

## **A Day When Grace Was in the Air**

*By Emma Cronin Transition Year student and Catherine Sutherland American Exchange Student*

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of April, the Transition Year students attending the Patrician Presentation Secondary School, Fethard set out on an unforgettable excursion to the beautiful Glenstal Abbey near Murroe, Co. Limerick. Our small school from south Tipperary was blown away by both the historical and spiritual surroundings of the premises.

When we arrived it was a lovely sunny day and we met one of the resident monks, Brother Pádraig, who would be our tour guide for the day. He began by telling us a bit about the history of the Abbey. The monks run a 500 acre estate which includes looking after a dairy farm, guest house, secondary school and gardens as well as officiating at Mass three times a day in the Abbey church.

As we stood in front of the stunning masterpiece, we were informed on the details encompassing the Benedictine monastery, home to roughly 242 students and 40 monks. The Abbey was originally a Norman Revivalist Castle built by the Barrington family in 1839 and converted to a monastery in 1929. The designer, William Bardwell, intended for the estate to appear like it was a twelfth-century castle; this is evident in the inscription on the tower resembling 1139, rather than 1839. The impressive grounds radiated wealth and status but also a sense of spiritual purity as we moved through the tour.

Once we had familiarised ourselves with its history we were taken to the cinema-gym for a snack and hot chocolate and watched a 23 minute D.V.D on the history of the Icon Chapel. The icons themselves originate from Russia. In the 1970s, a Swiss woman, Joa Bolendas, had a vision in which she was shown the icons by the Saint Nicolas, the patron saint of Russia. She sent investigators to Ireland to find out where these icons were. The icons had been given to Glenstal Abbey in the 1950s by Sir Thomas Gratton-Esmonde. In the 1980s the icons were placed in a special location under the main church and it was officially opened on the 10<sup>th</sup> of April 1988, the anniversary in 988 of Christianity's arrival in Russia.

We then had the opportunity to visit the Icon Chapel. It was amazing to see all the detailed icons and there was a wonderfully peaceful feeling in the chapel. The students carried emotion as we entered into the chamber-like room filled with blessed art and icons, a truly amazing sight. The silence and the dim atmosphere allowed for personal reflection to take place as we gazed at each piece. The dome ceiling was illuminated with the four Evangelist symbols. Transition Year focuses on all aspects of enhancing the individual, including spiritual growth. The Icon Chapel definitely made an impact on the students; the sacred sentiment found within that space was transformative.

We then had the pleasure of experiencing Mass in the Abbey Church. Appropriately as it was such a beautiful day outside the Gospel was about the idea of Jesus as the light and this theme was developed in the homily. There were 23 monks present at the Mass. It was delightful to hear the Gregorian chanting. Glenstal Abbey is one of the only monasteries

in Ireland that preserves the chanting. The ceremony was yet another opportunity for the students to reflect and connect on a holy level.

Lunch came next and we ate our packed snacks in a facility used by the students call the "cinema-gym". Following lunch, we were able to explore the surrounding gardens of the Abbey. First up was the Ladies Garden, originally a garden for the ladies of the castle, its location specifically chosen to allow the men of the castle to keep watch over them from the castle. There had been trees planted recently in this garden, in memory of some of the signatories of the 1916 rising. From here we had a look around the monk's graveyard and finished our tour in the beautiful walled garden. With the soft wind and the bright sun, there was no day more perfect to walk in the historical gardens. Some students stopped here and there for a quick picture and made the most of their experience.

We left Glenstal with a treasure trove of memories. If you are searching for a place to reflect on what it really means to be a person of faith or re-establish faith, there is nowhere better than Glenstal Abbey. The students from Fethard are truly grateful for the wonderful experience they had at the beautiful Glenstal Abbey and would like to thank everyone who made the trip possible. "To speak and to teach, indeed, befits the master; to be silent and to listen the disciple." - Rule of Benedict.