

Virgin Mary's image has pilgrims stumped in west Limerick

By JOHN REIDY

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WOULD you feel an awful stump of a fool if caught worshiping at the stump of a tree with that same stump the object of your fervour? You would wouldn't you?

Not if you're into your religion and possess a strong dedication to the Blessed Virgin. The vast majority of the population of the West Limerick town of Rathkeale has visited or looked on from a distance at the stump of a tree which many claim holds the likeness of the Blessed Virgin.

Some there even maintain that the stump, of the recently felled tree, glows in the dark and enforces their belief with a clearly defined outline of Our Lady.

It stands in the grounds of the local St. Mary's Parish Church and the grassy area around it has been trodden black under the feet of so many visitors. There are so many shapes of so many things in the stump and at one glance it resembles a piece of naive art. My first impression, from the roadside view, was of a shark appearing, jaws agape, out of a flat, black sea of mud. A removed, minor branch providing an almost perfect 'eye' in location and size.

"If you wait here until after it gets right dark you'll see her nearly coming out of the tree God bless her and then you'll believe it yourself, sir," was one woman's effort to convert me in response to a question on the sanity of people who worship there. "I've travelled to everywhere Our Lady was seen and that's why I came down here today," said the lady from Co. Clare.

And worship they do. There is barely a shred of bark left on the near, four foot high stump and it is decorated with medals, soft toys and rosary beads. The 'crown' of the 'lady' is gaining a patina from the constant rubbing of the past week or so since the news of the 'appearance' broke.

This differs from the 'apparitions' of the 1980s in that there is no hanging around waiting for 'It' to move. You arrive say your prayer, knock off a sliver of bark, leave your medal and away you go. This facilitates a greater turnover of visitors and the ground there has all the signs of it.

What do the locals say to people who scoff at them adoring the stump of a tree:

Richard O'Brien said that people are entitled to believe what they like. "She is after bringing the religion back to the place. I'm a great believer in the powers of Our Lady anyway before any of this happened here - but this is beautiful," said Mr. O'Brien.

Another local, Maureen Dillon, believes that she has never seen so many young people and children drawn to the church because of the new devotion that's sweeping the parish:

"Some people say they don't see anything in it but if you take a photograph of it on your phone it shows that there is definitely something there. I took a bit of bark down home with me one day last week and it's up on the window and the sun shining on it and it's still wet - there has to be something in it," said Maureen.

Teenager, Kathleen Quilligan - a regular mass-goer in Rathkeale claims the local experience is bringing faith "back into the world".

"My age group think it's the image of Our Lady and we believe in it and we all think it's beautiful."

Nora Sheridan is another local and a member of an older generation believes that it is bringing the generations, old and young together:

"Maybe when you see it first you only see the stump of a tree but to look at photographs after you see it clearly and it glowing in the dark and everything is for a purpose. It has brought young and old, black and white, Chinese, Catholics and Protestants all together here. Last Tuesday night there were over 400 people here and it's up to everybody to have their own beliefs after that," said Mrs. Sheridan.

There are several angles from which you could be convinced of an image of Our Lady. Was the hand of the man with the chainsaw guided to reveal some world saving phenomenon?

On my way home from Rathkeale on Saturday evening I listened to Lyric FM for any of the versions of the Ave Maria but none emerged from my dash to convert or convince me. I'm sticking with the shark because it was my first impression and people can see and believe what they want to - can't they?

- JOHN REIDY

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