

Remarks at Bergen Cathedral - Sunnivafestivalen, September 2020

By Ambassador Keith McBean, the Embassy of Ireland, Norway

Mayor, Bishops Nordhaug and Finnset, Dean, Rector, distinguished audience, kjære alle sammen.

In just over a year in Norway, this is now my fourth opportunity to visit the magnificent city of Bergen, approaching it both by land and sea. I am always struck by the welcoming atmosphere of the city, the warmth of its people, set among such a spectacular coastline. It is truly a special place.

On this occasion, it is a particular privilege to be here in the wonderful surrounds of Bergen Domkirke, the episcopal seat of the Diocese of Bjørgvin.

First and foremost, let me convey congratulations and admiration to the organisers of the Sunniva Festival. These events have been in the planning for a number of years and full credit to all involved. Despite the difficult circumstances under which we all are operating, you have put together a highly impressive programme. It is a fitting celebration for the important role of Saint Sunniva in all our lives, especially for Bergen and the West Coast of Norway.

This is a powerful moment by any yardstick.

Ireland and the city of Bergen have so many excellent and close connections. We share close historic, cultural and economic bonds. At the Embassy of Ireland we are glad to play our part in developing the strong and close relationship between Ireland and Norway, a role strongly reinforced over the past year with the establishment of an Honorary Consulate here in Bergen, with our excellent representative in place, Mr Gavin Collins.

In Ireland, we talk a lot about the Viking connection. Aside from more fearsome aspects of their reputation, the Vikings were great traders and did much to develop commerce in medieval Ireland.

It is, I think, fair to say that Ireland also influenced Norway in this period. While many Vikings brought Christianity to Norway when they returned from Ireland, the connection through the Saint Sunniva legend is one of the most important and enduring links.

The story of Sunniva says so much about the close historic interaction between Ireland and the West Coast of Norway. It binds us together.

An Irish princess, the heir to an Irish King, who had to flee when an invading heathen king wanted to marry her. On what must have been a perilous journey, she sought refuge with her followers on the beautiful west coast of Norway, in Selje. The narrative did not turn out the way they might have initially hoped, but the collapse of the caves where they sought refuge did facilitate the emergence of the sanctity of Sunniva.

This is a strong enough connection in itself. But another connection comes in the shape of how her story itself unfolds.

The Sunniva narrative follows similar Irish legends very closely, like the Brendan voyage, where navigation is entrusted to God's providence. In the case of the Brendan Voyage, 'Brendan the Navigator', the Irish religious leader and explorer sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to a new 'promised' land.

This narrative of entrusting navigation to God's providence can be said to represent an important link between Sunniva and Ireland. The similarities are in how these legends play out as pilgrim narratives.

And perhaps the story of Sunniva could also be seen as well as a parable, or lesson, for our own times.

She faced many adversities and challenges, but ultimately Sunniva transcended these adversities, her body intact, her faith preserving her.

Trusting to God's providence, the importance of hope and faith, taking people as we find them, in all their difference, are all important lessons from the story of Sunniva.

We need tolerance even more as a vital part of navigating the modern world, and also openness to people in need of our help. It is something that Ireland and Norway both know well, as two countries with their own histories of emigration. We would hope to continue to promote these values as we work closely together with Norway as newly elected partners at the United Nations Security Council.

Once again, let me thank all involved for the wonderful celebration. I look forward to developing our close connections even more, with Saint Sunniva's shining example as a beacon guiding us forward.

As we say in the Irish language, *Go raibh mile maith agaibh* – that's a hearty expression of thanks literally meaning may you have a thousand good things.

Tusen hjertelig takk, alle sammen.