Voices of Sisters
Horizons
Spirituality

Sr. Kathryn Press stands in front of the Gallarus Oratory in Dingle Peninsula, Co. Kerry, Ireland, in March. (Kathryn Press)

by Sr. Kathryn Press

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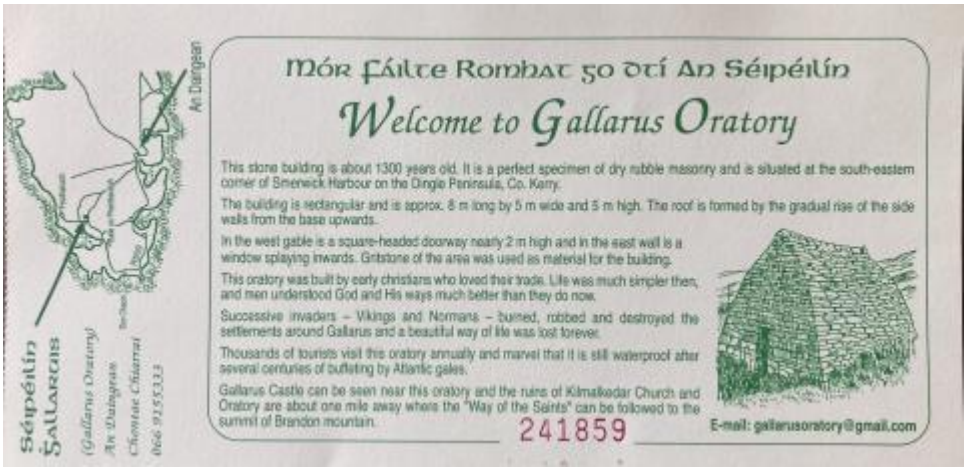
Sunshine, a breeze along the coast, temperatures in the 50s F (10-13 C). It's hard to get better weather in Ireland in March. During my parents' recent visit to Ireland, I played tour guide, taxi driver and daughter all at the same time. Our destination: the Dingle Peninsula in Co. Kerry, Ireland. Driving on the left isn't new for me. Still, traveling the narrow, winding roads, I was thankful that it wasn't peak tourist season.

This is the westernmost part of Europe, where people have been living for more than 10,000 years. The impact of modern humans is visible in roads and houses, but our ancestors have also left a lasting impression. As we looped around the Slea Head, we toured famous beehive huts (thank you, Star Wars), saw evidence of ancient forts and took in vista after vista across the Atlantic. Toward the end of our drive, and slightly off the beaten path, we followed signs for the Gallarus Oratory.

Gallarus Oratory is not a monastic center, like the round towers elsewhere in Ireland. It's not a natural wonder like the Cliffs of Moher or Giant's Causeway. Nor is it a burial site, like the dolmens of the Bronze Age. In the middle of the Irish countryside, surrounded by fields, a boat-shaped building appears.



Sr. Kathryn Press' admission ticket to visit the Gallarus Oratory (Kathryn Press)

It is constructed of dry stone and was once used as a church. The lack of mortar makes dating it difficult. Historian guesses range from the seventh to 12th century. The belief is that the oratory was a specific site to visit before heading out on a journey, perhaps even before departing by boat to travel the Camino de Santiago (which dates from the start of the ninth century).

The building is cared for and amazingly well-preserved. There's an entry on one side with a window opposite it. Even a dozen people inside would have felt crowded. I marveled at the architecture and wondered at what the walls have heard.

Our visit to the Gallarus Oratory during the Jubilee of Hope seems providentially timed. The architecture of this ancient church and the logo for the Jubilee Year speak to each other. An ancient church-hub for pilgrims and the movement of the Jubilee boat remind us that we're all on a journey. There's room for others, and we don't travel alone.

The image of a boat appears in my own congregation's seal. As Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we take our nourishment from his Sacred Heart, then we share that with others in classrooms, meetings, churches and neighborhoods. Just as walking asks us to shift our weight from one leg to another, I find myself needing to draw close to the Lord in quiet solitude so as to find him when I go out in ministry.

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I've not walked the Camino de Santiago (have to keep something on the bucket list!). And I don't know if I'll make it to Rome for the Jubilee Year. Nevertheless, I'm keenly aware of how I can make a local pilgrimage during this Jubilee Year. The Irish Catholic Bishops Conference has nominated three national pilgrimage sites. While the Gallarus Oratory isn't on the list, my visit there deepened my awareness of and appreciation for more local pilgrimage sites — shrines, religious communities (especially the contemplative and enclosed orders) and cathedrals. Maybe there's a place near you with such significance, or a site you can learn more about.

We're barely a quarter of the way through our Jubilee Year. And with Easter just around the corner, we have 50 days to celebrate. Where might you travel on pilgrimage? What sites are there to explore and who can you invite to come along with you? Let us be people on the move, journeying in hope and guided by the cross.