

Reflection for Thursday 22nd October 2020

From 1695 to about 1750, life was difficult for Irish Catholics; churches were closed, bishops were banished and many priests were forced to leave the country. Even with this risk, priests continued to celebrate Mass for the people in secret isolated outdoor locations, using rocks as Mass altars. Clearly the Catholic faithful decided that Mass was an important part of Irish life.

How did people know where the Mass rocks were located and how were they kept secret? Locations of Mass rocks were passed down orally, because including them on 17th- and 18th-century maps would have given legitimacy to the Catholic faith.

The Mass rocks are an important part of Irish heritage, according to Dr Bishop of the University of Liverpool, who has studied the rocks and set up a website about them. She said, “They are what kept the faith alive throughout the penal era. If Gaelic communities hadn’t gone to the Mass rocks, the faith would have died out.”

(CatholicIreland.net)

So far, Dr Bishop has studied Mass rocks in Cork, Mayo, Galway and the diocese of Clogher, publishing her findings on the website she set up, www.findamassrock.com and she is asking for help in finding the rocks before they disappear from local memory. Currently there are about 400 Mass rock recorded, many of which are inscribed with a cross but Dr Bishop believes there are probably “many, many more.”

“I suppose there comes a point where certain generations are less interested in the sites and less interested in their religion and their heritage, partly because a lot of sites are not physically recorded anywhere, so if somebody knows of one and doesn’t pass that information on, then the knowledge of that Mass rock is lost,” she told CatholicIreland.net.

The Irish name for a Mass Rock is *Carraig an Aifrinn*.

“Mass rocks are important religious and historical monuments that provide a tangible link to Irish heritage and tradition. When some say that they find Mass no longer relevant, I think of the Mass rocks, and the love of the Mass that inspired priests and people to gather there in all weathers, and in spite of great danger.”

Some of these Mass rocks continue to be venerated to this day and since March some of them have been used again, as many churches, even now, have not yet opened for the celebration of Holy Mass.

During the 1650s, when Oliver Cromwell and his troops came to Ireland, many of the clergy had to flee for their lives, while others stayed and remained faithful in order to minister to the faithful people — albeit in secret and in disguise. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was said in the open on a rock which more than likely came from one of the monasteries or churches that Cromwell had burned down and looted. The Penal Laws were enacted in 1695 whereby bishops and priests were banned from Ireland. Many went to safe countries like France, Portugal and Hungary, as was the case of Bishop Walter Lynch of Clonfert, who brought with him a miraculous image of Our Lady, “Consoler of the Afflicted.” Ireland was consecrated to Our Lady before this very image in 1662 by all the Irish bishops before their departure from Ireland.

Since March 2020, with the COVID-19 lockdown in Ireland, people have begun returning to the Mass Rocks to pray while the churches up and down the country were closed. While some faithful priests offered the Mass with small groups of the faithful at the Mass Rocks, others would gather and place vestments on a Mass Rock while praying the Rosary and the Chaplet of Divine Mercy together. This way, in the face of the lockdown and other obstacles, the Catholic faith and prayer has been preserved in rural Ireland.

The Catholic bishops in Ireland will admit to having lost a large portion of the Catholic population who may never return to the Church or to the sacraments. Some say that some of the blame lies with the bishops themselves, who for years ignored the call to instruct and to teach, while ignoring the steady advance of secularism including same-sex unions and abortion in the country.

Should another lockdown be enacted again for any period of time, the faithful people, like their forefathers before them, will return again to Ireland's revered Mass Rocks to pray, with or without their priests.

May the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary now triumph over all evil and every sickness.

Deacon Kevin

(adapted from catholicismpure.wordpress and aleteia.org)