



Jeanette McDermott

Photojournalist • Author • Documentary Storyteller

Documenting sacred landscapes and pilgrimage traditions

Co-Founder, Sacred Travels

President, Gubbio Studios

Author, *Walk the Pilgrim's Path*

Short Bio

Jeanette McDermott is a photojournalist, author, and documentary storyteller whose work documents pilgrimage traditions and the preservation of historic sacred landscapes.

A Vietnam-era U.S. Navy journalist, she later reported internationally, including serving as a foreign correspondent for United Press International in Ireland during The Troubles.

Across a career spanning more than five decades, McDermott has documented communities, landscapes, and spiritual traditions in 86 countries on six continents. Her work has taken her from the rainforests of Central America, where she reported on environmental destruction and taught children living inside Nicaragua's La Chureca garbage dump to document their lives with cameras, to monasteries, shrines, and sacred sites across the United States.

She is the author of *Walk the Pilgrim's Path: Discover the Black Madonna Shrine and Hidden Grottos of the Ozarks*, a book that introduced many readers to a little-known sacred site in the American Midwest and helped spark a growing regional pilgrimage movement.

McDermott is the co-founder of Sacred Travels, which organizes small-group journeys to sacred places for education, reflection, and personal growth while documenting and preserving their stories through writing, photography, and film.

She also founded the Sacred Preservation Initiative, through which she researches historic shrines, grottos, monasteries, and pilgrimage sites across the Midwest whose stories risk being lost as generations pass.

Long Bio

Jeanette McDermott is a photojournalist, author, and documentary storyteller whose work focuses on pilgrimage traditions and the preservation of historic, culturally significant sacred sites.

Her career began in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam era, where she trained as a journalist and photographer. That foundation launched a lifelong vocation in storytelling that would take her around the world documenting communities, landscapes, and the spiritual and cultural traditions that shape them.

McDermott later served as a foreign correspondent for United Press International in Ireland during The Troubles, reporting from a society grappling with conflict, identity, and memory. The experience deepened her interest in how places hold history, and how spiritual traditions help communities endure through periods of upheaval.

She later developed a close friendship with Father Paschal Phillips, a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky, whose mentorship in spiritual stewardship of the land, particularly his reverence for trees, deepened her interest in sacred landscapes and pilgrimage traditions.

Her work has since carried her to 86 countries across six continents, where she has documented the intersection of culture, environment, and faith. During three years living in Central America, McDermott turned her camera and reporting toward urgent environmental and human stories. In Nicaragua she worked inside La Chureca, then the largest garbage dump in Central America, where she taught children living among the refuse to use cameras to document their lives.

At the same time, she documented the destruction of primary rainforest occurring under the banner of “eco-tourism,” reporting on the loss of critical habitat for endangered species. For McDermott, the work moved beyond reporting and became a way to help others understand what was being lost.

Over time her work increasingly focused on sacred landscapes and pilgrimage traditions.

That focus culminated in her book *Walk the Pilgrim's Path: Discover the Black Madonna Shrine and Hidden Grottos of the Ozarks*. Written to preserve the story of Brother Bronislaus and the hand-built grottos he created in Pacific, Missouri, the book introduced many readers to a little-known sacred site in the American Midwest.

The book helped spark a growing regional pilgrimage movement.

That momentum ultimately led McDermott to co-found Sacred Travels with travel designer Onawa Terburg, guiding small groups on reflective journeys to sacred sites across the region.

Today Sacred Travels organizes small, reflective pilgrimages that invite participants to encounter sacred landscapes with attentiveness, historical context, and reverence rather than conventional tourism.

Based in St. Louis, McDermott continues her work as a writer, photographer, and pilgrimage guide. Through Sacred Travels she combines research, storytelling, and documentary filmmaking to help preserve the stories of sacred places while inviting others to walk the paths that keep those traditions alive.



PROJECT BACKGROUND

Why this work began, and why these sacred places matter

Walk the Pilgrim's Path began as a documentation project, not a travel program.

While researching the Black Madonna Shrine in Pacific, Missouri, Jeanette McDermott discovered that the site, built by Polish immigrant monk Brother Bronislaus Luszcz, was part of a broader, largely undocumented tradition of devotional landscapes across the Midwest.

These grottos, shrines, and pilgrimage sites were often created by immigrant communities who carried their spiritual traditions with them when they settled along the Mississippi River and throughout the American Midwest. Many of these sacred places were built by hand using local stone, concrete, and found materials. Over time, they became places of prayer and community.

Yet many of these sites remain little known outside their local communities. Some are quietly maintained by small parishes or religious orders. Others are slowly disappearing as the generations who built them and cared for them pass away, placing an important piece of Midwestern cultural heritage at risk of being forgotten.

Walk the Pilgrim's Path was written to document and preserve the story of the Black Madonna Shrine and the devotional tradition it represents. The book sparked a growing regional pilgrimage movement, which ultimately led to the

creation of Sacred Travels in partnership with educator and travel designer Onawa Terburg.

Through Sacred Travels, McDermott now guides small-group pilgrimages to sacred sites across Missouri and the Midwest while continuing her research into what she calls the **Midwest Sacred Sites Corridor**, a network of shrines, grottos, and devotional landscapes shaped by migration, faith traditions, and community memory.

Much of this sacred landscape developed in communities that formed along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. These places tell a story not only of religion, but of immigration, craftsmanship, land stewardship, and the human desire to create spaces of meaning and living faith.

By documenting these places through writing, photography, film, and pilgrimage journeys, Sacred Travels seeks to preserve the stories of these sacred landscapes while helping new generations encounter them with respect, curiosity, and care.

Walking the Pilgrim's Path: Sacred Places of the Midwest

Across the Midwest, sacred shrines, grottos, and pilgrimage sites wait for their stories to be told. Through writing, photography, and film, Jeanette McDermott documents these places and the communities they shaped.



Pilgrims walk among the hand-built grottos created by Polish immigrant monk Brother Bronislaus.



Hand-placed stones and devotional objects reflect the craftsmanship and devotion of immigrant communities who built many Midwestern shrines and grottos in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



German, Polish, Lithuanian, and other immigrant communities built shrines, chapels, and grottos across the Midwest as places of devotion and prayer.



Parishioners listen as a priest recounts the story of Brother Bronislaus and the devotional tradition that continues to inspire pilgrims today.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Career highlights and areas of work

Co-Founder | Sacred Travels

Jeanette McDermott is a photojournalist whose work has taken her to 86 countries on six continents. She is the co-founder of Sacred Travels, a pilgrimage and storytelling initiative that guides small groups to sacred sites across Missouri and the Midwest.

The journeys are intentionally simple and reflective, focusing on walking, learning the history of each place, and experiencing sacred landscapes with attention and reverence rather than tourism.

Through Sacred Travels, McDermott also documents these sites through writing, photography, and short documentary films so their stories can be preserved and shared with future generations.

Founder | Sacred Preservation Initiative

Jeanette McDermott is the founder of the **Sacred Preservation Initiative**, a research and documentation project dedicated to identifying and preserving sacred sites across the Midwest.

Through field research, photography, historical investigation, and documentary work, McDermott is mapping what she describes as a largely overlooked **Midwestern sacred corridor**: a network of shrines, grottos, monasteries, and devotional landscapes shaped by immigrant faith traditions.

Much of this sacred landscape developed in communities shaped by migration and settlement along the Mississippi River.

Many of these sites were built by immigrant communities and religious orders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, yet remain little known outside their local regions. The Sacred Preservation Initiative seeks to document these places before their stories fade and to preserve the cultural memory they represent. The research emerging from this work informs McDermott's writing, documentary films, and the pilgrimages organized through Sacred Travels.



Jeanette McDermott documents sacred sites while researching pilgrimage traditions across the Midwest.

Author | Walk the Pilgrim's Path

Jeanette McDermott is the author of *Walk the Pilgrim's Path: Discover the Black Madonna Shrine and Hidden Grottos of the Ozarks*. The book documents the remarkable hand-built grotto landscape created by Brother Bronislaus at the Black Madonna Shrine in Pacific, Missouri.

Although the shrine remained largely unknown outside the region for decades, McDermott recognized its historical and spiritual significance and began documenting its story. Her research and photography helped bring wider attention to the shrine and the devotional tradition behind it.

The book received critical acclaim and sparked a growing regional pilgrimage movement, ultimately leading McDermott to co-found Sacred Travels with travel designer Onawa Terburg.

President | Gubbio Studios

Jeanette McDermott is the founder of **Gubbio Studios**, a media and storytelling initiative named after the story of St. Francis of Assisi and the wolf of Gubbio. In that story, Francis brings peace between a fearful town and a wild wolf, restoring balance and mutual respect between people and the natural world.

Gubbio Studios reflects those same values of reconciliation, care for the earth, dignity for all living beings, and a deep respect for the spiritual dimension of life. Through writing, photography, and documentary film, McDermott creates work that highlights sacred places, ecological stewardship, and the stories that remind communities of their responsibility to care for both people and the land.

Journalist & Documentary Storyteller

McDermott's background in journalism shapes her approach to documenting sacred landscapes. Her work combines historical research, interviews, photography, and on-site documentation to tell the stories behind places that hold meaning for communities.

In this context, **cultural heritage** refers to the traditions, stories, architecture, and spiritual practices that communities pass from one generation to the next. By documenting these elements, McDermott helps preserve the memory of sacred places and the people who built and cared for them.

Speaking Topics

Available for podcasts, parish events, and educational programs.

Sacred Preservation in a Disposable Culture

Across the United States, sacred places quietly disappear as buildings age, communities change, and traditions fade. Drawing on her work through the Sacred Preservation Initiative, Jeanette McDermott explores why sacred sites matter and how storytelling and pilgrimage can help preserve sacred landscapes before their histories are lost.

The Hidden Sacred Geography of the Midwest

Across the Midwest lies a largely overlooked network of shrines, grottos, monasteries, and devotional landscapes created by immigrant communities and religious orders. Through field research, photography, and historical investigation, McDermott is documenting what she calls a **Midwestern sacred corridor**. This talk introduces audiences to these remarkable sites and the communities that built them.

Walking the Pilgrim's Path

How does a little-known shrine become the center of a pilgrimage movement? This talk shares the story behind *Walk the Pilgrim's Path* and the discovery of the Black Madonna Shrine in Pacific, Missouri. McDermott describes how research, photography, and storytelling helped bring wider attention to the shrine and ultimately led to the creation of Sacred Travels.

Travel vs. Pilgrimage: Why Intentional Journeys Matter

Not all travel is the same. A vacation entertains us, but a pilgrimage invites reflection, intention, and spiritual awareness. McDermott explores the difference between tourism and pilgrimage and explains why intentional journeys continue to resonate across cultures and generations.

Seeing Sacred Places Through a Journalist's Lens

After decades working as a reporter and documentary storyteller around the world, McDermott shares how journalism shapes the way we see landscapes and communities. This talk explores how observation, curiosity, and careful storytelling reveal the deeper meaning behind sacred places.

Sacred Ground and the Human Story

Throughout history, people have marked certain places as sacred. Why do these places endure? What do they reveal about the human longing for meaning, memory, and connection with the divine? Through stories from monasteries, pilgrimage routes, and sacred landscapes around the world, McDermott explores why sacred ground still calls to us today.

Selected Quotes

Perspectives on travel, learning, and cultural discovery

1. Loss of sacred sites

“Many sacred places disappear for a simple reason: their stories stopped being told.”

2. Midwest sacred sites

“Across the Midwest there are sacred sites people drive past every day without realizing the history and devotion behind them. Something powerful happens when you get out of the car and walk toward those places.”

3. Seeing the builders

“When you walk slowly through a shrine, grotto, or monastery, you begin to see the fingerprints of the people who built it.”

4. Sacred places close to home

“Some of the most remarkable pilgrimage sites are in our own neighborhoods. You don’t have to travel to Lourdes or the Holy Land to encounter something sacred.”

5. The hidden sacred landscape

“The Midwest holds an entire sacred landscape most people don’t know exists. My hope is that this work will help people discover these places and fall in love with them. Devotion is what keeps them alive.”

6. The calming of saints and stones

“When you stand among saints and stones, the world slows down. For a moment, chaos gives way to calm.”

Sample Interview Questions

Suggested questions for interviews and podcast conversations

1. What first drew you to the Black Madonna Shrine in Pacific, Missouri, and why did you feel its story needed to be told?
2. Your book *Walk the Pilgrim's Path* helped bring new attention to a shrine many people had never heard of. What surprised you most while researching its history?
3. Through your work with the Sacred Preservation Initiative, you've been documenting sacred sites across the Midwest. What patterns have you discovered in these places?
4. Many people think of pilgrimage as something that happens in Europe or the Holy Land. Why do you believe local pilgrimages are just as meaningful?
5. What is the difference between a vacation and a pilgrimage?
6. You began your career as a Navy journalist and later reported internationally. How has journalism shaped the way you approach sacred sites and spiritual landscapes?
7. Your work has taken you to many places around the world. What have you learned about the role sacred places play in people's lives across cultures?
8. What makes a place sacred, and why do these places continue to matter in modern life?
9. What are some of the most remarkable sacred sites you have discovered while documenting the Midwest corridor?
10. If someone wanted to begin exploring sacred places near where they live, where would you suggest they start?

CONTACT & BOOKING

Media inquiries, speaking invitations, and travel information

Jeanette McDermott

Photojournalist | Author | Documentary Storyteller
Co-Founder, Sacred Travels
Founder, Sacred Preservation Initiative
Founder, Gubbio Studios

Media & Interview Inquiries

For podcast interviews, press inquiries, documentary features, and media appearances.

Email: media@sacred-travels.com

Speaking Invitations

Available for parish programs and public events.

Email: speaking@sacred-travels.com

Pilgrimage Information

To learn about upcoming pilgrimages and sacred journeys.

Website:

WalkThePilgrimsPath.com
Sacred-Travels.com

Location

St. Louis, Missouri

Photo & Media Assets

High-resolution images, author photos, and pilgrimage photography are available upon request.

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