

Father McBride's Catholic Church

12-12-2013 BY HARRY ZIRKELBACH

A Roman Catholic attending Mass anywhere in the world can expect to find the same ceremony celebrating the Life and Message of Christ. The language, edifice, people will be unfamiliar, yet the rubrics are pretty much established through centuries of tradition, repetition.

Of course, exceptions exist. Adult Catholics in America have been surprised when a Mass differs from the norm of their decade.

The Catholics of 1930 in Erie, Pennsylvania, St Ann's parish, had such a treat. The Irish pastor, Fr McBride was this depression shepherd to a flock uniformly poor. To each parishioner he was unique, understanding. In addition to parishioners, the Gothic style Church building, Father Mac presided over an eight grade school taught by the Sister's of St Joseph, tuition free, each classroom full. This at the depth of the depression, when for six months in 1932 our family were his parishioners.

Father McBride demanded each adult entering his Church pay a ten cent seat tax, collected by ushers at the door. Firm. No exception. You didn't have ten cents? Go to the rectory; the individual answering the door would provide that thinnest of American coins, a shiny Mercury dime. While seldom done, it was that offer which caused adults to figure some way to scrounge ten cents from somewhere, avoid being seen begging at the Rectory before Mass. These silver pieces allowed Fr McBride to provide for this parish and school, without debt, through the Depression years.

My grandmother's sister, Aunt Winnie, and dad's sister, Aunt Florence had married. Both to divorced men. We children were never privy to those histories. However both women were members of Father McBride's parish, and contrary to established precepts, both attended Mass, received the sacraments. Father McBride was especially warm in greeting them, even in the presence of others.

Mass at St Ann's on Sunday was a model in brevity; choir, ushers, priests in sync from the moment the first parishioner arrived at the door, paid their dime. Ushers always available to take you to a empty seat of your choice, thank you for attending. The well-trained Choir and organist performed before, during and following Mass.

Sunday Mass was said hourly 7:00 AM through 12:00. Even when all the school children sat on the Epistle side of Church with their nuns, the celebrant and altar boys appeared to the main altar on the hour. As they began prayers in Latin at the foot of the altar, another priest proceeded to the lectern, began that Sunday readings, concluding with a short gospel sermon.

Announcements, readings, sermon had not interrupted the celebrant. Once the Priest finished the sermon, the ushers passed the collection baskets, consistently ending before the Consecration began. Once this principal part of the Mass was ended, a Priest would go to a side Altar, obtain a ciborium of hosts, begin distributing Communion. Later, joined by the celebrant.

The two would conclude the Mass usually in less than 30 minutes.

Outside that Mass the priests spoke to all.
Parishioners loved this Irishman, his work.

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Both my uncles never became Catholics, died early when I was a child.
Neither woman remarried.
Both men lie in the Catholic cemetery west of Erie.
For each, their wife (my Aunts) next to them.
I still marvel thinking of Father McBride,
that Irish face of Christ.