

Talk for St Brigid's Day event, St Bride's Church 1 February, 2024

Pat Gaffney, Volunteer, Irish Chaplaincy

When I told a friend of mine who lives in Trallee that we were holding this service she related that her English class today, for adults, migrants, those seeking international protection and those with leave to remain, would be having have a cross weaving session. Always lots of fun she said - weaving our hopes for the future! That sent me to YouTube to see how to make the cross – using natural resources, reed or straw. Through a simple pattern of folding, the cross is made with a square centre with 4 radials... as with these beautiful examples here on the altar piece and these two straw crosses. Perhaps next year we can all make them as part of our gathering? Doing something together creates a kind of unity and peace in itself.

Often woven on St. Brigid's Eve, the crosses are placed in the house, usually over the door, to bless all who come and to gain protection for the household from fire and disease. Tradition has it that Brigid wove a cross from rushes on the floor of the house of a dying man, some say her father. As she was making it she explained its symbolism for Christians – and this simple, yet strong symbol and its story of love self-sacrifice and self-giving, encouraged the man to be baptised a Christian.

St Brigid her witness and the cross she wove, have inspired others

In 1807 six Irish women came together at the invitation of Bishop Delaney to establish the religious congregation the Sisters of St Brigid, the Brigidine Sisters as they are known today, in Tallow, Co Waterford. Their early work was to care for orphans, offer education to children and soon their mission expanded into Europe and beyond, serving the needs of the poor and vulnerable in the global community. Today, they work through the spirit of Brigid, sponsoring and co-managing a Hospitality Centre for Asylum Seekers in Tallaght, South Dublin. They work with women and children trafficked for sexual exploitation. Here in London they have helped in the setting up of a 'Safe House' for trafficked women.

In another part of Ireland, during times of struggle and violence, the germ of an idea emerged when a family in Derry/Londonderry were invited to make a St Brigid's Peace Cross, to give life to the story of Brigid selling her father's precious jewelled sword to help the poor. Swords into ploughshares... or for our current time,

weapons into bread? The Irish Nobel Peace Laureate, Sean MacBride launched the Peace Cross campaign on behalf of AFRI, Action from Ireland), an Irish organisation working for justice and peace.

In 1993 – the year of the Good Friday Agreement, when hopes for peace in Ireland were high, the Brigidine Sisters and AFRI came together to create the first Féile Bríde in Kildare where the sisters had established their Solas Bhríde, Spirituality Centre inspired by St Brigid. The first conference linked to the Féile was entitled *Brigid: Prophetess, Earthwoman, Peacemaker*. The 2024 Conference will be held next week in Kildare with the title '*Light for Peace*'.

We marked the opening of our prayer time today with the Pause for Peace moment, introduced in Kildare in 2023. Brigidine Sister Rita Mineham introduced the project then saying: *By pausing for peace, we send out a message that we actively oppose warfare and the proliferation of arms, which wreak havoc on human beings as well as on the natural world. This movement aims to awaken and build a spirit of global solidarity in our search for peace. It would be a fitting tribute to Saint Brigid and to all our ancestors if it were marked with a Pause for Peace on her feast-day, February 1st each year."*

So today, in solidarity with people in Ireland, USA, Canada, Norway, Sweden, Germany and Italy, we pay tribute to Brigid –, a woman of compassion, a woman of prayer and contemplation, a woman who continues to show us how to weave peace and hope in a world in need of justice and healing.