

# NEWSLETTER

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## Reek Sunday Pilgrimage returns to its traditional format this year

Cover image: climbing the reek 1928  
Image from [www.petersonpipenotes.org](http://www.petersonpipenotes.org)

*Find out*

How the modern  
pilgrimage to Croagh  
Patrick began!



Croagh Patrick in c.1900.  
Image from [www.thereek.com](http://www.thereek.com)

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## When Reek Sunday was revived

This Sunday is Reek Sunday, the day of pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick. Although the mountain has a tradition of religious and ritual reverence stretching back into pre-history, it became a focus of Christian pilgrimage in the centuries after St. Patrick was said to have spent Lent on the summit in 441 CE.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the big day was typical of other pilgrimages, with much merriment, and sometimes a little violence, to accompany religious observance. The pilgrimage also had a Papal Indulgence granted to it ... more on that later.

However the Famine of 1845-49 punctured the pilgrimage's vitality, and in the decades afterwards, the tradition began to dwindle.

In 1882, Frs. Stephens and Clarke attempted to revive the pilgrimage. They arranged for a rudimentary roof to be placed over the remains of the medieval oratory on the summit of the mountain. Interest in the pilgrimage was renewed at that time, but it didn't last. One reason for this was Fr. Stephens getting on the wrong side of his Archbishop, Dr. Mac Evilly, who removed him from the Archdiocese of Tuam altogether. Stephens had to resurrect his career in Australia before returning to Ireland many years later.

It was not until 1903 that the Croagh Patrick Pilgrimage was officially revived and began its modern era. Dr. John Healy had been installed as the Archbishop of Tuam on St. Patrick's Day 1903. He had ambitions to revive the pilgrimage and give it national prominence. The first pilgrimage was a success, but it had an uncertain beginning.

The Administrator of Westport, the Reverend Fr. McDonald, had announced in early August 1903 that, weather permitting, he would celebrate Mass on the summit on Sunday the 15<sup>th</sup> of August.



Croagh Patrick on Reek Sunday 1905, with the newly constructed church in the background  
Image from [www.museumsofmayo.ie](http://www.museumsofmayo.ie)

Archbishop Healy had promised to attend and preach a sermon. The week leading up to the big day was so persistently wet that the prospects for the pilgrimage were bleak. The Archbishop decided it was not going to proceed and remained in Tuam.

In fact, Sunday the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1903 turned out to be fine and bright, and Fr. McDonald climbed the Reek and celebrated Mass there, and as such began the modern pilgrimage. He was joined by 10 other clergy, including Fr. O'Connor of Pittsburgh. Trains brought pilgrims from Achill, Castlerea and Ballinrobe. Between two and three thousand people were estimated to have climbed, although a rival figure of close to seven thousand also circulated. This latter figure seems to have passed into history as fact, being published in newspapers as far away as New York.

The pilgrimage was repeated in 1904, with Archbishop Healy in attendance on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August for a Mass at noon.

The Bishop of Achonry, Dr. Lyster, also attended. Dr. Healy noted that his clergy could attend the summit on the 14<sup>th</sup>, but only if they changed the times of their own parish masses to accommodate their journey to the Reek. The day was deemed a big success, despite a strong south-westerly gale charged heavily with rain. Archbishop Healy preached after Mass and announced that a chapel would be built on the summit.

Within 12 months of the announcement, the work was complete, and the chapel (minus the north and south wings, which were added in the 1960s) was built on the summit, ready for the 1905 pilgrimage.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a document dating to the 1400s was rediscovered in Rome. It stated that the Papal Indulgence\* for the pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick applied to the Sunday before the feast of St. Peter's Chains. This is the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, and so from 1905 onwards, the last Sunday in July became Reek Sunday.

\* An 'indulgence' was a remission of the punishments associated with sin, and could be obtained by performing a prescribed series of tasks, such as prayers or a pilgrimage.

This article is an excerpt from 'Fr. Angelus Healy, OFM Cap., 1875-1953: The Guardian of the Reek' published by Brendan Walsh in the Journal of the Galway Archaeological & Historical Society, 2021, vol.73.

