

Friends of Orthodoxy on Iona (2017)

Diary of an Irish pilgrimage

By Columba Bruce Clark, organiser

In the wake of Saints Patrick, Brigid and others we never knew

Sunday, July 2

The base for our pilgrimage activities is the pleasant seaside town of Rostrevor, on the east coast of Ireland just to the north of the border. But for some of us, the week begins 70 miles to the north, in Ballymena. That town has a modestly flourishing Romanian community, which worships in one of the well-appointed offices of a Catholic church. The Romanians, a community of well-churched young families, receive an unusual influx of newcomers at their Sunday service.

Father John Nankivell, our pilgrimage chaplain, concelebrates with the local priest Father Cornel Clepea. Also with us are Father John's Presbyteria, Georgina, and Mother Nectaria McLees, a peripatetic American nun who edits the quarterly magazine *Road to Emmaus*. Deacon John Russell Komline and his wife Judith, normally based in New Jersey, somehow find their way to Ballymena, as do Cyrus and Patrick, young men from Alaska who are on their first trip to Europe.

The Ballymena Romanians are astonished by Father John's proficiency in their language. As a young man he travelled in Ceausescu's Romania; now, in his seventies, he finds his Romanian is more needed than ever, because of the pastoral needs of his parish in the English Midlands.

We drive in convoy to Rostrevor and find several pilgrims already waiting at An Cuan, the sprawling and pleasantly shabby sea-front premises which will be our headquarters. We are a group of 28, including eight Americans, a young lady from Ukraine and people from all over Britain and Ireland. Jan and Meg Schaefer, sisters who curate a historic house in Pennsylvania, have made an epic journey.

An Cuan is a retreat and training centre run by Youth With A Mission, an evangelically-inspired Christian organisation, and the building also serves as an important location for inter-faith and inter-cultural debate and encounter, within Ireland and beyond. Its administrators give their Orthodox guests a

warm welcome and show great respect for the integrity of our services and common life.

Monday, July 3

In the morning, Peter McGrath, a nice local lad who is studying history at Queens University gives our whole group a walking tour of Rostrevor and its surroundings. We soon learn that many American servicemen trained in this area, just before D Day. We walk enjoyably through Kilbroney Park, near An Cuan: this is a former baronial estate that is now public property. Peter points out a holm-oak tree with an unusual shape and the two Alaskans immediately scramble to the very top.

In the afternoon we have two lectures on iconography: one by Colette Clarke, a lady from Dublin who chairs the Association of Iconographers in Ireland, and another by Eva Vlavianou, an accomplished icon-painter and teacher who lives in Paris. With the blessing of her spiritual father in Greece she has fostered the Irish iconography movement. Eva gives a passionate lecture on the basic principles of iconography, accompanied by about 50 images. Perhaps 20 Irish iconographers come to hear the speakers so the lecture room is very full. Afterwards there is a very stimulating dialogue between our group and the local icon-painters.

Tuesday, July 4

Our first coach trip brings us to the border country of South Armagh, which was a very troubled place during the Northern Irish conflict, and then to the city of Armagh. We have taken as a guide a lady called Una Walsh who has a deep love of this landscape and a talent for sharing it. We visit our first Christian site – the grave of an early female saint, Monnina – and Father John leads us in prayer. Una (a mother of seven and grandmother of four, she tells us) suddenly understands what sort of group we are. She successfully proposes that we rethink our tour, cross the border and take in a site in County Louth: the traditional grave-site of Saint Brigid. That early Christian holy woman is normally associated with Kildare, further south, but there is no currently accessible place of pilgrimage in that county. So pilgrims who want to honour Brigid's memory come to Faughard in County Louth. That's what we gladly did, although it involved walking in a straggling procession up a hill, in light rain, for about 20 minutes.

Then we head for Armagh Cathedral, a magnificent Anglican monument, complete with tattered regimental flags. The lay custodian, Leigh, receives us

warmly. Armagh was Ireland's ecclesiastical capital, and the Anglican Church (as in many parts of Ireland) occupies the oldest site.

In the evening, an American pilgrim, Pat Egan, gives a wonderful lecture on Saint Patrick, whose writings she has studied for about 20 years. She has also perused lesser known secondary sources in French and other languages. She is convinced that Patrick was born in Boulogne and not as conventional wisdom holds on the west coast of Great Britain. She has written an unpublished 400-page book on the subject, as well as producing new translations of Patrick's two works. For the benefit of two members of the audience I try to break down her argument into seven or key propositions, and then I translate them into Russian....so that nobody goes away having learned nothing.

Wednesday, July 5

At 10 am, another lecturer arrives: the local Presbyterian minister, Edward McKenzie, who gives an excellent presentation on C.S. Lewis and Tolkien. The speaker is a young man with a pencil moustache, tweed suit and waist-coat, almost like a young edition of one of those writers. He focuses in particular on Lewis's association with the Mountains of Mourne, which were a kind of early Narnia for the writer.

Then most pilgrims make the journey (some entirely on foot, most with a mixture of road transport and walking) to the Cloughmore Stone, a giant boulder which some regard as an inspiration for the Narnia stories.

Jonny Clark, the An Cuan administrator, joins them and uses the chance to tell the pilgrims a bit about Northern Ireland and the peace-building work he used to do in Belfast. In the evening, some pilgrims go to a local pub and enjoy some folk music.

Thursday, July 6

Another coach trip today – to Downpatrick and Strangford Lough. This time the lecturer is Thomas McErlean, a veteran historian and archaeologist from the University of Ulster. We meet him at Inch Abbey, a ruined but still evocative Cistercian site near Downpatrick; then move on after a tricky drive to Nendrum Monastery. This is a fascinating archaeological site on the shores of Strangford Lough which Thomas himself excavated, making some extraordinary discoveries about the efficient use of tidal power to grind corn. Being guided round this awesome place, a low mound surrounding by water, is a wonderful experience. Finally we go to Down Cathedral, where a pleasant young custodian shows her politeness by keeping the place open

for nearly an hour after closing time. We pray at the traditional burial site of Patrick, Columba and Brigid, which is a compelling place.

Then it's back to Rostrevor, arriving at around supper time, in other words 6.00 pm. Our hosts at An Cuan excel themselves in providing simple, tasty meals which respect the Orthodox fasting rules.

Friday, July 7

This morning we make our way to the Benedictine monastery, a couple of miles outside Rostrevor where we have been invited to celebrate an Orthodox liturgy.

The monastery is an impressive modern premises, set in beautifully landscaped grounds at the foot of the Mourne Mountains. This community has become a kind of reference point for Christians of all confessions across the island of Ireland. It was established by a group of French brothers who wanted to bear witness during the Northern Irish troubles.

So our "travelling circus" complete with icons, altar-cloths, censers and so on proceeds up the hill in a fleet of cars driven by the An Cuan staff. Thanks to Father John Nankivell and Deacon John Komline, as well as Georgina Nankivell (who does most of the singing) the service unfolds with all its dignified beauty. It appears to fascinate our Benedictine hosts who discreetly snap photographs. We go down to the village for brunch at the Old School House restaurant. Then some return to the Benedictines for their "nones" service at 2.15, and at 3.00 we have scheduled a discussion with one of our Benedictine hosts about the history of monasticism. This goes very well. Brother Thierry gives a presentation on the fundamentals of the Benedict ethos (stability, obedience, a perpetual process of conversion) and I speak for a bit on what we know of Columba's monastery, and the extent of eastern influences there.

We present Brother Thierry with a newly made icon of Saint Palladius whose day it is.

In the evening, Mother Nectaria McLees gives a talk on the chain of sanctity connecting the Gaelic lands, Scandinavia and Russia. The Kings of Norway, once Christianised, sailed westwards and brought the faith to Iceland and Greenland; the Kings of Sweden were intimately connected and intermarried with the eastern Slavs. Both the Norwegian and Swedish monarchs were mostly called Olaf; one has to concentrate hard to

distinguish between them. She has worked diligently to prepare this talk and negotiates the detail skilfully. A selection of 50 images brings the topic alive.

Saturday, July 8

Today has been timetabled as a free day, until Vespers in the evening. Numbers are thinning out a little. The two young men from Alaska leave early to pursue their travels round Ireland; the next stop on their old-world wanderings is Mount Athos. But some pilgrims have specific requests. About half a dozen are keen to see the nearby Mourne Textiles weaving studio, and I take them up; we were well received by Karen Hey-Edie, the matriarch of the enterprise. A larger number wants to make a second visit to Downpatrick, and finally we set out in four vehicles, so that each mini-party can go at its own pace. We visit Saul Church (place of Saint Patrick's encounter with a local chieftain), the Down Museum, which gives an excellent tour d'horizon of local history, located in an old prison, and the Struell Holy Wells.

Then, by last minute arrangement with the young chatelain and chatelaine, seven of us call at Killyleagh Castle, a magnificent medieval fortress in the middle of village. I thought we would simply get a quick look round the gardens. However, Gawn and Polly Rowan-Hamilton offered some of our number a chance to climb up to the roof. Kenneth Lock, a wiry septuagenarian who has been coming on our pilgrimages with his wife Marina since 2001, is among the first to scramble up the winding stone stairs, which are not for the claustrophobic.

We get home by 5 pm, just in time for the calligraphy lesson offered Marina Carrier, a lady who helps with pastoral work in the Nankivells' parish. About six of us take up the challenge and we try (albeit very amateurishly) to reproduce the interlacing patterns found in Celtic manuscripts.

Then Vespers – the latest of many services in the “quiet room” of the hostel which we have converted into quite a convincing Orthodox chapel. As we pray we have a breath-taking view over Carlingford Lough.

At 9.30, the pilgrims present me with two bottles of good wine and a card signed by all of them. The atmosphere is very warm.

Sunday, July 9

At 7 am, our final liturgy in the temporary chapel. The view out to sea is more beautiful than ever. Frank-Michael Woznitsa, a Russophile German with a strong spiritual calling, performs beautifully in the role of sub-deacon and server. He speaks limited English and his Russian wife Tatiana speaks none, although she does speak some French in addition to being bilingual in Russian and German. But throughout the week, language barriers have been happily overcome and many friendships have been formed or consolidated.

By 10.30 am, most pilgrims are on their way – to New Jersey, to the English Midlands, to Pennsylvania, to Frankfurt, to Kiev – or to Alaska via Athos.

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