

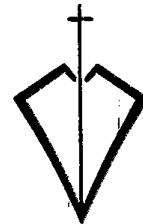
LOUGH DERG
GUIDE

+ Joseph
Duffy



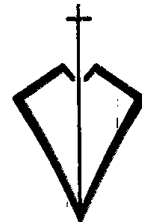
LOUGH DERG GUIDE

+ JOSEPH DUFFY
Bishop of Clogher



IRISH MESSENGER PUBLICATIONS
37, Lower Leeson Street,
Dublin 2.

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1980

These pages introduce you to Saint Patrick's Purgatory on Lough Derg, County Donegal, where 20,000 pilgrims come every year between 1st June and 15th August to follow an organized three-day programme of prayer and penance. The author, who has worked as an assistant priest on the island, gives an outline of the pilgrimage and explains why so many people from all walks of life find special happiness here. He was consecrated Bishop of Clogher on September 2nd, 1979.

This pamphlet has been approved as the official guide to the pilgrimage.

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FOR INTENDING PILGRIMS

1. The pilgrimage season begins each year on June 1st and ends on August 15th.
2. Pilgrims may begin their pilgrimage on any day of the season until August 13th inclusive.
3. No advance booking is necessary.
4. Pilgrims must arrive at the lake shore before 3.00 p.m.
5. They must have fasted from all food and drink (plain water excepted) from the midnight prior to arrival.
6. They must be over 14 years of age.
7. Only pilgrims are admitted to the island during the pilgrimage season.
8. On performing the spiritual exercises of the pilgrimage, pilgrims are granted a Plenary Indulgence applicable to the souls in Purgatory.
9. Information may be had at any time by writing to the Prior.

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Port glanta anma ó phianaibh

Haven to cleanse the soul from pains

Tadhg Dall O Huiginn (+ 1591)

A PLACE OF PEACE

Loch maoth-mhall-ghlas sidhe soin.

A quiet calm grey fairy lake.

— *Tuilleagna Mac Torna*

LIKE many of the sites of the old Irish monasteries, the natural surroundings of Lough Derg capture the unspoiled peace of the place. The lake is extensive, six miles by four, and is surrounded on all sides by low heather-clad mountains which have been partly forested in recent years. Only one good road leads to the lake, from the small town of Pettigo, four miles away on the Donegal—Fermanagh border. This road brings all pilgrims to St. Patrick's Purgatory and ends at the ferry where there is a house and offices. The pilgrim looks around him in vain for any other sign of dwelling or cultivation. But he sees at once from the lake shore the many clustered buildings of the island purgatory, dominated by the green dome of the main church. It is to this island, called Station Island, the pilgrim comes as the many thousands have come since the days of St. Patrick.

The peace of the natural surroundings is carefully preserved on the island. There is no commercialisation of any kind. No tourists or sightseers are permitted during the pilgrimage season; pilgrims may not bring cameras, radios or musical instruments. The only concession to commerce is a small unobtrusive shop where the pilgrim gets the leaflet of instructions and where rosary beads, prayer books, postcards and cigarettes are on sale. The privacy of the pilgrim is respected at all costs and he may remain anonymous and observe silence if he wishes. There are no community exercises apart from those of prayer. In general, the pilgrim is encouraged to absorb the pervasive calm of the island in his mind and heart in order that he may with greater ease make his peace with God.

The buildings on the island harmonize with this atmosphere. Two churches and two hospices form an enclosure for the

penitential cells, traditionally called "beds". The buildings belong to different periods over the last hundred years while the beds are remnants of an ancient monastery. As the pilgrim walks up the island from the boat-quay he passes the beds on his right and approaches the larger church which he has already seen from the mainland shore. Built over the edge of the island with local stone, its robust design takes full account of the expansive and simple setting of lake and mountain. The eight-sided shape of the interior makes community worship as intimate as possible in a church which seats 1,200 people. This church, dedicated to St. Patrick, was consecrated in 1931 and was then the only church in Ireland with the title of Basilica. The original design was by Professor W. A. Scott and the stained-glass windows depicting Our Lady, St. Paul and the Twelve Apostles, each carrying one of the Stations of the Cross, were the work of the Dublin artist, Harry Clarke. Less obvious artistic details in the Basilica are the symbols of the four evangelists inset in colourful mosaic in the pillars of the altar rails and the coat of arms of Pope Pius XI over the main entrance doors.

Every day during the pilgrimage season the stillness of the island is broken by the gentle sound of an open-air bell in a stone tower above the beds. This bell-tower is built on the site of the original cave where pilgrims formerly kept vigil and which gave the name "purgatory" to the island. About 1780 the cave was finally closed and replaced by a church on the site of the present Basilica called the "prison chapel". The ritual closing of the huge Basilica doors at the beginning of the vigil every night preserves this idea of being imprisoned for a time in Purgatory and of awaiting with Christ the dawn of the Resurrection.

The pilgrim soon appreciates the relief of the sturdy sycamore tree which shelters the large penitential bed. When Father Daniel O'Connor wrote his book on Lough Derg in 1878 he remarked that this tree was then about two or three hundred years old. To commemorate the Patrician Year in 1961 a seedling from the tree was planted near the boat-quay and is making steady progress ever since. Also in the 1960's the provision of more ground space around this smaller tree and of a large night shelter behind the Basilica has added enormously to the spirit of peace on the island.

THE PILGRIMS

Mo chean théid i dteaghdhais Phádraig.

Blessed is he who visits Patrick's house.

— *Aonghus O Huiginn*

ST. PATRICK'S PURGATORY was the principal landmark on the medieval maps of Ireland. It was, for example, the only Irish site named on a world map of 1492. We know from the copious literary remains of the period that many distinguished pilgrims from all parts of Europe — France, Hungary, Spain, England and Holland — came to Lough Derg from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. But the vast majority of pilgrims in these years, as always, were Irish men and women.

Neither the demolition of the buildings in 1632 nor the Act of Queen Anne in 1704 imposing heavy penalties, deterred pilgrims coming in their thousands in the following centuries. Numbers seem to have declined after the Great Famine of 1846 and averaged about 3,000 annually between 1870 and 1900. The modern resurgence began in 1909. Over 8,000 came in 1921, 14,000 in 1942 and a peak 34,645 in 1952. The number in 1977 was 20,431. A welcome development in recent years is the growing number who come in the quiet weekdays of June.

Women pilgrims exceeded men in 1977 by 7 to 2; pilgrim priests numbered 190, of whom one was a bishop. In recent years religious sisters have come in greater numbers. The majority of pilgrims still come from the northern half of the country, but with more buses and cars on the road nowadays one hears more and more the softer accents of Munster and South Leinster. Dublin and Belfast are well represented, especially at week-ends. There are always pilgrims from overseas on an Irish holiday, most of them of Irish parentage or origin. A number of English and Scottish pilgrims make the very considerable financial sacrifice of

coming specially to Ireland to make the Lough Derg pilgrimage. Many pilgrims too, follow a long family tradition. Many come annually or once every two or three years. Priests often bring parish groups with them and there are several pilgrimages organized every year by the Newry Legion of Mary, the Belfast Catholic Chaplaincy and travel agents in Cork, Waterford, Listowel and Navan. C.I.E. run an express bus service daily from Bus-Áras in Dublin via Cavan where pilgrims may also board.

All in all, one meets a cross section of society on Lough Derg. The island is not the prerogative of the pious or the elderly, the comfortable middle-class or the old-fashioned countryman. Professional and business men rub shoulders with farm hands, nurses, university students, housewives, noted sportsmen, shop assistants and office girls. Girls and to a lesser extent boys, in their late teens and early twenties, form the most numerous age group.

Conditions of entry for pilgrims are kept to a minimum. They must be at least 14 years of age and physically able for the exercises; they must be fasting from midnight and arrive before 3.00 p.m.; they must be conventionally dressed; they pay a small fee which is all-in, before taking the boat. There is a special free car park beside the ferry and no advance booking is necessary, although large organized parties, for reasons of convenience, should inform the Prior.

Pilgrims are catered for by a staff of 50, who reside on the island during the season. There are four priests, the Prior and three assistants, who belong to the diocese of Clogher where the island is located; the domestic arrangements are superintended by Sisters of the Congregation of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, who always include a qualified nurse. The island has its own motor boats, its own laundry, as bed linens are changed daily, its own chlorinator to purify the water and its own emergency power plant. Confessions in Irish will always be heard by one or other of the priests on duty and the leaflet describing the pilgrimage is available in Irish at the shop. As the pilgrim's stay on the island is brief it is entirely unnecessary to bring heavy baggage, but a good waterproof overcoat and warm clothing are very desirable. Rugs are not allowed.

THE PROGRAMME

Uaimh leighis lucht uabhair-nirt.

A cave that cures men of stiff pride.

— *Fearghal O'g Mac an Bhaird*

PILGRIMS arrive on the island any time before 3.00 p.m., having fasted from midnight from all food and drink except plain water. The leaflet which is always available at the shop beside the pier gives full details of the fasting regulations and of the time-table. The pilgrim then goes to the hospice and takes off all footwear before beginning the first station.

The station takes place in the open air. It combines silent vocal prayer and continuous walking, standing and kneeling around two crosses, the Basilica, the six penitential rings of stone, or beds, and at the water's edge. The Our Fathers, Hail Marys and Creeds enable the ordinary man by their simple rhythm and quiet insistence to subdue his restless thoughts and to lift up his heart to God. No other exercise of the pilgrimage is more suggestive of our pilgrim state in the passing world than this physical and difficult journey around the beds.

At any time after the first station the pilgrim may break his fast by eating dry bread and drinking black tea with sugar. There is no limit to quantity or to time spent over the meal, but it must be completed at one sitting and there is only one meal on each of the three days. Stations take about three-quarters of an hour each and three of them must be completed before 9.20 p.m. on the first day.

At 10.15 p.m. pilgrims assemble in the Basilica to begin their vigil. The vigil means keeping awake for twenty-four consecutive hours and is by far the most difficult part of the ascetic programme. It begins with a holy hour of preparation in common for Confession followed after an interval by the

Rosary, both of which invite reflection and mental prayer. Four stations are recited in common in the Basilica during the night, with intervals between the stations for taking fresh air and relaxing outside or in the night shelter. Pilgrims walk around the interior of the Basilica during the stations, as much as the numbers permit. Gradually the long night melts into dawn and all pilgrims re-unite for Morning Prayer and Mass.

Morning Prayer and Mass, Confession, Stations of the Cross, Evening Mass, Night Prayer and Benediction complete the time-table of spiritual exercises. The pilgrim makes a station outside on the second day and one on the third day before leaving. He goes to bed on the island on the second night but keeps the fasting regulations until the end of the third day.

During his stay here the pilgrim is surrounded by symbols from the Bible and the Liturgy. The three-day retreat from the world is a sharing in the paschal mystery of Christ who died to the world and rose again on the third day. The crossing by water is a reminder of the Baptism ceremony which is the beginning of the Christian life. Bare feet for Moses and Joshua in the Old Testament were a sign of reverence and respect for the presence of God. The gathering of pilgrims for Mass is a real experience of belonging to the Church through which we work out our salvation. When we renounce the World, the Flesh and the Devil with outstretched arms, we have the Church at our back, morally as well as physically. The shared fast and vigil bind pilgrims together and unite them with suffering humanity throughout the world.

The over-all programme leads pilgrims to participate more fully in the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. By prayer and penance we imitate Jesus who prepared himself for his total giving to the Father by his ascetic life. In the sacrament of Penance we acknowledge the Father's welcome and accept again the privileges of sonship. At Mass we take our place with our brothers at the table of Christ's sacrifice. The whole process is one of conversion, renewed and continuing conversion from self to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

LOOKING AROUND

A Rí na gceall is na gclog!

O King of its cells and bells!

— Donnchadh Mór O Dálaigh

AFTER the rigours of the stations and the long night of prayer in the Basilica, there is more free time on the second day. Pilgrims with an eye for detail and a feeling for the past will be keen to walk about and open themselves to the many historical associations around them.

Alice Curtayne's *Lough Derg* is a good general history of the pilgrimage and is readily available in paperback. It was first published in 1944 and has been reprinted with additional material four times since, most recently in 1976. It runs to 150 pages and is reasonably priced. Sir Shane Leslie's smaller and well-illustrated *St. Patrick's Purgatory* may also be had in the shop. His bigger compilation with the same title, published by Burns Oates and Washbourne of London in 1932, is long since out of print and is now a rare and valuable book.

Saints Island may be easily seen from the rear of the Basilica. This was the centre of the monastery which was founded in the time of St. Patrick and continued by the Canons Regular of St. Augustine, who came in the 1130's. The Canons were here about fifteen years when they were visited by the Knight Owen, the man who made the cave on Lough Derg famous all over Europe. The cave at this time was, as always, on Station Island, but some time later a second cave for pilgrims to keep vigil was opened on Saints Island. This second cave was suppressed by Papal order in 1497 without interfering with the original.

Saints Island was originally called St. Davog's Island, after the first abbot of the monastery. St. Davog is the local patron of Lough Derg and one of the beds on Station Island preserves his

name. He is said to have been a disciple of St. Patrick and to have come from Wales. He is listed among the Twelve Apostles of Ireland in the legend that describes the cursing of Tara and his name was widely revered as late as the 13th century. A great boulder called St. Davog's Chair on the top of one of the mountains near the ferry on the mainland, gives the best aerial view of Station Island.

The pilgrim will note from the leaflet that Davog's name on the bed is linked with another local saint, Molaise of Devenish. Molaise (pronounced *Mo-lash-eh*) died about 563, outliving Davog by forty-seven years. It is said that his monastery on Devenish on neighbouring Lough Erne adopted the rule of Davog.

The earliest recorded mention of the seven saints of the beds occurs in an Irish poem from about 1590. The first bed is dedicated to St. Brigid and it is interesting that a Brigid's Well and a Brigid's Chair at the lake shore on the mainland suggest a special cult of the saint of Faughart and Kildare in this part of Donegal. Another relic on the island is St. Brigid's Cross, which is cut in a block of stone and inset in the left-hand outer wall of the Basilica. The cross is of Roman type and probably dates from the 12th century.

The Catherine, to whom another of the beds is dedicated, is said to be Catherine of Alexandria, the patron saint of wheelwrights in the Middle Ages. The three remaining saints, Patrick, Columcille and Brendan, are better known. The beds called after these saints are really the remains of beehive cells from the early monastic period. They are called "lecti poenosi", or penitential beds, in the earliest records.

Our Lady, the greatest of all the saints, is also honoured on Lough Derg. St. Mary's Chapel was originally built by the Franciscan Father, Anthony O'Doherty, in 1763 and was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Angels. The present building dates from 1870 and was greatly enlarged with new confessionals in 1976. Special features of St. Mary's are a glass reliquary and a mounted 'penal' crucifix which was found in the hands of one of the victims of the drowning tragedy of 1795.

The other reminder of this tragedy is Friars Island which pilgrims pass on their left as they return to the mainland. A few larch and fir trees on the near side of this island cover the common grave of unknown pilgrims who were among the many who lost their lives when their boat went down. The accident took place on 12th July, 1795.

Apart from the two crosses and the penitential beds, there are very few archaeological remains to be seen today. There is, however, an interesting row of six inscribed stones built into the wall of the Basilica on both sides of St. Brigid's Cross. Two of them mention Francis McGrath who belonged to the Strabane community of Franciscans in 1753, the year given on one of the stones. Another names Anthony O'Doherty who built St. Mary's in 1763 and Anthony O'Flaherty who, presumably, was then his assistant. St. Patrick is invoked on one of these stones, also St. Blosses and St. Avil which seem to be corrupt forms of Molaise and Davog. The lettering on the remaining stone has deteriorated badly but, fortunately, it was deciphered in the last century: OR MECI NYSEAE QUI SAPIENTIUM PRIMUS FUIT (A prayer for MacNissi who was first of the learned). Some think it may be related to the stone font inside the main door of the Ladies Hospice which reads: MANUS,COIVANI. Coivanus is another name for St. MacNissi.

The sceptical pilgrim always asks the intriguing question: did St. Patrick really come to Lough Derg? The most honest answer is that every available scrap of evidence going back to within 250 years of his death connects St. Patrick with this region. The oldest surviving relic on the island is the column of St. Patrick's Cross where the pilgrim begins his station. The spiral tracery on this column and the three parallel bars forming the capital indicate probable ninth-century origin. Bishop Tíreachán, who wrote about 700 A.D., brings Patrick into South Donegal, where he would certainly have seen Lough Derg. When written records began with the Canons Regular about 1130, the saint is already securely in possession and his connection with the island was never challenged. At all events, any serious consideration of St. Patrick brings us to the most important theme of these pages, the unchanged spiritual character and the living religious tradition of the pilgrimage of which he is the patron saint.

THE MIRROR OF HISTORY

Loch Dearg, aon-róimh na hÉireann,
mar fuair sinn sa sein-léigheann.
Lough Derg, chief shrine of Ireland,
so we found in ancient lore.

— Tuileagna Mac Torna

THE ideal spiritual reading on the island is the *Confession* of St. Patrick. The simple dynamic faith of the saint whose name, as we have seen, has always been associated with Lough Derg, lives on here as in no other place in Ireland. All the distinctive elements of the island's asceticism, the fasting, the watching and the endless vocal prayer recall his own boyhood conversion on the lonely mountainside. The saints of the monastic period, in spite of their great learning and sensitivity, cultivated the same ascetic spirituality. Tedious and fantastic tales of visions and miracles reflect the European attitude of the later Middle Ages to Lough Derg, but the native Gaelic poets, like Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh and Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn, preserved the spirit of St. Patrick. They saw here a place to weep for one's sins and to have all spiritual wounds healed. Ó Huiginn characteristically attributes part of this process to St. Patrick himself.

The cave or purgatory is the most prominent feature of the pilgrimage in all the medieval accounts. In fact, some scholars have suggested that the name of the lake itself means the lake of the cave (loch geirc) rather than the red lake. In 1353 the twenty-four hour vigil in the cave was preceded by Confession, penance and a fast of fifteen days on bread and water. The cave at this period was three feet wide, nine feet long, and high enough for a man to kneel but not to stand upright. It was enlarged in later years, levelled in 1632, but was re-opened almost immediately and remained in use until 1780. It was then finally closed by the Prior as it was much too small for the pilgrims who wished to make the vigil. The "prison" chapel

was then built to serve the purpose of the cave and this church in turn was replaced by the present St. Patrick's Basilica. Since 1780 pilgrims on vigil are no longer confined indoors but the vigil still extends to twenty-four hours.

The fasting on bread and water was fifteen days in 1353. By 1517 it was reduced to nine and the first mention of the modern three-day period occurs in 1804. Many pilgrims in the 19th century came on foot by one of three recognised routes through Donegal, Tyrone and Fermanagh.

The most extraordinary instance of continuity on Lough Derg has been the manner of making a station. A Gaelic script of Brother Micheal O'Cleary from the early 1600's, the explanatory pamphlet of the Dominican, Dominic O'Brollaghan, written in 1735, and the present leaflet which was first issued in 1876, all repeat essentially the same ritual in order of beds and number of prayers. The prayers are the ageless ones, the Our Father, Hail Mary and Apostles' Creed.

The liturgical programme has also preserved the same basic contents, although there have been some quaint variations from modern practice. Up to the 18th century, for example, pilgrims used to have a Requiem Mass offered for them before entering the cave as if in fact they were dead and about to enter Purgatory. In the 14th century the pilgrim was actually laid out like a corpse and the full Office of the Dead sung over him. Tom Moore of the melodies gave a 19th-century version of the theme when he described Lough Derg as:

... that dim lake
Where sinful souls their farewell take
Of this vain world and half way lie
In death's cold shadow ere they die.

Bishop William Conway's address here in the Patrician Year (1961) develops the same theme in modern style: "memento mori", remember death.

The general aim of preaching down the years has been to instruct and encourage pilgrims in the Lough Derg essentials, the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. Bishop Hugh McMahon who visited the island in 1714 wrote:

Twice or three times a day a sermon is addressed to the people, who with copious tears, sobs, lamentations, and other marks of penance, frequently interrupt the preacher.

There was certainly no failure in communication in those days. Bishop MacMahon's successor, James Murphy, writing exactly a hundred years later, states that many pilgrims came to Lough Derg who had not for many years "complied with any Christian duty", and the pilgrimage gave them an opportunity to prepare for and to make a general confession of their sins. At this period (1814), two lay catechists assisted in this work on the island, one by teaching the Irish Catechism, the other by teaching in English. In 1852 the Protestant poet from Ballyshannon, William Allingham, praised the Prior's lectures as being both learned and practical.

The Plantation of Ulster brought hard times to Lough Derg. In the 1630's the area was taken over by the Protestant bishop of Clogher and later passed into the family of one of them, the Leslies of Glaslough, Co. Monaghan. Their claim to the island was never accepted by the pilgrimage authorities and led in the end to legal proceedings in 1881 and again in 1917. The Plantation was finally undone in 1960 when the entire Leslie interest in the lake was bought out by the Catholic bishop of Clogher.

The administration of the pilgrimage also changed hands. The Canons Regular were forced to leave in 1632 when they were expelled from their monastery on Saints Island. Their place was taken mainly by the Franciscans who tended the pilgrims during the darkest era in the island's history, the

Penal days. About 1780 they gave up their charge as their numbers decreased and the neighbouring friaries closed down. A parish priest of the diocese was then appointed prior and this has been the practice ever since. Since 1962 the team has included teaching priests who assist here during the summer holidays.

The title of Prior to describe the priest in charge goes back to the Canons Regular of St. Augustine. The Canons were monks who also did pastoral work and their house on Saints Island became the centre of the large parish of Termon Davog which originally stretched across the present boundaries of the diocese of Clogher into Raphoe and Derry. As a general rule in the Middle Ages, the prior of Lough Derg was also parish priest of Termon Davog and in fact this tradition continued until the Franciscans left in 1780.

The present prior, Monsignor Thomas Flood, is the twenty-sixth on record. Of these we have only ten names from the five-century period of the Canons Regular. Five were McGraths who are still the predominant family in the locality and two others were Maguires, the ruling family in Fermanagh until the Plantation of Ulster. The Franciscan period gave six priors, one of whom was a vicar-general in Raphoe and another a vicar-general in Armagh. A third was Francis Mac Cavell, described in 1753 as "pastor of Coolmoney and Carn, director and prior of St. Patrick's Purgatory, licentiate in both (canon and civil) laws in the consultative Faculty of Paris".

Since 1780 Lough Derg has been a diocesan rather than a monastic or a parochial commitment. As if to make the point, three of the ten priors became deans of the diocesan chapter—Patrick Bellew, Daniel Boylan and Patrick Keown. There are still many pilgrims coming to Lough Derg who remember Dean Keown who, more than any other, left the stamp of his strong personality behind him on the island and made possible the unprecedented growth of the pilgrimage in the present century. Since his retirement in 1942 the maintenance of the penitential discipline and the many improvements in facilities have been the work of his two successors, Monsignor E. C. Ward (1942-60) and Monsignor Flood, P.P., Dromore, Co. Tyrone.

MEANING AND MESSAGE

For the time being, all correction seems painful rather than pleasant; but afterwards, when it has done its work of discipline, it yields a harvest of good dispositions, to our great peace.

— (Heb. 12 : 11)

THE earliest commentaries on Lough Derg came from knights and monks of Continental Europe and dwelt on miraculous and fantastic visions in the cave. This was the impression of the pilgrimage which passed into the main stream of medieval literature. The Gaelic poets, on the other hand, were more sober and realistic; they came to do penance for their sins and they felt the severity of the exercises as pilgrims do today. The persecutions of later centuries brought a different kind of writing, a long series of attacks on the pilgrimage, like that of the Rev. John Richardson in 1727, entitled *The Great Folly, Superstition and Idolatry of Pilgrimages in Ireland*. Modern accounts have been largely historical and sympathetic, and have been stimulated both by admiration for the pilgrims and reverence for the place.

It is always interesting to ask pilgrims what they think of the spiritual effects of their pilgrimage. Some of them come here to ask God's help for a special intention, others want to thank him or to make reparation for their sins. Many feel the need of getting away from their daily routine for a few days in order to get nearer to God. Lough Derg is their practical solution to this problem. The natural setting of lake and mountain creates the right mood for thinking about God and the meaning of life. By the physical activities of moving round the beds barefooted, of fasting and staying awake, the whole body takes part in prayer. This kind of prayer and the clearly defined order of the programme have a strong appeal, especially for energetic young people. The utter absence of physical comfort makes the exercises difficult, but this very difficulty is a real challenge and a sure guarantee for many people that their prayer is

genuine. Perhaps the sheer simplicity of the Lough Derg programme is the main attraction; to go through with the pilgrimage at all is to do it well. The deprived senses are ultimately satisfied in the feeling of worthwhile achievement, a feeling which brings many of the same pilgrims back year after year.

The Church's teaching on penance helps the pilgrim to understand better the purpose of the pilgrimage, the reason why. We have already seen that penance is the keynote of the entire programme and has been for nearly a thousand years. Repentance and conversion belong, of course, to the daily life of the Christian; the painful process of rejecting sin and opening oneself to God must not be confined to Lough Derg any more than to a week-end retreat or a parish mission. But Lough Derg proclaims the universal need for penance in a special dramatic way, very much as John the Baptist did when the crowds followed him into the wilderness by the banks of the Jordan. His simple, uncompromising call echoes around the island shrine today as clearly and persistently as the lapping of the ripples at the water's edge: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand".

On the way to Lough Derg the pilgrim's fast keeps before him the resolution which prompted his pilgrimage. Like the signposts on the road it reminds him where he is going and how vastly different his mission is from a visit to friends or a picnic outing with the family. First-timers always feel a thrill of adventure and curiosity; but only faith in God and his revelation gives meaning and sanity to this journey. The pilgrims are in serious mood as they gather at the pier on the mainland. There is anticipation in their voice as they exchange greetings in the boat, determination in their eye as they view the scene of their penance, sprightliness in their step as they hasten to begin their exercises. Having heard the call they have come to obey.

The pilgrim endures in hope. If the resolution to come here is an act of faith, the effort demanded by the programme is sustained only by buoyant hope. The exercises pinch sooner or later. Bare feet, hunger, lack of sleep and general tedium

remind us forcibly how difficult it is to deny ourselves and follow Christ. The pilgrim needs to remember the example of Christ to get over the natural feeling of being sorry for himself. Christ's whole life on earth was a painful journey towards his Father, ending on the cross in utter abandonment. Being a man he would have preferred some easier way, but, as he said himself, he came not to do his own will but the will of his Father who sent him. Obviously, we can never hope to reach the perfection of his obedience, but he expects us to keep trying. As we renew our baptismal promises at the beginning of each station renouncing the World, the Flesh and the Devil; or as we make our way to the water's edge, the most vivid symbol of Baptism on the island: let us renew our confidence in Christ Our Lord who has gone before us to Calvary.

Conversion begins in faith, the pilgrim has disciplined himself for it in hope: he now achieves it in union with the risen Christ who fills him with his Spirit as he filled the Apostles on Pentecost. In the Lough Derg programme this means for the pilgrim that the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist renew and strengthen his resolve to follow the way of Christ. Since the entire programme is focused on conversion and repentance, Confession on the island is the high point of the pilgrimage. The faith and hope which enable pilgrims to undertake the pilgrimage prepare them to face up to their sins humbly and sincerely. The gift of true sorrow for sin is especially appreciated on Lough Derg by penitents who thought themselves beyond redemption. Pilgrims are now determined to lead their lives along different lines, inspired no longer by their own selfishness but by the Spirit of Christ. Their sharing in the Eucharist further emphasizes that this Spirit in practice means love or charity.

Charity is always evident in the numerous pilgrims who retain their good humour and patience on the island, who look for no preferential treatment, who manage to be helpful and tolerant of others at the same time, who refuse to preen themselves on "having done Lough Derg". Similarly, their sense of charity enables pilgrims to see their pilgrimage as something beyond what is of obligation, either for themselves or for others. There are many who "have their Lough Derg at home" in their

acceptance of unavoidable suffering. Lough Derg is never meant to be a substitute for any prior demands of duty. It is always out of the question for the physically and nervously afflicted.

The example of experienced pilgrims has always done much to boost the general morale down the years. They know that the programme is a rigorous one before they come, and submit freely to the discipline of the island through their own conviction. When the prayers are over, they will give an audience to the pipe-smoking philosopher around the turf fire or go off quietly on their own to contemplate calmly the brown waters of the lake. There is for all, the elementary advice of the Gaelic poet:

A dhuine théid go Loch Dearg,
Ná cuimhnigh fuath, fala nó fearg.
Dear pilgrim, to Lough Derg going,
Harbour neither spite nor anger nor hating.

The real value of the pilgrimage for every pilgrim, of course, is what he gains from it for his daily life. The Vatican Council sees Christians as immersing themselves in the world, as taking on social responsibilities, as working together with all mankind to improve the quality of living everywhere. All human talent is to be expended in this role but there must be, according to the Council, the influence of the Gospel penetrating all work. The timeless message of the New Testament — conversion from sin to God, which means coming to Christ with the cross of one's life and disposing oneself for the grace of the Holy Spirit — is also the message of Lough Derg. Layman and cleric alike come here to have God bless their work. Annual pilgrims find that the pilgrimage gives their prayer routine a new lease of life.

A final question: what is the specific role of Lough Derg in the Church of our time? The authoritative guide is a letter on penitential discipline addressed to the entire Church by Pope Paul VI in 1966. The letter removed most of the obligations regarding fast and abstinence and urged instead the practice of voluntary penance. This new emphasis on freedom and personal responsibility gives greater significance to institutions like Lough Derg. The Pope writes as follows:

While the Church is by divine vocation holy and without blemish, it is defective in its members and in continuous need of conversion and renewal, a renewal which must be implemented not only interiorly and individually but also externally and socially.

In the Old Testament we can establish that external penitential practices are accompanied by an inner attitude of conversion, that is to say, an attitude of condemnation of and detachment from sin and of striving towards God. One fasts or applies physical discipline to 'chastise one's own soul', to 'humble oneself in the sight of his own God', to 'dispose oneself to prayer', to understand more intimately the things which are divine.

In the New Testament and in the history of the Church—although the duty of doing penance is motivated above all by participation in the sufferings of Christ—the necessity of an asceticism which chastises the body and brings it into subjection is affirmed with special insistence by the example of Christ himself. Christ, who always practised in his life what he preached, before beginning his ministry spent forty days and forty nights in prayer and fasting, and began his public mission with the joyful message: 'The kingdom of God is at hand'. To this he added the command: 'Repent and believe in the Gospel'. These words constitute, in a way, a compendium of the whole Christian life.

The Church invites everyone to accompany the inner conversion of the spirit with the voluntary exercise of external acts of penance:

1. It insists that the virtue of penance be exercised in persevering faithfulness to the duties of one's state in life.
2. Members of the Church who are stricken by infirmities, illnesses, poverty or misfortunes are invited to unite their sorrows to the suffering of Christ.
3. The precept of penance must be satisfied in a more perfect way by priests, as well as by those who practise the evangelical counsels. The Church, however, invites all Christians without distinction to respond to the divine precept of penance by some voluntary act, apart from the renunciation imposed by the burdens of everyday life.