

An interesting beginning to retirement.

Seeing that writing has been in my blood for decades, I cannot simply hang up my pen and disappear with writers withdrawal symptoms. So I have decided on occasion with the blessing of Gulf Pine Catholic's editor, Terry Dickson, and the encouragement of loyal readers over the years, to pen an occasional column using the byline, "Across the pond"

My official retirement as a priest began on January 18th with a one way flight from Gulfport to Dublin, Ireland. On going through security at the airport, I heard a now "former" parishioner say, "I will probably be the last person to see you off on retirement".

The retirement really began with two overweigh suitcases at Gulfport airport and the threatening demand that I cough up \$100 each for my two overweigh cases. A frenzy of activity led to transferring stuff to an already overloaded carryon to accommodate the weigh restrictions. With some weight adjustments, I scrambled onto the plane. Arriving in Atlanta airport, I had to purchase an extra bag to accommodate my extra stuff.

While waiting for my flight from Atlanta, another "former" parishioner came and sat beside me. She mentioned that she was traveling to Dublin for the weekend also, courtesy of a friend flight attendant working the same flight. She was lucky to fly first class while I sat with the ordinary folks.

On the flight, sitting beside an empty seat, I was approached several times by flight attendants, asking, "Are you Fr. Tracey?" I was thanked for my ministry and was given one of the airline's toiletry bags usually reserved for first class passengers. At least, it served of a memento of my flight.

Arriving at Dublin airport, I was met by my nephew and two nieces waving a colorful banner saying, "Welcome Home Fr. Michael." I was then whisked to my nephew's home to meet the rest of my family. Lots of visiting, tea-drinking in a home where the boiler had decided to quit, left a chill in the air.

Later that evening, we were off to a 50th birthday party where the food was plentiful and the wine free-flowing. Of course, I did not have any wine as "I only drink on the job." Now, that I am retired, I will probably be drinking less.

Chatting with the guests at the party, I realized a new insight. I could no longer talk about "my parish" I was no longer pastor of anything or anywhere. I was now rowing along on the sea of retirement. It also reminded me of post-Katrina when I would hear myself say, "I used to have..."

Finally, on Sunday evening, I arrived home to my retirement home to find my sister busy in the kitchen readying dinner for a crew of eight. We sat down to enjoy soup, salad, chicken curry, meatballs and spaghetti as well as cream cheesecake for dessert. I sat among family in a home filled with decorated banners, colorful balloons announcing "Happy retirement."

Following a restful night in my own bed, amid the adjustments for jetlag, I awoke to a new surprise as I began my first full day at home. The surprise! Beautiful snowflakes falling softly to an expectant earth. Of course, I donned my winter gear, got all wrapped up and headed out for a morning stroll, allowing the falling snowflakes to caress my cheeks. I felt like a child seeing and enjoying my first snowfall.

The snowflakes soon stopped as the green grass sobbed. The sun appeared to dry its tears and I sat and reflected on a journey of new beginnings and experiences. Somehow, nature's journey and mine seems so similar.

Maybe, after all, a retired writer may retire but when nature and experience provide the raw material, one has no choice but to put pen to paper and see where it leads one. Maybe, there might be another column penned from across the pond.