

St Abbán's Cosán — A Short Commentary

1: Although this church is dedicated to St Mary, the mother of Christ, it is possible that the earliest stone built church was erected here in thanksgiving for and in memory of St Abbán. This points to an early tradition of marking places for their spiritual associations. To have a local saint would have been a great boon to the locals.

2: This Holy Well is now covered over and topped with a very fetching 'hat'. Before this area was built-up this Well would have served as a source for healing prayers. Notice how close the church and the Well are. It is called St Mary's Well now, but in the first modern map of this area it is called Lady's Well (perhaps these are the same as Our Lady is a name for St Mary).

8: The Cathedral is also dedicated to St Mary. This gets very confusing for visitors who call up the wrong location when they pin their photos and visitor comments on our respective social media sites!! The Cathedral was built from about 1840 on a site donated by the local Landowner. It is designed by Pugin, that great architect of English and Irish churches. Whilst the history of Ireland can be written from the perspective of the deep-rooted animosities between Catholics and Protestants and the gross injustices both wreaked upon the other it is fair to say that the two get on much better now and share in providing spiritual support and access to worship for locals and visitors alike. Ponder the need for religious tolerance and love.

11: **Clóch mochua** is a tricky place to find—so well done for standing in front of it—but don't kneel in the depressions worn by St Cudda's kneecaps; it can hurt! The story of Cudda (the diminutive form of Cuthbert) is a delightful one in the true tradition of Irish story-telling. I'll be brief! He left the monastery on Innisfallen to collect groceries from another monastery on the lake shore. On his way he heard a bird singing exquisitely so he knelt to listen and to give thanks to God. Eventually the bird stopped and Cudda made his way back to Innisfallen because he realised it was late; boy was he late(!). The doorkeeper said they had no-one belonging to his monastery called Cudda. It was then remembered that 200yrs earlier a brother had ventured out for supplies—and never returned. Cudda had been in repute listening to the bird and praying for 2 centuries. No wonder the marks of his kneecaps are so deep. Ponder not the timeframe, but the sense of devotion that the early Irish saints had for nature as an expression of God's love and glory. How much do we need to regain such a sense of respect for Creation in the C21st. Time flies when we engage with the divine majesty through the portal of nature's bounty and beauty. Have a rest!

12: When we pioneered this pathway we came across this Well hidden in a thicket. So we appropriated it for St Abbán, bless him. But I want you to turn round and look over the lake. You can see Innisfallen sitting out from the shore, majestic in its spiritual legacy. It looks quite unassuming. This would have been an important place for early Christians as water and lake-islands were their alternative to desert places of the C4th and C5th in Egypt, Arabia and Syria. (There's mounting evidence that Christianity came to Ireland from Egypt in the century before St Patrick; there are numerous remains showing links with early Orthodox Christianity and the earliest known church ruin is only 50kms from here on the Ring of Kerry.) But, there had to be tangible reasons written into the fabric of this place in the spiritual memory of the people for a very important monastery to have been founded on Innisfallen. The St Finan on the Wikipedia page is the wrong one; he wasn't born yet! But there is such a Saint located in the west of Kerry by Waterville, of the right vintage. What was it about this place that was so spiritually vital, that they established a place of great learning. Look around at the vista and imagine it back then with great Oak forest and swaths of Blackthorn. Can you sense it, perhaps you have the spiritual instinct they had? The King Brian Boru was educated here. The Annals of Innisfallen—a great litany of nationally significant events—was compiled here. Look at it, it's only a tiny place, but it yielded such greatness. One can go over there on a boat from the Ross Castle jetty (but not right now) as you've got to head up the hill past this

second Holy Well. Just offer up a prayer for healing and health as you walk by and as you get to 13 stop for a bite of a sandwich or chocolate bar as you soak up the view of the Lake and the islands (trust me, they're there, if all you've got is fog and rain; all the more reason to come back again).

As you walk along across the main road—do be extra careful of the busy traffic—I thought I'd give you some snippets to ponder. Did you know there are some 400 Irish Saints. Not one of them is a martyr. I think Ireland is the only country in which Christianity settled without anyone getting killed for their faith, in the early days. You might ask yourself: why? What did Christianity take so well here? You'll probably want to get back to your accommodation before logging in to our website that supports this **Cosán** for a more detailed review of the options. Suffice it to say; The pre-Christian religious culture understood their deities as being in threes, so they took to the Trinity naturally. They focussed heavily in their religion and founding myths on the previous occupants—a spiritual race—as having gone through the water portals into the other world and could be invited to offer healing through prayers and donations at Holy wells, so the idea of baptism as a life saving event and a resurrection was easily absorbed. They had a deep sense of the presence of the divine all around them in the landscape and its agency, so they took to the holistic engagement with nature of the early Christians of the eastern tradition. I can go on, but you get my point. If you were to press me, I would dare to claim that the modern Irish have that same holistic instinct just below the surface and it is apparent in many other early cultures that still exist today.

14: Walking up this steep incline can be a bit taxing, so take it steady, no rush. Perhaps you can ponder your own engagement, or otherwise, with spirituality and the Divine presence. Many people have been put off by organised religion, and I don't blame them. The Church has committed some horrendous atrocities over the centuries; and here is no different. So the purpose of this **Cosán** is to give you an opportunity either, if you're a disillusioned Christian, or if you're sorely wounded by the Church's sins, or if you've never ventured to think about God, the Divine, the place of spirituality in your life, ... is to give you a chance to find that same sense of awe and wonder, of reverence, of deep peace that nature offers our spirit. When we feel love and joy and peace and tenderness, these are motivations of the spirit writ across our hearts. These are Divine communications that have no words or thoughts. They are our intrinsic ability to commune with the One who made existence possible. The early Irish Saints (you'll maybe have noticed I never once used the word Celtic (oops!)) had this ability, so do we. Let your visit to Killarney activate in you that inner sense, that ability to exchange wordless words of deep feeling with the One who is. Killarney is what is called a "thin place"; a place where heaven and earth are but a gossamer thickness apart. The Spirit of Place here is so acute, so refined, so tangible that, even though people regard themselves as having not a single spiritual cell in their body, they still are moved, refreshed, enlivened, enriched, rested, inspired, and empowered by having been in this place. Let the spirit of God touch your heart and soul, like it did those who responded to **St Abbán's** words of wonder.

15: The ancient church at Aghadoe was a great Cathedral foundation in the early days; small, isn't it? The local area in the ancient Diocese is named after it. It was subsequently amalgamated with the neighbouring Diocese of Ardfert (famous for St Brendan the Navigator). Our Diocese still bears their names, even though it's now a long string of such names! This place is a well-used place of eternal rest. When you pop along the road to the viewing point at 16 you'll understand why. I sincerely trust that the forces of nature have granted you a peerless day of sunshine and light breezes so you can soak up the awesome site of the Macgillycuddy Reeks on the far side of Loch Lein (which means: the Lake of Learning). Is it any wonder so many people flock to this most visited place in Ireland (that's our claim!). Is it any wonder that they come back; just like you will. Is it any wonder that Killarney has such a vibrant atmosphere and community, when it nestles in the palm of God's hand like this?

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Please do be careful along this road as you head back to the right along the top road and back down into Killarney for the second leg of your walk; this is the cultural bit. If you're wondering about turning left instead, there are some narrow bends and the cars wouldn't normally expect walkers by the verge; risky!

When you get back into our Church at the end of your tour why not take some time to reflect on all you have thought and seen. Maybe give thanks to the God who has accompanied you in your feelings and thoughts, unnoticed. Maybe offer up a prayer of gratitude for the beauty of the place. Maybe start to realise that love and peace are hallmarks of the Divine Creator and that you share them too. God bless.