

View from the pew

I have known Bill and Carolyn for almost thirty years. They are very committed to their faith and family. Both surprised me with a visit to Ireland this past summer. It was their first visit ever overseas. While in Ireland, we drove 1,500 kilometres in a week while visiting historical places; encountering rugged coastlines; betting at the horse races; losing golf balls in treacherous rough on golf courses, sampling myriad shades of green; driving narrow roads populated by undisturbed grazing sheep; sampling varied cuisines and encountering hospitality wherever we went.

But one moment that stood out for me was something that Carolyn noticed at our Sunday morning Mass. While I celebrated Mass for the locals, Carolyn occupied a pew in the middle of the church. Afterwards, she told me of her experience.

A man and his son knelt in a pew in front of her. He seemed to be preoccupied and troubled during Mass. He rested his head on the pew in front of him

Following Mass, she described the man. He was of slender build, had a mop of grey hair and seemed to be in his early seventies. I asked her to describe his son and she did. Then, I was able to identify the local man and his son. I went on to explain the possible reason he seemed troubled and distracted at Mass.

The gentleman in question is a progressive dairy farmer in the area. Recently, his dairy herd of cows was decimated. Following a test for tuberculosis, over half of his cows reacted positively to the virus which was spread by an infected badger washing himself and urinating in the drinking water used by the cows. The man's herd was quarantined as well as those of his neighbours. Over half of his herd was slaughtered with little financial recompense.

I can only imagine what that man's prayer was that Sunday morning at Mass. He may have asked the same "Why me" question over and over again. He may have his doubts about a loving God who allowed such to happen to him and his family. He may have been angry at the burden thrust upon him without inviting it. He may have questioned his belief in God or wonder if there was any point in going to church anymore.

It was ironic that the gospel reading from Matthew that particular Sunday was an invitation to "Come to me, all you who labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light."

Obviously, the man came to church that morning overwhelmed and burdened expecting some rest from a yoke that was unbearable and a burden that was too heavy to carry alone. The man had poured out his burdens, falling prostrate on the pew but did he leave with an ounce of hope and a spoonful of rest? I will never know the answer but that may not be too important because the answer was given to the one who needed it most.

As a priest, I never get a view from the pew, a behind the scenes look at the body language that many troubled individuals bring to church every weekend. As priests, we see a sea of faces and try to read their hidden messages. Most seem sombre and distracted by the weight of their trespasses, fears, questions, boredom from minds stuck in another planet or another era. Some cover themselves with a veil of protectionism, carefully camouflaging their hidden scars and recent bad news. They come, often wondering why they bothered to come; looking for some morsel of daily bread that might lift them from the weight of their own crosses and thus give them some strength and energy to trudge along life's uncertain roads.

Seeing that priests are an endangered species, we never get a chance to view from the pew. By design and necessity, we become salespersons for a God who is love and wants people to know that such is good news even for dairy farmers with broken backs, shattered spirits, crushing yokes, humbled hearts and restless spirits seeking rest in a mysterious God whose invitation never expires.