



Twenty-five years of Féile Bríde festival came to a close with the celebration of Eucharist at St Brigid's Garden Well. Celebrant Fr Adrian Carbery, parish priest of Kildare and Sister Mary Minehan welcomed the group with a Céad Míle Fáilte. The sun shone on the clear crisp morning as Mass began to the sound of birds and flowing water. These sounds combined with the opening hymn: *Sing to the Mountains...this is the day the Lord has made...*

Fr Adrian spoke of the sacred ground on which we walked; reminding all present that this same place was where Brigid and her sisters walked fifteen hundred years ago! As water was blessed and sprinkled on all from Brigid's well, Adrian linked this blessing to the waters of our baptism.

In his homily, he noted that the same Gospel of Matthew 5:13-16 for the 5th Sunday in Ordinary time, was proclaimed throughout the Catholic world. The theme, *'Salt of the earth; light of the world.'* was fitting one for celebrating Brigid, 'Flame of Justice and Peace' the woman often associated with light, depicted in images with a lamp in her hand.



Fr. Adrian paid special tribute to Brigidines, particularly to Mary, Phil and Rita, as he thanked them for the gift of their presence in Kildare, their commitment to keeping the 'flame of Brigid' alive, and for the hospitality of the Solas Bhríde Centre and Hermitages, praising the vision that created it and its outreach, not only in Kildare town, but far beyond. He said, *'as we celebrate 25 years of that commitment, there's no better time to thank the Brigidines and all who have helped on the journey, in this place.'* He invited applause!



Among the pilgrims at the Well for Mass were greatgreat grand nieces and nephews of Sister Alacoque Miller, one of the pioneering Brigidines to Australia. (photo with Rita)

PILGRIMAGE ON THE EVE OF SAINT BRIGID

Féile Bríde festival began with the pilgrimage on the eve of Brigid's day, as some 400 people gathered around a large fire, with lights and lanterns, before setting out to walk the pilgrim route from the Japanese gardens, to St Brigid's wayside and garden wells; praying, singing, chanting, led by Deirdre Ni Chinneide (Celtic singer). The night was calm, mild and frost-free with the light of a crescent moon and lone star adding light to the many candles, lanterns and fire lights dotted along the route. Such atmospheric conditions added to the prayerful reflection of the vigil.



Sister Mary Minehan, in welcoming the pilgrims, spoke of Brigid's feastday as traditionally marking the beginning of Spring, according to the Celtic Calendar. It signals a time of hope, of opportunity, of new beginnings and new life, she said. She quoted the well-known words of the Celtic poem, "*Anois teach an earraigh, Beidh an lá ag dul chun síneadh, Is tar éis na féile Bríde, Ardóidh me mo sheol.*" (translation *Spring has come. The days are getting longer. And after Brigid's day, I can hoist my sails again.*)

Mary recalled the great sense of the sacredness of the hearth held by our ancestors, and on this eve, invited us to unite with them and with many people celebrating at Brigid wells all over Ireland as well as with those celebrating Brigid throughout the world. We are privileged to be here on Brigid's own ground, her home town, Kildare, Cill Dara (church of the Oak), she said.

Sister Phil O'Shea led the 'blessing of the water' from merged waters of Brigid's healing Well in Kildare (her monastic home) and her Well at Faughart, Co Louth. As pilgrims were blessed with the mixed waters, they chanted: '*Brid, Brid, guardian of the water, lead us to the deeper well.*'

As pilgrims formed a circle round the fire, Martine (Cairde Bhríde) wove the St Brigid's cross as Lauren handed her the fresh rushes. As she wove, she turned to the four corners of the Earth - East, South, West and North - to include all humanity and all of creation in the weaving. Then, the newly woven cross was lifted high with the Brigid's light to lead the pilgrim walk to Brigid's garden well and continue with prayers, chants, hymns.

CONCERT - Wednesday evening concert featuring Luka Bloom, '*Let your light shine*'

delighted a packed audience as he played and sang his own compositions, enchanting his audience with '*Don't be afraid of the Light that shines within you*' as all joined in the chorus. Cormac Breatnach played on the tin whistle. Luka (photo) has been a loyal supporter of Solas Bhríde for 25 years!



Throughout the week, there were many interesting activities and workshops, including a monastic tour of Kildare, workshop on floral art depicting the life and development of Solas Bhríde, poetry readings, writers group, sacred dance, and weaving of St Brigid's cross – activities to cater for all age groups.



On Friday evening, 3rd February, the Annual Celtic Heritage Lecture on Saint Brigid was hosted at Kildare Education Centre. Dominic McEvoy, director of the centre, welcomed Maírín Ní Dhomhnaigh (photo), professor of Old and Middle Irish and Celtic Philology, NUI Galway. She spoke of the ancient scripts associated with Brigid of Kildare. Besides the many myths, legends and stories associated with the woman Brigid, said Maírín, she was a 'Mary' figure for the Celtic people, often seen as a Goddess. Brigid is the first historical woman whom we can situate

between Patrick and Columba (Columcille) 524-528AD. She is an outstanding figure of the feminine identity. There is no doubting the vigour of her 'cult' which flourished, not just in Ireland but UK and Europe as is in evidence with churches, shrines and wells named after the saint. Foundations of Brigid, according to E.G. Bowen and her 'cult' followed migrations of Irish settlers to Wales – Scotland – Devon – Cornwall – Normandy – Brittany and as far south as Spain.

Unlike Patrick, there are no manuscripts of Brigid's own writings. Saint Brendan of Clonfert is said to have written about the virtues of Brigid. Cogitosus, Brigidine monk of Kildare in the 7th century, wrote a celebrated treatise on the life and virtues of St Brigid, but several manuscripts of this tract are yet to be found. Canon John O'Hanlon, (1821-1905) gifted priest, excellent historian, and graceful poet is credited with an extensive and best account of the life of Brigid. He puts Brigid (d 523) on a par with Patrick (d 461) and Columkille (d 596) – the three great patrons of Ireland, buried together at Downpatrick. The earliest life of the saint was preserved on the Continent.

There are 9 early lives of Brigid. Two of them are in Latin. Brigid was ordained Bishop when she sought to become a veiled nun and Bishop Mel of Longford said that this was given to her by God.

In the 7th century, Kildare was a leading centre of religion. The city of Kildare – an Episcopal See where Brigid was Abbess – was wealthy and important. There were holy women of Kildare, literate and educated. Many came from nobility. Abbess Muireann was the daughter of the King of Leinster. Brigid held her place as Abbess in the monastic city of Kildare.

Máirín's scholarly lecture confirmed Brigid - and her women companions - as celebrated for women who had power to *'turn back the streams of war,'* renowned for hospitality, love of the poor and the land. In conclusion, said Máirín, I believe in the historical Brigid and the Goddess.

Afri CONFERENCE Saturday, 4th February:

Joe Murray (Coordinator of Afri) and Sister Rita Minehan introduced the conference theme *'Darkness to Light'* as they welcomed participants to Solas Bhríde Centre and Hermitages for the



25th Afri Justice and Peace conference in partnership with Brigidine Sisters and Cairde Bhríde. Rita recounted the many events over the 25 years, including the lighting of the flame in Kildare town square by Sister Mary Teresa Cullen (Brigidine Congregation Leader) in 1993 marking the first Feile Bhríde.



The distinguished speakers included Alastair McIntosh, PhD, writer, speaker, broadcaster and activist, who began the conference with his **‘Turn back the Streams of War’**

Alastair began his talk stressing the importance of learning the meaning and power of non-violence and the necessity to have a deep commitment to the greater part of life that can never be killed - the soul. He praised the leadership of Pope Francis, in particular his *Nonviolence: a Style of Politics for Peace*, written in 2017 for the 50th world day of peace. (www.vatican.va)

Stressing how crucial it is to keep reforming our religion, and the great need for the Church to be constantly reforming itself, he expressed the disturbing factor of Donald Trump’s election, believing he got into politics and power through religion. He drew comparisons between what took place in the Island of Lewis, the homeland of Trump’s mother, (Alastair’s too from the age of 4 years) when she was forced with many more to emigrate. Trump’s mother’s passage to America was the direct result of the 1930s Highland Clearances thousands were brutally forced off the land, onto migrant ships or to cities. This was a case of slavery, as a direct result of landlordism. The Clearances had three stages, the first began from 1760s. The 1830s saw an intensification of migration and emigration. For generations the people of the Highlands and Islands suffered under tyrannical landlords. Life was aptly described by a crofter from the island of Lewis, *‘All we can expect is to live as slaves and die as beggars.’* Ironically, Trump’s own father Fredrick made his wealth from extracting rents!

According to Alastair, religion played a part then as now using the power of patrimony and fear to bring to conversion. Trump uses his mother’s Bible by way of ‘confirming’ his own adherence to religion – a tactic that proved supportive of his election. Did many Evangelical Christians vote him into the White House? Alastair’s analysis of the similarities, comparing the message of John Calvin 1509-1564 who preached on Total depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, Perseverance of the Saints, and today was merely reiterated under a different guise! In a binary world view, only a few are saved, and these are the ‘chosen.’ Most are damned. The Elect on the one hand and the Dammed/bad (Terrorists/ Mexicans/ Immigrants) on the other. So the ‘keep America safe’ slogan, building high walls and invoking strict immigration laws to ‘ban 7 countries from going to the USA’ to keep out the ‘other’ is the rallying cry. The Founding Fathers had the same view of themselves as the ‘Elect’ so that ‘America’ carried the idea and today Trump reinforces this same belief, that gives America the right to rule the world!

Alastair posed the rhetorical question, using a Quaker turn of phrase, *‘How might we seek to live in the virtue of that life and power that take away the occasion of all wars?’*

His own answer:

If we want to turn back the streams of war, we have to understand the deeps roots of war because we all carry the seeds of war in different ways.

He encouraged participants to look to Brigid as the archetype, the feminine, like Mary, the revolutionary woman who *‘pulled down the mighty from their thrones’* (Magnificat) since we have in her a model and to Jesus, whose ultimate ‘sacrifice’ on the cross was an act of *nonviolence* in the face of political and religious violence. Jesus never taught a ‘just war’ theory, rather he taught full-on *nonviolence!* *‘Put away your sword’* he told Peter. And to Pilate at his trial: *‘My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my followers would fight to save me.’*

He concluded with a poem 'recited' to Donald Trump, calling him 'back home' - home to the values of *nonviolence*... to build a golden tower: a human heart transmuted, transfigured, transubstantiated. Come 'home' (to the island of Lewis), just come on 'home' ... to honest folk, he said!



Kathy Kelly addressed the conference in the afternoon on the theme: **Other lands have dreams too!** Cathy has been a USA peace activist, author and founding member of Voices for Creative Nonviolence (www.vcnv.org). She has been imprisoned on many occasions, travelled widely to areas of the world where US military bombardments and drones are commonplace, like Iraq, Afghanistan, Gaza.

Quoting a Mexican Proverb, "*They tried to bury us, they didn't know we were seeds,*" appears to sum up her own tenacity as the woman sowing seeds (of courage to speak truth to power) for which she has been imprisoned more than 60 times!

Quoting from the Indian author, Arundhati Roy, "*Another world is not only possible, it is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.*" appears to be her motto.

Cathy's analysis of the 'killing machine' of the US, now that the troops have gone, is the use of drones. The people are scared of drones in Kabul, where or when they are going to fall, especially for the 1.5 million living in refugee camps. Here the US personnel ride in a helicopter from the airport so that they don't see what is taking place on the ground! These are the stories that are kept from the US public - children dying from cluster bombs. At the same time, nine trillion dollars is spent by USA, to preserve the oil. Exxon owns the rights to 67million acres of land.

Cathy poses many questions to the participants:

Who was paying the price for the war in Iraq?

Where does our conscience take us?

Who is going to pay attention to 500,000 Iraq children?

She challenges the group, asking

How do we come together as anti- poverty / environment/ peace movements to make an impact?

Where is the anti-war movement going?

She foresees that the Protection of Sacred Waters is what will consume us most into the future. For this, we have to educate the people all the time. We have to tell the truth, for example, that the military spends trillions while research on the environment is mere millions.

That 9,000 young people are involved in the military in the US from 12 years old.

That the greatest terrorism is the destruction of the environment!

For all of this, there is the need to educate; educate; educate!

According to Cathy, it is the US that needs all of our help.

Many new groups are forming, younger and newer groups. What she encourages is to equip them with resources so they can do the work we want them to do.

Above all, she encourages participants to show the face of contempt to war! A desperate need in our time is an Anti-war and a Peace movement.

She put some rhetorical questions: What sustains you? What to do in a practical way?

Her suggestions include: Form communities and start conversations, get young people on board.

Ireland had a huge refugee departure as a result of the famine. Many were stuck and buried in a mass grave. We need to educate the young, with mentors, to equip them for the world we are going into. Make Skype calls with Iranians so that we can see them as real people.

She concluded saying, on a more hopeful note, people are ‘coming to life’ in the US and ‘waking up’ as a result of the recent election, 2016!

The ‘Occupy’ movement in the US changed hearts and minds of the politicians!
It’s not impossible. Challenging leaders, asking what they stand for, is paramount!

DAVE DONNELLAN and COLM RODDY – PEACE ACTIVISTS

Both these men spoke of resisting war through faith in action.

Dave began by quoting from Professor Cornel West,

"First, we must try to tell the truth, and a condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak."

Allowing suffering to speak, he says, as it carries with it its own truth. That’s the place where we need to start.

Along with Colm Roddy, Dave was part of the peace action at Shannon Airport in May 2016, as they tried to inspect a Lear Jet they believed was being used by the US AirForce, parked at the airport overnight. A red cross was also drawn on a taxi area as part of the protest. They were arrested and this action which is still before the courts (2017).



Dave reiterated the point that when suffering is allowed to speak, it is a challenge by which we are changed. But first, we listening to the stories, allowing them to speak is important This can be a transformative experience. It brings change and there is an element of solidarity here which is key!

Dave gave the example of the ‘*Home Sweet Home*’ solidarity group that occupied an office block and transformed it into a home for homeless. Many people are in solidarity with the homeless. When the group occupied the building, the judicial system stepped in to protect the rights of the building and all the while had ignored the rights of the homeless people. Prior to occupation, the court system was silent when the people were homeless.

Similarly, he asked, are the 7 Countries banned from the US those that have been bombed by the US military machine? And if so, are they banned because the US does not want to hear the stories of sufferings from victims of this military machine?

Colm Roddy joined Dave to voice the ‘connection’ between his protest at Shannon airport in May 2016 and the occupation of the British military in 1916, a hundred years before.

The reason for his protest, he said, was because Jesus speaks of ‘my neighbour,’ and to Colm, Syrians, Iraq, Yemen are neighbours. He has been in court 5 times. Being in Court, he said, is an opportunity to challenge the assumption of what is trotted out, that ‘all the planes going through Shannon are unarmed!’ vis-a-vis the truth, of the New Testament – the book on which he swears the oath to ‘tell the truth.’ The irony of ‘what is truth?’ Is not lost on him!

Testimony and experiences of a Refugee/Asylum-Seeker woman from Zimbabwe (who asked not to be named), was the final speaker. She has been in ‘direct provision’ in a hotel in the Midlands of Ireland for a number of years, awaiting ‘freedom’ as a citizen of the country. Her harrowing account made for uncomfortable listening as we ‘allowed suffering to speak’ of the ‘prison-like’ conditions under which she is detained. Direct provision provides detainees with €19.00 a week. They cannot work, cook, or have the freedom to travel. She praised the local

Church community, clergy and laity, for the care, companionship and solidarity provided for them, without such care, life would be indeed intolerable.

The challenge to the conference is to experience the suffering and allow it to turn faith into action.



CONCLUSION

Joe Murray (Coordinator of Afri) concluded the conference by thanking participants for their presence and support, with special thanks to Brigidines at Solas Bhríde Centre for hosting the day, to Cairde Bhríde and all who worked ‘on the wings’ organising the events, and to the Missionary Society of Saint Patrick (Kiltegan) for their sponsorship.

The day ended with traditional Celtic music.



Compiled by Patricia Mulhall, Tuesday, 14 February 2017