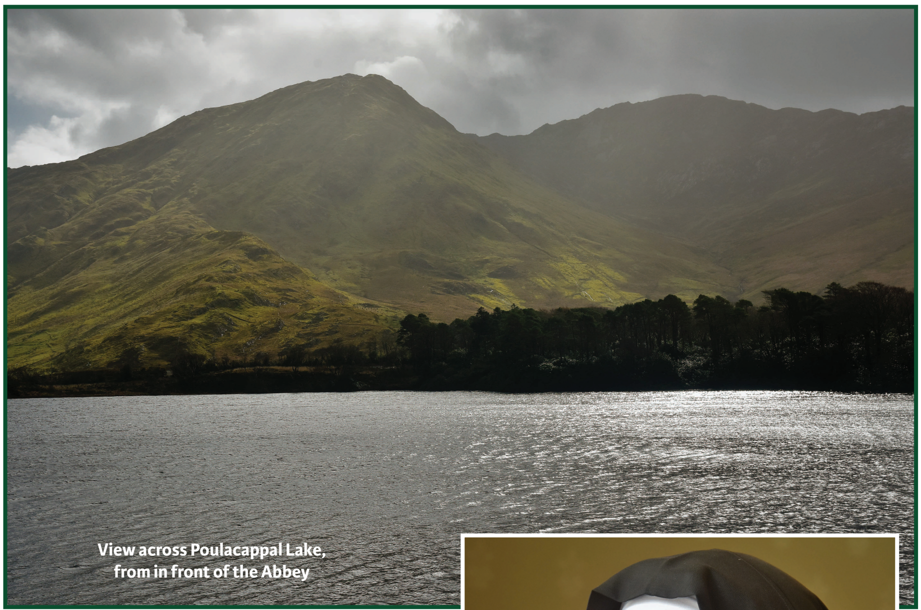
Interview with Sr Máire Hickey OSB, Abbess of Kylemore Abbey

FR CHRIS HAYDEN Can you tell us something about the striking building which became Kylemore Abbey?
SR MÁIRE HICKEY The Abbey building was constructed between 1867 and 1872, by Mitchell Henry, a wealthy Englishman of Northern Irish descent. The surroundings are spectacular, and the house itself is an extraordinary feat, because he had to dig into the mountains; there are no extensive level areas in the house and there are steps and stairs everywhere, linking different levels. Kids often say, when they come in: 'Oh – Harry Potter!'

It's a beautiful place to live, but it has the downside of being hugely expensive to maintain. There are lovely rooms with extensive views, and on the other hand, there is a warren of passages and steps and rooms looking out onto the bare side of a mountain. Living here, you get wrapped up in the labyrinth of it, and then there can be a door through which you find yourself in a wonderful, spacious room.

C.H. I always associate big, complex buildings like this, with their many tunnels and passages, with intrigue. Are there any stories of intrigue associated with the Abbey building?
Sr M.H. No, not really, because they were exceptionally good people – and they are still revered in the area. Mitchell Henry came from a Unitarian family in Manchester, and when the family came here, they got involved more with the Anglican Church. They were very socially-minded, and there was also a little colony of Quakers in this area, investing their wealth in improving the lot of the people, especially after the Famine. Henry was very dedicated in that way, and this was partly why he built the place – not merely as a dream castle. There was a strong social conscience at work. He was very well known, and our archives show that it was widely known that people here could be sure of getting fair pay and being looked after in a way that was exceptional among landlords at the time.

C.H. How did this building come to house a Benedictine community?
Sr M.H. To skip over a lot of history, our community came here in 1920. We had



View across Poulacappal Lake, from in front of the Abbey

Sr Máire Hickey OSB, Abbess of Kylemore Abbey

Photos: The Editor

been in Ypres in Belgium. We were founded in the middle of the seventeenth century by a group of women who were part of the Benedictine movement of Catholic women who were going abroad to provide education for exiled Catholics from England and Ireland. At a certain point, the Irish women in several convents came together in one convent, which was named the Irish Benedictines of Ypres. We were there until 1914, when the war started and the monastery was destroyed. The community moved to Ireland and was located first at Macmine, in Co Wexford. The Benedictine community at Edermine, near Enniscorthy, were the spiritual fathers of the Macmine community.

C.H. You had a secondary school here up till recently, and now an American connection?
Sr M.H. Yes. The school was closed in 2010, and in 2014 we were in contact with the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. They were looking for a place in the West of Ireland and we were looking for partners who would be interested in using our facilities for educational purposes. Notre Dame renovated a large part of the building and they now have programmes here for their students.

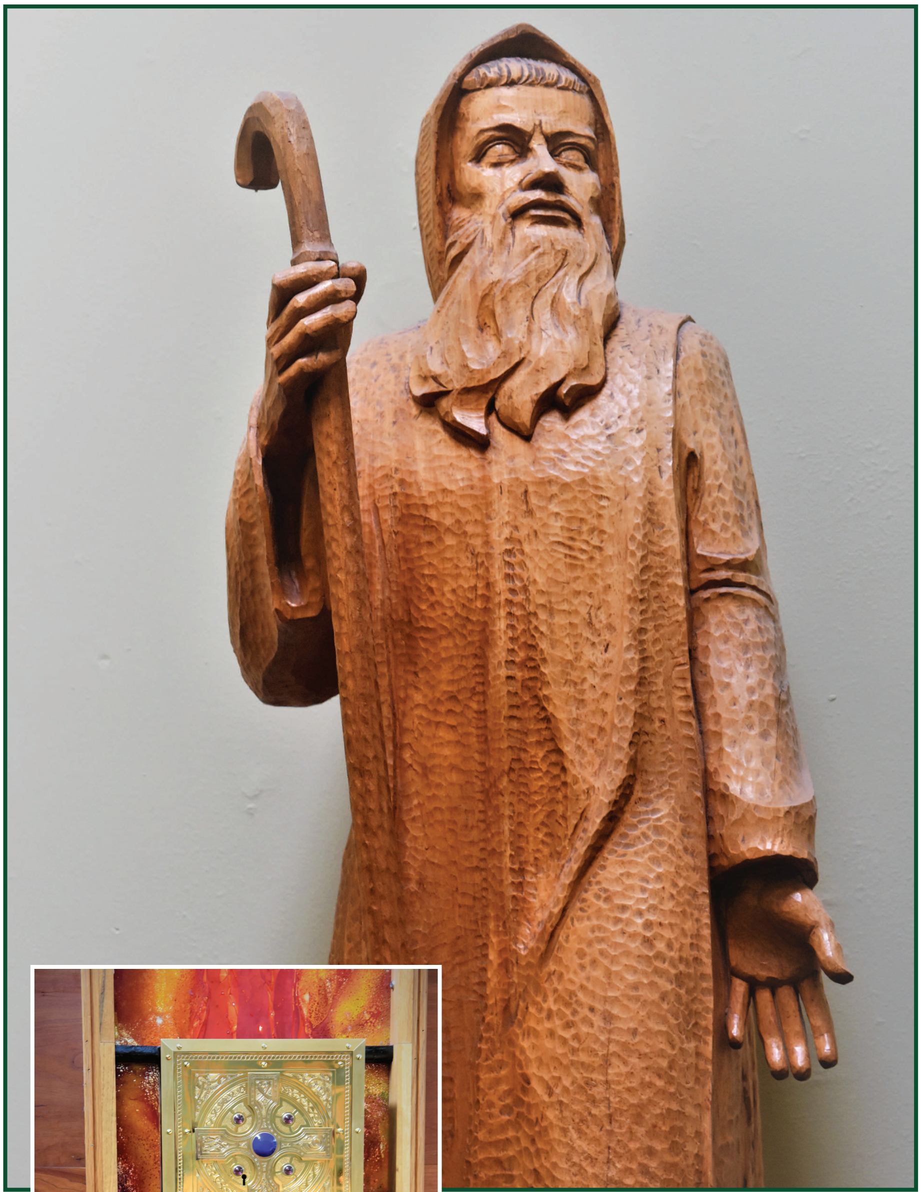
C.H. And your own Benedictine vocation?
Sr M.H. I grew up in Dublin. I wanted to be a nun from early on. I entered the community I was at school with in Dublin and went to England for my novitiate and for teacher training. But I left that community, and then I got to know some German Benedictine monks in England, who were very open and very committed. This was in the years after the Second Vatican Council, when people were leaving orders left, right and centre – but these monks were not. In 1968 or 1969, they invited me to spend Easter at their monastery in Trier. They were celebrating the new Easter rites, and I found it just amazing to celebrate Easter with the community. I sometimes tell people that I really became a Christian at those Easter ceremonies; something hit me, I began to grasp what it's all about. Afterwards, I kept in touch with that community, and

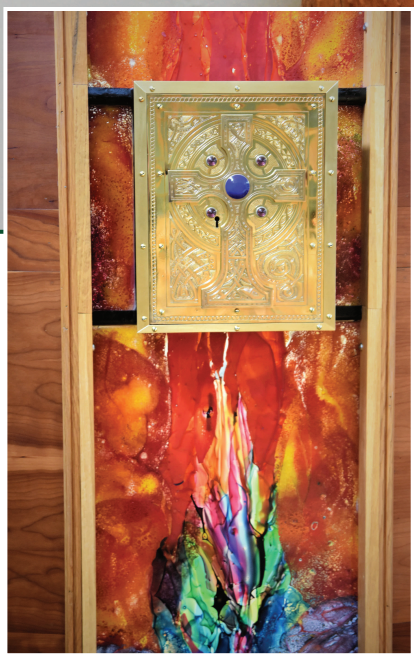
then I discovered a community of German Benedictine nuns. I remember, during one visit, seeing how they celebrated the liturgy, and thinking: 'My goodness, they're enjoying that, they love it.' This opened up the spiritual life for me in a new way and showed me that this was what I wanted to do.

C.H. It's a very striking thing to say that, in a way, you became a Christian through your participation in the Easter ceremonies. To borrow the language of Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, that was a part of the reform that did *not* need to be reformed. He was concerned that the liturgical renewal had flattened out, become banal, fallen into various abuses. But you've made a powerful statement of the goodness of the liturgical revival. Even if it did stray in some respects, at its heart it was something wonderful.
Sr M.H. Absolutely, and it still is, in spite of liturgical abuses and fashions. And I think this is part of the mission of a Benedictine community: with whatever resources they have, to be doing their bit to try and keep good liturgy at their centre.

C.H. If you were to do a SWOT analysis of the Irish Church today – Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats – what might it include?
Sr M.H. The weakness, as I see it, is in the institution rather than in the faith of the people. That's not just in Ireland, but in the Church as a whole. The sex abuse scandal has played a big role in the weakening of the Church; the leadership has lost a lot of credibility, even if not always directly through their own fault. I think the abuse scandal is a huge factor in the weakening of the Church, yet there's much more than that. There's a broad, human issue. For a person to live their sexuality in a way that is not selfish, that is not doing any damage to anyone, but that is fruitful for service and for the good of others – this is difficult, and perhaps not many people manage it fully. Healthily functioning sexuality, for families, for men and women, for single and celibate people, is at the heart of vibrant, faith-filled church life. But I feel we're still a long way from that, and I would see that as a big weakness.

If you were just reading news reports and watching TV, you might think that Catholic Ireland is dead and gone, but I don't find that at all. There are many expressions of wonderful faith and service. Look, for instance, at the National Board for Safeguarding Children. I think they've been doing a fantastic job. Out of the mess that we got ourselves into, this is part of the response that says: 'We're not going to lie down under it, or just keep our heads down. We're going to find a way of improving things so that the church is a much safer place for children.' As I see it, that's just one example of a great strength: a wide group of people, dealing in a positive and determined way with that whole issue. There are other examples, too, that I could mention.





Above: 'Listen!' Statue of St Benedict in Kylemore Abbey
Left: Tabernacle, Abbey Chapel

C.H. Here at the Abbey, with its beauty and serenity, we see a wonderful face of the Irish Church. Yet just four kilometres back along the N59, at the Industrial School in Letterfrack, there was a very different reality. Have you any thoughts on this?
Sr M.H. I think about it a lot, and I send visitors there. You can't forget it if you're living here. To go back to what I was saying about sexuality, Irish culture was not very healthy in that regard. And if celibacy is not embraced with full freedom, in a dysfunctional culture or environment it is liable to go wrong. That's not to say that celibacy in itself is problematic. I think it's a wonderful thing. But there were people living celibacy who did not have the right freedom, and that was part of what went wrong.

Photos: The Editor

Above: Kylemore Abbey

Right: Bronze - Letterfrack Church

C.H. After questions of Church, celibacy or sexuality, there's the very existence of the Industrial Schools. There was something dark in our culture, when there was a felt need to virtually quarantine kids who were less than perfectly behaved, or whose parents were not able to look after them. I wonder if we sometimes become so focussed on sexual wrongdoing, that we lose sight of the massive social injustice that gave rise to these places.

Sr M.H. Yes, sexuality is always part of a bigger picture, though a very important part. Here at the Abbey, there was privilege – although there were many children here who came from unhappy backgrounds, so it wasn't all golden. But by comparison with Letterfrack, it was privileged. This is something you can't forget if you're living here. And it's an impetus to work towards a church and a society where these things don't happen again.

In the meantime, we have to live with it, and it's a huge loss of prestige for the Church. But prestige is often superficial and shallow, and when you lose it you have to get down to your real self, who and what you are. That's part of what we all have to go through. The subsequent story of Letterfrack is very encouraging. The Industrial School was sold and became the property of a group named Connemara West, and they have done amazing things to transform Letterfrack. The Industrial School building has grown into a third level college that is part of the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT). It's great that this and many other local initiatives are happening, and the people who put effort into these things are the kind of people who show us that there is a way forward. Thank God for them. I certainly wouldn't want us to be a privileged, prestigious place; not at all. We have a lot to gain and to learn from being part of the local community.

C.H. We're sitting in your office. It looks like a busy place. There are stacks of paperwork, along with a computer monitor. No doubt, with all that's going on, you have lots of administration to do. But behind all that, what is the heart of the contemplative vocation today?

Sr M.H. That's a question for an hour's conversation, but putting it into a few words, I think the heart of contemplative life has to be God's presence, and his reaching out to us, his human family, through his creation. Contemplative life and prayer is our response to that outreach of God. It's a whole process of becoming aware of who I am, what I am. There is discipline and learning in letting our attentiveness be trained, in listening – 'listen' being the first word of the Rule of St Benedict. We spend our lifetime trying to learn this, but there are so many things pulling us away from it. Our Benedictine community is focussed on prayer, which means that we try to give first priority in our life to listening and responding – and maybe sharing that with other people who don't have the time and the way of life for it.

For Benedict, the motto covering everything is 'work and pray.' The prayer that seeks to reach out to God, the Other, is one part of life. There is another: we live in this material world, we have to earn our bread, to run a business, to run a school. The two sides are intertwined. What happens in community, in prayer times, in reading – that is really what my life is about, and even though I can't be doing that here in the office, it flows in to what I do here. There is a link between all this busy-ness, this untidiness, and the heart of contemplative prayer.