

CHRISTMAS CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

Paddy Travers

AS A YOUNG BOY growing up in rural north Leitrim in the nineteen fifties, Christmas Eve was the most wonderful magical day of the year.

We always set off early that morning to purchase the Christmas provisions. The village was thronged with shoppers from an early hour. All the little shops were bustling and busy. My eyes would glisten at the dazzle, the glitter, the tinsel, the cakes and the sweets—a feast to the eyes of a country child. People stopped to meet and greet friends and neighbours and wish each other Happy Christmas. Others hurried along laden down with bags and with brown paper parcels. The boys and girls home from England for the holiday were swapping tales about life in Cricklewood, Coventry, Bedford or Birmingham. The little village was aglow with fellowship and good cheer.

Before going home we always went to confession. The Church was packed with people of all ages. The parish priest—a cranky severe man—was never busy with customers! Men who hadn't darkened the door of a confessional for a year or more shuffled sheepishly along and joined the throng waiting for the curate. My mother, a practical woman with a busy day still ahead, was glad to join the short queue for the Parish Priest.

When we arrived home the animals needed to be fed. They always got a special treat at Christmas. The cows got a sheaf of oats as well as the usual stall of hay. The donkey wasn't forgotten. He was very special. The cross on his back was a reminder that it was the donkey who carried Mary to Bethlehem.

The postman was a welcome visitor to every house on Christmas Eve. He brought the last of the letters, cards and gifts from friends and relations at home and abroad. As our house was almost the last house on

his round, he was in the mood for celebration. As he relaxed beside the fire with a whiskey or two he relayed all the latest news of the parish. Darkness had always well and truly descended before he delivered his last card, told his last story and faced his wobbly bicycle for home.

Before long it was time to get ready for midnight Mass. First we placed a candle in the window to welcome the Holy Family and light them on their way. As we travelled along the little quiet road in the cold clear air, the only sound was our feet crunching through the snow. All around was quiet, calm, and serene, as if the entire world was holding its breath. The fragile light from the candles in each house on the mountainside speckled the velvety darkness. As we got closer to the Church the crowds increased, bicycles whirred along the road, some with lights, others without. The hum of conversation rose and fell. People exchanged banter and greetings. The parish priest cruised by in his Austin A40...we all quickened our step.

I loved midnight Mass...the excitement of being up so late, the old Church glittering with candle and lamplight, the lovely carol singing, the mingling aroma of incense and candle wax, the crib with the infant Jesus—all made a powerful impression on my young mind.

The Priest entered in his white vestments, slowly climbed the altar steps, bowed before the Tabernacle, and solemnly intoned *'Introibo ad Altare Dei'*. The altar servers responded *'Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem*

meum'. The congregation reached for their rosary beads as midnight Mass commenced.

The Church was always full for midnight Mass. The porch was particularly crowded. Men who weren't regular Mass goers during the year, went no further than the porch, kneeling on one knee, head bowed, where they escaped the attention and the wagging tongues of the holy Josies further up the Church. Not everybody had their minds on the ceremony. The sexes were segregated—men on the right, women on the left. Some of the local lads stood strategically placed in the porch, leaning out of sight, against a pillar or a doorpost, with an unimpeded view of every woman on the other side of the Church. They closely surveyed each and every one of the local girls who were back home for the Christmas holidays—calculating their chance of success on St Stephens night at the dance in the parish hall.

As we streamed out of the Church to head for home, my journey was full of excitement and anticipation. Santa was already surely on his way. Where was he now? He must be getting close? Maybe he had arrived already? Full of wide eyed wonder, I searched the starry sky for prancing reindeers.

I didn't know it then...but that short journey home from midnight Mass, as a young boy, all those years ago, was probably one of the happiest and most exciting journeys of my entire life.

Olwyn McCartin, Newtowngore, with Santa Claus!

