

# A Summer of Sabbatical and Pilgrimage

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 delaware.church/bishop-browns-sabbatical-2023/

*“I expected the pilgrimage to be challenging, and it was. Very early on I asked myself why I had signed up for so many days and so many miles along not-exactly-easy geography. I journaled, “what have I gotten myself into?”*

Hello beloved of God in Delaware,

I have returned from my sabbatical, and I can say unequivocally that I come back rested, renewed, and ready to reaffirm the blessings of life. I wrote in April [\[link\]](#) about what I hoped and expected from the time away. Here are a few reflections as I return to work and slip the mitre back on.

The centerpiece of the sabbatical was a wonderful month in Ireland. The first half was time of personal pilgrimage, alone on a motorcycle, where I rode 1,600 miles (about half the width of the United States) of Irish coastline. I rented a silver Royal Enfield Himalayan and each day set off with “Hi ho, Silver!” into the scenery of the Wild Atlantic Way.

Not only was the route breathtaking, but the locals I met were gracious and supportive. Even among all the natural beauty, I came to treasure most the journey itself. After early doubts, I started to relish the challenge of mastering an unfamiliar bike in an unfamiliar land on the left side of the road. (And yes, those large multi-lane roundabouts are something else.)

Sometimes the road was quiet, but usually it was as unpredictable as the sheep which roamed freely in the north. I chose not to use a GPS but relied instead on road signs. (This got tricky in a few places where signs were printed only in Gaelic.) At times, the day would become unexpectedly dramatic. I will never forget climbing the twisting, narrow, cliffside route up to a high vista that overlooked Ashleam Bay in County Mayo. The drop to the ocean below was steep, and there were often no guardrails or lane markers despite two-way traffic. I stayed focused on the ride, not the scenery. At the summit, I basked in the breathtaking panorama of the North Atlantic Ocean, feeling a profound connection to the grandeur of nature and a heightened sense of proximity to God’s beauty. I offered prayers and reveled in the sheer joy, thrill, and exhilaration of my achievement. As I prepared to descend and tackle the miles that lay ahead that day, I could not help but reflect on the pilgrimage’s overwhelming capacity to inspire, invigorate, and reaffirm my faith. It ignited a surge of creativity in my journaling, unlike anything I had experienced in years.

After two glorious weeks I bid farewell to ‘Silver’ and exuberantly met Caroline in Dublin. My heart was full as we celebrated her birthday and took in a ton of Irish history. We spent a few quiet days in retreat at Glendalough, the home of St. Kevin, and we were in Kilkenny when the city celebrated the local hurling team’s dramatic victory over Galway. We visited old

friends who have a home on Shirkin Island and basked in the local music and hospitality in yet another gorgeous corner of Ireland. The highlight of the entire month, no doubt about it, was our hike, in the glory of a sunny day, with our friends of Skellig Michael, the rocky mountain top of an island eight miles off the southwest coast where the beehive huts and chapel of an ancient monastery still stand. Skellig Michael is a bucket list destination for many for its history and dramatic, even dangerous, beauty. Though we approached the island with trepidation (that path to the top is not for the faint of heart) we rejoiced in the day and in what we had achieved together.

The rest of my sabbatical was spent back home in the United States, in Delaware, North Carolina, and Tennessee, largely as planned. I was able to spend time with my wife and daughters, to study, read, learn, and rest, all the while rekindling my personal prayer life. The activities of these weeks are not as sensational as those in Ireland, but they are certainly just as important. My family appreciated my undivided attention, my availability, and our Sunday mornings together during these precious moments of reconnection.

Having said all this, it is important to note: the secret sauce in a successful sabbatical is not to travel to a foreign land, experience a novel pilgrimage, or attend some other marquee event. Success hinges on the ultimate ability to truly separate from the constant demands and stresses of work. When I was on sabbatical, whether in Europe or at home, I was not doing the work of the church. I am profoundly grateful to the Mission Support Staff for shouldering additional responsibilities in my absence. The team was empowered to make any unexpected choices or big decisions without checking in with me. Accepting that level of responsibility requires a solid dose of two-way trust between bishop and staff that I am grateful for and do not take for granted. This also goes for the leaders and members of our governance bodies, including Diocesan Council, Standing Committee, Trustees, and the Annual Convention planning team. Thank you all for marching forward. I have confidence in you, and I am honored by the confidence I feel in return.

Sabbatical was a real blessing for me and my family. I am glad to be back, and I feel as ready as ever for the unknown roads ahead.

*+Kevin*