



# Modern pilgrimage in the west of Ireland

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*This paper considers pilgrim walking along routes in County Clare, developed in an ecumenical setting under the auspices of the Methodist Church. It relates to the experience in terms of 'pioneer ministry' and its effectiveness; to recovering possible medieval practice; to contemporary practices by local people; and to international interest in routes to Compostela. It suggests the reasons why people may walk in search of spiritual growth; the resources they may wish for, the ways in which the contemporary search functions in a largely post-Catholic manner, and the position of those from other Christian or religious traditions.*

PIONEER MINISTRY • PILGRIM • PILGRIMAGE • VERNACULAR • SPIRITUALITY  
• SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA • SCATTERY ISLAND • CELTIC SPIRITUALITY •  
INIS CEALTRA (HOLY ISLAND) • KILFENORA • COUNTY CLARE

Shall I go, O King of the Mysteries, after my fill of cushions and music,  
to turn my face on the shore and my back on my native land? ... Shall  
I take my little black curragh over the broad-breasted, glorious  
ocean? O King of the bright kingdom, shall I go of my own choice  
upon the sea?

The questions are asked in a poem attributed to the scholarly bishop-king of Cashel, Cormac Mac Cuileannáin, who was killed in AD 903.<sup>1</sup> The speaker goes on to question the costs of journeying for the love of God, the sacrifices he will make of lifestyle and comfort, the dangers of the journey, and, given the society he came from, the cost of exile, of being unknown among strangers, without the status and family support that were integral to his time and culture.

The poem was probably written over two centuries later. In it we see the dilemma of the rich young man of the Gospels. Versions of the poem have been simplified, set to music or formed the basis of extended contemporary reflections.<sup>2</sup> In whatever form it is known, it touches the widespread current desire among certain Christians to be a pilgrim.

While the king of the poem was concerned with the danger of the journey across the sea, it is never mentioned that he might walk part of the route, though many pilgrims then and since have done so, out of poverty in the days when they could not afford a horse, and more recently by choice for the activity it brings to the limbs; for the effects on the blood, muscle and general well-being; for the relaxation reported by those who become accustomed to walking each day; for the unexpected company of like-minded people; and for most people the minor but surmountable difficulties this most ancient method of transport brings.

This paper reflects on the concept of modern pilgrimage in the culturally Catholic society of County Clare in the west of Ireland. Drawing on the experience of the author as an organiser and historical interpreter as well as a participant-observer, it considers the expectations of those who journey, in groups or alone; how and when they journey; the impact on the local population and their interpretations of ancient sites which may be in use as devotional centres and burial grounds; the resources they need to interpret what they encounter; and, specifically, what it means to Christians as a new way of expressing their faith with other walkers, some of them of uncertain faith commitment, and some who are practising Pagans.

The word 'pilgrim' is taken here in its full, traditional, sense, in which the religious context is crucial. A pilgrim is a wanderer, a searcher for whom the explicit, religious, destination is the given purpose, but the journey among strangers and the learning to know oneself on the way are essential to the experience. However, this interpretation is not shared by all who write on the subject. While many are familiar, at least at a distance, with the contemporary communal experience of the Muslim Hajj, there is currently no communal, physically demanding, Christian equivalent.

Most people who consider themselves pilgrims in the spiritual sense will undertake some part of their route on foot, or at least on bicycle, for the purpose of walking, of using the body and stretching its resources. This 'stretching' is also achieved through some kind of sacrifice of comfort, in order to travel light and rest cheaply in suitable hostels, which give opportunities for conversation. Yet 'spiritual' and 'pilgrim' are terms that people may take to themselves, and to some people this 'experience' can be undertaken by coach.

There are other tensions, some creative, concerning the understanding of spirituality and who decides its nature and content; the relations between the formal historical interpretation of ancient sites; local usage and popular understanding, perhaps promoted by non-locals; access over privately owned land or to buildings not in public control, such as churches; and the roles of the heritage sector and of the tourism industry. Many routes are presented and maintained by public bodies, with their own interpretations of ancient sites.

There is also the social background. Before the world recession, the 'gap year' journey had become a significant rite of transition for young westerners who could afford it, similar to the European Grand Tour of earlier generations. Within religious traditions, the desire for a similar rite of transition through pilgrimage is regaining its strength. In some Catholic parishes, people restore their own holy well, sometimes with the support of public funding. Some traditional local places of veneration are now signed, and thus also made accessible to casual visitors. An example is Maméan, a traditional site in the Conamara Maamturk Mountains, which is visited communally during Holy Week. Most undertake the steep pilgrim walk on foot though occasionally a quad-biker joins them.

From within Christian practice, there are certain ecclesiological considerations. Many of the expectations of church life are breaking down, in all denominations, and people are increasingly making their own, explicitly individualistic, spiritual searches. Side by side with this trend, church-organised 'pilgrimages' may be basically congregational outings, bus tours with a

religious tinge, designed as communal activities for an older age group. This we can expect to continue, for much of modern communal Christian practice appears increasingly focused on events, on cultural matters that are engaged in by people of similar interests. Pilgrimage is one way in which the modern capacity for spiritual choice can be expressed.

The longer pilgrimage of medieval times has been drawn on in recent decades across Europe. The journey to Compostela through northern Spain has been supplemented by the opening, or reopening, of subsidiary routes. Significant numbers, many of them people more robust than the average churchgoer, are taking their search for the spiritual seriously enough to walk strenuously. The activity brings the blood to the forefront of the brain, to the reflective, creative parts, a matter that helps to explain the experience of deep conversations and appreciation of the landscape which pilgrim walkers report. This is a holiday activity or one for youthful pensioners, as Europeans with jobs work too long hours with too limited breaks to engage in the traditional manner; and those without work cannot afford the outlay nor the time away from the demands of their benefits' systems. Modern transport means that sections can be walked by people in different years rather than necessarily as a continuum. There is no current equivalent in preparation to the medieval settling of one's affairs and taking time to leave the normal pattern of life in favour of a lengthy and probably hazardous journey, undertaken for the good of one's soul and of the souls of those who cannot make the journey themselves.

It is relatively new in Ireland that people of the Protestant traditions engage in pilgrimage in any numbers, for the word 'pilgrimage' has Catholic overtones, in particular in the North. This not only makes many Protestants uneasy, but their presence may be considered, for historical as well as theological and devotional reasons, as jarring to traditional Catholics. Further, although many of the sites that are still used for regular religious worship are in Church of Ireland hands, the engagement of Nonconformists is new. Finally, both the practice and understanding of traditional religious activities are decreasing rapidly in contemporary Ireland, so there are increasing numbers of people who may be attracted to pilgrimage sites without being aware of how to act there.

Of the underlying reasons that led to the pilgrim walks, one is that people are walking anyway as a leisure activity and many walkers consciously connect the act of walking, and what they encounter, with the spiritual. There are hill-walkers, many of whom belong to groups, and groups with an interest in plant

life, historical sites, or stargazing. Pilgrimage seeks to incorporate some of these interests but to do so by drawing on the specifically spiritual impact, to make it central to the experience. This can be compared to many so-called 'fresh expressions' of contemporary Protestant church life which seek to make faith accessible through providing an activity familiar to what people do already, seeking to articulate the link with the spiritual through the activity.

In a largely post-agricultural society, sites and routes are shared with other groups, some of them interested in spirituality but not necessarily Christian spirituality. From the perspective of 'pioneer ministry' this may be significant in opening discussion on the spiritual dimension of such walks, with other groups and with public officials, not because the latter are necessarily unaware of them but because their role gives them no way to address them unless matters are raised by users. Discussion can lead to the development that in turn leads to new ways of celebrating the Christian life.

The experience in County Clare was the vision of the then Home Missions Secretary, the Revd Des Bain, who conceived of pilgrim walks in terms of the increased fascination with all things Celtic, as a means to reconnect with the spirituality of people in this country. This vision occurred during the 'Tiger Years' when Ireland was briefly a wealthy country with in-migration. It was also a country of increased formal secularisation, which appeared, together with anger at the child abuse scandals surrounding the Catholic Church, to diminish its previously accepted self-understanding as having 'spiritual capital'.

Des Bain's vision led to a series of walks, and then a book, which explored the pilgrimage theme while providing both routes and interpretations of sites, for visitors and the local community. In practice we walked together on certain days, with stopping places for historical input, prayers and singing.

While this was the model in Clare, there is a wider pattern of rural prayer walks, and a variety of approaches. The vision of each is influenced by local or individual factors, though there appear to be some common threads. This requires us to consider the spiral of experience, reflection and adaptation, but also the need to communicate with other groups doing things differently. Pilgrim routes were at the same time opening in south-west Ireland, while in Donegal to the north a Columcille route is developing to link with similar work in Scotland that will terminate on Iona. These routes require a deal of local input on access and maintenance issues, together with the work in which the churches might assist but are unlikely to be lead players, as the Methodist Church was for a short time in Clare.

Clare is a well-walked county. The northern part comprises the Burren, a landscape of exposed karst limestone with fertile valleys. This unusual landscape has proved very attractive for walking across the 'pavement', bare rock broken by long natural furrows, remarkably pleasant underfoot, and up stepped limestone to the highest points. There is a warm microclimate; there are unusual rock formations, underground caves and 'turloughs' (temporary lakes). There is also evidence of human activity on the light soils from the earliest times, while farmers continue to winter their cattle on the Burren, and there is a population of feral goats. Most significantly, there are a number of small early Christian hermitages, some very remote, ruined medieval churches and the remains of a Cistercian monastery. Buddhist and New Age meditation centres are a modern feature, as is a traditional music school. Local activism some years ago ensured that for the present the Burren is favoured for small-scale and ecologically viable tourism. This area is set up for the pilgrim walker.

Clare also boasts a dramatic coastline, now part of the national 'Wild Atlantic Way', on which may be found Loop Head, which projects to the north of the Shannon estuary, and long beaches, some of them used by surfers, and the major tourist attraction of the 700-foot-high Cliffs of Moher. Less walked is the southern part of the coastline along the Shannon estuary. East Clare has mountains of granite and Lough Derg, through which the River Shannon flows. While this article was being completed, two major sites received substantial attention from public bodies. Scattery Island in the Shannon estuary was one, while Holy Island (Inis Cealtra) in Lough Derg, the site of a significant early Christian monastery, passed from private hands to the County Council.

The Clare experience over four years developed as prayer-walking rather than pilgrimage. The walks were advertised as explicitly and ecumenically Christian, and appealed to some of these walkers but not all. Through local contacts, the media and the internet, people were invited to take part along some or all of a designated route over a number of days. As with church services, there were no bookings or charges, but the different stages of the walk were timed in order to enable others to join at specific points. Pauses were built in, which allow for the inclusion of relevant stories, Scripture, historical narration, poems from ancient times, hymns, and prayers relating to contemporary concerns today, and, where possible, input concerning the geology, plants and other wildlife of the locality. The walks were presented through their Christian source while suggesting that they may be of interest to others, including those who may not participate in traditional church life. They were undertaken in a context

where there are numerous other walks taking place that are also identified as spiritual.

People who joined walks were invited to contribute their knowledge or otherwise take part. The intention was to recognise what people experience as the presence of the divine in the natural world, and what they encounter through the physical reminders in ruins or buildings of the faith practices of the past. Some of the routes and stopping places are traditional, while others have a more recent significance. Not all stopping places were beautiful, and included views of power stations or half-built houses. These served as the focus concerning contemporary society and concerns, including the international as well as the local.

After a slow start the events attracted people of all backgrounds and levels of religious interest, and included both local residents and people from further afield. Some church leaders, including the local bishops, attended, drawing their own following, while others brought in people with no declared faith position. Unexpectedly, no hostility was evinced to the approach taken: the only hostile comments were ones on the internet, apparently emanating from the United States and objecting to Protestant presence on 'Catholic' sites. Even the expected embarrassment of singing together, in a society where singing in church is not a majority activity, was not in evidence, perhaps because of the experience of walking together first.

In this, the model adopted in the rural west of Ireland differs substantially from what is being considered in contemporary urban prayer walks. In a city context, part of the experience is likely to be walking with nowhere obvious to shelter from the weather and no money to pay for food. This is aimed at experience with a view to action for social justice. If the walkers are out on the same day, they may walk at best in twos or threes, perhaps taking the same route in a different order. Apart from the deliberate experience of isolation, a group of strangers would appear intimidating in poorer residential areas. In an urban pilgrimage, sharing is likely to occur at the end of the day.

In contrast, a rural walk can have the features of a traditional pilgrimage, of sharing experiences and knowledge, and food, along the way, in the company of people with some similar interests. The process provides the communality, the doing things together that is central to Christian practice. Undertaking something physical together and with some common pattern seems to allow people to share their personal stories. Meanwhile, local rural residents are used to seeing groups of people walking and to some extent contributing to the

local economy, even if they do not themselves take part. It was possible to assure them that we were doing something understandable rather than imposing our own interpretation, spiritual or otherwise, on the area, and the provision of brief local histories was welcomed in those areas where none already existed.

While some walkers were attached to no Christian tradition, the majority came from one of them. Prayer-walking allowed the engagement with those aspects of history that jar with the contemporary social and religious ethos. For example, in West Clare, there is the nineteenth-century Little Ark of Kilbaha, a wooden altar on a cart which was wheeled below the tideline because the parish priest was prevented from saying Mass on land. The Corofin Heritage Centre in mid-Clare preserves the Bible pierced by a bullet aimed at a local Protestant evangelist, whose servant was killed in the same attack. The communal Famine grave at Kildysert in South Clare has a memorial stone commemorating those who died rather than 'pervert' (become Protestant). The fact that many of the historical ruins are so old that they can be regarded as part of the common heritage – and cost of their preservation is certainly the common responsibility – makes interpretation at these sites theoretically easier. From the Protestant perspective, some effort was made to avoid evangelical terms like 'claiming Clare for Christ', which, if they had become known to the local residents, would have caused much offence.

Another attraction to prayer-walking is that it is perceived as being light on the natural environment. The taking of a holiday in one's own country, or a nearby one, may be an ecological decision. The cost of accommodation and meals means that a holiday of this kind may not be financially cheaper than one abroad, but might be regarded as more desirable, as well as a healthy option. Further, bringing modest amounts of money to a rural locality enables the residents to remain and manage the local resources, and this is seen as benefiting the wider society. Thus, the history of pilgrimage as holiday, something to be undertaken on one or more holy days, days of relaxation from the normal round of work, is present. Socially expected relaxation becomes relaxation with God, a perceived means of enjoying life in a way that does not cost the earth.

Living more lightly brings us to the final attraction of the walks. The environmental is one of the themes of a movement that fascinates many who come, the celebration of the 'Celtic' heritage. The current form of Celtic spirituality has been around for a generation, and has redefined and developed



popular understanding of how heritage, real or perceived, can be valued and gives a sense of continuity and refreshment. While there is often a very loose relationship between the modern movement with its suppositions and what we know of early Irish religious practice, or indeed recent folk tradition, modern Celtic spirituality has proved remarkably resilient. In its Irish form there is a recognition of the ancient prayers and poetry of Ireland, of the significance to local people of the historical religious sites, most of which have been reused down the centuries for burials, and acknowledgement of the ongoing folk tradition. Interest was greatly increased through the writings of the County Clare native John O'Donohue (1956–2008), whose *Anam Cara* (1997) and subsequent books became internationally known.

The presentation on the walks of translations of actual early Irish (and later) poems, prayers and stories, including the 'King of Mysteries' poem, was part of the means by which it was intended to enrich the understanding of the 'Celtic' by linking what is known from the academic world to contemporary spiritual interest. As well as respect for the environment, the natural world and its intrinsic beauty, other 'Celtic' themes resonate with modern pilgrimage. There is the emphasis on the early saints, who are seen as people who lived close to the world of birds and land animals. Interpretations made of their 'Lives', later hagiographical accounts, encourage an appreciation of place, in particular places that have been deemed sanctified by continuing pilgrimage. Another aspect is that the saints who left their own land to travel become models for the modern walker.

The responses have identified something significant in the understanding of local group pilgrimage – a question of ownership. This is not only about sites in public care, access and local traditions of use, for example for burials. It is about interpretations and who has the right to provide them. Not all the interpretations of sites may agree with the views of local historians or with those of academic historians and archaeologists. Modern understandings of what constitutes Celtic spirituality are not automatically open to debate, and while vernacular pilgrimage may continue alongside without reference to any such considerations, questions of 'ownership' needed consideration.

The people who were walking came mainly from beyond the immediate area and tradition. There were also locally resident people who settled in Ireland in recent years. To African walkers, stopping at sites of interest that contained graves, including recently opened ones, was considered unusual, and pausing to eat there was culturally unacceptable. At another level, landmarks whose

background and function were taken as understood were not immediately comprehensible to people whose origins lay in landlocked countries. When a Zimbabwean on Loop Head asked 'What is that tower?' there was a positive if layered response as people struggled to explain both the practical function of the lighthouse to warn and guide shipping with its unique signal, and the uses made of its imagery in historical, emotional and specifically Christian discourse. The process of developing group pilgrimage also led to the development of alternative 'inter-faith' (predominantly former Catholic and modern Pagan) pilgrimage routes. Some of these were even staged as rival events, leading to confusion over publicity.

Another intriguing aspect was that the pilgrimages were organised by a person with a physical disability, which prevented the walking of the routes personally, but allowed the plotting of them, consulting on the local history and undertaking that peculiar but essential experience of entering into them with a view to helping to transmit the knowledge gained to others in a way that would be of assistance for prayer.

What happened afterwards? The Methodist Church in Ireland ran out of money for this project. However, visiting the area showed that although little appeared to have occurred in the time frame, community groups developed in some of the historic centres used, and these have thrived, if in ways that do not necessarily connect to the churches. In some areas, relations between churches were strengthened, though this may not yet have led to common action. The publication of a book on one of the three-day routes reawakened interest and may ensure continuity, at least in some areas and for lone walkers. In terms of growing church communities, the stopping places, particularly those on ancient sites, are the focus, but the experience of walking and of having had a free offering of the walks laid the basis for future good will and future worship.

One man consulted during the process declared that it took four years for his boating business to settle and develop when he moved to the area. The need for pioneer ministry to have a seven-year start-up period, and a recognition that the slowness of the start is an essential ingredient if it is to thrive, was reiterated in this project. More specifically, the use of pilgrimage as a form of pioneer ministry, with the causes and consequences, may produce a fertile training ground for current and future ministers in how a church of the future may function.

Like the 'King of Mysteries' poem quoted earlier, many of the sites were built and have survived for a variety of reasons, and there are layers of interpretation

associated with them already. Historical guides add to the interest and understanding of the complexity of heritage, but there are questions of who decides the routes and who decides the interpretations, and whether the churches have any contribution. There is too a genuine 'Celtic' spirituality that can be drawn on as a source, for walking, interpretation of the sites and other prayerful activities, providing that we consider some of the original works, with all their power and capacity to be accepted as genuine by the local population, something that is not always the case with modern interpretations of the 'Celtic'.

The great European pilgrim ways developed over centuries and had the force of the universal Western Church to maintain them and their hostelries. Starting from a different point, modern attempts to recreate such an experience need consideration of many practical aspects. If the churches are part of the process, it may be possible to ensure that the need of the person who walks for spiritual reasons may be taken into consideration as these packages develop.

The practical aside, the common purpose of pilgrimage is to follow the ancient tradition of walking together, to a destination, for the love of God, or at least in quest of God. The journey is as important as the arriving. It provides time to use the body for the purpose of prayer and relaxation, and a chance to share knowledge and skills with the stranger on the road. In the places where such walks are developing, there are a variety of models and motivations. As a way of expressing current spiritual desires through the sacred sites and prayers of the past, the organisers may be offering something that enables others on their own quest, or may be offering their own interpretations, which may satisfy, or irritate.

Many questions remain on how to develop pilgrimage well, with local acceptance of the routes and interpretations. Pilgrimage in its various guises will continue, and it would be missing a major opportunity for spreading the gospel if the churches were not part of this movement.

## Notes

1. Greene and O'Connor [1967] 1990, pp. 151–153.
2. For example, Adam 2000; see Power 2010.

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