Faith in motion: How two Church leaders blend their life of exercise with religion

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Sr Liz Smyth

Fr Aodhán McDunphy (left)

"A healthy body and a healthy soul," said 87-year-old Fr Aodhán McDunphy, OCSO of Our Lady of Silence monastery, after his 545 kilometre and 11 day cycling journey on the Camino. Liz Smyth, a Dominican Sister from Belfast, runs every week with the Cherry Orchard Running Club and is currently preparing for the Dublin marathon. Both Fr McDunphy and Sr Smyth fuse their life of piety with exercise and wellness.

Working to better oneself is one of the foundational pillars of Catholicism. Faith is holistic, and Fr McDunphy and Sr Smyth embody this message; dedicating their lives to exercise, community, and God.

Sr Smyth runs four times a week with her over 200 member running club in Ballyfermot. "I see it as part of my ministry, running with people," she said.

Encouraged by one of her other Dominican Sisters, Sr Smyth began running in 2018 as a part of the 'couch to 5k' initiative, slowly training to work up to long distance running. In September 2024, she completed the Belfast half marathon for her 60th birthday.

With the support of the Cherry Orchard Running Club, she completed the Belfast full marathon in May 2025, one of her biggest races to date.

"I'm doing it because it helps me connect with others and it helps me see others' success," Sr Smyth said. "But most importantly, it teaches a positive way of life and a positive respect. And in the Cherry Orchard Running Club, there's a lot of respect."

Outside of the club, Sr Smyth uses her hobby as a way to fight for social justice. Late last month, she cycled through Ballyfermot wearing a shirt and hat displaying support for Palestine, and a scarf with the flag's colours.

"It's important that we as religious walk with people and be present with people… That's all," said Sr Smyth. Last week, she marched through the streets of Dublin with the Dominican Sisters in the National March for Palestine.

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"I see Catholicism and faith as promoting life, promoting joy and giving people hope. Always having hope in the midst of darkness, in the midst of difficulties and challenges," she said. "So my running with the people in Cherry Orchard and Ballyfermot gives me hope and I give them hope."

Across the island in Roscrea, Fr Aodhán McDunphy cycles weekly with his partner, Paddy Smyth, a college year head from Cistercian College.

Fr McDunphy embarked on his journey through the Camino to celebrate his 60th anniversary of priesthood. This follows his previous cycle on the Camino Francais for his Golden Jubilee, with the newer and longer route suggested by Mr Smyth.

"We almost consider our[selves] a little cycling group… We compensate each other's strengths and weaknesses," said Mr Smyth. "We take care of each other."

Throughout the journey, they saw several landmarks, like the Fátima Sanctuary in Spain. What was truly memorable for them, however, was the people they met on the way, or "Camino angels," Mr Smyth said.

"I met Jesus and the Holy Family in the persons of the ordinary people," said Fr McDunphy, recalling the generosity and hospitality of those they met along the way.

Paddy Smyth echoed the same sentiment, and told *The Irish Catholic* a memory on how he was guided by a stranger on this trip.

On their last day, they stopped at a hotel, but would only be able to store their bikes at the sister location, about six kilometres away.

"I went off on my bike, and suddenly the battery of the bike failed, and my phone went down, and suddenly I'm in a park, woodland, no phone, no bike," said Mr Smyth. "I was desperately thinking, how am I going to contact anybody? I don't know my way back, and I don't know my way forward."

Almost out of nowhere, a couple with their two kids came along and "did everything they could to help," Mr Smyth said.

In broken Spanish, he asked for a way back. In response, they navigated out of the park with Mr Smyth holding on to the window of the car, and drove him straight to the hotel.

This journey represented more for them than just exercise, serving as a pilgrimage in which they can deepen their faith and connect more with the earth. "It was an adventure, but also a spiritual adventure," said Fr McDunphy.

"[It's] always about generating some sort of change within ourselves," Mr Smyth said, hoping the message of health in conjunction with faith "spreads to other people."

"I was in the open, you're seeing the beauty of creation, you're meeting the most wonderful people, what more?" continued Fr McDunphy.

Connection

In fact, it was through cycling in which Mr Smyth and Fr McDunphy became close friends. On one of Mr Smyth's long cycling journeys, he encountered a man from Holland who travels 70 kilometres to church, and it inspired him to visit his own monastery, which was much closer. There, he met Fr McDunphy for the first time.

On another cycling trip in Rome, he quickly spotted him and they grew close, citing how he was given "solid advice" and companionship on his journey.

Throughout that trip, he felt an immense privilege in having, "this spiritual Aodhán cycling with me," he said. "I stayed in contact with Aodhán [after that]."

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They've been cycling together for about eight years now.

On this most recent trip on the Camino, they encountered several challenges, like bumpy cobblestone roads and a cold Fr McDunphy had to fight off at the start.

Nevertheless, "We took each piece as it arrived at us. I think that's what you have to do when you're doing those journeys. You can't see it as a whole because if you do, it'll be too big and you'll back off," said Mr Smyth. "That's our philosophy. I think that's why we did pretty well."

"As the journey came to a close, they highlighted the importance of rest and reflection, settling at the Piazza Beato country retreat"

As the journey came to a close, they highlighted the importance of rest and reflection, settling at the Piazza Beato country retreat that Fr McDunphy booked for them.

"The whole highlight for me was to have achieved this trip together. For me, I'm 63 so I think it's pretty okay,... but with Aodhán being 87 it just blows me away," Mr Smyth said. "Certainly age is no barrier to do anything."

Mr Smyth told *The Irish Catholic* he hopes to one day be able to be as fit and dedicated as McDunphy when he's older, referring to him as his "inspiration."

The way of life that Fr McDunphy, Paddy Smyth, and Sr Liz Smyth live is one of zeal, commitment, and self-fulfillment, with the blend of religion and their regular exercise allowing them to grow their faith and connection with their family and community.

"My Camino really started the day I was born," said Fr McDunphy. "In honour of my parents who brought me to the priesthood."

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