

Journey of the Heart: Fr Frank Fahey

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Following the death of Fr Frank Fahey on 15 July 2026, Brendan McManus SJ reflects on his meetings with Fr Frank, which took place in 1994 when, as a Jesuit novice preparing for the Ignatian Camino in Spain, he and Tony O’Riordan walked from Knock to Croagh Patrick. Along the route they discovered Ballintubber Abbey and met Fr Frank, beginning a friendship that would continue for many years.

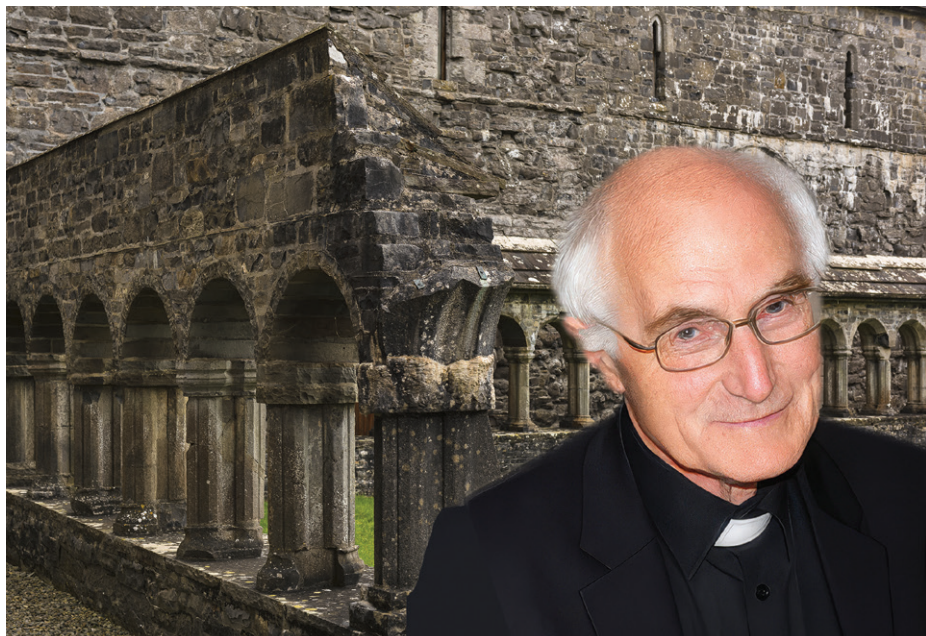
In this reflection, Brendan recalls those early days and the lasting impression Fr Frank made through his warmth, hospitality and love of pilgrimage.

In 1994, Tony O’Riordan and I were Jesuit novices preparing for the Ignatian Camino in Spain. We decided to walk from Knock to Croagh Patrick. Along the way we stumbled upon a thirteenth-century gem, Ballintubber Abbey. Fr Frank Fahey immediately made us feel very welcome, letting us camp on the grounds, inviting us into his house to use his facilities and making sure we were well looked after. It was a great introduction to pilgrim hospitality from Frank and also to the treasure that is the ‘resurrected’ abbey and the Tóchar Phádraig pilgrim trail that Frank was instrumental in constructing. There began a long association

with Ballintubber, where we brought groups to walk the Tochar, to listen to Fr Frank and experience some of that West of Ireland hospitality. I was greatly saddened to hear of his death but greatly enriched by knowing him, and his testimony and legacy lives on.

When I think of Fr Frank Fahey, I think of pilgrimage and the Camino. I am sure that a lot of my own insights on pilgrimage were picked up from Fr Frank. He didn’t have a big connection with the Camino, but he had imbibed so much of Celtic pilgrim spirituality that he embodied its spirit. I remember Fr Frank teaching us that life is a journey, that we are all pilgrims and that what matters most is not how fast we travel but how we accompany one another on the road. He was especially big on gratitude and used to tell us, ‘Say “Thank God” for everything and no complaining!’

Fr Frank is synonymous with Ballintubber Abbey and the many Tóchars connected with it: the Tóchar Phádraig pilgrim path to Croagh Patrick, the Outdoor Stations of the Cross (Tóchar Chríost), the Rosary Way, the Furrow and Church Island (where I camped once). The abbey is rightly famous for its history, its beauty and its place in Ireland’s pilgrimage tradition. But places become holy because of



Ballintubber Abbey cloisters and Fr Frank Fahey

the people who inhabit them. Frank has helped make Ballintubber not just a destination but a place of encounter – a place where people can experience Irish hospitality, healing and God’s presence.

We often ran weekend walking retreats in Ballintubber Abbey, that remarkable place where they have celebrated Mass continually over the years and you can feel the prayer in the very walls. We would arrive in the atmospheric abbey on the Friday evening, Fr Frank would give us a talk in the upper chapter room (sometimes we would sleep there too), we would walk the Tóchar Saturday and climb Croagh Patrick on Sunday. It was a great pilgrimage that had everything: scenery, culture, history, spirituality and tradition, all explained beautifully by Fr Frank. What always impressed

me was Fr Frank’s ability to welcome people and to be able to speak to their reality. He was so humble and down to earth that you knew he believed every word he said, and we hung on his words. Like the best of pilgrimage hosts, he made people feel welcome and opened up his own house and heart to us.

Over the years, I came to appreciate not only what Frank did but who he was. He had a natural warmth that put people at ease, a quiet wisdom that came from years of walking with God, a great sense of humour and a generosity of spirit that was exceptional. Nothing was too much trouble. He had that rare gift of making you feel that there was nowhere else he would rather be than in the conversation he was having with the group at that moment. One of the great lessons of the

Camino is that God is found in ordinary encounters. Looking back, many of my memories of Frank are exactly that: conversations over a cup of tea, stories shared after a walk, laughter with pilgrims, moments of prayer and countless acts of hospitality that probably seemed small to him but meant a great deal to others. He taught people about God not only from the pulpit but from the way he lived.

What I admired most was his deep trust in God. Frank never struck me as someone anxious to control outcomes or force solutions. Rather, he had the pilgrim's wisdom of trusting the road, trusting the process and trusting that God is already at work. That trust has given encouragement to many people who found themselves facing uncertainty or standing at a crossroads in

life. On a personal level, I am grateful for Frank's friendship, support and example. He has shown me, and many others, what it means to be a priest who walks with people rather than ahead of them, who listens more than he speaks and who understands that some of the most important journeys happen in the human heart.

Ballintubber Abbey is steeped in more than 800 years of history, worship and hope. Aside from being a valued cultural site, it is a welcoming church with regular Masses and ceremonies. Discover St Patrick's Well, sculptures, serene gardens and the abbey itself. Follow pilgrim paths and learn about the abbey's connection to pirate queens and kings of Con-nacht. A hidden history is waiting to be unearthed!

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