"The Irish Pilgrimage Trust - A Very Special Journey"

Easter Pilgrimage to Lourdes for Young People

IN EASTER OF 1972 a small group of twenty-eight Irish people travelled on a pilgrimage holiday to Lourdes, the famous international shrine in the foothills of the French Pyrenees. This group consisted of fourteen young people with special needs who were accompanied by fourteen adult carers. Most disabled pilgrims stay in the Lourdes hospices and hospitals, but this group preferred to have the young people stay as honoured guests in hotels and to get as much out of their holiday as other young people. Upon returning home, the word began to spread of how truly worthwhile and rewarding this week of pilgrimage and friendship had been.

Thirty years later the word is still spreading and the Irish Pilgrimage Trust's growing "family" now extends to over six thousand people from the thirty-two counties who have travelled to Lourdes at least once if not many times with the Trust. Each Easter, over four hundred young people with special needs are accompanied by five hundred adult carers on a very special journey.

This pilgrimage is designed especially for the young people who participate fully in a varied spiritual and social programme. Small groups consisting of eleven young people and eleven carers, with very much a family atmosphere, stay in one of the many superb hotels in Lourdes. During the week the liturgies associated with Lourdes are adapted to appeal to young people. Highlights of the week include the International Trust Mass where the Irish group is joined by five thousand other pilgrims from the UK, USA, Slovakia, Romania and the West Indies in a celebration full of music and song.

Of course, this visit is a holiday as well as a pilgrimage. There is always a lively atmosphere in the hotels, and you are quite likely to hear the strains of "The Fields of Athenry" wafting through the streets as one of our groups engages in an impromptu singing session. There is also a day trip to the mountains or one of the many other interesting places in this scenic part of France.

All the adult carers pay their own fare while the Trust covers the costs of those young people selected to travel. It costs approximately €850 to bring a young person to Lourdes.

Kilcuan - Our Holiday Home

Over the years the Irish Pilgrimage Trust has organised summer holiday camps, or "Friendship Weeks", for young people with special needs. For these Friendship Weeks it was always difficult to find a suitable location to cater for the very specific needs of the Trust's young guests. In 1997, the Trustees of the Irish Pilgrimage Trust accepted a very generous gift of a site from the Brothers of Charity in Clarenbridge, Co Galway. "Kilcuan", a purpose built holiday home was constructed and it now plays host to many Friendship Weeks throughout the year. Groups and organisations caring for adults or young people with special needs, and who are not members of the Irish Pilgrimage Trust may book "Kilcuan". All rooms are en-suite and suitable for people with special needs. Facilities include a fully equipped kitchen; TV, video, and music system; and a large lounge, dining, social and play area. There is also a beautifully designed oratory. The house has a substantial garden and provides a safe, relaxing and welcoming haven for guests. 'Kilcuan" is ideally located for visits to Galway, Knock, Connemara and the Burren, and guests have the use of a specially adapted wheelchair-friendly minibus.

Fundraising

Obviously to finance the activities of the Trust, a significant amount of money is needed. The Trust relies on the generosity of people making donations at church gate collections or at the many functions organised by its regional committees. Any donation, no matter the size, does make a difference and is always welcome.

Whether you accompany the Irish Pilgrimage Trust on a trip to Lourdes, or pay a visit to Kilcuan as part of a Friendship Week, you are certain to come away having experienced caring companionship and the feeling that you too have been on "a very special journey".

Illustrations for Ned's Game, The Secret Room & The Hero's and The Oaf's by Sean Reynolds.

Sean is from Gortletteragh, now living in Limerick where he manages his own Graphic Design Company "Alphaset" at the Tait Business Centre in Dominic Street.