

Remembering Past Times

Mary Kearns

“We never knew the word “liturgy” but we were always aware of the seasons in the Church’s year.”

Alice, now in her eighties reflects on her experience of the Church’s liturgy in the Ireland of the 1950s.

The coming of spring meant the Triduum to St. Brigid. Then on the feast-day itself the first of February, there were pilgrimages to the holy well and to the shrine of the saint. But soon it was going to be Lent and that was a well-marked time of the year. Many got up for early Mass before work, and there were devotions in the evening. Fasting was on every day except Sunday and St. Patrick’s Day was looked forward to like an oasis in the desert of Lent.

Life was lived against the background of the Church. There were always devotions and this meant the rosary, sermon and Benediction. There was the Monday night perpetual novena to Our Lady; Tuesday night, the men’s Confraternity and Wednesday the women’s Confraternity. We also had May Devotions, the novena to St. Joseph and October Devotions in honour of the holy rosary. Then there were devotions for Advent, but these were never so well attended. Mothers of families were busy with baking and other preparations for the coming of baby Jesus at Christmas. Everyone took part in the holy week ceremonies and the great celebration of the Lord’s resurrection meant that ladies had a new hat - an Easter bonnet!

Every two or three years the parish mission took place, usually in the month of May. Alice remembers



“There might be a few people who didn’t go to the mission but I never knew any. Every seat in the church was full and if you didn’t go you had to be sick or have a new baby with no-one to mind it.”

This was serious business and the mission priests were awesome figures. The first week was for the women and the second for the men. Separate sermons were given on the sixth and ninth commandments, the necessity of avoiding immodest conduct, impure thoughts and the occasion of sin. It would be improper to address these topics in mixed company.

The commandments were dealt with individually. Alice remembers the sin of gossiping about the neighbours and how a person’s character could be defamed by calumny and detraction. If you told a lie about somebody it was calumny, but detraction was even worse because it was the truth about someone’s wrong-doing that you had no right to reveal. The

missioner’s voice thundered from the pulpit.

Sins against honesty had people shifting uneasily in the pews. If you took so much as a pencil home from your place of employment you would burn in purgatory unless you made restitution.

But there were lighter moments.

The missioner often told a joke or two before he got down to serious matters. Alice chuckles as she recalls an incident involving a lady who suddenly remembered she had forgotten to turn off the cooker.

She scribbled a note and indicated to her neighbours in the pews to pass it along to her daughter who sat at the end. However somebody misunderstood this intention and handed the note up to the pulpit. You can imagine the poor lady’s consternation when the missioner read aloud “Go home and turn off the gas.”

The closing of the women’s mission was on Sunday afternoon as the

men's week would begin that same evening

"You couldn't go to the closing unless you had a new hat, and maybe a new costume. Well I remember the sight of these beautifully dressed women on a sunny Sunday afternoon coming to the Church, each hatted and gloved to perfection. It was the beginning of summer and we were all decked out in our best."

June brought the other great feasts of the Church - the Ascension, Pentecost and Trinity Sunday. Pentecost was also known as Whitsunday and Whitmonday was a holiday as well. You were not supposed to swim in the sea until after Whitsunday. Then there was Corpus Christi. Every town had its procession through the streets.

We walked in front of the Blessed Sacrament which was reverently carried under a canopy by the parish priest flanked by all the priests of the parish. They were all vested and were followed by clergy from the religious orders of the town.

Then there was a break for the summer months until the Feast of the Assumption on the 15th August. Even so, every Sunday evening throughout the summer there were devotions in the church, and additionally on the first Sunday of the month there was a holy hour with Exposition. The Sundays were known as "Sundays after Pentecost" right up to the feast of Christ the King in October. This kept the significance of Pentecost always in mind.

November, the month dedicated to the Holy Souls, began on the 2nd with men and women of all ages, praying the special prayers to gain a plenary indulgence for their departed relatives. On that day it was possible to gain this indulgence by praying for the Pope's intentions

while visiting a church. Provided you fulfilled the conditions of Holy Communion and Confession, every time you went in and said those prayers you gained the indulgence.

At every Catholic church you could see the people walking outside for a few minutes then going back into the church as every visit entitled you to a new indulgence and who would waste that opportunity?

Of course every Catholic went to Mass on Sunday - the women with their heads covered and the men with heads bared. In fact the whole week was almost like a preparation for Sunday Mass. You wore your good clothes so these had to be washed and pressed in time. Nobody would wear a new pair of shoes until they had first worn them to Mass.

Boys who wore short trousers until about fourteen, had to have knees scrubbed and girls were decked out with straw bonnets. On Saturday night all shoes were polished and Sunday clothes laid out.

Children carried prayer books from which they would be expected to follow what the priest was doing at Mass - Latin on one side and English on the other. Ladies were

told if they wore a headscarf it should be a plain one without pictures of Lourdes or Rome as this could distract those who knelt behind them. Most ladies however, would wear a hat and not a scarf on Sunday. Headscarves were for daily wear, not for Sunday.

Looking back on what it meant to be a Catholic in Ireland in pre-Vatican II days one can sense a rhythm of life structured around the Church's liturgical year. Alice reflects: "There was a lot of strictness and the ones in authority were sometimes very hard. At the same time we had a sense of security and belonging to something bigger and better than ourselves. Everyone I knew was a Catholic and there was great respect for priests. I think what Pope John was trying to do by the Council was bring more love into the ordinary person's experience of the Church without losing what we had. You can't help thinking afterwards that maybe the baby got thrown out as well as the bathwater."

For catechesis and liturgical formation please email marykeenankearns@gmail.com 087 7794687



**Heavenly Father,
Pless bless President
Donald John Trump and
the American Nation.**

**O Mary conceived
without sin, pray for us
who have recourse
to thee. EC**

