



EXPERIENCING IRISHNESS

BY RAYMOND AUMACK

There was Hoochie, Dimo, Cloudy, and Rags. There was Nu Nu, Jaybird, Birdie, Packer, and Bags. There was Butsy, Pecker, Salty, Soupie, Yosh, and Ching. We had two Bulls, Bear, Snake, Weasel, Tock, and Bugs. We had Bigger, Locketts, Cheeks, Chucker, and Butch. There were several Leftys and one Lefty Wright. There were several Reds, one Johnny Red, at least three Whiteys, and one Blackie. We also had Jim Jim, Sully, Guinea and his younger brother, Little Guinea. We had Alfie, Goldie, Hudder, Hick, Murph, and three Gunners (triplets). We also had Pickles, Scap and Bro. My nickname

was Oarlocks because Hoochie liked the sound. The girls we knew did much better but even among them there was a Perky and a Rocky.

These are the nicknames of the friends of my youth and the rest of my life. They were classmates, teammates, and neighbors. They include older role models and contemporaries. We all have honored Christian baptismal names but this is how we know each other. We all grew up in Bayonne, NJ. Most of us had an Irish heritage and lived in St. Mary's Parish.

We belonged to a social and athletic club called the Bayonne Celtics. The Celtics Club was founded in the late '40s by guys who wanted to continue the camaraderie they experienced in the military during WWII.

For two decades the Celtics provided dominant regional basketball and baseball teams. We played in community and county leagues, New York industrial leagues, against military teams, and even at Sing Sing Penitentiary.

As second generation Irish kids for the most part we were very well connected to our Catholic faith and to our parishes. It was a very special time of life and may never be experienced again. It was the last minute before television became dominant and our task in life was to discover and know one another, to socialize.

A couple of weeks ago we had the latest in a series of reunions. There were one hundred and five of us, remarkable because we are all in our seventies and eighties. So many of us have gone to the Kingdom of God, and others of us are no longer able to travel.

We gathered at St. Catharine's Church in Spring Lake for a reunion Mass, concelebrated by the priests among our fellow Celtics. The Liturgy was beautiful and touching as each of us experienced the warmth of the community's affection, a congregation where each of us knew everyone else's name and history. We shared celebrating and being the Body of Christ. We remembered well those who have gone to God before us, and prayed especially for our founder, Jerry Cougher, sport columnist for the Bayonne Times and the Jersey Journal.

An elegant cocktail hour and dinner extended the celebratory experience of the liturgy. The homilist at Mass was Fr. Victor Hoagland, a Passionist priest and the speaker at the dinner was Ken Kunzman. Both spoke of the uniqueness of our experience growing up in Bayonne in the late 40's, 50's, and early 60's.

The key point to remember from this story is the value of friendship and the bonding that occurred among us and continues to this day. We all know each other and most of us recognize each other's warts. What matters is the union of heart and mind, shared memories, and the acknowledgement of loving friends. We are bonded by the experience of growing up together, learning to appreciate one another, growing to respect each other, and finally, to love each other. We are bonded by our friendship, our faith and our "Irishness." I have to believe that somehow we are a microcosm of the community of Heaven.