



## Slí Cholmcille

A prominent new camino was established in Donegal 2021, the newest of many caminos in Ireland. The Bishop of Raphoe, Jesuit **Alan McGuckian** describes the route and his pilgrim walk.

St Augustine of Hippo said that every Christian life is a pilgrimage or camino; we are all on the road towards the Kingdom of God, and we shouldn't be acting like people who have settled in comfortably for the long haul. God first called us out of our comfort zone with Abraham. The first thing he said to him was, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.'

In St Colmcille's days the Irish had their own concepts of pilgrimage. If someone wanted to put their whole lives in God's hand and entrust everything to the Lord, they would leave their home and head off to live elsewhere in Ireland. If they wanted to try their trust in God even further, they headed overseas, often never to return; that is what Colmcille did when he set out for Scotland with a group of twelve companions in 562. He saw himself as a 'soldier for Christ'.

Last July I set out on Slí Cholmcille with a small group of companions in



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the footsteps of St Colmcille. On our first day we walked from Glencolmcille over the mountain to the little deserted village at Port and on over a second mountain all the way to Ardara. The scenery of south-west Donegal was awesome and the company was great. Still, that first day was thirty kilometres and at journey's end some of us felt like 'soldiers for Christ' who had just been in the wars.

As we set out that morning we were encouraged to meditate on those thoughts from Abraham, St Augustine and St Colmcille as we walked along. We had Fr Brendan McManus SJ as our guide along the way. Each time we stopped for a break he led us first of all in some helpful stretches – good for the poor muscles. Then, even though we were really enjoying the chat as we walked along, he advised us to spend



Aerial view of Fort Dunree,  
Inishowen Peninsula

the next half hour in silence and walk on our own.

In the course of twelve days we walked more than 250 kilometres. It took us from Glencolmcille, on through the Donegal Gaeltacht, out to Tory Island, through Gartan, the saint's birthplace, and into Doire Cholmcille (Derry). Our very last day involved a walk out to Shroove in Inishowen, the very last place where the saint set foot on Irish soil as he left for Scotland. It was as challenging as any camino and worth every bit of it. We followed the same order every day: Mass before we set out, a few stops for the dreaded but much needed stretches and then periods of walking on our own. At the end of the day we came together to review the day and reflect on the interior movements that we had experienced. We were amazed to find

that the Holy Spirit was moving in each person in their own way. It is interesting that it was from those periods on our own that almost everyone got the most benefit, even though many of us were trying to avoid them! Fr Brendan was clever and turned it into a bit of fun and that got the best out of us.

Very often in life we are tempted to choose the comfortable life of the 'settler' instead of the freedom of the pilgrim, a sort of 'shaking up'. That shaking up is what's involved when we take on the rigours of Lent, or go on retreat or do Lough Derg. Going on camino or pilgrimage is a wonderful way – both very ancient and very new – to stretch ourselves, body and soul, and to give ourselves a good shake-up. Where better to do it than in Donegal walking in the footsteps of a 'pilgrim soldier of Christ' on Slí Cholmcille? 💚