

## St. Patrick's Day Youth Mass

Homily of March 17, 2002

by Fr. Brian Joyce

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Today, with the gospel of Lazarus, it is really a time to reflect on what is life-giving and life-nourishing in our own lives. And I suggested a question in the beginning. Who have been the people who have been life-giving for you? I have to reflect on it myself. And, you have to begin with your family. My family is Irish. .... You were wondering how I was getting from Lazarus and Lent to St. Patrick's Day?.... It was right there.

It really came home to me thirty-nine years ago, this weekend, when I was ordained a priest and said my first Mass on St. Patrick's Day, which then too fell on a Sunday. My relatives on my mother's side of the family from up in the north of Ireland, in Donegal, had this chalice made in Dublin, and I've used it every day since. And I used it at my first Mass, on March 15th, 1963, which was the fifth Sunday of Lent. My relatives, on my father's side of the family, my father's brothers and sisters, had a set of vestments made for me, and they sent them from the Aran Islands out in Galway Bay, the smallest island, Inisheer, for me to wear at my first solemn high Mass on the fifth Sunday of Lent... A beautiful set of green vestments. Not only were they green, they were a fiddleback style that had not been used since the late forties and early fifties in the United States Church. So, I accepted them gratefully, but folded them up gently and wasn't able to use them that Sunday. We had a set of purple vestments for all the priests, arch-priests, deacon, sub-deacon. And, for about six months, every once in awhile, my mother would say, "When are you going to wear those vestments?" And I said, "Well, we don't wear that style anymore. I mean, they really look different here." So she wrapped them up and sent them off somewhere.

It's interesting, 37 years later, a year ago last September, I was at a family reunion and we went out to the Island in Galway Bay and celebrated Mass in a small chapel there, and then up to the north to Donegal, and celebrated Mass in a small chapel there, filled with people. We got there just in time! It was Sunday Mass. I threw on the vestments, said Mass, and went walking out after. One of my cousins said, "It must have been interesting wearing those vestments." I said, "What vestments?" .... "YOUR vestments, from your first Mass." My mother had smuggled them to her family's side, and they had been used ever after, in that chapel in Donegal, with my name on them.

You know, one of the blessings that I list as life-giving is family and my Irish roots. Another life-giving blessing, I think of, was Monsignor Wade. And, Monsignor Wade, (It always struck me! And there were so many like him.) who came here in 1933 from Ireland and when he left Ireland, as they did for many others, they had a wake. They

used to call it the "American wake" because as far as they were concerned, they would never see one another ever again. So he left family and all to come to northern California to preach the gospel to us heathens. No hope of ever seeing his family again.... The sacrifice that was! And, in those days, the chief export of Ireland was its own young people, young men and women all over the world, and a lot of priests and a lot of nuns.

There are still a lot of young Irish coming to our country, if I can judge from my friends and relatives, most of them undocumented aliens, in the Bay Area and the East Coast. Although, today, I found out that the major export of Ireland is no longer its own people but Export #1 is computer software. Export #2 is Viagra. You didn't know that's where it was invented, at the Pfizer plant in Cork. The chief exports have changed. And the stereotypes, I think, remain the same. The Irish, what they export, is fighting and drinking and singing. G.K. Chesterton, the author and apologist and writer wrote,

*"... For the great Gaels of Ireland  
Are the men God made mad,  
For all their wars are merry  
And all their songs are sad."*

I don't think it's really true, but what would you expect from an Englishman anyway?

The real export of Ireland, with its deepest roots, sent out by its people like missionaries, I would suggest, is its Celtic spirituality, a spirituality that stands for perseverance and also for deep, deep reflection. You can see it as you travel through Ireland, the perseverance in the face of persecution, when you see chapels dotting the land that go back a hundred or two hundred years, and really go back to the times just after it was completely illegal for Catholics to vote, to own any land, or to get an education. And in those days, the Mass was celebrated in hidden places. Education was carried on by scholars and by priests behind the hedges where no one could see that they were doing that rebellious thing of teaching reading and writing, the days that were referred to as days when.... (the chalice that was used to say Mass),

*"Our chalices were made of wood.  
But our priests were made of gold."*

But, if you go back even further (That's just a few hundred years.) to the five hundreds, you find the ruins of hermitages and monasteries all over Ireland because Ireland was the "Land of Saints and Scholars."

A best seller came out a couple years ago, "*How the Irish Saved Civilization*," which sounds kind of proud until you read the book. And they really did! In the dark ages of

Europe, they took the libraries and the learning and the literature and the gospel and they treasured it and reflected on it, and then they sent their sons and daughters out to share it with the world. I grew up hearing about a lot of saints in Germany, in France, in northern Italy. And, as I got older, I found out most of them were from Ireland. I found out St. Virgilius of Germany was actually (That was Latin.) St. Fergus of Limerick. (There were) St. Gall, who established monasteries in France and Germany, and St. Columban, who established monasteries, centers of learning and education, in France and Germany and Northern Italy, where he is buried. Like Monsignor who is buried here and never went home, these missionaries ended up buried in distant lands, where they brought civilization, learning and reflection, and above all, I think, brought a spirituality that we call Celtic that is really unique but at the same time deeply Christian, a sense that, first of all, it is nature that reveals God. Think of St. Patrick out there, a slave boy, looking at nature and having no church, and yet, meeting his God. Maybe it's the Cliffs of Moher. Maybe it's the great Dun Angus in the Aran Islands. Maybe it's the Lakes of Killarney. But whatever it was about the land and scenery of Ireland, it produced a people who were great mystics and realized the number one sacrament of the presence of God was nature. And also, the sacredness of the individual. Maybe it was the barren land, or the awesome beauty, or the famine, or the persecution. But they learned to treasure each and every individual, and realize that, both in solitude, which they treasured, and community, which they built, that God was very near. They celebrated with prayers that we still have today like the Celtic prayer:

*God to enfold me, God to surround me,  
God in my speaking, God in my thinking,  
God in my sleeping, God in my waking,  
God in my watching, God in my hoping,  
God in my life, God in my lips,  
God in my soul, God in my heart,  
God in my sufficing, God in my slumber,  
God in mine ever-living soul, God in mine eternity.*

Let's reflect on scenes of Ireland. And I would invite Stephanie to recall Irish blessings and prayers on our behalf....

*May you recognize in your life the presence, power and light of your soul.  
May you realize that you are never alone,  
That your soul, in its brightness and belonging,  
Connects you intimately with the rhythm of the universe.  
May you have respect for your own individuality and difference.  
May you realize that the shape of your soul is unique,  
That you have a special destiny here,  
That, behind the facade of your life, there is something beautiful, good and  
eternal happening.*

*May you learn to see yourself with the same delight, pride,  
And expectation with which God sees you in every moment.  
And may the road rise up to meet you.  
May the wind be always at your back.  
May the sun shine warm upon your face,  
And the rain fall soft upon your fields.  
And, until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of His hand.*

Amen.