

# Ireland's gift to Florida

Diocese of Venice  
home to 17 priests  
who left Emerald Isle  
to serve church here



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The Rev. Thomas Anglim was a college student of 18, already planning to dedicate his life to the Roman Catholic Church, when an American priest came to his class in Ireland to speak of the Florida missions.

"I remember he spoke of the beautiful climate. I had pictures in my head of how the flowers were always blooming and of trees that were always green," Anglim recalled.

Though the visiting priest neglected to give an equally vivid description of Florida's long, hot summers, said Anglim, now pastor of St. Francis Xavier parish in Fort Myers and vicar general of the Diocese of Venice, "Florida summers are not too much of a problem for Irishmen, because the climate in Ireland doesn't exactly have a plethora of sunshine. He really sold me Florida."

The Rev. Edward McLoughlin, now 35, knew he'd leave Ireland to become a priest in Florida when he was still a boy, one of 17 brothers and sisters gathered around the family table listening to his uncle tell of the mission work here. McLoughlin's uncle, who still serves as a priest in Tampa, came here from Ireland in 1933. On his yearly visits home, he told his nephews of the terrible shortage of priests as thousands of northern Catholics began to migrate south to Florida. McLoughlin and his brother Nicholas are now priests at St. Charles Borromeo parish in Port Charlotte. A third brother, Luke, is a priest in Jacksonville.

The Rev. David Page, pastor of St. James Cathedral in Orlando, wanted to be a missionary to Africa, but his superiors in the seminary told him he had to choose an English-speaking country — either the United States, England or Australia. He chose to come to Florida 28 years ago because it was the closest the church could place him to his sister in New Jersey.



ANGLIM

Anglim, McLoughlin and Page are members of the FBI — foreign-born Irish — as their parishioners have dubbed them. Page, who wrote a brochure about the history of Irish priests in Florida, estimates that 30 to 40 percent of the active priests in Florida were born and raised in Ireland.

The Diocese of Venice, which includes Southwest Florida, is home to 17 Irish priests. Bishop John Nevins was born in New York, but his mother was from Ireland. On the hot summer day in 1984 that Nevins was appointed to this newly formed diocese, Catholic church secretaries throughout the area had to get on the telephone to Ireland to notify their vacationing pastors.

When the first Floridian diocese, St. Augustine, was formed in 1870, Bishop Augustine Verot, a Frenchman, sent to Ireland to find priests because that nation had more than it could use and they already spoke English. Verot's successors continued and enlarged upon the tradition. About half of the state's early bishops were from Ireland, Page said.

"The modern flow of priests from Ireland to Florida began about the 1880s and intensified from the 1920s on, especially in the '40s and '50s," he said. Irish college students who promised to serve the church in Florida had their seminary education paid for by the Florida diocese would serve.

In recent years, the number of Irish missionaries to Florida has slowed, in part because young Floridians are now studying for the priesthood but mainly be-



DAN FITZPATRICK/News-Press

The Rev. Edward McLoughlin knew since he was a boy that he'd leave Ireland to become a priest in Florida. McLoughlin was influenced by his uncle, who was a priest in the U.S.

cause Ireland is no longer overflowing with young priests.

"They have enough for themselves, but not for the rest of the world," Page said. "The dioceses here are happy to get them, but it is difficult."

Although they get homesick for Ireland's mountains and streams and the vivid colors of its earth and vegetation, Florida's Irish priests say they would not trade their American parishes for Irish ones. They go home each summer to visit — the McLoughlin brothers take their 45 nieces and nephews en masse to McDonald's and a movie — and they also congregate at Irish events in Southwest Florida, such as the St. Patrick's Day parade in Venice.

On Monday, St. Patrick's Day, Bishop Nevins will dedicate a new retirement center at St. Charles Borromeo, where three out of four priests are Irish.

While St. Patrick's Day in Ireland is the only day in Lent when Catholics are exempt from whatever sacrifice they have made for the holy season, McLoughlin said, the character of the day is far different than it is in the United States. The Irish consider American practices, such as dying beer or rivers or painting streets green, quite bizarre.

In Ireland, it is a national holiday with a religious origin: St. Patrick was the English priest who converted the Irish to Christianity.

"We wear little badges with the colors of the flag — green, white and orange — to remind us of our faith," McLoughlin said. "The majority of the Irish people go

to Mass, then they go to a parade. But the parades never start before Mass. Even if the President is not a Catholic, he still goes to St. Patrick's Day services at his own church."

Differences over the proper observance of St. Patrick's Day aside, Anglim believes that Irish priests adapt easily to the United States. "The Irish mentality has a lot in common with the American mentality: We are fun-loving and we are freedom-loving," he said.

The fine science of blarney helps the Irish priests over the rough spots, Anglim said. He takes his definition of blarney from the late Bishop Fulton Sheen, who compared it to baloney.

"He said that baloney is the unvarnished lie laid on so thick you hate it, while blarney is flattery laid on so thin you love it," Anglim said. "I think blarney is a science. It's the ability to deflect the good in other people and make them aware of that good and feel good about that good. It's authentic, common-sense psychology, and that's no baloney."

The biggest difference Anglim found between Americans and the Irish when he arrived at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore in 1950, he said, was the work ethic.

"The Irish have a balance between the need to work and the need for physical and mental relaxation," he said. "It's a good approach because it wards off burnout and controls tension and pressure. I felt a tremendous

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emphasis on work when I came over here. I have never met an Irish workaholic or an Irish person who is a victim of burnout. Work is a means to an end, not an end in itself."

McLoughlin recalled a more profound sense of culture shock when he arrived to study theology at St. Vincent de Paul Seminary in Boynton Beach.

"You can't explain Florida to people," he said, recalling why all of his uncle's and brothers' stories had not completely prepared him. "You can explain sunshine and beaches and palm trees and the tremendous contrasts in wealth and poverty, but not until you get here does it sink in."

McLoughlin is glad that he was able to adapt to the culture shock as a student, rather than arriving in America as a fully ordained priest. He recalled how important it was to live in a seminary community.

"I had been here for three months when my father died," he said. "When I came back from the funeral, the warmth and caring of the priests and students turned everything around for me."

In fact, after some initial confusion, such as asking for a lift when he was looking for an elevator, McLoughlin found that he liked the American character.

"People here are more honest, in a way," he said. "If you ask an Irish person a question, he'll answer with a question. Americans will tell you exactly what is on their mind. They either like you or they dislike you. At least you know where you stand."

He found enjoyable differences in the parishes as well.

"People are far more involved in parish work over here," he said. When he gives talks at retreats, everyone from children to senior citizens engages in serious discussion of what he said. Members of the parish take communion to the sick, counsel unwed mothers, try to bring alienated Catholics back into the church and keep the priests informed about which parishioners need their attention, he said. It is for that reason that McLoughlin would not want to go back to work in Ireland.

"You have so much lay involvement, and that is good for the priests; it keeps the priests very, very human," he said. "You get to know the needs of different people. In Ireland the priest does everything and the people aren't allowed to get that much involved. Here, nearly from womb to tomb, the laity are all involved working with the priests. They all look for the betterment of the parish."

While Anglim believes that priests in Ireland aren't nearly as autocratic now as they were in his boyhood, he has his own reason — somewhat the opposite of McLoughlin's — for not wanting to serve a parish in Ireland. Except in the larger cities, he said, there simply isn't that much for the Irish priests to do.

"I don't think I'd be able to just sit around. I like to work," he said.

Likewise, Page has no desire to pastor a parish in his native land.

"I couldn't ask for a better place to serve than Florida," he said. "The church here is alive and a priest has more scope to use his talents than in Ireland, where the church is more bound by tradition. The parishes there are all set. There is no building going on, except in a few areas. People are content to say, 'We've always

can Catholics are more secular than their Irish counterparts is largely a myth, say the Irish priests.

"The Catholics here are among the best Catholics in the world," Page said. "There is so much temptation here that that brings out some things that are not so good, but it also brings out the best as well. Catholics here tend to be more committed to their faith. Christianity over there tends to be more of a tradition than a living thing."

McLoughlin believes that Ireland is heading into the same state of religious questioning that America experienced in the 1960s and '70s, while Americans are experiencing a religious renewal.

"There is a tremendous swing-back to religion here," he said. "Here at St. Charles, we have 10,000 to 11,000 people on a weekend and 1,000 each day during the week for Mass. If people say that America is secular, it is not. The Catholic that

practices is really a good and honest Catholic Christian and very supportive of the church."

While some people might mistake American Catholics' material possessions for a sign of secularism, Anglim said. "American Catholics are very generous. Human nature is the same everywhere, for the most part."

So why has the Irish church produced so many more priests proportionally than the American church? McLoughlin believes it has to do with Irish history and the role that Catholicism has played in the Irish identity.

"If you look back in Irish history, you see persecution because of religion," he said. "Just over 200 years ago, there was a price of 5 pounds on every priest's head and people were imprisoned for practicing their faith or even speaking the Irish language. Masses were held in the mountains with lookouts watching."

Although the conflict today in

Northern Ireland has its roots in civil rights for Catholics, rather than their right to worship as they choose, it is tied into the same heritage of religious repression, he said. One of McLoughlin's brothers owned a pub just south of the border of Northern Ireland, where leaders of the various factions in the war used to hold clandestine negotiations. "We would meet them there when we visited the pub and it made us more aware of what they were struggling for," he said.

McLoughlin loves the American tradition of democracy and religious freedom. He is frustrated that he is not yet an American citizen and therefore cannot vote.

"I hate it that I can't vote yet," he said. "I look at the number here that can vote and the number that actually do. I ask myself, do these people realize the freedom they have? That is what has kept Ireland's faith and language alive, even to this day."