

RED DAHLIA PROJECT

NEWSLETTER

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Happy Easter! Happy Spring!

Easter - a celebration of spring and new life symbolized by the resurrection.

On PEI, however, there was always a pretty good chance that you would have to travel through snow for Easter Mass. Even if you got a spiffy new outfit, nobody would get a look at it under your winter coat. And you could forget about showing off your shoes!

Easter is late this year, so mud is more likely. Whatever the conditions, let's celebrate the earth renewing itself and coming back to life after what sounds like a tough winter in many parts of Canada.

Patrícia



Why does the date for Easter change from year to year? The Vatican has been setting the date by the moon since 325 AD. It always occurs on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the Spring Equinox in the northern hemisphere. This means that it can fall anywhere between March 22nd and April 25th. This calculation was meant to align Easter with the Jewish observance of Passover which was believed to be when Christ was crucified.

St. Mary's Church

This is where Catholics spent Easter weekend – long sessions on Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. Often, little ones received their First Communion that Sunday.

The church building is a designated national historic site, thanks to its architectural beauty and sandstone exterior. The stone was quarried in St. Catherines near the site of the current “waste management centre” (aka “the dump”).



This is the third church building on the same site. Parishioners cleared trees and helped to construct a small church that started celebrating Mass in 1838. That structure burned to the ground in 1849 and was replaced by a similar building later that year.

To meet the demands of a growing population, this large building that can hold 1200 people at a time opened its doors in 1902. After another fire in 1929, only the sandstone walls remained, and the entire interior had to be rebuilt. Another interior refurbishment took place in the 1950s.



With its elevated location and impressive appearance, the church still has a commanding presence in the town. In other ways, though, its influence has diminished. Since the 1970s, attendance has declined, and the church no longer serves as the focal point of community life.

For me, attending Mass was usually more of a social experience than a spiritual one. It was a chance to check out the neighbours, find out what was going on, and maybe make plans for an outing or two.

What are your memories of church life? Please share here: [St. Mary's Church | Shanachie](#)

Shaping Catholic Identity

Ireland

Ireland (Hibernia) never became part of the Roman Empire, so the Gaels were not swept up in Rome's move towards Christianity. They continued nature-based spiritual traditions longer than people in other European locations.

The island consisted of small kingdoms and tribal groups, so when Christian evangelists like St. Patrick started arriving in the 5th century, conversions happened sporadically and gradually. Over time, early Christians built monasteries that promoted learning and culture and spread monotheistic beliefs and rituals.

By the 12th century, England had taken over most of Ireland. Around the same time, the Irish church came under the control of the Roman Catholic Church.

In the early 1600s, King Henry VIII established the Anglican Church and, in a move to anglicize Ireland, he outlawed the Catholic Church there.

Penal laws restricted property, education, and voting rights among Catholics, and solidified Catholicism as a key part of Irish identity. Saying you were Catholic meant that you were native Irish Gael, not English.

Highlands and Islands

Scotland (Caledonia) had more involvement with the Roman Empire than Ireland, but northern areas were mostly unaffected and carried on with their own spiritual practices.

As in Ireland, in the 5th century, Christian enthusiasts like St. Columba started establishing multi-purpose monastic settlements that facilitated spreading the "new faith" among scattered groups of people.

The English conquered parts of Scotland in the late 1200s but were soon driven out. Scottish clans and kingdoms remained independent until England's King James I, a Protestant, declared the region to be under his rule in 1603. (The *Act of Union* formalized this arrangement a century later.)

Under English rule, Scottish Catholics experienced legal, economic, and social discrimination to the point where the religion pretty much died out everywhere but in more remote areas.

In 1745, Highlanders rose up to put Charles Stuart, a Catholic, on the English throne. Being a supporter of the "rising" or a Jacobite became synonymous with being Catholic. After the English decimated them at Culloden the next year, Highland Catholics faced even more persecution.



PEI Catholic – Protestant Relations

I remember hearing about “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland in the 1960s and ‘70s and wondering why Catholics and Protestants couldn’t get along there. I didn’t realize that the fight wasn’t really about religion but stemmed from the injustices of English colonization. “Protestant” was just another word for “English”. I thought about Catholic – Protestant relations at home. Catholics outnumbered Protestants and had a much bigger church, so I concluded that we were the dominant group. It took a while for me to learn that, even though Protestants were smaller in numbers, as in Ireland, they had formed the ruling class of the Island.

Up until my time, Catholics and Protestants on PEI lived side by side but not necessarily together. (Understandable, given the history behind these allegiances.) As government became more centralized and communities became more secular, people were brought together through changes like these:

- Rural schools weren’t officially segregated along religious lines, but communities had been settled that way, so it was only when one-room schools were consolidated in the ‘60s that it became common to share learning across religious lines. (At my school, Catechism continued to be taught daily at 3:00 p.m. I used to wish I was Protestant so I could leave early too!)
- Up until the opening of the University of PEI in 1969, there were two separate post-secondary learning institutions – Prince of Wales College for Protestants and St. Dunstan’s University for Catholics.
- The Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Charlottetown opened in 1982 to replace the Prince Edward Hospital which had no official religious affiliation but, by default, was mostly used by Protestants and the Catholic-run Charlottetown Hospital.
- Until 1993, PEI had 16 electoral districts, each represented by two members - a Catholic and a Protestant. The PC Party and the Liberal Party would nominate one of each and run them against each other. Protestants ran as Councilors and Catholics as Assemblymen. Now, there are 27 single-member districts.

As lives became inter-twined, romance bloomed. Proposed “mixed” marriages tended to cause a stir. Sometimes, they were completely forbidden. Other times, they were tolerated but not discussed. Often, the Protestant partner would be expected to “turn,” or join the Catholic church as the Vatican did not recognize non-baptized marriage celebrants. There is even an old story about a woman from a “mixed” marriage being dug up in her husband’s Protestant graveyard and re-buried at St. Columba on the northside, presumably by concerned parishioners.



Remember these sickeningly sweet Easter eggs? We used to fill our bellies with these and then hit the road for an Easter visit with the Gillans in Borden. I don’t think we made it as far as Mount Stewart before we needed to stop the car! Enjoy your Easter treats!