

Ireland pilgrimage brings challenge and cheer

By Father John J. Lombardi

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Celtic Crossing.

Irish Pilgrimage.

Religious Freedom Pilgrimage 2015.

All these phrases are appropriate to describe our recent June trip of 19 pilgrims to Ireland to walk 100 miles for religious freedom. Oh, and we came back with 20 pilgrims! (Read on)

We learned to drive on the wrong side of the road, negotiate Euros, use rugged bathrooms (one stated: “Close door as sheep will eat bath tissue”); learn the Irish language – they like the words lovely and grand a lot; to stand in a “que” – a line, and “go to the till”-a cashier; had spontaneous picnics along highways and in valleys, walked on seashores and learned to sacrifice for one another.

Spending 24/7 together was, shall we say, “family-like.”

We went to the Emerald Isle to walk for religious freedom in our United States, to witness to others our faith, and sacrifice for our freedoms here which are threatened. This was after the Irish vote on same-sex unions and before the ominous U.S. Supreme Court decision legalizing the same. Maybe we should now walk a thousand miles.



Anyway, we had beautiful, sometimes overcast Irish weather; celebrated daily Mass and prayers; heard guitar strumming from a pilgrim as we walked, sometimes beleaguered, other times zealously; talked to curious passers-by; played soccer with

bright children. We enjoyed the beauty and smell of exceptionally large roses (entrancing) and the moisturizing breezes of the Atlantic Ocean in Dingle Bay; stone fences all over the lands (glad we didn't have to build them); wandered thru thousand-year-old monasteries; even enjoyed an occasional pub crawl with the jolly Irish (they really like American music, including John Denver).

There were Three Big Lessons:

The Irish were, overwhelmingly, amazingly friendly people. In the city of Galway our three vans went down a one-way street the wrong way, and three different people helped us out of the international predicament. Second, we toured much of the Emerald Isle relishing in the rugged beauty that is Ireland, and reached our main destination, Croagh Patrick, a rugged mountain of 2,500 feet, and climbed it, all in challenging conditions.

The Real Lesson: all made sacrifices in walking 100 miles. Laura Haber, a chaperone, found out there that she and husband, Dave, were pregnant and kept walking amidst the joyful news. And we had an elderly couple, the McKenzies (yes - Irish), who walked gingerly and gigantically many of the miles with cheer and true grit.



In Ireland, one pilgrim asked me concernedly: "Father, what do you think of our country's future?"

We pilgrims were coming back to a changed and challenging land. Like St. Patrick, we need to answer by recognizing all the mounting challenges and act for justice and peace, like Patrick, with tenacious faith and perseverance.

Father John J. Lombardi is pastor of St. Peter in Hancock and St. Patrick in Little Orleans.

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