

Witness an online magazine

Tromenie de Locronan The Monk's Walk

Photographs & Text
by
Richard Falco



Troménie de Locronan

On the western edge of Brittany, where the Atlantic winds shape both landscape and tradition, lies the remarkably preserved village of Locronan. Considered one of the most beautiful villages in France, Locronan is not merely picturesque—it is a place where layers of spiritual and cultural history stretch back over two millennia. Long before Christianity reached the region, the site was a sacred Celtic nemeton, a consecrated space used for ritual and worship, likely connected to seasonal cycles and territorial boundaries.

In the 6th century, this ancient sacred ground drew the Irish hermit Saint Ronan, a wandering monk seeking isolation for prayer and contemplation. According to tradition, Ronan lived as an ascetic, embracing solitude and spiritual discipline. Over time, his presence transformed the site: he Christianized the old pagan sanctuary, establishing a new religious center that gradually attracted followers. From this fusion of Celtic spirituality and early Christianity, the settlement of Locronan emerged. Its very name—derived from the Breton lok (hermitage) and Ronan—means “the hermitage of Ronan,” preserving the memory of its founder.

By the 14th century, Locronan had evolved into a prosperous economic hub. Its wealth came from the production of high-quality sailcloth, woven from hemp and linen and exported to major naval powers across Europe. This industry financed the construction of the village’s impressive granite houses, its church, and public structures, many of which still stand today. Walking through Locronan now feels like stepping back in time: narrow cobbled streets wind between solid stone buildings, while wells, crosses, and fountains punctuate the landscape, reinforcing the town’s deep historical continuity.

A woman clears the area around the Saint’s small chapel the night before the Troménie. (cover)

A priest makes several announcements before the Troménie begins. (right)



At the heart of Locronan's identity lies the enduring veneration of Saint Ronan, expressed most powerfully through the Troménie. The term comes from the Breton *tro minihi*, meaning “the monk's circuit” or “the sacred walk.” According to legend, Saint Ronan would walk barefoot each week along a defined path encircling the territory of his hermitage, blessing the land and establishing its spiritual boundaries. This act was not merely devotional—it echoed much older Celtic practices in which ritual circuits marked and sanctified space.

Today, this ancient route is preserved in the Troménie, one of Brittany's most distinctive religious traditions. Two forms of the procession are still observed: the Grande Troménie and the Petite Troménie.

The Grande Troménie is the most significant of the two and takes place every six years, between the second and third Sundays of July. Covering approximately 12 kilometers, the procession follows a path believed to correspond closely to both the original monastic circuit of Saint Ronan and an even older Druidic route. It is one of the most important pardons—traditional Breton pilgrimages that combine religious devotion with communal identity—in all of Brittany.

The route is carefully marked by 12 major stations, each represented by a granite cross, as well as 42 smaller shrines or huts, each associated with specific saints or episodes from Christian tradition. Participants, often dressed in traditional Breton costume, walk the route in a solemn and reflective atmosphere. Silence plays a central role in the Grande Troménie, reinforcing its penitential character and encouraging inward contemplation. The procession is not merely a reenactment but a living ritual that connects participants to centuries of faith, memory, and landscape.

In contrast, the Petite Troménie takes place annually and covers a shorter distance of about 6 kilometers. While less extensive, it is more frequent and accessible, allowing both locals and visitors to participate in

Many of the march's participants congregate in the square around the church before the procession begins. (right)





Young and old gather near the Church of La Pénity waiting for the services to begin. Some have traveled a great distance to participant in the Troménie.

the tradition each year. The atmosphere of the Petite Troménie is somewhat less austere than that of the Grande Troménie. Prayers, hymns, and communal expressions of devotion accompany the walk, and the procession often reflects the vibrant cultural identity of the region, including Breton language and dress.

Together, these two processions embody a remarkable continuity between past and present. The Troménie is not simply a religious observance; it is a ritual landscape in motion—a merging of Celtic sacred geography, early Christian devotion, and enduring local tradition. In Locronan, history is not confined to buildings or archives; it is walked, remembered, and lived, step by step, along the path first traced by a solitary monk over a thousand years ago.







On the Sunday morning of the Grande Troménie, the town of Locronan awakens to one of its most solemn and visually striking traditions. Residents and pilgrims from across Brittany gather in the square near the Church of La Pénity, forming a dense and reverent assembly. Many participants are dressed in traditional Breton attire—richly embroidered garments, lace headdresses, dark woolen fabrics, and ceremonial sashes—reflecting both regional identity and centuries-old custom.

The ceremony that begins the day is known as the *baissé des bannières*, or “lowering of the banners.” During this ritual, the great parish banners—each representing a saint, a parish, or a confraternity—are slowly inclined in a gesture of humility and devotion. This symbolic act expresses reverence before the sacred and marks the spiritual opening of the Grande Troménie.



Following this deeply ceremonial moment, the gathered community participates in a Catholic Mass, celebrated outdoors or within the church depending on the year and conditions. The liturgy unites the faithful in prayer before they set out on the long procession, grounding the journey not only in tradition, but in shared belief and collective memory.







Upon completion of the service, the congregation will gather around the church, sharing traditional waybread before beginning the walk.



Upon completion of the service, the congregation gathers around the church, forming small groups in a quiet yet communal atmosphere. Here, participants share traditional waybread—a simple, symbolic food that reflects both hospitality and spiritual nourishment. This moment of fellowship bridges the solemnity of the Mass with the journey ahead, reinforcing bonds among pilgrims and grounding the ritual in shared tradition.



Many of the townspeople have participated in this event for generations.





At the tolling of the bells, everyone will move into formation with their designated groups to start the procession.



Participants gather in front of the church before the procession begins.

After this brief pause, the banners are raised once more, and the procession slowly begins. Led by clergy, standard-bearers, and participants in traditional Breton dress, the faithful set out from Locronan along the ancient sacred route. With measured steps, they embark on the Grande Troménie, retracing the path of Saint Ronan in a journey that is at once physical, spiritual, and deeply rooted in the history of Brittany.

At its heart are the relics of Saint Ronan, carried with great care in a reliquary, or feretery, borne on the shoulders of designated custodians. Their presence transforms the procession into more than a commemorative walk—it becomes a visible expression of the saint's spiritual presence, who is believed to guide and bless the route.

The reliquary remains at the center of the march throughout the entire 12-kilometer journey, reinforcing the spiritual focus of the Grande Troménie.







The procession quietly makes its way from the center of town into the beautiful surrounding countryside.







The relics of St. Ronan are carried in a reliquary or *feretery*, for the entire procession.



In addition to the participants of the Troménie, people from all over come to watch the procession.



The procession passes golden wheat fields ready for harvest as they make their way to a small chapel about halfway along the route.







Saint Ronan of Locronan

Saint Ronan was a 6th-century monk and the spiritual founder of Locronan. Born in Wales, he studied under Saint Illtud at the monastery of Llantwit Major, a renowned center of early Christian learning.

After completing his studies, Ronan traveled to Brittany, seeking solitude and a place to dedicate himself fully to prayer and contemplation. There, he established a hermitage that grew into a monastery, becoming its first abbot. His life was marked by deep devotion to the Virgin Mary, daily celebration of the Eucharist, and a rigorous commitment to prayer and liturgy.

Ronan was also known for his charitable works. He cared for the sick and poor, reportedly founding a hospital and providing for the community's most vulnerable. His reputation as a healer spread widely, and many miracles are attributed to his prayers and intercession, especially in matters of health and recovery.

He is remembered not only for his spiritual discipline but also for his extraordinary ability to integrate faith with action. Saint Ronan is said to have walked barefoot around his hermitage's boundaries in prayer—a practice that later inspired the Troménie, the annual sacred procession in Locronan.

Ronan died around 547 and was buried in the monastery he had founded. His tomb became a revered pilgrimage site, drawing those seeking healing, intercession, and spiritual guidance. Today, Saint Ronan remains central to Locronan's identity, honored in rituals, processions, and the enduring devotion of generations of the faithful.



As they approach the chapel, the participants will circle it.
Once everyone has circled the chapel, prayers are said.
This is followed by a short rest period and refreshments are served.



As the procession advances along the ancient route, one of its most distinctive gestures unfolds at the small chapel and shrine. Upon arrival, the movement slows, and the participants begin to circle the structure—most often three times—in a deliberate and unified rhythm. This act, central to the Grande Troménie, is far more than a matter of form. It is a ritual of consecration, echoing both Christian devotion and far older Celtic practices in which sacred spaces were defined and honored through circular movement. Walking in this way, the pilgrims do not simply visit the chapel; they symbolically enclose it, reaffirming its place within a sanctified landscape.

When the circling is complete, the procession comes to a brief halt. Prayers rise softly—sometimes spoken, sometimes chanted—carried by the wind across the



fields and stone paths. The great banners dip in a restrained gesture of reverence, and attention turns to the relics of Saint Ronan, borne throughout the journey and honored at each station. For a moment, time seems to gather in stillness, as if the centuries-old rhythm of the Troménie pauses to take breath. As the participants rest, volunteers and local residents step forward to offer simple refreshments. This is shared among pilgrims as a gesture of hospitality and communal care.

Then, gently, the atmosphere shifts. As the banners are raised and the lines begin to reform. This brief exchange, both practical and symbolic, sustains those walking the long route while reinforcing the deeply social character of the journey. Strengthened and reassembled, the procession moves on toward the next station, continuing its slow passage enroute back to the town.





After a short rest, the procession continues the journey back to town.



The entire walk takes about six hours from beginning to end.



The spirit of the march is about reflection and the renewal of the lifeforce inside all of us.



As the marchers approach the village once more, the procession gradually slows, the rhythmic cadence of footsteps blending with the quiet murmur of prayers. Emerging from the surrounding fields and paths, they reenter Locronan and make their way back to the square in front of the Church of La Pénity. Here, the atmosphere shifts from the meditative stillness of the walk to a sense of communal fulfillment and reverence.

Before anyone re-enters the church, the relics of St. Ronan are held above the entrance so that all participants can pass under it. The first to enter are those carrying the flags and banners. Many of the worshippers will touch the reliquary while passing under it.



As the procession re-enters the town, it will assemble again in front of the church.



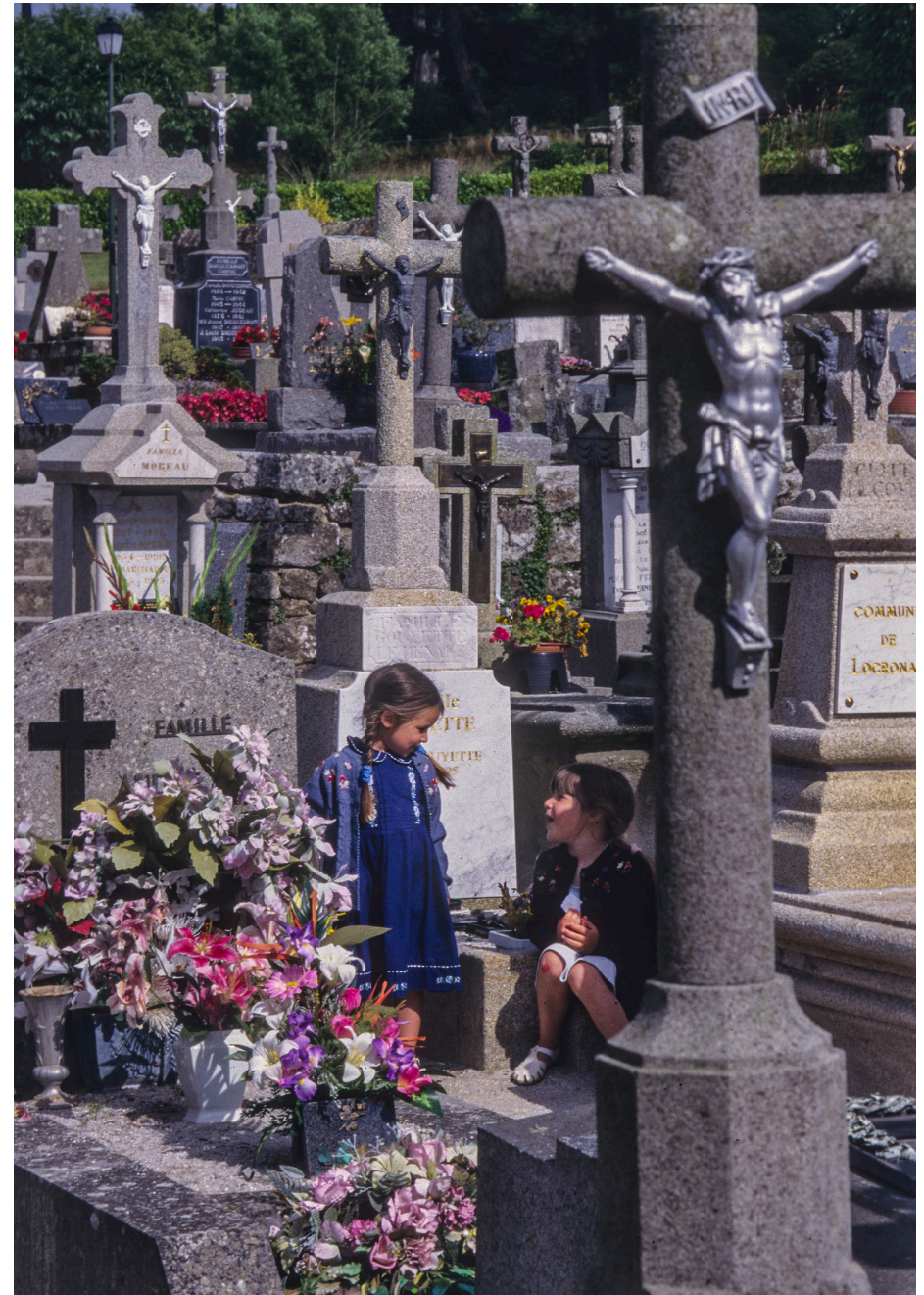
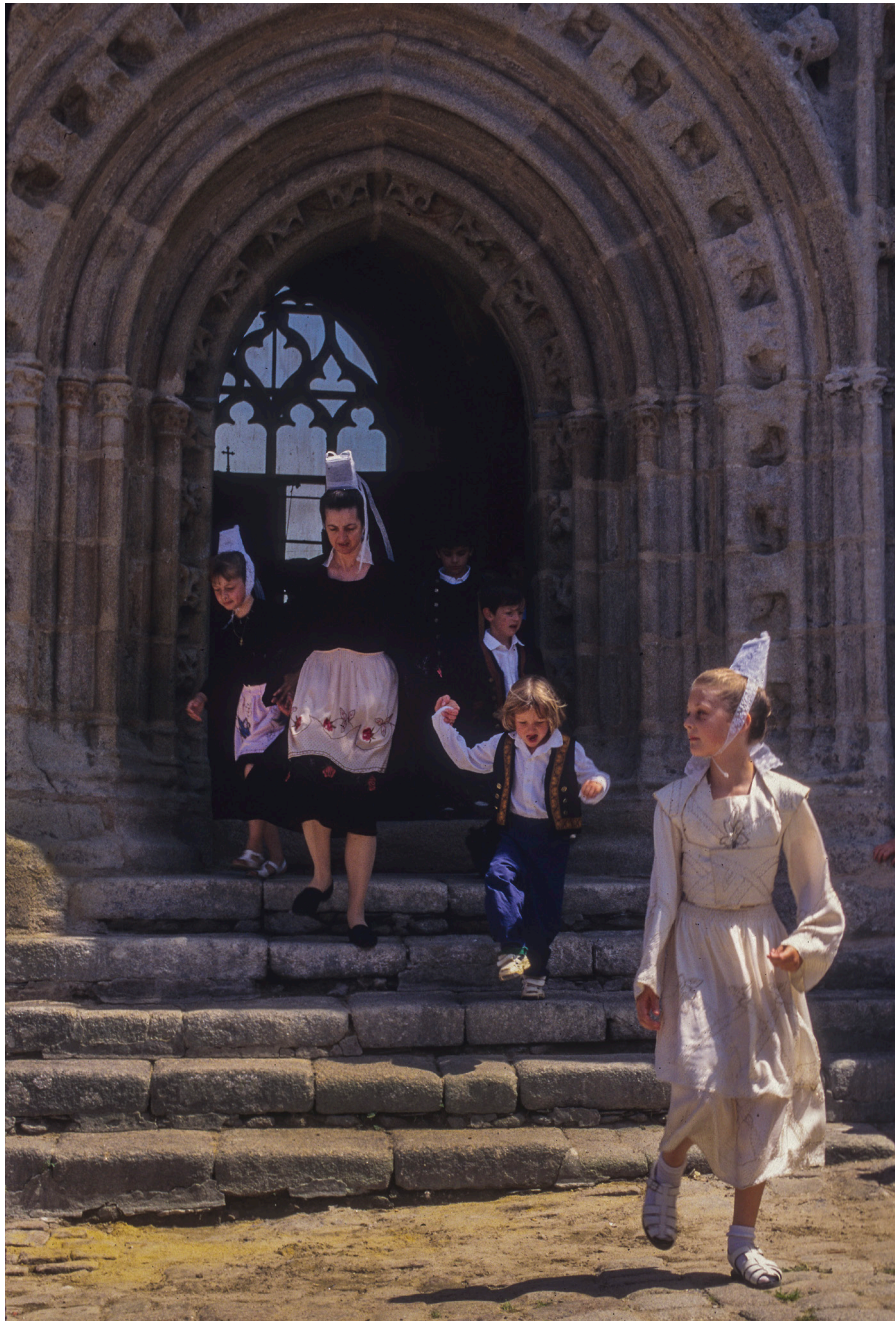
The conclusion of the Troménie is often marked by hymns, the ringing of church bells, and sometimes a final blessing from the clergy. Families, neighbors, and visitors linger in the square, sharing words, gestures, and sometimes food, echoing the fellowship that began with the sharing of waybread at the morning service. In these final moments, the Grande Troménie reinforces not only spiritual continuity but the strong social and cultural bonds that define Locronan—a village where history, faith, and community are walked, remembered, and celebrated, step by step.



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After the Tromeie is completed, most will return home, while some will pay their respects to loved ones buried behind the church.



A woman reflects on the day's event
before returning home.

Richard Falco

For the past thirty-five years, Richard Falco has worked as a photographer, documentary filmmaker, journalist, and educator. He has traveled extensively throughout the world, working on assignments in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the United States. His photographs have appeared in major publications. Clients include *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *Business Week*, *New York Times*, *Life*, *National Geographic Society*, *People*, *Geo*, *New York Magazine*, *Stern*, and *U.S. News & World Report*, to name a few.

There are six published books of his work: *To Bear Witness/September 11*, *Medics: A Documentation of Paramedics in the Harlem Community*; *Hunger and Rice in Asia*; *Witchcraft: Ancient Traditions Alive in Salem*; *Water, Wild & Light: The Dingle Peninsula*, and *Autumn Madrigals*.

Mr. Falco is the director of the films, *Crossroads: Rural Health Care in America*; *Project Music: Not A Single Dissonant Note*; and *Holding Back the Surge*, and the executive producer of the films *Josie: A Story About Williams Syndrome* and *Dorothea's Tears: The State of Mental Health Care in America*. He is also the editor & chief of *Witness Magazine*.

He has exhibited in the United States and abroad. Exhibitions include International Center of Photography, NY; Corcoran Gallery, Washington, DC; Nikon Galleries, Tokyo; New York Historical Society, NY and others.

He is a winner of the *International Media Award*, a 15-time award winner for *Excellence in Journalism* from the Society of Professional Journalists, and an *Award for Excellence* from the Society of Publication Designers.

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For further information contact:

Vision Project Inc.
www.visionproject.org
info@visionproject.org