

CROAGH PATRICK

A Place of Pilgrimage, Penance and Prayer

Introduction

Some of the most beautiful scenery in Ireland can be seen as you travel from Clifden, in Connemara, to Westport, in County Mayo. This includes one of our most famous landmarks, Croagh Patrick, which towers majestically over the rugged landscape.

Ireland's Holy Mountain traces its place in history to its connection with Saint Patrick. According to Tirechán, a seventh century writer, 'Patrick went on to Mount Egli to fast and pray on it forty days and forty nights'. The Papal registers record that certain indulgences were granted to pilgrims who complete the climb and also to those who attend confession and receive communion in the chapel on the summit.

Pilgrimage

Originally the climb was done at night. The winding track from the base of the mountain to the summit was illuminated with torches and lamps carried by the pilgrims. Weather conditions were very changeable and sometimes pilgrims who began the climb in favourable conditions soon found themselves subjected to high winds or torrential downpours. Because of the high incidence of accidents the night climb was eventually abandoned and was replaced by a daylight pilgrimage.

For many, the pilgrimage is only complete when they have gone to Confession and received Communion on the summit of the mountain and also completed the 'Stations of the Reek'. There are a total of three Stations, located on different parts of the mountain. Pilgrims stop and pray at each of them. The first Station is called Leacht Benain and is located at the base of the mountain cone. It consists of a circular mound of stones. Pilgrims walk around this mound seven times, while reciting seven Our Fathers, seven Hail Marys and one Creed.

The second Station begins when the pilgrims reach the top of the mountain. There they kneel down and recite seven Our Fathers, seven Hail Marys and one Creed. Then they say fifteen Our Fathers, fifteen Hail Marys and one Creed as they walk around the chapel on the summit fifteen times, in a clockwise direction. The pilgrims then recite seven Our Fathers, seven Hail Marys and one Creed as they walk seven times around Leaba Phádraig (Patrick's Bed). The third Station takes place at Roilig Mhuire (Virgin's Cemetery). This is situated on the western side of the mountain. It consists of three mounds of stones. The pilgrims say seven Our Fathers, seven Hail Marys and one Creed as they walk around each of the mounds seven times. Finally as they continue to pray, they walk around the enclosure seven times. The pilgrims have now completed the 'Stations of the Reek.'

Penance

Most of the pilgrims who climb Croagh Patrick do so for the purpose of doing penance for their sins. The pilgrimage has become not just an annual event, but an integral part of life for many Irish families. Some parents involve their children in the pilgrimage when they are very young, and this has occasionally resulted in individuals from four generations of the same family climbing the mountain together. As one pilgrim said, "I am 82 years of age and this is my sixtieth time for the climb."

Many dedicated climbers abstain from food and water during the pilgrimage, while others climb in their bare feet. During each pilgrimage, a number of people are injured, mostly from falling. Many pilgrims believe the more difficult the climb, the greater the spiritual benefit. Some are willing to suffer the effects of adverse weather conditions, strict fasting and even minor injuries in their efforts to earn indulgences. They will then ask God to put the merits of these indulgences either to their own account or to the account of some loved one whom they believe to be in Purgatory.

Prayer

Croagh Patrick is also a place of prayer. Many pilgrims will spend time in prayer on the night before the pilgrimage. They will seek to assure their deceased loved ones, whom they believe to be aware

of what is happening, that they will make every effort, through climbing Croagh Patrick, to help shorten the time they must spend in Purgatory. The content of their address to their deceased loved ones may be similar to the following:

'Dear Mother, my heart is breaking as I think of you this evening. I have many happy memories of when you were rearing us. Times were not easy, and you had to endure a lot of difficulty. But you made sure we always had enough. Thank you for all the sacrifices you made on my behalf. As I remember your loving face and your wonderful smile, I find it hard to come to terms with the fact that your soul is suffering severely in the fire of Purgatory which, according to Saint Thomas Aquinas, is heated even hotter than the fires of hell. I am determined to do all I can to help get you out of Purgatory as soon as possible.

As you know I have already climbed Croagh Patrick on a number of occasions, seeking to earn forgiveness for my own sins. But I intend to climb it tomorrow on your behalf. I will attempt it in my bare feet on this occasion, as I want to suffer as much hardship as possible during the climb. I will pray for you at each of the Stations on the mountain and attend mass in the chapel on the summit. I hope to earn as many indulgences as possible. I will then ask God to put the merits of these indulgences to your account, thereby shortening the duration of your stay in Purgatory.

Mother, I do not know how long you will have to stay in Purgatory, suffering for your sins! It causes me severe despair as I think of you having to go through such suffering. But please be assured that I will do all that I can to get you out of Purgatory soon. Mother, I will be climbing Croagh Patrick tomorrow for you'.

Penalty

What a heart-breaking situation! Here is a devout pilgrim sincerely seeking to earn forgiveness not only for his own sins, but also for the sins of a deceased loved one. Indeed there are many people hoping that their pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick and holy shrines, membership of a particular church or participation in good works can somehow save them from everlasting punishment in hell.

However, the Scriptures make it clear that pilgrimages, prayers or penance can never earn or merit forgiveness for sin. According to the Word of God we are all sinners, and **'No one is righteous—not even one'**.¹ The Bible clearly teaches that **'everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard'**.² As sinners, we are liable to sin's penalty – **'For the wages [penalty] of sin is death'**.³ This includes spiritual death, physical death and, for all who die in their sins eternal death, which is separation from God. **'It's your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, he has turned away and will not listen anymore'**.⁴ Eternal separation from God involves conscious, everlasting suffering in the fires of Hell. According to the Word of God, **'Anyone whose name was not found recorded in the Book of Life was thrown into the lake of fire'**.⁵

Many years ago, a certain man, on realising his need of salvation, asked the apostle Paul, **"What must I do to be saved?"**⁶ Several people find themselves in the same situation today and are asking the same question.

Pardon

The Bible makes it clear that salvation cannot be earned or merited by our own efforts or good works and that no church, priest, minister or religious leader can save us. It also emphasises the fact that **'he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit'**.⁷ The Scriptures leave us in no doubt concerning the fact that salvation is by grace, through faith, and is a free gift - **'God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God'**.⁸ Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it'.⁹ This amazing grace is God's unmerited favour to the sinner. It is God reaching down to the helpless sinner, offering him a pardon from sin's penalty. Jesus secured this pardon when He took the sinner's place by becoming his substitute - **'But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like**

sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on him the sins of us all'.¹⁰ As He suffered and died upon the cross, Jesus paid the penalty for sin that the sinner should have paid. The pardon Jesus purchased for sinners when He died on the cross will be put to the account of all who repent of their sins and put their faith in Him.

The pilgrims who climb Croagh Patrick each year return to their homes physically exhausted. But spiritually they are no different than they were before they climbed Ireland's Holy Mountain. Deep down in their hearts they know that their pilgrimage, penance and prayers cannot save their souls. They may have fasted, prayed, completed the Stations and suffered physical pain during the climb, but they still need the Saviour. According to the Scriptures there is only one way to Heaven, and that is through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, who said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me'.¹¹

Invitation

The apostle Paul referred to Jesus as 'The Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me'.¹² He knew that Jesus loved him so much that He willingly laid down His life to pay the penalty for his sins. My dear friend, do you know that Jesus loves you, too? Like Paul, you can have the assurance of eternal life. You can have the assurance that your sins have been forgiven and that when you die you will go directly to Heaven to be with Jesus, who said, 'There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am'.¹³

This great assurance of salvation can be yours.
There are three simple steps:

- ▶ **Acknowledge the fact that you are a sinner and confess your sins to God.**
- ▶ **Repent of your sins.** This includes not just sorrow for sins, but also a determination to turn away from sin.
- ▶ **Put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.** In other words, believe that Christ paid in full the penalty for the guilt of your sins when He died upon the cross as your substitute. To put your faith in Christ means to depend upon Him to save your soul.

Jesus said, "Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends."¹⁴ Friend, could it be that the Lord is knocking on the door of your heart, the door of your life, seeking admission? Will you invite Him in?
"Come now, let's settle this," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool."¹⁵

Do not hesitate or delay, 'For God says, "At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you." Indeed, the "right time" is now. Today is the day of salvation'.¹⁶

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Scripture References

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| 1: Romans Ch.3 v. 10 | 2: Romans 3 v. 23 |
| 3: Romans Ch.6 v. 23 | 4: Isaiah Ch.59 v. 2 |
| 5: Revelation Ch.20 v. 15 | 6: Acts Ch.16 v. 30 |
| 7: Titus Ch.3 v. 5 | 8: Ephesians Ch.2 vs. 8, 9 |
| 9: Titus Ch.2 v. 11 | 10: Isaiah Ch.53 vs. 5, 6 |
| 11: John Ch.14 v. 6 | 12: Galatians Ch.2 v. 20 |
| 13: John Ch.14 vs. 2, 3 | 14: Revelation Ch.3 v.20 |
| 15: Isaiah Ch.1 v. 18 | 16: 2 Corinthians Ch.6 v. 2 |

