

PRIEST IS ONLY ONE WHO CAN'T SEE VIRGIN MARY'S IMAGE



RED ROSARY: Children place beads around wooden apparition



DIVINE LOVE: Locals gather to pray and worship before Our Lady of the tree

By GERALDINE COMISKEY

A TREE stump believed to bear an image of the Virgin Mary has been put under 24-hour guard.

The residents of Rathkeale, Co Limerick, have mounted a round-the-clock vigil at the stump in the grounds of the Holy Mary church — because they fear the priest will have it removed.

Thousands of believers have flocked to see what appears to be an image of the Mother of God in the grain of the sawn-off stump.

The vague shape, which apparently shows her holding baby Jesus on her lap, was first spotted this week by woodcutter Eddie Tierney and his colleague Anthony Reddan, while they were felling trees as part of a FAS project in the church grounds.

Spookily, Mr Tierney's chainsaw suddenly stopped after he had cut the stump of the 70-year-old willow, exposing the image. "The tree wouldn't let him cut it any more. It gave him a message and that was that," a local lady told the Sunday World.

The shy woodcutter would not talk to the Sunday World but he has been spending hours at the site, praying along with the crowd, every day this week, since his "miraculous" discovery.

His supervisor, Community Council boss Noel White, plans to put a glass casing over the tree-stump to protect it from pilgrims who are taking pieces of bark as relics.

Mr White said there needs to be dialogue between the community and local clergy on what should be done and they will await the return of the parish priest, Canon Joe Dempsey, from his holidays.

More than 2,000 people have visited the site to kiss the stump, rub it and pray. An all-night vigil was held on Wednesday night, when they said decades of the Rosary.

And when I visited the site on Thursday, I have to confess I could see an image resembling the Blessed Virgin emerging from the tree stump top. Locals are guarding the site round the clock — because they fear the priest will remove it.

"We're standing vigil over this 24-7 in case the priest has it taken away," James Hogan told the Sunday World.



JACKO JAPE: James Hogan with a picture of the tree stump with Michael Jackson's face on it

Mr Hogan, along with his brother Declan and some other local men, have been taking turns to park in front of the church, facing the stump, every day this week.

They were upset when curate Fr William Russell told a large crowd to go away on Wednesday night.

"He put them away from the stump because he said there was no evidence that the Virgin Mary was there. The priest is all confused about it."

Rubbish

"He can't see what we see. He thinks it's just a tree," pensioner Paddy Shannon told the Sunday World.

Fr Russell also rubbished their belief on local radio, saying: "There's nothing there. It's just a tree. You can't worship a tree."

But locals hope the parish priest, Canon Dempsey, will take them more seriously when he returns.

And they insist the image is clear. Cancer patient Gerry Heffernan (61), from London, is among the many who believe the stump may have miraculous powers.

Mr Heffernan, who was visiting family in the area this week, visited the stump to pray for a cure.

A lady in a wheelchair also arrived with her carer and kissed the image

on stump. Rosary beads and other religious objects are being added daily to what 'pilgrims' now call the Shrine to Our Lady.

Some locals are even hailing it as a miracle for business in the town, which has never enjoyed a boom.

Local shopkeeper Derek Downes says pilgrims have been flocking to his Eurospar shop. Up to now Rathkeale was more renowned for the large number of settled travellers and traders who built huge houses around the town.

The McCarthy family came from Tralee especially to see the image on the tree stump.

Granny Kathleen McCarthy pointed out that she could be regarded as an expert, as she is a regular pilgrim to other sites where Catholics believe Our Lady appeared.

"I go to Knock and Lourdes a few times a year, I've been to the Holy Land, I was in Millstreet three years ago when Our Lady appeared in a well, and I was in Ballinspittle when the statues were moving. It's the same thing again — it's Our Lady appearing on earth," Mrs McCarthy told the Sunday World.

Her daughter Geraldine McCarthy said: "I'm not as religious as my mother, but I can see it too."

Sceptical

Declan Hogan brought his little daughter Jasmine (2) to touch the stump.

Locals Sinead Picard (28) and her friend Bridget Daly (25) told the Sunday World they were sceptical at first — and got a shock when they saw it. "I can see it better in photos. You can make out the figure of a woman holding a baby," Sinead said.

Both girls described themselves as Catholic but not particularly devout — until now. "I'd go to Mass but just once a week. I'd believe in God," Sinead said.

Michelle Lowe (12) and Aisling Donovan (14) saw a bit more than most people. "We saw a girl kneeling down beside her," said Michelle. "And she's holding baby Jesus."

James Hogan said the image brought him closer to God too. Sitting in his white Mercedes as he guards the site, with Tiger Woods tattooed on his arm, he looks more like a Hell's Angel than a worshipper at the shrine to Our Lady.

Mr Hogan showed the Sunday World a mobile phone picture of the stump which clearly bears an image of... Michael Jackson!

"If he was here he'd get up off that stump and start dancing! Then we'd have a show!" he laughed, adding: "Our Lady won't mind me having a laugh. I'll say a few Hail Marys."

He added: "Rathkeale is known for lots of things like the bare-knuckle fights. But now it'll be known for something else. Even if the priest doesn't believe it, he shouldn't be stopping the people from praying."

A spokesman for the Limerick diocesan office said: "The Church's response to phenomena of this type is one of great scepticism, while we do not wish in any way to detract from devotion to Our Lady, we would also wish to avoid anything which might lead to superstition."

SERIOUS: Jasmin and Declan Hogan pose as pilgrims pay respects to the miracle tree stump

