

Religious Prejudice: Culture?

By John Gilbert

Delia, my dear old Irish Catholic mother-in-law had a hard life. Her father died when she was 10 years old. Her mother, with children to support, re-married and somehow Delia, in 1912, at age 15 could obtain enough money for passage to New York City. After 7 years working in New York City as a maid she met and married an immigrant Irishman. They started life in and around New York City and eventually purchased a home and started a family in nearby New Jersey.

In 1942 Delia's husband died at age 47 leaving her with 5 children, between the ages of 2 and 19. His death was probably precipitated by depression-era strains and excesses, but left Delia with the full responsibility for the family. This was the beginning of the Second World War so the eldest, a girl, entered government-sponsored nurses training. The next two children, boys, entered the military as soon as their age permitted and before graduating from high school.

The only stability in Delia's life had been the Catholic church. She had grown up in the environment where her only reliable father was the church.

I, and Delia's fourth child, Patricia, had married outside the Catholic church in Denver, CO, while Delia and her 11-year-old daughter were living in New Jersey. Delia soon came to Denver with her remaining daughter – not because of our marriage, but because her family had migrated out of her life.

By 1954 we all had moved to Southern California. Delia lived near us with her youngest daughter, so we saw her often. As Delia aged and reflected on her life she acknowledged that there were many ways to get from point A to point B. However, her engrained childhood cultural training could not be cast off like a

worn-out jacket.

In later life Delia heard a joke that she never forgot. She liked me and repeated the joke to me many times, because, in some manner, it seemed to sum up her cultural dilemma. Here it is:

A retirement home for elderly nuns was on a busy street. The nuns would sit in the front room watching activity through a large picture window facing the street. They soon had spotted a house down the street where professional men often went up the steps and only stayed a short time. The nuns knew what that meant.

One day they saw a well-known minister enter and leave afterward. There were gasps of horror. A day later they saw the Jewish Rabbi do the same. One nun summed it up, "How could men of cloth do such things?" The following day their priest was seen going up the steps. They sat in stunned silence. After a short time one nun spoke up meekly, "Someone must be sick there."