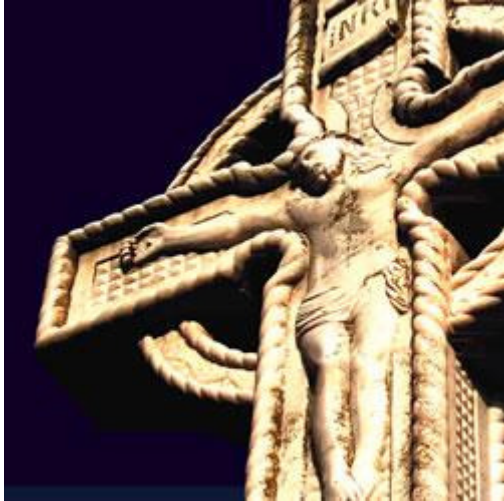


## The Power of Pilgrimage



## The Power of Pilgrimage

By Christian George

August 16, 2007

It was a dangerous journey—too dangerous to be highly recommended. It was a pilgrimage so marked in my memory that I can still feel the wild movement of that boat, tossing us up and down like an empty can in the hands of an angry ocean.

By the lines carved in his face, I knew that Captain Owen had seen the sea. For over two decades in his orange, dual engine, 30-foot boat, he had taken pilgrims from Port Magee to the Skellig Michael. His father, too, was a captain; and he taught his son everything about the North Atlantic Ocean—the 50-foot waves, the unexpected currents, and, of course, the misconception that a clear, sunny sky meant great sailing weather.

*Pilgrimage* is an ancient practice in need of modern discovery. It is a tangible expression of a Christian's journey to God—a discipline for the sole and the soul. Many Protestants are discovering it for the first time, while many Catholics are recovering its biblical interpretation.

For me, *pilgrimage* is not about when we go or where we go; it's about why we go—to expand the horizons of our faith, to move us from certainty to dependency, from confidence to brokenness, from assurance in ourselves to faith in God. Forcing us from our comfort zones, pilgrimage exposes us to a radical God who calls us to burn like beacons in this dark and dying world.

Sacred Space Five hundred years after the birth of Christ, Christians built a monastery on the summit of Skellig (Irish for “rock”) Michael, a remote island off the western coast of Ireland. In that time, Skellig

Michael was the most distant island of the known world, the last bit of earth one could stand on before falling off its “flat edge.”

There were 12 of us in the boat. After climbing down an iron ladder, I stepped onto the floating vessel. Captain Owen was dressed for the water—thick, brown rubber boots and a bright yellow jacket.

“So the water will be calm today?” I asked, looking at the cloudless sky.

His thick, Irish accent disarmed me. “No, lad. The stomach of the ocean is upset today.”

I waited for the punch line.

“We’ll be lucky if all 12 of us can make it to the island!” he grumbled.

I paused. “But the water is calm. There’s not even a ripple out here!”

Captain Owen smiled. “Young lad, I hope you had a small breakfast this morning.”

Our boat departed, and we ventured into the blue unknown. The green hills of Ireland were greener than I’ve ever seen. Every imaginable shade can be seen from the water—forest green, lima bean green, Granny Smith apple green. I saw shades of green I never even knew existed. It was as if God had cut the grass of the earth and spread the shavings across this country. The sun was scorching my neck, and the gasoline fumes were burning my throat; but the gentle rocking of the boat calmed my nerves. *What’s all the hype about, anyway? I wondered. I don’t see any waves.*

Then: Up—down—splash! Up—down— splash! Up—down—splash! Frantically, I turned on my video camera in hopes of submitting the tape to some TV show like “When Nature Goes Terribly Wrong” or “When Sea Creatures Emerge.” Everyone on board, including myself, began to be violently tossed around by the giant waves accosting our vessel. All the unconfessed sins of my life rushed to my lips—every mistake, every lie, every thought.

Up—down—splash! Up—down—splash! Up—down—splash! *Have mercy on us, oh God!*

I thought of Jonah. Perhaps my transgressions were causing this turbulent water. If I were thrown overboard, the sea might subside and the others could be saved. I looked at the blackish, foamy deep. Scaly creatures were surely waiting beneath the waves. The sea had never looked so hungry.

Jesus, too, was once in a boat. The water was white with foam, and His disciples were white with fear. The waves mounted, the thunder clapped, and the boat was breaking to pieces. Yet there was Jesus, the Creator of the clouds, lying asleep beneath the bow. This thought strangely soothed me—like aloe on my soul. Even asleep, God was in control. And if a sleepy Savior can awake from a dream to hush the nightmares of His disciples, surely He could calm my fears, too.

### **Faith on the Move**

*Pilgrimage* is a revolutionary way of expressing our faith. It moves us out of our comfort zones and challenges us to think clearly about our calling as Christians. Sometimes the path is paved with difficulties, other times with hardships. By taking us away from the everyday luxuries of life, pilgrimage teaches us about the essentials of our faith and urges us to abandon our self-confidence. To this end, we sing with the hymnist B.B. McKinney, “Wherever He leads, I’ll go.”

“There she is!” yelled the captain, aiming his finger at Skellig Michael. The sight of the massive stark rock was paralyzing. Squawking white birds circled our boat. We docked against the port, disembarked, and said a prayer of thanksgiving. At last—something solid to stand on!

A 1,000-year-old stairway took us to the top of the island where the monastery was located. Six hundred cracked and weathered steps held us to the hill—not an easy climb! At times, the path was only two or three feet wide and slippery when wet. As we tried to keep our balance on the shaky steps, birds swarmed around us, playing, flying, and soaring as they have done for thousands of years without regard for safety. The occasional gust of wind threatened to throw us off the path, and at times I crawled on hands and knees. Better safe than sorry.

A stone archway welcomed us into the safety of the small but sturdy remains of the monastic community. Our legs were weary, and our lungs were wheezy; but at last we had arrived. Six beehive huts, two chapels, and an ancient, overgrown cemetery composed the monastic settlement. I was baffled by the huts, the rocky igloos that had sheltered the ancient monks. There was even a small plot of land where they harvested vegetables. Historians say that the monks brought cows and sheep to Skellig Michael; but, one by one, they just kept falling off its slopes (not entirely surprising).

I walked into a roofless, rocky chapel, so strange and old. I was 3,000 miles away from my home, standing on the top of a remote island surrounded by flying birds, jagged rocks, and the sound of water crashing against the stones. Yet within the crumbling walls of this monastic church, I felt at home. I shared a common heritage with the hermits who had worshiped in this room. My fears were their fears. My prayers were their prayers. My Christ was their Christ.

What a perilous pilgrimage it was—a spiritually challenging, emotionally draining, physically stretching adventure. The boat ride back to Port Magee was as volatile as the first, though Captain Owen cut us a fine pathway through the choppy sea. When we arrived at our hotel, I opened my Bible to the book of Romans; and a pilgrim named Paul lulled me to sleep with his words: “For I am convinced that neither *height* nor *depth* can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:28). And with peace in my heart and salt on my lips, I kissed the world goodnight.

### **Pilgrims or Tourists?**

The dictionary describes a *pilgrim* as one who “journeys in foreign lands.” Pilgrims are not tourists, casually meandering through a city. Nor are they nomads, wandering aimlessly through a wilderness. The pilgrim is a sojourner, a seeker of the city “whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10). Unlike vacations, pilgrimages urge us to grow in our spiritual understanding of God as we see the world through sacred lenses.

What about those who cannot travel—the elderly, the hospitalized, or the handicapped? Can they practice pilgrimage too? Absolutely. Pilgrimage is centered around one thing—progression. God does not call us to be static saints. We are constantly on the move, evolving in our understanding of Him, chasing Him in our prayers, crawling and climbing over obstacles to find Him. Everyone can practice pilgrimage—a family taking a week-long spiritual retreat or an armchair traveler browsing through *National Geographic*.

From a very early age, I traveled the world with my father. We voyaged to distant lands and different cultures, to pilgrimage sites in dozens of countries. From mossy castles to ancient islands, we followed the footprints of thousands of pilgrims who have gone before. Pilgrimage after pilgrimage, God grew bigger in my eyes, more transcendent, multicultural, and internationally involved. One day I realized

that the song was right after all: God really does have the whole world in His hands.

It has been several years since I stood on the windy summit of Skellig Michael; but every once in a while, I'll close my eyes and go to that stony chapel where austere, Irish monks took their burdens to the Lord. When life overwhelms me and exams overcome me, I'll secretly escape to that place of mystery, prayer, and seclusion. And I'll be home again.

*Christian George, the son of celebrated theologian/writer/historian Timothy George, is a writer, preacher, and speaker.*