Priest recalls Catholic Church’s central role in Irish culture

By ROD DREHER

Irish priests have served Catholics in Baton Rouge for at least 200 years. The first pastor of St. Joseph’s Cathedral was an Irishman. Now, six Irish-born priests work in the Baton Rouge Diocese. The Rev. Michael Moroney, pastor of Our Lady of Mercy, is one of them.

Though Moroney, 47, has spent his entire 20 years as a priest in the Baton Rouge Diocese — and indeed, is now an American citizen — the lessons he learned from his Catholic boyhood in Ireland have stood him well in his Louisiana ministry.

“I’ve gone from eating meat and potatoes to eating crawfish and seafood,” Moroney jokes. He is sitting in his office, which the priest has decorated with reminders of home. A poster of Irish castles. A photograph of his parents. Even the wallpaper is emerald green.

Moroney, the eldest of four children, was born in County Limerick in the southwestern part of the island shared by the Irish Republic with British-ruled Northern Ireland, which is mostly Protestant. In the Republic of Ireland, Moroney says, “religion, culture and everything are so linked together. A lot of culture is supported by the Catholic Church. When you live in a country that’s 95 percent Catholic, most everything comes to you by way of the church.”

The Moroneys were a traditional Catholic family, one that said the rosary together and went to Mass on Sunday together. Catholicism was taught in the schools, highly disciplined institutions whose masters were believers in corporal punishment.

“When I was in school, that was a very big fear, that you would get a whipping,” he says. “For misbehaving, for not knowing your lesson. Of course, that has completely changed.”

St. Patrick introduced Christianity to Ireland in 432, and after his death, the Irish monasteries he founded became centers of scholarship known throughout the Christian world. For centuries, Ireland has been among the world’s greatest producers of missionaries.

Moroney points out that the historical commitment of the Irish to their Catholic faith is in part due to nationalistic concerns. “The Irish were persecuted for their faith for centuries. To be a Catholic in Ireland under British rule was very difficult,” he says. “The whole background of defending the faith instilled a great amount of dedication and commitment to faith that’s always been a part of Irish history.”

The Irish have suffered for their Catholicism virtually from the moment they accepted it. Viking raiders of the eighth century sacked monasteries as they pillaged their way through the countryside. The long history of English colonialism of Ireland is replete with stories of British monarchs executing and imprisoning Roman Catholic clergy, including the celebration of Mass, confiscating land from Catholics and denying them political rights.

Religious persecution of Irish Catholics was only fully halted in 1921, when the 26 southern counties that made up the Republic of Ireland gained independence from Great Britain. The minority Catholic population in Northern Ireland believes itself to be discriminated against by the Protestant majority.

Moroney says that being reared Catholic in Ireland marked him with a sense that God will see his people through tough times.

“I feel that life has a tremendous amount of goodness and that goodness will prevail,” he says. “That’s how we grew up, with the idea that life is good, and that though things might be bad, if you stick with it, things will work out. Maybe not like you expect, but you will make it through.”

“In our American culture, we have a tendency to overreact, to be crisis-oriented about things. In Irish culture, we say, ‘Well, life is not perfect at all times, but the Lord does prevail.’”

A lot of culture is supported by the Catholic Church. When you live in a country that’s 95 percent Catholic, most everything comes to you by way of the church, he declares. “It has always been able to prevail, and come back stronger than ever.”

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At age 20, while living in London and doing social work on weekends for a halfway house, Moroney came in contact with two priests. They influenced him to consider becoming a priest. Six years later, he was ordained a priest of the Baton Rouge Diocese.

Moroney didn’t have much choice but to leave Ireland. In those days, one had to go to a prep school to be a priest in one’s home diocese. Moroney hadn’t done that. Plus, Ireland had a surfeit of priests in those days. Many Irish priests were leaving for other countries.

Moroney served at St. Mary in New Roads, St. Charles Borromeo, Redemptorist High School and St. Isidore before taking the pastorate at Our Lady of Mercy. His two decades in Louisiana have softened his Irish brogue. The easygoing nature of south Louisianians and their commitment to their families remind Moroney of the Irish.

In Ireland, St. Patrick’s Day is a holy day of obligation as well as a national holiday. Moroney says, “The celebration with green beer and all that is really American. In Ireland, it’s really a day of rest.”

At Our Lady of Mercy, no big fuss is made over St. Patrick’s Day. But it’s not quite business as usual.

Says Moroney: “We celebrate noon Mass in honor of St. Patrick. We sing Irish hymns in his honor. (Parishioner) Pat Shingleton is involved in all that. Sometimes I go to the parade. I offer up a Mass for unity and peace in Ireland.”

Once a year, Moroney makes it back home with his family. Ireland has changed much since he first left. As in the rest of Europe, the church doesn’t claim the allegiance it once did. Just as he fears the popularity of television is causing the traditional Irish skill in storytelling, he says, is Moroney concerned that moves toward cultural integration with Europe will dilute Ireland’s commitment to the Catholic faith and its sense of national identity. Yet he is hopeful.

“Ireland has preserved its Catholicism through many attacks throughout its history,” he declares. “It has always been able to prevail, and come back stronger than ever.”

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