A JOURNEY THROUGH FAITH

Discovering the diocese of Ardagh & Clonmacnois

Marianne Rheinheimer

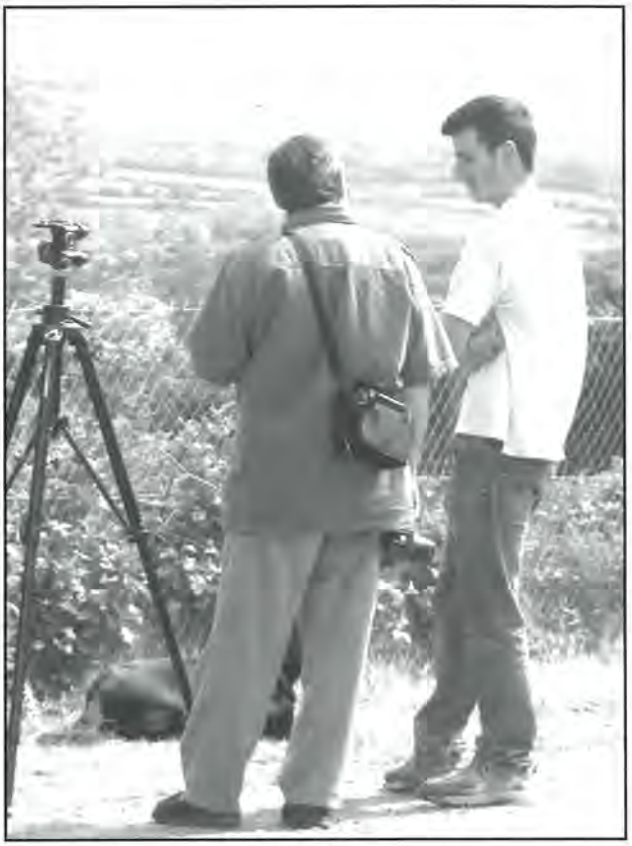
IT NEVER CROSSED my mind to write an article for the *Leitrim Guardian* until I met Aiden Kelleher. My husband Martin and I were taking photographs outside St Joseph's Church in Cornageeha when a car stopped. This was a good opportunity for us to ask for directions to the next church which we could not find on the map. Aiden told us exactly where we would find the church. His question "what are you doing here?" demanded an answer and we told him that we were taking photographs of all the churches in the diocese for a book which is to be launched in December 2005.

He was interested in our background and we told him that we always knew that we didn't want to stay in Germany when we retire but we were looking towards the area of Southern France or Italy. Noticing an advertisement in a German newspaper about a house next to a lake with 8 acres grounds, which seemed huge to us having less than a quarter of one acre with our house in Germany, we immediately decided to fly to Ireland and have a look at the house.

As far as we were concerned Ireland was an Island in the far west of Europe where it rains day and night. And we were right. We touched down in Dublin on the 15th of August 1988 in pouring rain.

Driving to Leitrim in the rain and looking at the lone house on the shore of Lough Scur we fell in love with it and bought it without having seen any other house. We thought if we could love it in the rain we would love it even more when the sun shines which didn't happen during the three days we spent in Ireland.

During the first few years we used it as a holiday home developing the house and garden and in 1994 we came to stay. Having no children it is more difficult to integrate into a community, but now, more than 10 years later, we have become part of the community. We met our neighbours and received a friendly welcome and I joined a women's group and Martin and I joined a church choir. Everybody was helpful in introducing us to the Irish way of life.



Suveying the environs of St Stephen's Church, Rossan

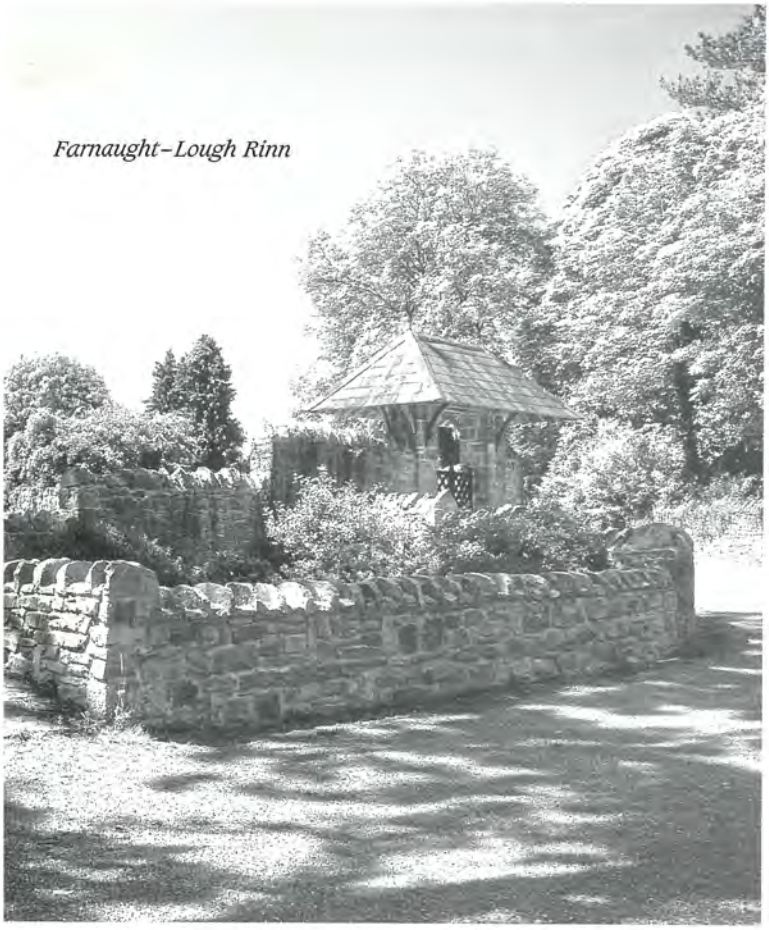
Because of our interest in architecture and churches we made friends with the late Father Michael Rigney who restored St Brigid's church in Kiltubrid. He thought of the idea of taking photographs of all the churches, not for a book but for ourselves. We often went to churches which had an interesting architecture on his days off.

Fr Rigney must have mentioned this to Bishop Dr. Colm O'Reilly because three years after his death we were invited to a meeting with the bishop and a publisher who did similar books for different dioceses in Ireland. It was decided to publish a book of the Ardagh and Clonmacnois Diocese as well and that we would take the pictures for that book.

We first of all made a plan as to how and where to start the project. The diocese stretches from Killenummery in the North to Banagher in the South. There are 41 parishes with 80 churches and some ruins of old churches or monasteries. Martin made a special map on which he marked all the churches that we had to go to.

Then we had to wait for dry and sunny weather so we could start from North to South. Ireland is blessed in that most of the churches are open during the day and we often met people in churches praying on their own or lighting candles. We had most interesting conversations with people that we met on our travels.

St Stephen's church in Rossan was closed the first time we called. It was the second time of calling and we were debating where we could get the key. A young man with a dog came along and I asked if he knew who could have the key to the church. Like performing magic he took the key out of his



Farnaught–Lough Rinn

Marianne Rheinheimer working on the diocesan project

pocket and even took the time to show us the church and its surroundings and directed us to the next church we had to go to.

Two men worked in the graveyard at the old ruin of the Abbey of Fenagh who opened the lock for us to go into the ruin so we could take photographs of the rose window and of them as well.

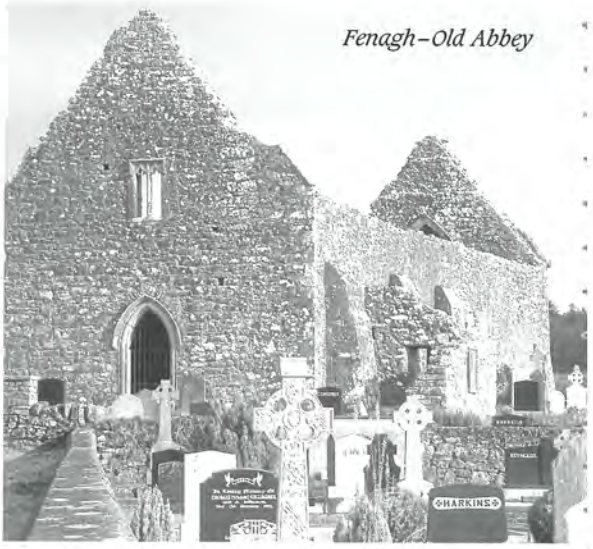
In the South we were lost at a point near the Grand Canal and had to ask for directions. The man we met studied in Maynooth and talked about the church on the campus. I told him that I knew Maynooth well from taking part in the summer school for Irish Church Music. We agreed that to come to Maynooth church made you feel at home. The ceiling and the sides have wonderful paintings, the seats are carved, and the floor is a mosaic.

He told us about the Harry Clarke windows and we could tell him that we just come from St Manchan's in Ballycumber which has the shrine of St Manchan and St Mary in Pullough. Both Churches have fantastic windows. He told us that in the Thirties the parishioners protected the windows from the parish priest who wanted to change them to Art Nouveau windows. The parishioners kept watch for six weeks and neither the priest nor the bishop was allowed to come near them. Thanks to the parishioners we can still admire the wonderful works of art of Harry Clarke who, by the way, also made the windows for Bewley's Café in Grafton Street in Dublin.

Meanwhile we have seen all the churches and have our favourites. One of these is St James' in Clonbroney. The church looks like a castle from outside and has a wonderful mosaic floor inside and a beautiful round window. Two of our favourite ruins are Fenagh Abbey and the Cistercian Monastery ruin in Abbylara. Of the graveyards we visited, we think the one Father Quinn showed us in Farnaught, near Lough Rinn, is idyllic.

We enjoyed our work and learned a lot about the diocese—like the Saint we had never heard of before such as St Samthann in Clonbroney who was abbess in Salzburg, Austria.

Our journey showed us that the faith of the people was kept alive through the centuries.



Fenagh–Old Abbey

Martin Rheinheimer busy behind the lens of his camera.