

The Bells of St. Thomas

Kevin O'Madden

Irish is who we are. I was told that all me life...my life. Me...my father was Irish. My mother was Irish. My grandparents were Irish. Irish Catholic.

There's a moniker worth being labeled. My brother Shawn and I were altar boys. We were altar boys when being altar boys was cool. Going to a Catholic school in the early 60's, being Irish, we were shoe-ins. But, being the early 60's it had its "trials of the soul".

When we started altar boy training, the Catholic mass was still said in Latin. Consequently we had to memorize all the prayers in Latin. All the prayers.

Then Vatican II happened. I didn't know there was a Vatican I, much less that you could make more. The consequence of Vatican II was that the Catholic Mass would now be said in the native tongue of the participants.

You guessed it. We now had to relearn all the prayers in ENGLISH. This has nothing to do with the story; I was just fishing for sympathy.

Any way, we were altar boys at a small, I'd like to say run down, but I believe "humble" is more appropriate, parish in urban Columbus Ohio. Shawn and I were great at serving the Latin mass, all you really had to do was begin with Dominae, and end with Deum Nostrum, with a lot of passionate and sincere mumbling in between. As long as you "hit your mark" on stage (the altar), rang the chimes at the appropriate time, let the priest determine how much wine goes in the chalice, don't giggle at the participants sticking their tongue out for the host, you were a "Knight of the Altar".

With the advent of English prayers, depending on the priest, you could squeak by or be the recipient of a glare that you knew meant, "You'll obviously never amount to anything, AND will probably spend the better part of eternity roasting in purgatory". But we were successful, and obviously preferred as supporting cast members in the celebration of "The Passion of The Savior", brought to you every Sunday at 7, 9, 10:30 and noon. I used to believe we were so good at it that we were requested, but in reality, it may have been because Father O'Keefe knew the Maddens always came to 9 o'clock mass and that they always brought a pair of trained altar boys who could be drafted for the masses that may or may not have servants attending. In the hierarchy of altar boys, the older and more experienced were the ones who got to do the large productions like "High Mass", high holy days in the church, weddings, baptisms, and funerals. Shawn and I were grunts. Merely foot soldiers in the trenches. We never did the really elaborate pageants of faith.

Except this one time.

I believe the scheduled acolytes were unavailable due to weather or illness, but at the end of mass one Sunday, Fr. O'Keefe asked Dad,(we had no input in the decision), if Shawn and I could do a funeral, scheduled at 2pm that day.

"Of course, my boys would be honored father."



Now a Catholic funeral involves a grand procession down the center aisle led by two altar boys, with hands folded, followed by another altar boy bearing a tall staff affixed with a crucifix, and the priest, followed by two more altar boys (me and Shawn). When we all arrived on stage, those not actually serving the mass, sat, kneeled, stood and bowed on cue, on a bench to the left of the altar. That is where my brother and I were.

Keep in mind this was 2pm, Shawn and I had been at church since 8:30.

A Catholic requiem mass has a great deal of chanting, singing, incense and oration. If you don't have a leading role in the event, and you've missed you're traditional after church pancake breakfast, and lunch, it is understandable that at some time during the solemn chanting and incense burning, you might tend to doze.

While returning to conscience at one point, I realized everyone else was kneeling, and here I was enjoying a little nap time on my little bench right up there in front of God and everybody. I quickly fell to my knees, or that's how it started. I actually had my cassock (the black robe), caught under my left foot, and as I threw myself forward, the front of the robe jerked me down prostrate on the dais. Now, my knees had the robe pinned to the floor, pulling my upper body down toward my belly button, with my forehead solidly in the carpet. Sister Mary Nevergets mad, whom we all loved, said I looked like the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus when Our Lord called on him.

Sister Beatrice Scaryperson had quite another take on the event. The glare from Fr. O'Keefe threw doubt on my chances of even making Purgatory. From here it just went down hill.

Most of the remainder of the Mass for the Dead swims in my memory as a slow march of doom. Even Shawn, who was more than familiar with my short comings in anything requiring strict adherence to protocol, ceremony, and sanctity, was trying to distance himself from the inevitable fallout of his brother's nincompooery.

The conclusion of the formal service is followed by a similar procession by the troupe back down the center aisle, leading the pallbearers and the casket of the dearly departed out the front doors of the church.

However... Fr. O'Keefe, wanting to avoid the possibility of this solemn event collapsing into something that might warrant the attention of the Bishop, told Shawn and I "you boys tend the bells"

Shawn and I had never "tended the bells". Not even for the simple noon ringing that used to be common back in the day.

There we stood. Both of us staring at the rope.

What do we do? I don't know, just pull it. O.K., how hard? I don't know, I've never done this. Don't look at me, I ain't done it either.

Shawn reached up and pulled down steadily on the rope. A very slight "pong" came from some where above us.

This is harder than I thought. Gimme a hand.

Both of us grabbed it and gave it a mighty shove. BONG-BONG-BONG. The rope went up, we both jumped up and grabbed it pulling it down while we bent our knees, and landed on the floor in a squatting position while still grasping the rope.

BONGBONGBONGBONGBONG.

Ohhhh yeah! We got it now by golly!
Up we went, grinning like gargoyles.

BONGBONGBONGBONGBONGBONGBONG.

The door crashed open. There stood Fr. O'Keefe. His white hair which is always combed and properly slicked to his head, stood out in thick strands looking just like the Great and Powerful Oz. His eyes bulged, I know this because I



had never seen bulging eyes before, but the sight of his eyes confirmed my mental image was dead on. Though there was no possibility of wind in the belfry, his robes and vestments were flowing as if by a mighty tempest.

JAYSOOS MAUREEE EN JOUSEFFFF, WHAT IN DE NAME O GOD ARE YE BOIS DOIN?????

He stepped up grabbed the rope, stopped it in mid swing, the bells went BAbnk.
ONE RING, SAY ONE HAIL MARY, ANOTHER RING, SAY ONE HAIL MARY, A THIRD RING, SAY THREE HAIL MARYS AND START OVER!!! CAN YE DO THAT BOYS?

...yes father.

ARE YE BOTH SURE O THAT?

...yes father

Alright then boys, keep that up till someone comes to tell you to stop. Remember, one Hail Mary between rings, three rings, three Hail Marys and start again. Got it right?

...yes father

To this day I know, I mean I KNOW the proper sequence of bell tolls for a Catholic Requiem Mass. Not that I ever got the chance to do it again.