Reluctant Pilgrims

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WE HAD JUST come through a hard and stressful period. Summer had ended and we had had no break or holiday from work for about three years. I was exhausted and said to my husband could he find out if a group of people were going anywhere, to anything. We were not sun worshippers and thought we would enjoy the security and camaraderie of a group. He contacted a travel agent but nothing they offered interested us. However, as he glanced through the *Leitrim Observer,* he found that a pilgrimage from Leitrim was going to Rome for the beatification of Blessed Charles Meehan OFM, who was an Irish Franciscan martyr executed in Ruthin, North Wales on August 12, 1679. His beatification was to take place in Rome on November 22, 1987, along with eighty four other martyrs from England, Scotland and Wales.

We were delighted and honoured to go as Fr Charles Meehan came from adjacent parish to us in Rossinver, only six miles down the road. There was one snag, it was a pilgrimage and we were in no mood for praying. When we got the itinerary, we realised there was Mass every morning and vespers in the evening and the highlight of the tour was an audience with Pope John Paul II and a homily given by Cardinal Hume. There was one half day allocated for shopping. My husband and I had been to Rome before and so decided to skip everything except the audience with the Pope and Cardinal Hume's homily. We also decided we would go incognito. We were both doctors in the local community, but would prefer to be Mr & Mrs for the trip.

It was now the end of September and the pilgrimage was in November. During the month of October, I had a few characters who had not been in for a while coming in to have their blood pressure checked. I asked why they wanted a check up (a part from the fact that many of them were well into their eighties) and the response was 'I have a mind to go to Rome'. I did not tell them that I was going too. I could see myself ending up looking after half the group.

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November came and we all met at Dublin airport. I was delighted to see some locals including Pat and Nora McGriskin and relatives, and Joe Mooney, a councillor and his wife from Drumshambo. Frank Meehan, his wife Bridie, and his brother John and his wife, were also among the group. Frank and Bridie were going as direct descendants of Fr Charles and Bridie had his bible on which his name was inscribed in Latin. Also with us was Fr Corrigan, who was parish priest of Rossinver at the time.

We arrived in Rome in the pouring rain. We were escorted to a hostel called the Domus Pacis. It was very basic. There were two single beds with spring mattresses. The only ornamentation was a crucifix on the wall between the beds. There was a long corridor for access to showers and bathrooms. We didn't mind. We were away from our own stresses and worries.

There were two thousand English pilgrims, a large group from Wales and Scotland, along with three hundred from Ireland. We were allocated a bus and we stuck to that bus for the week. We took seats as the back of the bus, as I figured, that's where the fun would be. All of us were Irish or of Irish descent. At breakfast the first morning two blond English girls were complaining about everything. They thought they were going on a sun holiday to Rome, not a pilgrimage. However they stuck with it and by the end of the week were delighted that they did.

As I said, Dessie and myself had decided only to go to the audience with the Pope, and Cardinal Hume's homily. However, we boarded the bus and the Franciscan father gave us all little jobs to do, such as readings and prayers of the faithful. We could make up whatever we wanted for the prayers of the faithful.

Our first event was in St Peter's square

where we carried a large banner with 'Irlanda, Pax et Bonum, Cathal Beannaithe O Míocháin O F M' on it. When we looked up where the Pope usually comes out to give his blessing, we noticed a banner above the balcony indicating that there was a beatification taking place on martyrs from England, Scotland, Wales but no mention of Ireland. We were livid. Joe Mooney took out his notebook to complain to the Pope. On top of that we were cold and wet and a few old fellows were looking for hot whiskeys. Dessie and myself tried a few hostelries and speaking in Latin we managed to get hot whiskeys for the old lads. This became a daily exercise. Dessie and myself found we were not missing out on anything.

Of course, the highlight of the pilgrimage was the audience with the Pope. As we sat in the Vatican I saw Joe Mooney, taking more notes. The other highlight of the visit was Cardinal Hume's homily. As we walked into the cathedral of St John Lateran, with Bridie and Frank Meehan, Joe Mooney was directly behind Cardinal Hume. Joe was still livid that Ireland was not mentioned in anything so he pulled Cardinal Hume's long scarlet robe. Cardinal Hume turned around. Joe introduced himself: 'Your eminence, I am Joseph Mooney from Drumshanbo, County Leitrim in Ireland. And I would like to point out that there are three hundred pilgrims from Ireland and these are direct descendants of Charles Meehan, and pointed to the bible Bridie was holding up. Cardinal Hume was most gracious and apologetic, and in his homily (which went on for two hours) he pointed to the way the Irish had suffered by the English and talked about Fr Charles Meehan. Joe Mooney and all the group were delighted.

Another wonderful experience we had was Fr Corrigan's candle-lit mass in the Catacombs. We held tight to our seats on the bus and had singsongs and jokes and stories all week. There was a Fr Cronin, who was in Corby in England, who kept us entertained all week with his stories.

After day three, members of our group were getting very fed up with the Italian breakfast of coffee and croissants. On our half-day shopping, Dessie and myself managed to buy a dozen boxes of Cornflakes. When we went back to the Domus Pacis hostel we might as well have given them gold bars. There were hugs and kisses and proclamations of how great we were to get Cornflakes in Rome.

At night in the Domus Pacis, Pat McGriskin kept us all entertained with his wonderful stories. We had singsongs, and were always the last to bed. An English group got a bit fed up with our group stealing the limelight and one night the tried to outdo us with their song. But we outdid them and sang Rule Britannia with more gusto.

On day three, our guide announced that we were going to Assisi. He asked our group to help to make sure everyone got up on time, and that no one slept in. Frank Meehan took this very seriously, and the morning of the tour knocked on our door and shouted at the top of his voice 'Get up doctor Philomena, get up, don't be late'. Our anonymity was gone and I ended up treating half the crowd on the bus. But Frank never let the bus go without us after that.

Day five on the itinerary was a visit to the monastery at Monte Cassino. Dessie and I were looking forward to this as we had read into its history. The weather forecast for that day was bad but we decided to go anyway. About twenty of our group went. The journey took about two hours but just as we reached it a horrific thunder and lightning storm blew up. We knew the monastery had been bombed to ruins during World War II by the Allies, who thought that the Germans were in the monastery, when in fact they were hidden in the small caves (of which there were many) and undergrowth in the hillsides below Monte Cassino. The monastery was re-built.

As we stood looking out from one of the balconies, it was as if we were in the middle of the battle with the huge blasts of rolling thunder and the flashes of fork lightning coming one after another. As the storm raged, we were having mass in the basilica and it was Dessie's turn to read the prayers of the faithful. I was terrified he'd hold the electric microphone and get electrocuted, but he didn't touch it. Every now and then the sacristan would come out and look up at the dome of the basilica to make sure no damage was done to it. As I walked up the many steps to the basilica I noticed a man beside me stopping very often. I went over to him and he told me he had five stents in his heart and had angina.

I advised him to rest and to use his nitrolingual spray. While I sat with him, he told me he had been a boy soprano in Rome fifty years ago and that he was chosen to sing Panis Angelicus at this mass. I advised him to sing from his seat which he did. I'll never forget how beautiful he sounded and the depth of feeling in his voice.

When we came out to board the bus — a huge sixty five person Mercedes coach — it had been completely lifted off the ground with the storm. As the thunder and lightning continued we knew we were completely safe in the coach. On the way back, trees had fallen blocking the road, so a number of the men got out and cleared the way. When we got back to the Domus Pacis hostel, those who had stayed behind, were praying for us to come back safely as they had heard on the news about the storm and flood warnings for the Tiber.

Our bus was very popular. Out of the blue, without any prior warning, we were invited to a party in the Franciscan College and to the Irish Embassy to the Holy See. Anyone on our bus who had a great-great-great-grandmother from Ireland wanted to claim their Irish heritage and all were invited to the parties. (The other buses were not as lucky.)

In the end Dessie and I never missed a single event on the itinerary. I have never enjoyed a 'holiday' like it since and I made so many new friends with whom I keep in contact to this day. It was an experience of a lifetime.