

The faith that refused to die

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I grew up in an area steeped in history and faith in Ireland. Every morning, I viewed and often climbed Croagh Patrick, the mountain where St. Patrick spent the forty days of Lent in prayer, praying for the conversion of pagan Ireland. I listened to stories of Mass rocks during the Penal Days; stories of priest hunters, making a living by providing the heads of priests to the English authorities as well as generations who sacrificed and suffered for their Catholic faith.

During my vacation, I celebrated Mass in my home parish church. The church, Ballintubber Abbey, was founded in 1216 and Mass has continued to be celebrated there without interruptions since, in spite of persecution, plundering and destruction.

I stood behind the main limestone altar and looked out on the tall whitewashed limestone walls that stood strong for centuries. I walked on the stone floor, remembering the generations of people who walked on the same flagstone floors centuries earlier. I celebrated Mass with people – old and young, visitors and strangers. They were all connected by a common tradition, a common faith and a common desire to celebrate their roots among those hallowed walls.

I remembered the many Baptisms, Confirmation, First Communions, Funerals and Weddings that have taken place here. I noticed the bows that decorated the simple pews and the torches that stood guard. They were there in anticipation and welcome for another couple who would tie the wedding knot shortly. Then I thought about famous weddings here, especially a few years ago, the wedding of actor Pierce Brosnan and Keely Shayle. I also thought about the many not-so-famous young couples who got married before this same limestone altar. I wondered why this “Abbey that refused to die” hosted so many weddings, almost daily. Then, I realized that there was something deeper and more mysterious at stake. Couples felt the need to be part of history, to be connected and rooted in a tradition that continues to form and shape them.

I looked out on the gathered faithful at weekday and weekend Masses. I remembered their forefathers who worshipped here generations before. I remembered St. Patrick who passed this way centuries earlier and left his mark of conversion on the then pagan population. I remembered the graves of my ancestors whose bones now caress this powerful giant of an abbey.

As I celebrated the funeral of a parishioner, I became aware of another cycle ending and how fresh bones would join the thousands of bones of people who once worshiped in this place and who are now silent.

I led the funeral procession down the long nave, conscious that just a few feet under me was a tunnel that allowed the priests and monks to escape from Cromwell’s persecutions. Because of such dedication and commitment to their faith, in spite of persecution, I felt humbled to be a part of such a rich tradition.

The funeral procession snailed its way through the ancient and not so ancient graves, to a final resting place in a corner of the cemetery. We passed the grave of the notorious priest-hunter, Sean naSagart (John of the priests). John Maloney was that local priest hunter for the English authorities during the Penal Days. I grew up with stories of his escapades and how he finally met his death at the hands of a priest he had tried to kill. Now, his grave lay among the graves of the local citizens. They died professing their faith. He died trying to destroy it. Both shared the same burial grounds.

Celebrating Mass in an abbey that refused to die in spite of pillage, persecution and famine, I felt connected and privileged. I felt grateful for the sacrifices of generations who have gone before me. Because of that, I felt blessed to be part of such a rich and wonderful faith.

Now, living in a different environment today, I am conscious of the choices we have regarding participation in our faith. Often such choices can lead to taking that faith for granted. With such choices and the ease they present, so often the element of sacrifice is missing and is replaced by a taking for granted attitude regarding that same faith.

I am glad of my roots in the faith; grateful for the sacrifices of generations past who now allow me to treasure my faith and allow it to become a faith that refused to die because it was shaped and formed in an abbey that refused to die.