

On this rock

We turned off the main road onto a narrow road on a Saturday afternoon. The winding road had trees on both sides that stood as an honor guard to anyone who might be brave enough to venture down that road. We finally stopped at a small brown timber post that had an etching of a cross and an arrow pointing down a narrow laneway. This trip was to connect me with my past and its troubled but faith-filled history.

Some people had asked me to say Mass at a rock, a rock that proved to be pretty special. A group of pilgrims, some forty – were making a walking pilgrimage of twenty two miles from Ballintubber Abbey – four miles from my home in Ireland – to Croagh Patrick – the mountain on which St. Patrick spent forty day in prayer and fasting for the Irish people back in the early 400's. The pilgrims were walking in the footsteps of St. Patrick on a path known locally as Tocher Padhraig, or St. Patrick's Journey.

I journeyed through a winding well trodden path carrying a Mass kit. Finally I caught sight of some people standing round while they waited for some of the slower walkers to catch up.

Then I saw it. It was raised like a high altar. At the top, a huge, mostly flat stone sat. Some water from a recent rain still lodged in some of the crevices in the rock. At the bottom of the rock, there was a carved Celtic circle etched into the rock. The surroundings were well sheltered and secluded for its own reasons.

Finally all the walkers had arrived. Some were from nearby, having made several such journeys. Others were visitors from various places around Europe embracing a piece of Irish history.

I set out the chalice, ciborium, wine and sacramentary on the well worn rock I even got some water from the rock. I had chosen a Mass of Thanksgiving to celebrate my first ever Mass at a Mass Rock.

What is a Mass Rock? A Mass Rock is a stone or large rock that was used in Ireland during the Penal Days (1691-1727). Bishops and priests were not allowed to say Mass. The people gathered together in the open at Mass Rocks or in safe houses to celebrate Mass. Because the activity was illegal, the Masses were not scheduled and their occurrence was communicated verbally between parishioners. The place of the Mass Rock was usually secluded, away from the roads, well-sheltered with trees. Often lookouts were posted in case the British soldiers might come. Often such Mass Rocks were placed near streams so that it was possible for people to walk on the bed of the river without leaving any footprints.

Centuries later, the practice of saying Mass on a Mass Rock evolved into what was called "Station Masses." Masses would be said in people's homes in the various villages in a parish. As a young altar server, I had the privilege of serving such Masses for a few years growing up.

All during that Mass on the Mass Rock, amid the sheltering trees and the prayerful disposition of the participants, we were pioneers in bridging a gap of centuries of our faith journey. We were all connected, not just as people from the surrounding areas or mainland Europe, but we were connected with the many people who gathered at this same rock to celebrate Mass centuries ago. They gathered at a time of persecution and hardship as they desperately held on to one of their greatest treasures their faith. Because of such gatherings centuries ago, we had the privilege of being grateful for their depth of faith and commitment to practice it in spite of persecution.

Then there was a much deeper connection; a connection with St. Patrick himself who introduced the faith to Ireland. This Mass Rock where we were celebrating Mass, lay along the journey of St. Patrick himself. The gift he gave was not wasted but treasured in good times and in bad; in heroic times of Penal Days and in famine times.

My past centuries of faith took on a whole new meaning and depth as I celebrated Mass on this rock of ages, this Mass Rock.