

Slí Cholmcille

Fr Brendan McManus SJ led the annual Slí Cholmcille walking pilgrimage, which took place in north-west Donegal in July. This route covered some of the key Columban sites in Donegal, including Tory Island.



The dramatic valley of Glengesh on the Slí Cholmcille

‘The weather forecast was not good for the week, and if I had believed the forecast, we might never have left home! Thankfully the reality was a lot better, with only two wet afternoons. The rest was lovely walking weather, which even included a few sunny days. At one point it was raining everywhere else in Ireland but for the extreme north-western tip or Donegal, proof again of the pilgrim’s trust in providence and the need to just get out there. Even the rainy days failed to dampen our spirits. On Saturday we had a beautiful walk across a bog road from Creeslough to Glenveagh. We were surrounded by running water and full watercourses – a unique Irish ‘desert’ experience.’

Reporting on what the pilgrims experienced, Brendan welcomed that people said they found the walking and silence helpful in getting out of their ‘heads’, out of overthinking and ruminations. ‘Walking brings a level of

peace and stillness that helps to sort out one’s head, deal with feelings, and begin to discern or listen to what God is saying in the deeper parts of ourselves. One of the themes was listening – trying to still that shrill internal voice – listening to our true selves, listening to nature and to others. This was about being present and free of unhelpful anxiety and worry in order to find God within.’

There was input twice daily for the pilgrims on prayer and pilgrimage themes, a daily Eucharist and an evening faith sharing. He also took time to talk to people individually about their lives.

‘It was a privileged position and one which I greatly value, as well as being very rewarding. The main thing I have learned after leading more than fifty of these walks is that less is more. It’s about facilitating pilgrims having an experience of God on the trail and

helping them understand that experience. Often the best thing I can do is get out of the way!’

‘Before each session, we had a short input and some short scripture passages to pray with, especially from the psalms. People appreciated this, looked forward to it, and missed it when it wasn’t there, such as the day we took the ferry to Tory Island. Again, this is another key ‘camino’ element; time spent alone with God on the trail is where the action happens.’

Since the pilgrimage is in the footsteps of St Colmcille, the group attempted to follow the spirituality of the saint as far as this can be ascertained from the sources. ‘While there are legends and stories aplenty concerning Colmcille (our guide Seamus Dooan was very good on these), we know for sure that Colmcille was firmly rooted in Donegal, was born in Gartán, and travelled widely’, says Brendan,

adding that his spirituality was ‘ascetical, monastic, contemplative, Eucharistic, Gospel-based (the Good News of Christ’s presence within) and based on pilgrimage (he described himself as ‘an exile for Christ’). We used these themes from the saint’s life (pilgrimage, exile, poetry, and scripture) along with quotes from the Psalms, exposure to nature, and the actual landscapes that Colmcille was immersed in.’

In their final reflection the pilgrims recognised that they needed to change their lives in order ‘to create places of silence, still the over-thinking and shrill voices in the head, be more tuned into God in their lives, and be more active agents of God’s love in the world’.

It will be back on next summer, probably July, but a date hasn’t been set yet. Keep an eye on the website: <https://slicholmcille.org/>. (Reprinted from www.jesuit.ie with permission).