

Reminiscence Project

Religious customs and occasions

Religious observance was an important part of early life for most Irish people. Although it is still important and a comfort for many, some may have stopped practicing or believing. For various reasons some people have actively rejected the religion they were raised in and the subject must be handled sensitively.

However, for those who are comfortable with the topic, it can be a wellspring of memories and recalling the rituals, prayers and hymns can be emotionally and cognitively stimulating. It is important not to assume all participants are Catholic as some will identify with a Protestant tradition. The difference (if any) can generate discussion probably highlighting what is shared, rather than what differs.

Some useful questions to trigger discussion

Did you go to church on Sundays? What did you wear?
Was it very different to modern services? (if applicable)
Can you remember any of the prayers or responses? Do you still have a favourite hymn?
Were your family religious? Did you pray as a family?
Did you have religious pictures or images at home?
Did you wear any religious symbols like medals?
Did your family say the Rosary? Could you still “give out” the Rosary?
Do you remember your first Holy Communion/Confirmation?
Do you remember what you wore? Was there a celebration?
What did you eat on Fridays? What did you give up for Lent?
Did your house have “the Stations”?
Did you ever go on a pilgrimage to a local shrine/Knock/Croagh Patrick?
Do you remember any funny stories about family prayers, religious services or celebrations?

Some background information

Irish people from either Catholic or Protestant traditions might well recall the long sermons that invoked guilt, fear of hell and eternal damnation. Reminiscence is not therapy, but fear and guilt may have been internalised and this might be an opportunity for life review.

All might be able to recite prayers and sing hymns and older Catholics might recall Latin responses to the Mass or liturgy. People from the Northern Irish Protestant tradition might well recall Sunday as a very serious day of rest when children from deeply religious families were not allowed to play. Playgrounds and swings were closed on Sundays for a time.

Families from either tradition may have been religious so things like saying grace at mealtimes, prayer or bible reading might have been routine at home. Pictures or statues (iconography) were frowned upon at different times but homes may have had symbols of their religion in pride of place. Catholic families are likely to have said the Rosary every evening with different family members “giving out” and the rest responding. Children (and some adults) would have worn symbols like a crucifix, miraculous medal or scapular to keep them safe. The Angelus chimed from churches, the radio and latterly TV at noon and six pm and people stopped to pray.

Communion and Confirmation were much simpler than they are today and different between Catholic and Protestant traditions. They are generally a rich seam of memories. The “stations” tended to be a more rural (Catholic) custom where Mass was said in a different house once each year. This was a great honour and involved cleaning and decorating the house and garden.

Mass was held on the kitchen table, with the candlesticks every self-respecting Catholic home owned. Breakfast was provided for the priest, using the best (often borrowed) china, grapefruit, butter rolls for his bread and lump sugar for his tea. A buffet for the neighbours followed often with music and dancing into the night.

Despite the strictness of church and religion, older people often recall things like getting the giggles in church, giving the wrong responses or other youthful mishaps.

Some useful resources

A helpful account can be found in Alice Taylor’s *To School Through the Fields* (Brandon). Chapters (i) Preparing for the Stations and (ii) Beneath Gods Altar

<https://faithinlaterlife.org/news-blog-what-happens-to-faith-when-christians-get-dementia/>

<https://sixtyandme.com/the-surprising-relationship-between-dementia-and-faith-communities/>