

Dear Parishioners,

‘Does it bother you, living at number thirteen? Not a very lucky number, is it?’ So a visitor said to me recently. Catholics of course don’t believe in luck. We believe in Divine Providence, but all the same I was happy to tell him that when England was a Catholic country the number thirteen was considered a lucky number, suggesting as it did Our Lord assembled with His twelve Apostles. It’s just one example of the quite deliberate ‘reprogramming’ that took place in our country at the time of the Reformation. The state didn’t just set about destroying monasteries and shrines but also attempted to erase England’s Catholic memory.

Sadly they had a great deal of success. But you don’t have to look far to find things that slipped through the net. In a previous message I encouraged you to enjoy praying outdoors in your garden and in the countryside. Did you find Marigolds in your garden? Or come across Our Lady’s Slipper, Our Lady’s Mantle, Our Lady’s Smock, Our Lady’s Fingers, Our Lady’s Bedstraw, Our Lady’s Tresses, Our Lady’s Thistle or Our Lady’s Seal? All reminders of the time when England knew it was Our Lady’s Dowry. And crawling between the flowers you may also have spotted a Ladybird.

I hope you had your ‘breakfast’ this morning. In Catholic times many people went each day to a very early morning Mass, and of course fasted beforehand if they were going to receive Holy Communion. After Mass they ‘broke their fast’ with the first meal of the day before going off to the fields. Wedding Masses were usually celebrated early in the day too and the couple fasted before receiving Holy Communion. The reception afterwards was their ‘Wedding Breakfast.’

Perhaps they had their celebration in a pub called ‘The Salutation’, or ‘The Angel’ or ‘The Seven Stars’, all names which survive and which recall the Annunciation and Our Lady. Or they went instead to the ‘Crossed Keys’ which was almost certainly near a church dedicated to St Peter, the first Pope.

If you’ve ever said, ‘He hasn’t a halfpenny to bless himself with’, it comes from the pre-reformation practice of blessing oneself with the first coin you received that day. If you hadn’t received so much as a halfpenny you were indeed poor. Your house may have the name, ‘Dun Roaming’. It should of course be ‘Done Roming’. The word recalls England’s ancient devotion to the Holy See and the popularity of pilgrimages to the tomb of St Peter.

I hope you’ve never had cause to ‘Send someone to Coventry’, meaning to ‘snub’ someone. Apparently, unruly members of the Cistercian Order were sent to Coventry to cool off, in the hope that they would change their ways. Most of us have on at least one occasion come back from holiday having bought a souvenir that other people thought cheap or tasteless, like the trinkets that pilgrims used to buy around St Audrey’s shrine at Ely. Hence ‘Tawdry’.

If you watch proceedings in Parliament on television you’ll notice that MPs frequently bow towards the Speaker. It’s seen as a mark of respect for his office. But in fact it’s because Parliament used to meet in St Stephen’s Chapel in the Palace of Westminster and the custom of bowing towards the altar has been continued.

On St George’s Day the Queen and the other Knights of the Garter gather at Windsor for their annual service in St George’s Chapel. And splendid they all look in their blue

cloaks. Why blue? Because King Edward III founded the Order of the Garter to the 'honour of the Blessed Virgin'. On Our Lady's feasts knights used to wear a golden image of Our Lady on the right shoulder of their blue mantles.

A ship is never launched on a Friday because of a now forgotten respect for Our Lord's Passion. And on board ship sailors still salute the quarterdeck. The salute is given to the place where a crucifix always hung in Catholic days.

A flower which blossoms around the feast of St Michael in September is the MichaelMAS(S) Daisy. And of course ChristMAS(S) is still the highpoint of England's year.

And so on. Next time you're out and about, keep your eyes and ears open for the customs, names and sayings that speak of our country's past.

Many of the snippets for this week's message come from a little book, 'Catholic Trivia', by the late Fr Mark Elvins OFM(Cap). May he rest in peace. If his book is still in print, you might like to buy it. It's a cheerful read but has a genuine message. You've only to lift the hem of Britannia's cloak a little to find that she's Catholic underneath.

God bless you,

Father O'Shea