

Hanging up the boots!



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Retiring Gracefully from Leading Walking Pilgrimages

In the summer of 2019 I was support leader on a pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick in Co. Mayo. Among the group of young men, one was struggling as we began climbing the mountain. I realised that he wouldn't be able to make it to the top and volunteered to guide him down, releasing the leader, Eddie, to bring the rest of the group up and celebrate Mass on the top, always a sublime experience. It was a defining moment for me in that it represented taking on the humbler role of support to the leader, as well as realising that my days as leader were numbered. I had been to the top of Croagh Patrick around 25 times with groups over the years, so I knew what the view was like from the top. It was hard letting go though, realising that my fitness, energy and focus were not what they used to be, and also that empowering others to be leaders was a worthwhile service. Jesuit spirituality helped me to realise that this was happening and that it was a good thing- I was in 'consolation' about it in Ignatian terms. God was inviting me to let go or trying to hold on to the past and graciously accept a new reality.



The purpose of this article is to reflect on some of the learnings involved over 25 years and 30-40 walks, and to remember some of the great experiences and people along the way.

It all began with Tony O'Riordan SJ, when after our 1993 noviciate pilgrimage in Spain (See: [The Inner Journey article](#) in the Way Journal) we came home all fired up to bring the walking experience to Ireland. There was a real spiritual joy about being pilgrims, accepting whatever came and learning to trust each other. It was a lived, or walked, spirituality that found God on



the road, in every moment of that challenging (no money) but wonderful 600km pilgrimage journey.



As part of our training for Spain the previous year we had stumbled across the wonderful Ballintubber Abbey in Co. Mayo and the 22 mile [Tochar Phadraig](#) pilgrim route to Croagh Patrick. The following summer in 1994 we had the first ‘official’ pilgrimage walk with a small number of young guys, where we slept on the floor in the atmospheric 13th century abbey and walked to the mountain over two days. That connection with the abbey and with the local priest, Fr. Frank Fahey, was to last over two decades. What I remember most about that first walk was one of the guys from Cork who shall remain nameless insisted on carrying a backpack, more like a suitcase with

straps which his mother had packed, all the way along the trail until the steep mountain slopes forced him to abandon it.

The fledgling Jesuit youth ministry, which was to become Sli Eile and then Magis Ireland, adopted the walking pilgrimage as a key project from the beginning and it featured in virtually every summer program from the 1990’s onwards. In one of the early walks with co-leader Dermot King, we tackled Croagh Patrick in the early spring and found the mountain almost completely snow covered. We were lucky to get up and down without accident, probably not realising the risks involved, but the snowy mountain had a still and stern beauty that I will never forget.



As a Jesuit student (scholastic) 1994-6 I was involved in Sli Eile’s summer pilgrimage from Dublin to Glendalough. We already had contact with Fr. Michael Rogers in Glendalough and it seemed the obvious Celtic pilgrimage route so close to Dublin. The first day was easy leaving Marlay park, but without the benefit of GPS or reliable maps, I got lost and we had a lengthy 9km detour that saw us arriving at Knockree hostel in the dark and tired. Trying to keep the group motivated, I over-used the phrase “It’s only another 20 minutes” and had people ready to kill me!



Another walk with Sli Eile was the pilgrim path up Mount Brandon on the Dingle peninsula in Co. Kerry. It was called 'the Brendan



Voyage', a little bit tongue in cheek. I remember planning the walk with Dermot King and we wisely decided to ascend the mountain via the pater nostra lakes, the most difficult rocky ledges being easier to ascend than descend. Then at the top, I was lifted up into the top of the trig point in celebration - I swear I could see America from there!

While working at Belvedere college I designed a walking retreat for transition year students based around Orlagh retreat house in the Dublin mountains and we walked the Tochár Phadraig with the senior students.



A really pivotal trip was a walk I led with fellow Milltown Institute (Dublin), students and co-leaders Vincent Klein SJ & Vinny Judge to Croagh Patrick around 1996. The first day on the flat Tochar trail went really well but the second day on the mountain saw a heavy mist descend and the group of around 20 was soaked through. The problem was I had agreed to meet the bus driver Galway up the mountain (he dropped

us on the other side and had walked up to meet us). However, without a mobile phone we had no way of communicating with him and the group were huddled behind the toilet block halfway up, getting cold with the windchill. A chance encounter with a trained Mountain Leader saw him escort us up the mountain and any danger was averted. Walking along with him, his gentle advice to me was that I need to get some training if I was to bring groups into these extreme situations.

Fair enough, I thought and immediately signed up for the two year Mountain Leader course, done at weekends at the Tiglin Outdoor Centre in Wicklow. A series of walks helped us to learn navigation skills, using a map and compass, group management, first aid, assessing routes and safety techniques. We were taught some very useful skills and I was able to put these into immediate effect on the group walks. Another memorable moment on the Mountain Leader training was a weekend camping in Co. Kerry where we had to do 'night navigation (without being able to see any landmarks you have to trust the compass)'. Late in the



night, it was my turn as the last person tasked with finding a particular stream in heavy rain and wind. Fortunately I found it quickly and we could finish early, that God. We were all so happy to get back to the tents and get some sleep that mad night.

Very soon after that I remember leading a group through Wicklow to Glendalough. On the second day, we all got a soaking from the incessant rain and arriving at the mast on Kippure mountain, we had a miserable and cold lunch break. I decided to call off the rest of the walk and headed for the road where we were to be picked up by our support driver. I took a compass bearing from the mast to the meeting point and no one was more surprised than me when we came out at exactly the right spot! At the debrief that night I was amazed to hear people talk about how much they had got out of that day, the rain and heavy going (deep heather, peat hags and bog) brought out a solidarity and mettle that I never forgot. (don't worry about the weather, always go, became our slogan).



Over the years we build up a simple pilgrimage method, based on experience, that seemed to work well for most people. It was composed of these elements (contact me for resource materials): time walking as a group enjoying nature and being with others in an unstructured way; two periods of walking single file in silence for up to 40 minutes, normally with a short passage from scripture e.g. "God has carried you all the way along the journey to this place (Deut. 1:31)"; simple shared meals cooked by ourselves; a faith sharing at night reflecting on the day (i.e. the Ignatian Examen prayer) often incorporating Eucharist; and finishing with a sing song that all can join in on, preferably with a campfire! Again, the Tochar Phadraig became our classic route, thanks to Debbie Moore, Rory Halpin & Pdraig Swan.

The MAGIS 2014 West Coast Pilgrimage (<https://www.jesuit.ie/news/walk-work-pray/>) with Janet O'Donnell, Sr. Jessica Kerber and Niall Leahy SJ, was again the classic Tochar Phadraig route to Croagh Patrick though we did it over a week and stayed in a series of halls and hostels, thanks to the good people of Mayo. Probably the most significant story that stands about above everything else was a local woman who took us in out of the rain.



We had departed from Knock on the first day full of beans and within an hour of two had been soaked by an unexpectedly heavy shower. As the leader I was looking out for somewhere dry to get out of the continual rain and have lunch. Walking along the road we came across a farm by the road that had a huge turf shed that seems ideal. I knocked on the door and it was answered by Caroline Halligan who invited us in to her house. "But there are 18 of us", I said, "Bring

them all in” she said. “But we are dripping wet”, I said. “Just put the backpacks in the scullery” she said and invited us into the main room which had a cosy range and a picture of the Sacred Heart. We all sat around the walls eating our sandwiches while she prepared tea. She contacted her son and soon we had him and his two red-headed sons arriving, who gave us tours of the farm. It was exceptional hospitality and it was so providential, particularly at that moment (I have been back to visit the family several times since).



The other moment from that pilgrimage was on the second last day as we crested a heathery ridge in a huge bogland, and got our first view of the Atlantic ocean; we just sat and gazed in wonder. Finally, there was the joy of mass on Croagh Patrick where one of the group played violin for us (Jessica Kerber), and the astounding view from the top on a fine day with Clew Bay laid out below us. (We repeated this same

walk with a group of Jesuits in 2015 including a memorable visit with Caroline and her family again!)

The 2017 MAGIS pilgrimage from Dublin to Glendalough was another great walk along the Wicklow Way. Niall Leahy SJ and myself organised it along with Máire Fitzgerald the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart. We had a lovely group of young people and the weather cooperated to make for a lovely outing in Wicklow. Valerie Walsh from Canada was our medical ‘officer’ and had a queue of ‘patients’ to minister to every night. One memory really stands out, during our stay at the Glendalough Youth Hostel a group of us took a walk out to the viewpoint for St. Kevin’s cave on the Miner’s Road. We were just sitting scattered in meditative silence in the heather on a blowy evening, I think I felt closer to St Kevin than I ever did that evening. I am very grateful to film makers Graham Roberts and Tom Pollard who made a film on this walk and provide a unique insight into the walking pilgrimage experience (Connections):



<https://irisleeds.wixsite.com/faith/work-02>

Summary points:

1. Walking mirrors your life journey, it provides great moments of reflection and hopefully insight. The trail, like life, teaches you.
2. “Always go”, don’t wait on good weather, some of the best walks start off as the most unlikely days. Also, waiting for a good day in Ireland, you’ll be waiting a long time!
3. The baggage you bring with you is what slows you down and holds you back; it’s a lot harder than you think to abandon it!
4. Get the training and expertise needed to organise walk; it greatly enhances security and people’s well being, but it also gives you the skills to be able to facilitate some of the memorable moments mentioned above.

If you are lost go back to where you were sure of; keeping going and hoping for the best often doesn't turn out well.

- 6 It is no accident that these walks took place along some ancient pilgrimage roads (St Kevin's way, Tochar Phadraig) to finish in some stunning Celtic Christianity sites (Glendalough, Croagh Patrick, Mount Brandon). Walking in the footsteps of many thousands of pilgrims connects us with a universal experience of sites, roads and symbols that goes to the heart of Christianity (experience of encounter with Christ).
- 7 Walking in a group helps to create a sense of solidarity, realise our common humanity (everyone struggles at some stage) and support our faith through prayer, liturgy and sharing.
- 8 A key pilgrimage attitude is being open to providence, the unexpected happening that tests your adaptability but which always works out for the best.
- 9 What people valued most about the walks was the periods of silence and time alone to 'get your head sorted', as well as being in nature and having like minded people to debrief with at the end of the day.
10. Knowing when to step back, retire and hand over to someone else, is a great grace, not holding onto things too tightly.



Finally, thanks to a whole host of people who helped to create some wonderful experiences and memories. It's hard to single people out but special thanks to the many co-leaders I've had the pleasure of working with above, Fr Michael Rogers, Glendalough, Fr Frank Fahey, Ballintubber, Knock Shrine, Dublin Diocese's Catholic Youth Council (CYC), Sli Eile/MAGIS Ireland and the Irish Jesuits, the Irish An Oige Youth Hostel Association, Tiglin Outdoor Centre, the many drivers, cooks, shoppers and support people who made it all possible.

P.s Even those this marks a retirement from leading groups, the Camino and other trails will still be walked!



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