

Monsignor's Sibilant S
By Dennis Payton Knight

Father John McDevitt came from Ireland to help Catholicism flourish in the sparsely populated state of Wyoming, and he served as pastor of the Laramie parish for nearly three decades. He seemed to have been modeled after the crusty Barry Fitzgerald who played the aging parish priest beside Bing Crosby as the handsome young assistant in the movie *Going My Way*.

I put it as 1954 when Father McDevitt was given the special honor by the pope of being named a monsignor, which, among other things, allowed him to affix a red pom-pom to his biretta, the four-cornered hat that priests once wore and may still. To be exact, the pom-pom on top is rightfully call a tuft.

Father Thomas Fahey, another Irish missionary priest, came to Laramie about that time, straight from the old sod and rich with a brogue. Fahey was Bing Crosby to McDevitt's Barry Fitzgerald, each with matching personalities.

Monsignor McDevitt, here longer, spoke like an Irishman, too, but without such a heavy accent. The most distinguishing thing about his speech was a sibilant S, which is characterized by a hissing sound. At its worst, the trait makes us think of a devil hissing through his S's. But Monsignor's sibilant S, especially when he reached the peak of his oratory, became a whistle. A heavenly whistle at that.

Father Fahey would come weekly to the lower grades in our Catholic school to give religion classes which he inevitably took as an opportunity to pass along Irish folklore and tales of the leprechaun to his enthralled little audiences. Monsignor, on the other hand, would teach religion to the upper grades in an obligatory, if whistling way that made us think about sin as coming without fun.

The good priests' Sunday sermons were much the same, with Father Fahey charming the congregants to lift up their lives in joy, and Monsignor McDevitt whistling his S's and fire-and-brimstoning them into a quiet, reverential submission. I don't know whether the coins dropped into the collection basket more joyfully on Father's watch, or if they fell only dutifully under Monsignor's.

And then it happened that the Church of Saint Laurence O'Toole was remodeled to reflect mid-century aesthetics. The old crucifix was removed and replaced with a massive one. Walls and lighting were brightened, speakers were hung in corners and a microphone was put on the pulpit.

With speech amplification, the congregation now got sermons delivered from Father Fahey in his full intonation without shouting to reach the back. Our Wyoming ears still needed to sort out his brogue, but it was lovely. The aging pastor, too, could speak in conversational tones, but as he did, his whistling S's became more prominent.

Now, when Monsignor John McDevitt took the pulpit, old people removed their hearing aids, and dogs gathered on the church steps. In fact, some believe there was a marked increase in the salvation of canine souls due to Monsignor's amplified, whistling sibilant S.