

A solitary walk from Glendalough through the Wicklow Gap to the Solas Bhríde Centre in Kildare reveals that while Patrick is ‘the saint of the Church’, Brigid is ‘the saint of the people’ / By MARGARET HEBBLETHWAITE

Woman of fire

ONE WAY that the pandemic has affected me is to prompt more walking. But if the struggle for gender equality in the Church means anything, I need to exercise it myself, and so it was that after a couple of pilgrimages to the sites of male saints, I decided that my next pilgrimage must be in honour of a woman. When I heard from a Brigidine sister that the fifth-century Irish saint, Brigid of Kildare, had been ordained as a bishop, my ears pricked up.

My friend advised me to make the pilgrimage for St Brigid’s Day, 1 February, when a week of events begin in Kildare, and suggested that I could begin in Glendalough. It was an odd time of year to begin a pilgrimage (long before Chaucer’s April-showers weather), but at least it meant that this walk would be different in more ways than just being female-centred. Winter not summer. Ireland not Britain. Self-planned, not following a prepared route.

When I began my pilgrimage in frosty January, I was just beginning to discover Brigid through a little book (now out of print but being updated), *Rekindling the Flame: A Pilgrimage in the Footsteps of Brigid of Kildare* by Rita Minehan, whom I later met in Kildare. Brigid had been born a slave, daughter of a slave mother and a chieftain father, but became a towering figure in Irish history, travelling the country and setting up innovative religious houses all over the land. In Kildare, she founded a double monastery (i.e. monks and nuns), which became a model for future European monasteries, exceptional not only for its hospitality and advocacy of the poor, but also for its learning and artistic excellence. It had a dairy, a hospital, schools and a high-quality scriptorium.

But Brigid was also a shepherd, a milker of cows and a churner of butter; and she became a skilled midwife. Her generosity to the poor was such that her father tried to sell this slave girl on before she bankrupted him – and even as he spoke about this to the King of Leinster, she was giving away his valuable sword to a leper to sell. The king told him she was “too holy and exalted to be either bought or sold”, and donated another sword in replacement.

MOST OF the Brigid legends are laced with miracles, but one that we can take at face value shows her opposition to legalism. When a kind but poor host had prepared a meal for two of her nuns, and they had refused to eat it because it was Lent, she was so cross with



PHOTOS: MARGARET HEBBLETHWAITE

St Brigid’s statue at Solas Bhríde

them that she drove them out of the refectory.

Glendalough embraces the ruined “monastic city” of sixth-century St Kevin, who had lived as a hermit among the rocks at the lakeside. I began my pilgrimage with a full day in the spiritual ambience of this historic place nestling in the Wicklow Mountains, staying in the Mercy Sisters’ Hermitage Centre. There was a creative prayer time twice a day before a blackened yew-tree tabernacle, thousands of years old and vaguely evocative of a pilgrim walking and stretching an arm to the heavens. Next to us was a meditation garden and a labyrinth: I walked the spiralling path, diverted this way and that as I reflected on the ebbs and flows of my life, and finally discovered myself at the centre.

Daylight hours are short in winter, so I set off on 29 January just before sunrise. I was walking alone, and had arranged for my luggage to be driven over to my next B&B. I began by entering the ruined cathedral in the monastic city and asking St Kevin to accompany me in my search for the woman who just one generation earlier had inspired him. Some short prayers from Rita Minehan’s book were apt:

Circle us, Lord, keep protection near and danger afar.

Circle us, Lord, keep hope within and doubt without.

Circle us, Lord, keep light near and darkness afar.

Bless to us, O God, the earth beneath our feet.

Bless to us, O God, the path whereon we go.

Bless to us, O God, the people whom we meet.

Then I was off, following the little yellow monk with a staff and a cowl who was the waymark symbol for St Kevin’s Way, which was to form my route for the first day. It led me along the course of a mountain stream, and when I came to a dozen large stepping stones, I could not resist crossing the river and back, from sheer delight. Cold was never a problem, for walking builds up body heat and I was well wrapped up, but wind and damp were challenging as I rose higher and higher towards the Wicklow Gap. The views were stunning, but at times the wind knocked me backwards, and I was glad to have put on waterproof over-trousers as wet, cold jeans are a misery.

FROM THE Wicklow Gap, the route followed a broad path alongside a forest, but there were big muddy patches, and it was slow work searching for footholds between the barbed wire on one side and the spiky pine branches on the other. I passed only one other walker in all my journey, who was coming in the other direction and sounded French. He had camped out overnight. “It was cold,” he said cheerfully. When I reached a stretch of road, I decided to stick to tarmac from then on: it would be a longer distance and the gale was strong on the road, but given a choice of wind and mud, I preferred to suffer wind.

Luckily, I wavered in my resolve when I came to the next little yellow monk, and could not resist exploring where he would lead me. I was so glad I did, as the next stretch proved the most delightful part of the walk, and a double row of firm boardwalks studded with non-slip nails made progress swift over the irregular forest floor. The words ran through my head, “A highway for our God ... the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain” (Isaiah 40: 3-4). The path took me to the most enchanting picnic spot – a grassy bank, with a flat stone for my feet, by the bend of a stream that formed a clear pool and then tumbled over rocks, and to the side a pretty footbridge.

When St Kevin’s Way emerged on to road again at Ballinagee Bridge, the route divided and I took the stretch to Valleymount, where I had booked a B&B. All was road now, but with sweeping landscapes and almost completely free of vehicles. I reached the house comfortably before nightfall, and settled warmly in front of a stove to study the map and choose the quietest roads to walk the next morning.

I then heard on the news from Britain that there had been such a severe storm that two

people had been killed, and another storm was forecast for the morrow. I assumed that the wet gales buffeting me had been the fringe of this tempest, and I saw my local weather forecast was predicting rain and wind the next afternoon. It was, therefore, crucial that I should start early and make all speed. As I set out, I checked my walking speed – it was 3.5 m.p.h. – and I did not dare stop even while eating my sandwiches. I told myself to keep going, because even when I was tired my speed only fell to 2.8 m.p.h., and any time spent resting would not be made up. Just before one o'clock, the first patters of rain began. I went on walking while taking off my rucksack, opening the pocket, unfolding my rain cape and searching for the holes for my head and arms – all while trying to juggle the crumbly sandwich that I was still eating and my mobile phone on which I was checking my route. Despite the distance walked that day, which my Strava app revealed to be 22 miles, I reached my destination by 3 p.m.

I was now within the grassy Curragh plain, also known as Brigid's Pastures, with its lightly rolling hillocks and yellow gorse bushes. My B&B was tucked away from the road with nothing in view but sky, grass and sheep. Brigid had been responsible for making the Curragh free grazing land for the poor, after acquiring the territory through an alleged miracle. The King of Leinster had agreed to give her as much land as her cloak would cover, and according to the legend her mantle spread out until it covered the entire Curragh region of nearly 5,000 acres.

For the final day's walk, I set out eagerly, and I loved being able to walk across the pits and furrows of the grassland instead of along roads. I needed to arrive at the Brigidine Sisters' Centre of Solas Bhríde (Light of Brigid) in Kildare in good time, for the celebrations of Féile Bríde (Feast of Brigid) began that evening of 31 January. Again, a prayer from Rita Minehan's book fitted my journey:

O Brigid, Mary of the Gael,
May your protection never fail.
Spread your mantle over me,
Where e'er I pass, where e'er I be.
Weather foul or weather fair,
Keep me in your loving care.

The title "Mary of the Gael" is an ancient one, and reflects the supreme importance of Brigid for Ireland, alongside Jesus' mother. The imagery of a protective cloak forming a shelter for the people is associated with both women. There is also similarity in the way that Brigid's intercession is sometimes elided into language that identifies her influence with God's action, so that it evokes the divine feminine in the same way as much Mariological language:

Woman of fire, woman of light ...
Set our bones ablaze with the fire of your love
for the poor, the dispossessed.

"Woman of fire" refers to a perpetual flame that had apparently burned in Brigid's abbey



Above: the landscape in the Wicklow Mountains along the way; below: a Brigid cross

for over 1,000 years, until it was extinguished in the sixteenth-century suppression of the monasteries. Fire had been associated with a pre-Christian goddess of the same name, but St Brigid had transformed the ancient Celtic tradition into the light of Christ.

That evening at Brigid's Wayside Well, we bore lighted candles and sang to her as herald of the spring, as the goddess before her had been:

We sing a song to Brigid, Brigid brings the
spring,
Awakens all the fields and the flowers, and
calls the birds to sing.

There were splashed blessings of well water and a procession back to the centre, where clumps of the first snowdrops confirmed the start of spring. We gathered in front of a bronze statue by Timothy P. Schmalz, which shows a young and lively Brigid in a monastic cowl, blessing with one hand and holding her crozier in the other. Around her are small



panels of Brigid milking a cow, delivering a baby, giving away her father's sword, attending to a beggar, sharing spiritual conversation with a soul friend, overseeing the double monastery and being ordained bishop.

THE ORDINATION also features in a stained-glass window in St Brigid's Cathedral, Kildare, and the verger proudly pointed out that since they are an Anglican cathedral, they have a woman bishop over them once more. Over the next days I was able to read more about Brigid's alleged ordination, which inevitably will arouse the curiosity of readers, as it did mine.

The story is found in a ninth-century life of Brigid called the *Bethu Brigte* (among other sources), and lest anyone suspect me of doctoring the account, here is what it says: "The bishop being intoxicated with the grace of God there did not recognise what he was reciting from his book, for he consecrated Brigid with the orders of a bishop. 'This virgin alone in Ireland,' said [Bishop] Mel, 'will hold the episcopal ordination.' While she was being consecrated, a fiery column ascended from her head." It would be anachronistic to suggest that the bishop was intending to extend ordination to women: he barely realised what he was doing until he had done it. The point of the story is that God chose Brigid for this office because she was exceptional, and confirmed the inspiration of the Holy Spirit with a divine sign. It was no mistake.

It is clear from the ancient accounts that Brigid took part, along with other bishops, in their episcopal activities, and some hold that, as abbess of a double monastery, her rank was equal or more than equal to that of bishop. The *Bethu Brigte* story is repeated in an eleventh-century *Life* with the explanation: "Wherefore the men of Ireland from that time to this give episcopal honour to Brigid's successor." But in 1152 (six centuries after Brigid), the Kells/Mellifont synod ruled that abbesses of Kildare should not be accorded episcopal honours.

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But the Irish people do not feel bothered by the controversy. They just get on with honouring Brigid, and increasingly so, for from next year there will be a new annual public holiday on St Brigid's Day. Many speakers said that 1993 had been a turning point for them, when Brigid's fire was lit again in the Market Square of Kildare in an inspiring liturgy. Since then, the Brigidines have kept the flame burning.

A virtual reality show in the Kildare Heritage Centre declares that while Patrick is "the saint of the Church", Brigid is "the saint of the people". There are many folk customs associated with her, especially the making of the Brigid cross, woven out of rushes and with a pretty, lopsided shape, as though dancing. Brigid had made such a cross with rushes from the floor while attending a dying chieftain, and telling him about the love of the one who died on the Cross, which led him to



The writer arrives at her destination

request baptism. Now there are Brigid crosses everywhere, and I was given three.

I also saw how much Brigid was "the saint of the people" in an *Irish Times* article of 30 January. It spoke of the tours, debates, films, podcasts, concerts, exhibitions and roller-skating events in Dublin, all celebrating women's role in Irish history and Brigid as a feminist pioneer – but not a whisper of anything to do with the Church. Brigid's iconography, too, is changing. The older portrayals have her in an all-encompassing nunish habit, but always with a crozier; the new images are wild and colourful, showing her with flowing red hair in flaming red or Irish green robes. "Inspiring descendants past and to come, her creative flame fires eternal," said Irish singer Imelda May. "It's time to thank her. It's time to heal. It's about time."

Margaret Hebblethwaite is writing a book about the women in the gospels.

Who was the angel the cardinal was talking about? We hadn't been introduced



CARDINAL Vincent Nichols made an appeal last Saturday. "We ask you, Almighty God," he said, "command that these gifts be borne by the hands of your holy angel to your altar on high."

He had just recited the words of institution from the Last Supper, and on the altar before him now lay the sacrament in which the body and blood of Christ were present. The occasion was the ordination as a Catholic priest of the popular Jonathan Goodall, until last September the Anglican Bishop of Ebbsfleet, a see taking its name not from the Eurostar station but from the place at Pegwell Bay where St Augustine arrived in 597.

But who was the angel the cardinal was talking about? We hadn't been introduced. His words were hard to fathom partly because he was using the first Eucharistic Prayer, the so-called Roman Canon. For much of the time, I find it difficult to tell what it is going on about. The puzzle starts in the first three words: "To you, therefore." What does it mean, "therefore"? The puzzle grows more intricate as it goes on.

The canon resembles a dressing-up box with lovely items of historic clothing bundled in, producing strange juxtapositions when they are pulled out again. Since the mystery can't be put into words anyway, it seems fine to surround it with hierophantic, reiterative, tangential utterances. I like the antiquarian sensation. It makes going to Mass a little like having dinner in Sir John Soane's Museum, surrounded by displaced sarcophagi and paintings mounted on hinged panels.

Adrian Fortescue, the sage of Letchworth, who possessed a love for dead languages and analytics later shared by Ronald Knox, had a lovely time rearranging sections of the Roman Canon into an order making more sense. That might have shocked the unprepared reader of his entry on the Mass in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* in 1908. But I don't know if the prayer is seldom used because of its obscurity. The second Eucharistic Prayer might be the most popular simply because it is shortest.

I'd hate to think so, since, having got through a sermon and then bidding prayers probably compiled with the help of the *News at Ten* headlines, we've still managed to lift up our hearts. It would

be a waste to then consume at one gulp the heart of the Mass, as William Buckland, the geologist turned Dean of Westminster, was said to have done to the shrivelled little heart of Louis XIV when it was shown to him in 1848.

WHETHER Buckland did so or not, Cardinal Nichols certainly made a reference to that angel. Someone long ago made a dim guess that it really referred to the Holy Spirit, since there is no explicit epiclesis in the Roman Canon, calling on him to come down. Still, the explicit is no great shakes in liturgies. As I may have mentioned before, the words of institution are lacking in the eucharistic liturgy of Addai and Mari (used by some Catholics in Iraq), which really is surprising, yet it was ruled perfectly valid.

But the Holy Spirit is not an angel. Who, then, is this angel? No one we know by name, just one who comes and goes. St John of Damascus, who knew a thing or two about angels, asserted in the eighth century that an angel could not be in Heaven and on earth at the same time. That sounds right.

The body and blood of Jesus are already in Heaven, and the sacrament of his presence remains on the earthly altar, so the angel's job here remains obscure.

I NOTICED the reference to the angel, which I'd only heard a few thousand times before, because I'd just bought from a Catholic charity an icon of a guardian angel. It's not a real icon but a reproduction on a gesso-covered board. On the back, a seal certifies something or other – principally that it was made in Ukraine. The survivors there need money rather than sponsorship of artisans, but from its place above the door to the kitchen the icon does serve as a reminder.

The angel is shown cradling a sort of mandorla, or a crystal sphere, enclosing a baby in swaddling clothes, representing not just a soul but a human being. Angels are servants of providence rather than magicians, and if it is time for thousands in Ukraine, or for me, to meet their maker, it's the guardian angel's task to bear their souls to that altar on high.



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