



The World Community for Christian Meditation

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Bere Island School

Dear friends,

Many hearts must have sighed at the recent Tablet photo of the cardinal robed in his *capa magna* posing before a celebration the Tridentine rite, the long trail of scarlet silk like a beautiful serpent daimon out of Philip Pullman, held at the right distance by a devout altar boy. Similar looks of frozen solemnity appear in many similar sepia photos of the past, sacred tradition pressing down on weighty prelates, majestic memory enshrined in rituals and gorgeous vestments. They seem reminders of a real or imagined era when people knew where God wanted them to be in His hierarchy.

It is nice to know that ancient chants and fragrances of worship can be used again. The photo could also be read however as a very modern statement about the tradition of modernity. This is marked by a pluralism of styles (including nostalgia and restorationism). The modern church has learned to allow complementary rites to coexist simultaneously and non-competitively, Gregorian here, folk mass there, as different windows can be pulled up on a computer screen. Tradition has an odd way of updating itself.

A simpler and humbler experience of tradition hit me recently. It was at a small Irish island school where Mrs Toomey was retiring after thirty-six years of service. The number of primary schoolchildren drawn from a total resident population of two hundred hovers about twenty-five. When they are twelve years old they graduate to a daily commute on the ferry to the secondary school on the mainland. Mrs Toomey lives in town on the mainland and so has made the twice daily trip for her whole career.

She recalled her first appointment as assistant teacher. She had got her teaching diploma but was uncertain what to do and was working at her father's petrol station in town. As she was filling a car one day the parish priest came up to her and asked her about her plans. She explained she didn't have anything definite in mind and he said, 'right so, you'll teach on the island then.' She was hired. Bureaucracy and selection processes have come a long way since then, she remarked during her farewell speech. Despite her fear of water she accepted the appointment - for a year. About ten years ago the ferry half-sank as it was docking and

she was thrown in the water and had to swim to the jetty. Since then she (and her pupils) have always worn a life-jacket.

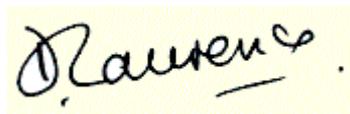
Parents, devoted former pupils and friends gathered in the classroom to celebrate her. Her students, who now cover the globe, grew up on the island with a local identity that time or distance cannot erode. In the hard times most islanders were compelled to emigrate, for the Americas, England or Australia. Today, they would usually prefer to stay; or they feel drawn back to live the better quality of life, raise their children in a healthier and happier environment, to be part of a community rather than an urban crowd. It is a simple life. Every night after the last ferry it feels as if the drawbridge has been raised. But it is no longer primitive and, as in any real community, full of things to do and stories to tell.

Mrs Toomey spoke with great composure and all the confidence of a teacher in her classroom. Then, as she realized that a chapter of her life was ending with her words, her tears began to flow, to the delight of her audience, and she sat down to watch the slideshow. It seemed an endless sequence of class photos of no great photographic merit and for me they quickly became a blur. But around me each slide evoked cries of recognition, faces named, younger selves laughed at, questions raised, and life-histories updated. The homely liturgy ended with a toast.

An old islander once told me how they had entertained themselves before television. People would venture out at night, in all weathers, and make their way to a neighbour's house where they would sit, over a ritual tea or Jamison, and retell the stories that renewed the community. Family histories would be recounted again, with a final update, a child born in Boston, a death in Sydney.

Tradition (literally a 'passing on') lives on compound interest, not by burying the talent in the ground, by risking change not turning the clock back. People confident in their community are realistic about change. An American visitor to the island once complained because a tree in front of his father's old house was being taken down to make way for a new driveway. 'My father used to climb it,' he said. 'Ah but it wasn't there a long time before your father was,' remarked an old man, making everything clear to those who had ears to hear.

Much love,

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow background. The signature reads "Laurence" in a cursive script, followed by a period.

Laurence Freeman OSB

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