

Thumbs up this Lent

I missed Mardi Gras this year by design, location and purpose. The folks here probably never heard of it. They never heard the chant of “Throw me somethin’ Mister!” They never heard of people lining the streets watching lavishly decorated floats and merry folks having a good time.

Instead, I discovered “Pancake Tuesday.” Of course, that was a new experience for me. On Pancake Tuesday, a.k.a. Shrove Tuesday, I went with my fourteen year old niece to the local town with two missions in mind: get some pancake mix and secondly, get some fish for Ash Wednesday. We arrived home with some powered pancake mix, some salmon and haddock fish for Ash Wednesday.

Having downed a plentiful supply of pancakes, we made preparations for Ash Wednesday. Seeing that this was to be my first Ash Wednesday in Ireland in over forty years, I was not sure what to expect.

As in the States, I didn’t have to listen to the constant calls of people wondering “When are ashes?” Instead, I never got a phone call. I wondered about the number of people who would show up for their ashes that evening.

I walked into the sacristy at 6:45 p.m. for the 7 p.m. Ash Wednesday Mass. Outside, there were very few cars. Inside, a handful of people had arrived early and were deep in their own thoughts in the pews. In the sacristy, the sacristan was busy wetting and pounding some ashes. Beside him, he had two corks.

I began Mass with a half-filled church. One of the things I learned from past experience was that if you give out ashes at the recommended time before the offertory, many people just come, get their ashes and walk out without waiting for the rest of Mass or receiving Communion. To combat such practice, I reverted to giving out ashes at the end of Mass. It may not be liturgically correct, but it is practically correct.

Now, celebrating my first Ash Wednesday Mass in my home parish, I asked about traditions, expectation and was told, “do it however you like.” I was going to do it that way anyway. Following the gospel, I decided to give a brief homily which surprised the folks. They remained standing, expecting me to continue with prayers of the faithful.

I told them how, as kids growing up in this parish, we gave up sweets and kept our stash of goodies for Sundays when we gave ourselves permission to eat them because Sundays were not really included in Lent. We concluded that, because Lent is supposed to be forty days, if you include the Sundays, then it is longer. As I spoke, I could see old heads nodding in agreement. I asked the people to consider, not giving up things as such but to take on things – do extra good deeds without being asked; compliment people; be grateful; spend a little more time being reflective on one’s faith journey.

The rest of the Mass continued including Communion. I had warned people that we would do the blessing of the ashes at the end and then distribute them. Maybe, it wasn’t what they were used to, but it was what I was used to because of practical insights.

I blessed the ashes and then came the moment to distribute them. I looked at the two saucers of black, moist ashes and the two cross-carved corks looking at me. Would I revert to my usual way of distributing the ashes. Mash your thumb into the ashes and trace the sign of the cross on the forehead of the waiting penitents or would I use the supplied perfectly carved corks? If I used my thumb, then it would necessitate some gentle scrubbing of the thumb and inside nail at the end or one could walk away with a clean thumb.

I decided on the latter. As I dipped the perfectly contoured cork in the ashes and stamped each recipient with the perfect cross, it all seemed so clinical. Everyone walked out of church with a perfect cross. No one twitched their noses as the remnants of ashes accidentally got in the wrong place. It was all so clean, clinical and perfect. So, at least for this Ash Wednesday, it was a “thumbs up.” Next year, might be a “thumbs down.” We’ll wait and see!