

August 14th Sermon

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer of our faith.” *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

In this morning’s Collect, we pray to God for help in following daily in the blessed steps of his Son and his most holy life. I was truly blessed to have the opportunity to go with our teens on the pilgrimage to Ireland last month. We followed mostly in the steps of St. Patrick, but we did spend a day following the steps of St. Kevin. What I want to share with you this morning is mostly some of my reflections from our two day hiking adventure from Ballintubber Abbey up to the top of Croagh Patrick. Before we begin our journey up that mountain; I want to pause and say a word about what some of us observed at St. Kevin’s Monastery.

The Irish seem to pay a greater respect for their dead. You get a real sense that you are indeed walking on holy and sacred ground when you visit their monasteries and graveyards. On several of the head stones, words of inspiration and dedication are written about their loved ones. It was a reminder for me that we are truly surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses or saints – small s. The saints who have gone before us and perhaps inspired us or nurtured us. I want to offer this sermon to the Glory of God and in loving memory of my grandmother Ellamirl. I thought about her quite a lot during the two days of hiking in the footsteps of St. Patrick. Some of you who have been at St. John’s for a long time no doubt fondly remember Ellamirl and you must admit she was full of

determination and didn't back down from anything. You could say she had a lot of spunk. Well, I'm here to tell you that to get to the top of Croagh Patrick; you better possess a lot of spunk. Ellamirl also taught her children and grandchildren that whenever they faced a difficult situation; they needed to imagine her fist in the small of their back to help guide them and give them the strength they needed to conquer the problem. Jesus also promised us not to leave us orphaned, but gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit to help us in difficult times.

On Tuesday the 12th of July, we met Father Fahy at Ballintubber Abbey and he provided some wonderful spiritual insight before we began our walk through fields and roads and a variety of terrains. There are certain elements of pilgrimage built into the walk and reminders of these are erected at certain places along the way. They distinguish the "Pilgrim" from the "Tourist." You light a candle before you begin as a symbol of your faith. There is no complaining; instead you are to say "Thanks be to God". You are to include the stranger in your group. Most importantly, you are to have a change of heart; what is the Lord suggesting you must change about yourself. Fr. Fahy told us you are truly on a spiritual journey when you ask yourself during the walk why am I here? Or why am I on this mountain? We were asked to find a jagged stone and put it in our pocket as a reminder before the walk and only take it out and place it back on the ground once we have resolved to make that change. And finally, celebrate; share your food, your joy, your love, and your care. There were a few of us who completed 9 miles of hiking that first day. I'm grateful for the landowners who made it possible to walk on their property in the footsteps of St. Patrick.

On Wednesday morning; we were greeted with a spectacular sunrise and a guide by the name of Michael Murphy. Michael was truly another blessing and the real reason why any of us made it to the top. He was a very spiritual man and he told us that we were truly blessed to have this beautiful day in which to make the climb. He thanked God for this beautiful day. There are signs posted everywhere that if there is heavy rain or dense fog; you will not climb the mountain. Our prayers for good weather were answered. It was a reminder to us that God must be invited first in any given situation. Before facing any challenge; invite God first to help you. You cannot do it alone.

Michael did a wonderful job with our teens. Once we finished our pilgrim's Eucharist at St. Patrick's statue, he divided the teens into three teams and talked with them for about 15 minutes. He explained exactly what he wanted them to do. Each of the three teams would take turns leading the group up the mountain. My task was to bring up the rear and signal to Michael when there was trouble or if all is well as we made our ascent. One of the first things he taught the teens was instead of focusing on the top; they were to pick a destination in which they felt confident they could make. He wanted them just to focus on getting to that point and then taking a break and another group would lead to the next stopping point where we could take another break. Climbing a mountain is a wonderful metaphor for tackling problems in our everyday lives. When each of us has a mountain to climb or insurmountable problems; we must take it one step at a time. Each of us should pick a spot where we want to get to for that day. The next day we can work some more on the problem. We cannot hope to achieve success if we try to tackle

too much in one day. Michael also insisted that we look back during these breaks to see how far we have come; to see your progress as he put it. That is so important in life too; you have to look back to see how far you have come. Sometimes, you have to look back at your past to find your path to the future.

Michael also stressed that if anyone could not continue; they would have to be accompanied back down the mountain. There was no way he would allow anyone to go back down alone. What that meant was if someone had to turn back; someone else who may have wanted to continue had to sacrifice their opportunity to see the view from the top and help the individual back down the mountain. That caused a tremendous amount of turmoil for the individual who needed to turn back because they didn't want to cause another person to miss that opportunity. We had a few of these occur during our climb, but there was one that caused us to stop for about 15 minutes as we worked through who was going to help that individual back down. It was a very emotional time and one that made me realize just how much effort was required to make this climb. The best image I can come up with to explain the effort is imagine a sliding board that you would see on any elementary school playground and fill it with marbles or golf balls and trying to walk down the sliding board. The footing was treacherous especially on the way down the mountain. You had to be strong physically, mentally, and spiritually, but you had to be lucky too. Any one of us could have fallen or slipped on the rocks and possibly would have to be carried off the mountain. But I will tell you this; it was during these moments that I saw the face of Jesus. The ones who instead of climbing helped the injured back down the mountain truly exhibited walking in the steps of our Savior. This is one of St.

John's strongest traits, our circles of relationships, **our strength of community**, and our willingness to help each other in all adversity. We cannot handle our problems or our struggles alone. We need God and we need each other. This group bonded together very quickly and in a way I have never experienced before. Yes, we were truly blessed by wonderful spiritual guides along the way and that certainly helped, but the maturity of our teens was clearly visible for all to see on this pilgrimage and several of our hosts in Ireland commented on how well our teens acted and looked out for each other.

Well, it took 14 of us just about 4 hours to make it to the top and we were treated to an extremely beautiful view of Clew Bay and the 367 islands that can be seen from the top. We called down to the group below to inform them that we had made it to the top and they informed us that all who had to be helped back down had also made it safely which eased our minds and then a most awe-inspiring event happened. One in which I will never forget. As we were eating our lunch and resting for the trip back down; a cloud came and overshadowed the top of the mountain. It was there with us for about 5 minutes and then moved on and the sun continued to shine bright. Perhaps it was that great cloud of witnesses who had cheered us on from another shore. Perhaps it was God himself reminding each of us that we are His children and deeply loved and created in His image. I've been to Holy Island in Lindisfarne and I've been to Iona in Scotland, but I enjoyed this pilgrimage to the top of Croagh Patrick so much more because I really had to work to get to the top and enjoy that view. We tend to appreciate things in life more if we have to work hard to receive them. I'm not sure there were many of us at the beginning of this pilgrimage who really expected or imagined we would get to the top either because of

time, weather, or maybe injury, but the author of Ephesians wrote three verses that should remind us to expect the unexpected. “And to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to **accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine**, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations. That great cloud of witnesses, the saints – small s of this church, can still inspire us and help us reach new heights. Our hope is to someday join them in God’s eternal kingdom.

Many of our guides on this trip quoted the spiritual writings of John O’Donohue who had died at the age of 52. I leave this for you to ponder the next time you travel. It will help distinguish you as a pilgrim instead of a tourist.

“When you travel,
A new silence goes with you,
And if you listen,
You will hear what your heart would love to say.
A journey can become a sacred thing.
Make sure, before you go,
To take the time to bless your going forth,
To free your heart of ballast
So that the compass of your soul
Might direct you towards the territories of spirit
Where you will discover more of your hidden life;
And the urgencies that deserve to claim you.
May you travel in an awakened way,

Gathered wisely into your inner ground;

That you may not waste the invitations which wait along the way to transform you.

May you travel safely, arrive refreshed and live your time away to its fullest;

Return home, more enriched, and free to balance the gift of days which call you.” *Amen.*

