by default and, sheepishly, exited the parish as quickly as possible, hoping never to be invited there again.

In the meantime, I was happy to receive invitations to help out in other parishes without incurring the wrath of parishioners

My relief was evident and my memory of the encounters faded over time until I received a phone call the other day.

It was that same priest, the priest of the same Irish speaking parish with a request. Could I celebrate a Saturday evening Mass for him as he had a wedding in another parish that day?

Before committing, I told him of my experience there some years earlier; how the people were not happy that I didn't celebrate the Mass in the Irish language for them. His answer was, "Don't worry about that. It will do them good to have Mass in English now and again." In a moment of weakness, I accepted his invitation.

I arrived at the church early. Two ladies talked in the courtyard. I greeted them. Then I heard one of them say to the other, "A Yank." It was the first time, I heard myself referred to as a "Yank." Then, I thought, if they think I am a Yank, then the folks at church will know not to expect to hear any part of the Mass in the Irish language.

Still, on the way to church, I had practiced some simple parts of the Mass. Being used to beginning Mass in the English language for so many decades, I had to remind myself that I was now in a different environment with different expectations.

I began the Mass with the sign of the cross in Irish. Over the first hurdle, I introduced myself – name, place of origin and "Mississippi," my place of service. So good, so far! Then came the "Lord, have mercy, etc." I had heard it said in the Irish language several times, so I attempted it. The Gloria had to be defaulted to English. Readings were proclaimed in the English language so I proclaimed the gospel in the same.

Attempting to present the homily in Irish was a bridge too far to cross. After all, the next morning, the homily would be presented in English in my home parish. The Eucharistic prayer defaulted to English as well.

Next came the Lord's Prayer. I still remembered most of it in Irish from being a kid. So, I began in Irish and the congregation took up the cadence for the rest of it.

I finished the rest of the Mass in English, exited to the sacristy to await any judgment, complaint or kudos for effort. I waited and waited and waited. No one came. So, the Yank went home.