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## **Stones of a Sure Foundation (Isaiah 28:16)**

**Faith Brace**

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I just completed a pilgrimage. It was 5000 miles long and it lasted eight weeks. Thanks to the generosity of my employer, the board of Inner City Pastoral Ministry, and a grant from the Louisville Institute, I had the time and the money to travel to the Republic of Ireland and visit the sacred sites of the Celtic saints.

A pilgrim is looking for something: the experience of holiness. Why go so far when the Holy Spirit is present at home also? The great age of the Irish sites provides layers and layers of devotion and prayers of pilgrims ancient and modern. The spirituality of the Irish people motivates them to preserve the sites; they continue to visit them. Celtic spirituality puts a high value on the natural world; the sites are often in places of great beauty and prominence. I contrast my recent experience of visiting Moraine Lake in the Canadian Rockies with a visit to Croagh Patrick, Ireland's holy mountain. Both are strikingly beautiful, but where Moraine Lake is a tourist site, crowded and tawdry, Croagh Patrick is a holy place, simple and quiet, for the hundreds of thousands who climb it each year. In our worship of materialism, we North Americans sometimes forget the spiritual dimension of life.

Like the Jews with their memories of the Holocaust, the Irish people have a shared experience of suffering: the Famine of the 1840s. Millions died; millions emigrated; the land, the nation, and the people were devastated. It was not only a natural disaster, but one generated by oppression, hatred, and injustice. But the Irish and their faith, their music and their poetry have survived. Their land is fresh, green and fertile; their people are lively and exuberant; their national life is energetic and outgoing. Ireland is among the most generous of nations in giving to those who suffer hunger and deprivation. Their own history of suffering has made them tender rather than bitter.

So against this background, we walked the paths of the saints. And we discovered the stones that mark the holy places. There are pre-Christian stones, full of mystery, with vivid carved designs. There are circles of stones, full of intention but silent on their meaning and purpose. There are stone churches, stone abbeys and monasteries, stone castles, towers, and ring-forts. There are stone fountains, altars, tombs, and gravestones. There are holy wells ringed with stone, prayer-stations made of stone, healing stones, swearing stones, kneeling stones, grinding stones. And everywhere, the Celtic high crosses, made of stone, intricately carved and graceful, bear witness to the ancient faith which still speaks powerfully to us 15 centuries removed.

It was good to appreciate the spiritual qualities of these places. But it was a unique experience to discover the spirits present in places which are not normally recognized as life-giving, creative, or powerful – places which appear barren, lifeless, inert. Such a place is the Burren, a large sloping limestone region in County Clare in the west of Ireland. It gives the impression of a grey stone wilderness. Its name (“bhoireann”) means “stony place.” It is inhabited by feral goats, which recalls the wilderness of Engedi where King Saul went to look for David among the Rocks of the Wild Goats (I Samuel 24:2). But it is not a desert place; it is rather a rich and fertile place, where Arctic and Mediterranean plants co-exist, and cattle graze on nutritious grasses which feed on mineral water seeping from crevasses in the rocks. Orchids grow here, as well as a diverse collection of lime-loving plants otherwise rare in Ireland, including 24 species of dandelion! The area has an extensive underworld of caves, “the wildest and most remote places in a landscape filled with wonders.”<sup>1</sup>

There is a human history of the Burren as well. “For several thousand years, man has been laying down an almost bewildering succession of human meanings in the Burren...from Neolithic times to the present.”<sup>2</sup> This includes the ring-forts and wedge-tombs scattered across the landscape, silent reminders of communities which inhabited the place before there was any written history. It includes the monasteries, abbeys, churches, and chapels built in medieval times (6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries), now in ruins but still beautiful – eloquent witnesses of the faith of early Celtic Christians.

The footprints of an elder race are here,  
And memories of an old heroic time;  
And shadows of an old mysterious faith  
So that the place seem haunted  
And “strange sounds float in the wind” (Anon).

In the west of Ireland, in a green valley a few miles from the sea, is a complex ruin, Corcomroe Abbey, built in 1194 by Cistercian monks. The monks named the church “St. Mary of the Fertile Rock.” The stone out of which the abbey is built literally blooms with carved flowers and human faces. Doorways and arches rise high, their pure and beautiful shapes wonderfully preserved despite the ravages of time and the brutality of successive waves of enemy attack. Once it was a busy and productive place: ancient Christians sang, read, and prayed; in primitive conditions faithful monks copied and illustrated books of Holy Scripture in order that the Word would be preserved - their efforts brilliant and beautiful works of scholarship and art, providentially still available for us to marvel at and enjoy. The place is quiet now, but the strong and faithful spirits remain. A holy place, a place of awe and wonder.

That people settled in this seeming desert-place suggests that they recognized its fruitful possibilities, or that they wanted the challenge of its barrenness, and later found it to be fertile. It is a landscape fierce in its apparent barrenness, but intense in its life and possibility.

Such a landscape is the “inner city” of any urban area, a landscape fierce in its degradation and violence, but intense in its clinging to life and hope. How do I transfer the discoveries of life and hope in the grey stone wilderness to the “concrete jungle” of inner-city Edmonton? The leap would seem too great - if it weren't for the messages in the stones. When the disciples and the multitude shouted praise to God as Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the Pharisees asked Jesus to order them to be quiet. And Jesus said, “If my people were silent, the stones would cry out” (Luke 19:40). So in Ireland, where the voices are silenced by death and the passage of time, the stones yet speak. And in the inner city, where the voices are silenced by poverty and despair, the signs still express a faith and hope made more intense by their mute simplicity. What are those signs?

A homeless man known to us as a violent person turns up for lunch after our worship service. He stalks the room, restless and unpredictable. Ready to prevent trouble, we watch him carefully. When I encounter him face to face, I offer him a cigarette. He is an aboriginal person and he understands the gift of tobacco as a sacred thing. He searches through his jacket pockets and produces a gold-coloured case. He opens the case and takes out a tiny silver crucifix and offers it to me. Is it stolen? I don't know, but I accept it. For me it's a sign of his repentance and faith.

A pilgrimage is to strengthen our faith, to bless and encourage and deepen our ministry. So I return to the valley of the inner city, to continue the journey which is everyday life. There are no fine views, graceful arches, or eloquent stones. But there is a community which knows both poverty and suffering - a people tender and generous out of their own experience of pain. And there is much stone - in the form of pavement and concrete. The setting is bleak, but the witness of the Celtic saints suggests that in primitive conditions, a strong and vibrant faith may produce something brilliant and beautiful. A holy place - even in the gruesome streets?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> J.W. O'Connell and A. Korff, eds., *The Book of the Burren* (Tir Eolas: Kinvara, Co. Galway, 1991) 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.