

What ancient Irish monks can teach us about silence, solitude and slowing down.

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Analysis: The Irish monastic tradition reminds us that silence is not a gap to be filled, and human flourishing does not solely depend on productivity

In Gougane Barra, tucked away in the wilds of west Cork, a small chapel sits on an island in the lake. The chapel itself is relatively modern, built in 1901, but the place has much deeper roots. Tradition holds that St Finbarr, patron saint of Cork, founded his hermitage here in the 6th century. For centuries afterwards, pilgrims would make their way to this remote site, drawn not by grandeur but by stillness. Finbarr's choice to withdraw into solitude here was not an act of escapism. It was a deliberate re-orientation of life away from noise and distraction, toward silence, prayer and attention. In his time, such retreat was a form of radical devotion. In ours, it can provide an answer to a quite different set of needs.

We live in what many have called the "attention economy". Every ping of a phone, every notification on a laptop, every new headline competes for a slice of our inner life. Distraction is no longer an occasional nuisance but a normal eruption into our daily existence. Burnout and anxiety are not fringe experiences but mainstream conditions. Against this backdrop, the figure of the Irish hermit Saint may seem remote. Yet when we look closer, traditions like that of Finbarr at Gougane Barra offer something urgently relevant: a way of being in the world that values silence, solitude, and slowness.

For the Irish monastic, silence was not a void to be filled but fullness itself. To keep silence was not just repression of speech but cultivation of a deeper listening to God, to nature, to one's own heart. In many monasteries, silence was woven into the rhythm of daily life, punctuated by chanting of the psalms. It was a discipline of attention, a way of clearing space for the sacred. Contrast this with our contemporary soundscape. Silence today can often feel awkward or unsettling. Think of the discomfort when a conversation lapses, or when we are alone without background music, podcasts, or television. How many of us can sit in silence and do nothing for five minutes?

The Irish monastic tradition serves to remind us that silence is not a gap to be filled but an invitation to undistracted awareness.

When Finbarr retreated to Gougane Barra, he did not intend to sever his ties with others entirely. Solitude is not about isolation in a modern sense. It is about stepping back from the demands of the crowd so one has the physical and mental space to cultivate a different kind of presence. Today, solitude is often confused with loneliness. The former replenishes us while the latter diminishes us. One recent study found that how we think about being on our own can help us transform isolation into solitude. What the monastics knew is that solitude, when chosen and cherished, can become a source of deep renewal.

Anyone who visits Gougane Barra, Skellig Michael or Glendalough is struck by the landscape. Early Irish Christianity was profoundly shaped by the natural environment. Hermitages were carved into cliff faces, islands, and secluded valleys. Monks wrote poetry about the blackbird's song, the rustling of trees, the play of light on water. Hermits' lives were shaped and inspired by the harshest of natural settings. For them, nature was not a product to be exploited but a reminder of the divinity of creation. We are rediscovering that slowing down in nature is not only good for mental health but essential for sustaining the planet. This understanding of the environment challenges our tendency to treat nature as mere scenery or resource. Instead, it invites us to see the natural world as alive with meaning, as a partner in spiritual life.

Underlying all of this was a radically different vision of time. For Finbarr and his contemporaries, the daily itinerary was ordered not by the demands of work but by prayer, study, community, and contemplation. To us this might sound impractical, but their rhythm of life demonstrates that human flourishing does not solely depend on productivity. We feel the cost of living as though every hour must be monetised, every task optimised. But how much time is spent needlessly scrolling? The monastic rhythm challenges us to imagine a different balance. Even if we cannot live like hermits, we can still carve out daily practices that resist the tyranny of endless busyness.

Places like Gougane Barra, Skellig Michael or Glendalough are not just heritage sites. They are reminders of what those early monks knew: that silence, solitude, and attentiveness can anchor a human life. For contemporary Ireland, re-engaging with this contemplative heritage need not mean embracing the old religious forms in their entirety. We can simply recognise that the practices of silence and stillness are not relics, but resources. They are ways of inhabiting time and space that counter the noise, distraction, and exhaustion of the present.

Standing at Gougane Barra today, it is easy to imagine Finbarr in his hermitage. His world was vastly different from ours. Yet the questions that moved him are perennially relevant: How do we live well? How can we live attentively? How do we find meaning beyond the demands of our daily lives?

Perhaps the lesson of Ireland's monastic tradition is simple: in slowing down, we do not lose life but recover it.

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