

# Reek Sunday: Croagh Patrick

Jesuit Brendan McManus writes of a traditional pilgrimage in Ireland on the last Sunday of July: the climbing of Croagh Patrick.

As a priest, one of the most rewarding experiences has been celebrating Mass in the little oratory on Croagh Patrick as part of a walking pilgrimage. I have been to the top of Croagh Patrick around twenty-five times with groups over the years, but every time it is fresh and different. The weather is so unpredictable that you never know what you will be facing, from strong winds to snow and ice. A good day is a real blessing. The view from the top is transcendent with the expanse of Clew Bay dotted with islands, and the entire west coast revealed in all its glory. Your life looks different from the top.

The oratory is very basic. Built in 1905, it is a simple rectangle of stone walls, an altar with rails and a tiny sacristy at the rear. Often it is so cold and damp that the moisture drips from the roof and walls, and you can see your breath. When we celebrate Mass there with a group, we leave the door open and inevitably pilgrims crowd in, each with their own intention and pilgrim prayer that makes for a real encounter. These 'spontaneous' Masses hint at something profound about the Eucharist: we are all pilgrims in the world, trying to make sense of life and its challenges, in need of this 'bread of life' as food for the journey. Coming together in this way, as pilgrims have done for over a hundred years here, is

a humbling experience, and it is genuinely transformative. The mountain gives perspective, clarity and direction for our lives.

This perspective does not come easily. Croagh Patrick is a considerable challenge to pilgrims. It is a significant mountain at 764 metres and because of the exposure on the west coast, it can present unexpected conditions. Many pilgrims get caught out with unexpected turns of weather, not having the right gear or not being fit enough. Indeed the mountain rescue service is often called out, and the helicopter regularly has to make airlifts to come to the aid of pilgrims, especially around Reek Sunday. There is a significant penitential aspect to this pilgrimage that is important: it takes several hours to ascend, and it is a testing experience in many ways. The final steep scree slope leading to the summit is daunting and off-putting. Then reaching the top, often in sub-zero temperatures and an icy wind, can involve only a brief stay, before the even more challenging descent that tests tired legs. However you know that you have done something significant and paradoxically, there are moments of pure joy.

Fr Frank Fahey who instigated and ran the Tóchar Phádraig pilgrim trail from Ballintubber Abbey to Croagh



Patrick talks about the pilgrimage as giving real perspective. I always remember his words, 'We climb the mountain to get perspective.' We put away the distractions of our lives, face our humanity and meet the God of pilgrimage who is waiting for us. Modern life has become so sanitised and technological that it's easy to forget who we really are (pilgrims) and what our lives are about (meeting God). The mountain reminds us of these ancient truths and walking in the footsteps of countless pilgrims helps uncover God's voice within. There is always a message to be received and standing on the exposed, bare mountain helps to hear it clearly. As Fr Frank says, 'There is something in the human heart

– in every tradition and religion – that searches for meaning and wholeness.'

The perspective that we get is:

1. Our lives are more than just what we have or do; just existing or taking it easy is not satisfying for the soul.
2. We are pilgrims in this world and need to be reminded by getting onto the mountain and walking.
3. We need a challenge and a climb to remind us of our humanity, limits and need for God.
4. Just like in biblical times, the mountaintop is where we meet God.
5. We come back with a clarity about who we are (dependent pilgrims) and how we should live (trusting in God).