

## Peace on Earth and Mercy Mild

Ours was a Catholic family that had been in Steubenville for at least five generations by the time I was born. Our parish, St. Peter's, had been established and consecrated by the Irish immigrant John Baptist Purcell, then bishop of Cincinnati, in 1835. In 1850 he was appointed archbishop. There are a number of interesting coincidences in the stories of St. Peter's, Archbishop Purcell, and me, and I will lay them out in due course. But first, some holiday season cultural and family background.

As a boy in Steubenville, I was drawn deeply, if not willingly, into the sternly pious Irish-American version of Catholicism. Part of an extended family that included on the Madigan side my still-living great-grandmother, Maria, her four daughters and five sons and all of their children, and on the Hague side, my grandmother and grandfather, my dad and his brothers, all but one of whom still lived in Steubenville during my boyhood, and my own siblings. All told, there must have been fifty members of the clan in town at that time. Most attended Mass at St. Peter's, in the North End, where a few large stone mansions stood, remnants of the Gilded Age wealth extracted by the region's coal, steel, and railroads. On the most sacred highday masses, Christmas and Easter, just behind the dozen wimpled and rosary-beaded nuns who taught in St. Peter's school, the most prestigious pews would be occupied by my relatives, properly prayer-booked and all dressed up.

This was before Vatican II. Women and girls still wore hats or mantillas in church, respectfully covering their heads, and everyone stopped and genuflected before entering the pew. Invariably, some sleepy boy would be distracted when one or another great auntie took a knee, and he'd rear-end her and nearby congregants would muffle a laugh as the old lady caught herself and scowled. Or there would be some near-sighted altar boy, trying to light the high candles with an irritating instrument consisting of a long brass tube, from the end of which protruded a long, limp waxen taper, burning at its end. The boy was to dip this somehow over the brass metal retainer at the tops of the most towering candles and light them. As he

failed and failed, his neck would turn bright red above his surplice, and his body language would approach panic. My father would get so worked up over such a boy's fumbling efforts, sparks and burning taper dropping onto the linen altar cloth, that I feared he would jump up and run down the aisle, storm the altar, and snatch the thing out of the kid's hands.

The distracted sleepy boy who bumped his aunt was me, whose father was also fanatic about not being late to Mass. So on Christmas Eve, when we all attended the solemn midnight celebration, we'd be in the church parking lot by 10:45pm or so, and we would not return home until about 1 or 1:15. In those two and half hours, we would be caroled by the combined men's and boy's choir, organ-blasted by the ecstatic Mrs. Gilligan, choired, blessed with holy water, nimbused by incense, thrilled by Latin, choired some more, homilied, belled, communioned, and then caroled again, only to step out into the blackest and coldest night to wind our way back through the snowbound downtown and up the switchbacks of the high ridge we lived on. Then, at last, to bed.

Which bed wouldn't last long. Because my father, devout as he was, insisted that we attend the second High Mass of Christmas, this one at 10'oclock on Christmas morning. But it too had a half hour of caroling before Mass, so we'd leave at about 8:45, sit in the parking lot a bit, then enter church, where another two hours, more or less, of worship would begin again.

I confess that often I was not "present" at the second Christmas Mass. In my sleep-deprived pre-adolescent state, I would find myself drifting off, having wearied myself at last by gawking to my right and left, to see if anyone interesting— that is, some pretty girl like Karen Harris, who lived just a few blocks away, in one of those fine 19<sup>th</sup> century mansions—was in attendance, in all her beauty and finery.

Only after all this would we be dismissed with the cheerful Latin imperative: "Ite, missa est"—Go, the Mass is over." We'd get back home, eat something sweet and quick—maybe some pizzelles, thin Italian cookies my mom learned to make from her Neopolitan friends, and then we'd open presents. Given the interrupted sleep and the bursts of liturgical excitement and fatigue, it all seemed anticlimactic. "But wait!" some offstage announcer might have interjected at this point:

“There’s more!” Because Christmas Day always ended with a big family dinner; in my earlier years this meant with Great Grandma Madigan, Grandma Heights and Grandma Hague, Pap Pap, my great-great aunt Aggie, my great-aunties Dorothy, Miriam, and Leona, and my brother and sister. Dennis and Debbie fidgeted and gaped while the aunties, smelling of talcum powder and old roses, mostly smiled dreamily and didn’t hear very well. Sometimes, the gathering might even include a great-uncle or two, maybe the red-faced Andrew Madigan, drinker of swamping amounts of black coffee who had, back in his whiskey days, once visited Ireland, or the lean toper Paul Madigan, whose two children, one of whom was to work for the CIA or the FBI (it was never clear) and the other of whom hardly spoke, would grow up to be among the strangest of my cousins. It was as exhausting as it sounds.

Had I known then what I know now, though, I might have had some exciting conversational gambits to toss out between courses to stir up the table talk.

“Little do we realize, sitting here tonight,” I might have precociously begun, “that I would be teaching for forty-five years in a school named after John Baptist Purcell, the consecrator of our very own St. Peter’s. As a matter of fact,” I would say, ignoring their indignant protestations, “As a matter of fact, he was the fellow who bought the land the church was built on. From no others than Bezaleel Wells and James Ross. The latter gentlemen, I need not remind you, were the very founders of Steubenville, Ross having settled in the Indian land forbidden to whites before the establishment of the Northwest Territory. He lived at first in a hollow sycamore tree.”

By now everyone would be squirming and mumbling, “Really, Dickie,” my mother would growl across the cranberry sauce. “Can’t you stifle yourself?”

“Or that the very priest who will inherit the title when the present Msgr., Henry Grigsby, bless his soul, dies in a few years—oh, yes, the brand new monsignor of St. Peter’s parish in Steubenville, will have attended Purcell High School as a boy. Not to mention Archbishop Purcell’s early invitation to the Sisters of Charity, who came from Maryland and would wind up co-sponsoring the later Purcell Marian...”

My grandfather at this point, deaf as he was from the railroad, would look around and see that something was afoot. “*What?*” he would shout. One of the

aunties would yell across at him, “He said ‘Archbishop Purcell! St. Peter’s! Sisters of Charity.’”

“*Hah?*” Ironhead—for that was my grandfather’s nickname, would shout, clapping his right hand behind his right ear to hear better. “*What?*”

Ironhead’s deafness was an apt metaphor for my own theological deafness at the time. Christmas then was never tangled up in the heady notions of the Incarnation, or the conditions of salvation, or in the substance of the catechism questions we had learned to answer not from our hearts but from the same secular parts of us that memorized the times tables. In college much later, I would ponder the finer points of Catholic theology and philosophy, but for that boy back in Steubenville, Christmas was about church pageantry, late, groggy hours, ancient music, glinting lights, beeswax candles, the smells of incense and perfume, and most of all, it was about our crazy, congenial family commotion. This would come to a head in that Christmas evening dinner with Ironhead and Miriam and Dorothy and Leona and all the rest.

After my bold accounting of the future that night, the aunties would run through their litanies of parish gossip and recent deaths, replete with interminable genealogies, bowing their heads and muttering “God rest his soul” and “God rest her soul,” and blessing themselves repeatedly with the sign of the cross. My father might sneak off later and pour himself and Ironhead a dram of Jameson’s, which they would sip in comfortable chairs in the family room, away from the kitchen clean-up hustle and bustle.

Steeltown Christmas: bonus checks in the pockets of steelworkers and railroaders and coal miners, butchers and clerks and paper boys. Huge steam engines still pounding through the valley. Our little house, on its high ridge, stuffed to bursting with food and tale-telling and kin. And outside it might be snowing, the hisses and seethes of the mills over the hill muffled and the sky a warm red over the open hearth furnaces. And the baby Jesus himself would be swaddled and snug, surrounded by tiny, worshipful plaster oxen and sheep, in hundreds of mantel-top crèches all over the God-blessed town.

