

Tonight at 6:45: The
Sorrowful Mother Novena
in Sacred Heart Church.

University of Notre Dame
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Sunday at all Masses: An
explanation of the new
Holy Week Ritual.

St. Patrick's Day In The Morning

At times you wonder if some "professional" Irish don't oversell this commodity, because fact and fiction blend so easily with them that they never let arithmetic spoil a good story. But in tomorrow's feast there are still one or two things worth sifting and remembering. In Ireland, St. Patrick's Day is more than a legend -- it's a Holy Day of Obligation; later, a good day for a parade, as the people pay tribute to this apostle who early in the Fifth Century brought the Faith to a pagan country, and planted it so firmly that it persists today. And history attests that when the light of learning went out all over Europe, Ireland was the candle that burned throughout the long night. It is also interesting to note that Ireland falls outside the familiar European experience -- it is a land without heresy; nor has the Church there ever felt the hand of reform.

In material things, Ireland is a poor country. Maybe that's why she never knew the precise coincidence of conditions that tend to encourage a decline of Faith from within. Since her enemies were always from without, the Irish and their Faith never had a chance to go soft from prosperity, and success, and peace. They're a good example of the paradox that touches the heart of Christianity, namely that "the Catholic Church is never less secure than when its status in the world seems most privileged." In Ireland there were plunderers before Henry VIII and Elizabeth -- when clergy and churches were equally victims with the laity. Then came Cromwell; and after that the Penal Laws (no churches, no schools -- only the Family Rosary), whose punishments could be escaped only by denying one's Faith. No wonder that out of this crucible of persecution there emerged a tough, Christian metal!

Once, when someone asked what the Irish do for entertainment, a contemptuous wag replied: "They go to Church." The quip is not totally without truth, and is revealed in their fidelity to Sunday Mass. It also reveals not only a "sense of the sacred," but a respect for the things that matter. For example, no one would think of a wedding outside Mass. And there's a similar feeling about servile work on Sunday. That's why Ireland sends as many priests to foreign fields as she keeps at home. It also helps to explain why she has the lowest crime-rate in the world. In short, they are not ones who dilute their spiritual life by specious theological reasoning that religion is for women and children only, or that it is for Sunday only. Nor do their priests coddle them. Quite bluntly and directly they will tell you, or anyone else, that you can't be a healthy Catholic while observing the habits of a healthy pagan. It's little wonder that they forge a link between a strong Faith and a virtuous life.

Among material-minded people, the great sin is Poverty -- not much else is to be feared or avoided, unless it be disease. Alongside this standard the Irish have failed miserably. But in eternity it may turn out to be their greatest asset -- because it's amazing what things the wolf of poverty has kept away from the Irish door -- the luxury, and comfort, and ease that beget indifference and idleness, and so choke the spiritual life that presently a people forget God!

And so, a moment's reflection on tomorrow's feast brings home the striking truth that there is much more to being Irish than simply parading down Broadway, or wearing a sprig of green in your lapel or shouting: "Go Irish, Go!". National pride can be more than a little silly, unless one holds steadfastly to the Irish heritage, and to the elements that made a people great. The term, "Fighting Irish" could hardly be applied to a Notre Dame man who forgets his Faith, or barter ethical principles for dollar diplomacy, or stifles his conscience in casting aside the Ten Commandments. The Faith is responsible for our name. Without the Faith it wouldn't mean a thing. Our title fits only if we keep the Faith. Tomorrow, then, whatever your antecedents be, pray to St. Patrick for a Faith so strong that it will survive the ravage of our time.

Tomorrow: There is a general exemption from the laws of fast and abstinence.