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Monday, April 6, 2009

An Irishwoman's Diary



Leanne McGilligan and Anne Cassidy during an Easter pilgrimage to Lourdes with the Irish Pilgrimage Trust. There's plenty of time for a range of activities from a visit to the zoo to playing frisbee in the park.
Armintha Wallace

ON Easter Sunday morning, while we're all trying to make that big decision about which of our chocolate eggs we should crack open first, a group of Irish volunteers will be making decisions of a rather more practical kind at Dublin, Cork and Shannon airports. It's not easy to get more than 400 young people with special needs on to a charter flight, but the Irish Pilgrimage Trust has been organising this annual exodus for more than 30 years. And for children between the ages of 10 and 18 with both physical and intellectual disabilities, a week in Lourdes is a real Easter treat.

"We bring a range of children with special needs," explains the trust's chairman, John O'Reilly. "On the physical side it could be anything from spina bifida to cerebral palsy, deafness or blindness. The learning disabilities would cover the full spectrum from ADHD to autism and Down syndrome. Primarily it's about giving them a good time and giving them a break." It also, of course, gives a break to the family and carers at home.

Lourdes is an old-fashioned sort of destination but it is, O'Reilly says, a very special place with very special healing properties.

"There's a sense of peace and calm which comes over people there – even sceptical people who don't necessarily buy into the whole religious aspect.

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“A lot of our children wouldn’t go to Mass from one week to the next. But during this week-long trip, time and again, we see what we call mini-miracles. That’s the children who, at the beginning of the week, are very quiet or shy or embarrassed, not sure how people might accept them. By the end of the week, they’re just like any other kid – having a great time, being treated as any child should be treated, without any fuss or palaver about their condition.

“And they open up. You might have someone who has autism and can’t speak, or whose speech is very hard to understand, but you discover that they can draw beautifully or play a musical instrument. You see that all the time.”

The trust was founded in the UK in the 1950s by Dr Michael Strode. It has been operating in Ireland since 1972.

One of its main activities is the provision of respite care at its 30-bed centre at Klicuan near Shannonbridge, Co Galway; it is also in the process of renovating a smaller, 18-bed holiday home in Rosslare, Co Wexford.

But the Easter pilgrimage is the major annual event on the Irish Pilgrimage Trust calendar.

“The key to the way we organise ourselves is that the children travel in small groups,” O’Reilly explains.

“The groups are really the core of the whole thing. They generally comprise about 11 young people and 11 helpers, who travel together. They go into the hotel together; they do everything together as a group, over the week.” This helps create a safe, family-style environment for the children, many of whom have never even been to a hotel before, let alone travelled outside of Ireland.

It’s a sign of the times that the trust’s code of practice runs to some 40 printed pages. “We’re aware that many people might be wary of sending children with special needs to Lourdes because of the whole priests-and-sex-abuse scandals,” says O’Reilly.

“We’re incredibly careful about child protection. It’s a huge issue for us. Each group must have a qualified nurse and a chaplain. The other helpers are aged from 17 to 70, and come from all kinds of social backgrounds.

“Many are doctors and nurses who give up a week of their own holidays to come out and be a doctor or a nurse for the week. Then there are ordinary Joe Soaps like me. I’m an accountant. I just got involved because I thought it was something I’d like to do.”

If you’re thinking that a week in Lourdes will be all about praying from morning to night, you may be mildly surprised by the agenda for the pilgrimage.

True, there are daily Masses to be attended. “But they aren’t like your ordinary Masses at home,” O’Reilly says. “These are more like carnivals. There’s singing, dancing – it’s an extraordinary set-up.”

The Trust Mass, for example, will see up to 5,000 young people and their helpers congregate in the underground basilica at Lourdes on the Thursday morning, for a great celebration of community and joie de vivre.

But there’s plenty of time, too, for a range of activities from a visit to the zoo to playing frisbee in the park. “On Wednesday we go up to a ski resort in the mountains. That’s always a great day because it’s either glorious sunshine or there’s snow on the ground. So we play football or have

snow fights or whatever. The scenery is unbelievable, right at the foot of the Pyrenees.”

Thursday is fancy dress night. “Everybody dresses up. It’s wild. They get home from that at about midnight, and they’re wiped. So Friday is a quiet, winding-down day. We might go shopping for presents. There’s a lot of tacky souvenir stuff in Lourdes, as you may know – flashing Jesus and so on – so we just buy the little medals, which make great presents for people back home.”

Friday afternoon is spent sitting around having coffee and ice cream.

“What’s different to just taking them to Disney World or somewhere like that,” says O’Reilly, “is you’ve got the fun and games but you also have the spiritual side of it.

They gain something from the whole experience which helps them cope with day-to-day life.”

Which has got to be better, even, than chocolate.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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