

# ABOUT HOLY WELLS

There is much evidence to suggest the reverence of wells is the continuation of a pagan Celtic tradition. In their study of holy wells Janet & Colin Bord <sup>1</sup> comment for example:

*"The finding of a spring near a sacred site may have sanctified it in the eyes of the local people, since water welling from the earth at a sacred site would naturally be considered to have great potency ... certainly a large number of holy wells [are] located in close proximity to ancient sites of all kinds."*

They also discuss a head or skull cult associated with holy wells that continued from Celtic until recent times. There was an interesting discovery at Killeen Faulmore in the 1870s that may be connected with this.

During penal times priests probably celebrated Mass at holy wells as there were then no fixed places of worship & these sites could be described as the only "holy" places in the parish. A number of wells have "alters" associated with them.

Historian Fr Swords <sup>2</sup> describes various celebrations that took place at the holy wells in Christian times:

*"The people ... celebrate enthusiastically the patron saints of their parishes. These celebrations or 'patterns' took place usually, though not always, at a holy well ... Pattern is a corruption of the word 'patron' and the devotion was celebrated on the feast of the patron."*

*The 'stations' performed at the wells shared a large number of features. Pilgrims circled the well a number of times on their bare knees. This was done usually seven times, though ... any uneven number such as three or nine, would suffice.*

*They followed the sun in an east-west direction ... A set number of prayers was said invoking the saint, or sometimes they told their beads. Hands and feet and particularly any injured or ailing part of the body were washed. A cup or bowl was provided at the well, from which they drank. Once the station was completed, a piece of cloth torn from one of their garments was tied to the tree which usually overshadowed the well."*

Several different explanations have been given for the practice of tying rags around trees associated with holy wells. Perhaps the most popular is that they were used to wash a diseased part & then hung with the intention that the disease be transferred to the rag & leave the person as the rag rotted. They may also have been simple offerings or left with the intention of retaining a contact with the holy place.

*One commentator in 1739 stated that each pilgrim took a rag already on the tree and re-placed it with one of their own. This was wound round wherever they wished to be cured. The rag had gained the curative powers that the tree had absorbed from the*

well." <sup>2</sup>

Another practice was to spit on the rag before it was tied to the tree. Asked why, a pilgrim is quoted as saying:

*"their ancestors always did it, that it was a preservative against Geasa-Draiocht, the sorceries of the Druids, that their cattle were preserved by it from infectious disorders and that the daoine maithe (fairies) were kept in good humour by it."* <sup>2</sup>

There are accounts of other objects such as bent pins being left alongside the rags.

Holy wells were visited by individuals hoping for cures as well as being used for celebrations or patterns & different wells were associated with curing different diseases both of humans & animals.

Visiting Holy Wells to perform "The Stations" or in the hope of a cure for illnesses was practiced in Attymass parish within living memory.

### **Notes & resources:**

<sup>1</sup> The book Sacred Waters by Janet & Colin Bord [1985 ISBN 0-246-12036-3] the history & folklore of holy wells.

<sup>2</sup> A Hidden Church by Liam Swords [1997 ISBN 1856072045]. Fr Liam Swords is historian for the Diocese of Achonry.