

In his footsteps

Every morning, I begin my day following breakfast with a morning stroll. As I travel along the country road by my house, I free any clutter from my mind and embrace the new day. Glancing to the west, I see Croagh Patrick with its cone shaped top. On the last Sunday of July, people from all over the country come to climb the mountain as part of an annual pilgrimage. Many people climb the mountain in their bare feet. On other days during the year, you will find many people climbing the mountain as well. St Patrick spent his Lent on this mountain in the year 432. Ever since people have claimed the mountain as part of an annual pilgrimage.

Just 3 miles east of my home, stands Ballintubber Abbey, founded in 1216 and Mass has been celebrated continuously there since then. St Patrick visited this site and established the original church. Every year, hundreds of pilgrims trace the steps of St Patrick from the Abbey to Croagh Patrick. Armed with walking sticks and good walking shoes, they travel the journey and climb the mountain.

As the pilgrims begin this journey, they are met by an inscription on the wall that marks the beginning of the journey. The inscription from the "Book of Lismore" reads "going on pilgrimage without a change of heart brings little reward for it is by practising virtue and not by mere motion of the feet that we are brought to heaven"

It is interesting that the word "Pilgrim" comes from the Latin word "peregrinus" meaning "through the land." In other words, a pilgrim is a person who ventures beyond his or her own space or place into unknown territory.

Many years ago, I remember reading the book, "The way of the Pilgrim." It is the story of a poor man who searched for the meaning of St Paul's phrase, "pray without ceasing." His journey takes him on an inner journey to discern the implications of "pray without ceasing." His search ends in Jerusalem as he discovers what is called, "the Jesus prayer."

Pilgrims today, from all walks of life and all backgrounds and nationalities search for something deeper. Some stay close to home in their search by partaking in national pilgrimages. Others travel to places like Lourdes, Fatima, Medjugorje, or the Camino, made famous by Martin Sheen's movie, "The Way."

Meister Eckhard reminded us that "nothing is so like God as silence." All pilgrimages have both a physical and a spiritual aspect. Travellers leave behind the comforts of home and set out on an arduous journey that is both demanding and often unknown. They carry with them few provisions but, most of all, they carry silence and solitude. As they journey, they are confronted by their inner demons that try to distract them from their spiritual quest. The pilgrimage may be a journey to a place, but it is especially a journey within where, in the silence, God can have a voice. The journey is filled with both expectation and surprise. It also involves both a change of heart and a change of place.

Sometimes on such journeys, it is easy to be distracted by fellow travellers and the journey can become a party like atmosphere instead of a communion of hearts seeking a common visitor. At other times, fellow travellers can provide encouragement, support, example, and often wisdom.

During the last two years, I have travelled with groups of pilgrims to Medjugorje. There I have witnessed thousands of people of all ages, from different countries, coming together to touch and be in touch with the divine. As a priest, I have had the privilege of hearing confessions during such pilgrimages. Priests find a corner by the chapel walls or a shaded part of a courtyard to hear confessions in various languages. Pilgrims come burdened, yet hoping to be healed touched, forgiven, and loved by a silent God. Amid the multiplicity of languages, people share a common desire, namely to touch and be touched by the divine.

My next pilgrimage begins tomorrow morning following breakfast. I will take my morning stroll along the country road as I listen to the sounds of nature and animal life as it wakes up to a new day. But most of all, in the silence, I will be able to go on pilgrimage within and allow my creator to be my guest and companion not only on this journey but on all life's journeys.