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Celtic Monasticism - 1 (Hieromonk Ambrose)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

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Prayer of St. Columban of Iona

«Kindle in our hearts, O God,

The flame of that love which never ceases,

That it may burn in us, giving light to others.

May we shine forever in Thy holy temple,

Set on fire with Thy eternal light,

Even Thy son, Jesus Christ,

Our Savior and Redeemer.»



*Eileach An Naoimh (Little Isle of The Saints, aka The Saint's Mill Race), Garvellach Isles
Early monastic site associated with Saint Brendan the Navigator*

With the imagery of fire and light contained in this wonderful prayer I want to move immediately to a recorded incident in the life of St. Columban, a description which shows how he himself personally experienced this «light» – which of course Orthodox Christians recognize as a vision of the Uncreated Light spoken of in Scripture and in the Holy Fathers. Here is the account:

«One winter's night a monk named Virgnous, burning with the love of God, entered the church alone to pray. The others were asleep. He prayed fervently in a little side chamber attached to the walls of the oratory. After about an hour, the venerable Columban entered the same sacred house. Along with him, at the same time, a golden light came down from the highest heavens and filled that part of the church. Even the separate alcove, where Virgnous was attempting to hide himself as much as he could, was also filled, to his great alarm, with some of the brilliance of that heavenly light. As no one can look directly at or gaze with steady eye on the summer sun in its midday splendor, so Virgnous could not at all bear the heavenly brightness he saw because the brilliant and unspeakable radiance overpowered his sight. This brother, in fact, was so terrified by the splendor, almost as dreadful as lightning, that no strength remained in him. Finally, after a short prayer, St. Columban left the church. The next day he sent for Virgnous, who was very much alarmed, and spoke to him these consoling words: 'You are crying to good purpose, my child, for last night you were very pleasing in the sight of God by keeping your eyes fixed on the ground when you were overwhelmed with fear at the brightness.

If you had not done that, son, the bright light would have blinded your eyes. You must never, however, disclose this great manifestation of light while I live.'» It's no wonder, then, that ancient writers said that, on the faces of Celtic monks who had advanced in spiritual life, there rested the glow of **caeleste lumen**, heavenly light.»

In the life of St. Adomnan we read about the following incident:

«At another time when the holy man was living in the island of Hinba, the Grace of the Holy Spirit was poured out upon him abundantly and in an incomparable manner, and continued marvelously for the space of three days, so that for three days and as many nights, remaining with a house barred, and filled with heavenly light, he allowed no one to go to him, and he neither ate nor drank. From that house streams of immeasurable brightness were visible in the night, escaping through chinks of the door leaves, and through the key-holes. And spiritual songs, unheard before, were heard being sung by him. Moreover, as he afterwards admitted in the presence of a very few men, he saw, openly revealed, many of the secret things that have been hidden since before the world began. Also everything that in the Sacred Scriptures is dark and most difficult became plain, and was shown more clearly than the day to the eyes of his purest heart. And he lamented that his foster-son Baithene was not there, who if he had chance to be present during those three days, would have written down from the mouth of the blessed man very many mysteries, both of past ages and of ages still to come, mysteries unknown to other men...»

(Fr. Gorazd Vorpatrny, «Celts and Orthodoxy, «<http://www.orthodoxireland.com/history/celtsandorthodoxy/view>)

In the Introduction to his translation of the Vita Patrum: The Life of the Fathers, the Righteous Fr. Seraphim of Platina wrote appreciatively about the Orthodox saints of the pre-schism West in Gaul, but of course he could have been writing about the Celtic saints of the British Isles from exactly the same period of time.

«A touchstone of true Orthodoxy,» Fr. Seraphim wrote, «is the love for Christ's saints. From the earliest Christian centuries the Church has celebrated her saints- first the Apostles and martyrs who died for Christ, then the desert-dwellers who crucified themselves for the love of Christ, and the hierarchs and shepherds who gave their lives for the salvation of their flocks.

From the beginning the Church has treasured the written Lives of these her saints and has celebrated their memory in her Divine services. These two sources -the Lives and services- are extremely important to us today for the preservation of the

authentic Orthodox tradition of faith and piety. The false 'enlightenment' of our modern age is so all-pervasive that it draws many Orthodox Christians into its puffed up 'wisdom,' and without their even knowing it they are taken away from the true spirit of Orthodox and left only with the shell of Orthodox rites, formulas, and customs....To have a seminary education, even to have the 'right views' about Orthodox history and theology-is not enough. A typical modern 'Orthodox' education produces, more often than not, merely Orthodox rationalists capable of debating intellectual positions with Catholic and Protestant rationalists, but lacking the true spirit and feeling of Orthodoxy. This spirit and feeling are communicated most effectively in the Lives of saints and in similar sources which speak less of the outward side of correct dogma and rite than of the essential inward side of proper Orthodox attitude, spirit, piety.»

With this principle in mind-that the lives of the saints are of critical importance if we are to understand and pass on true Orthodox Christianity to the next generation-I want to continue by defining two important terms: «Celtic» (or «Celt») and «spirituality.»

It may come as a surprise to learn that the Celts actually never called themselves «Celts.» This word comes from the Greek Keltos, and means something like «the other» or «a stranger.» The Greeks also called these people Keltoi, which was a word the Celts did adopt because it means «the hidden ones» or the «hidden people.» In fact, the Old Irish word **ceilid** means «to hide or conceal.» So these people were called «Celts» by those who came into contact with them and saw them as being quite different than other tribes and peoples. And they were. In their long, pre-Christian period they were a ferocious war-loving lot who fought just for the sheer joy of fighting. «One Roman writer described Celtic men as 'terrible from the sternness of their eyes, very quarrelsome, and of great pride and insolence'. Nor, to his dismay, did these qualities stop with the men. 'A whole troop of foreigners [he wrote] would not be able to withstand a single one if he called to his assistance his wife, who is usually very strong.' The Greek historian Strabo was more blunt in his assessment. 'The whole race,' he concluded, 'is war mad.'»

(No author given; Heroes of the Dawn: Celtic Myth)

Christianity softened all of this, but Celtic Christians did not lose their fierceness which, under the influence of Christ, no longer expressed itself in a lust for war, but now was channelled into Christianity as a way of life – and this they pursued with a singlemindedness rarely seen elsewhere. «Monasticism appeared attractive to a warrior people who were drawn to an ascetic lifestyle. It appealed to a marginalized people who saw the monk as one who lived on the edge of things, on

the very margins of life.» **(Timothy Joyce, Celtic Christianity)** We see this in the lives of monks like St. Cuthbert and St. Guthlac, who «were uncompromising solitaries and their ascetic practices aroused wonder...To go all-out for something» is a distinctive mark of Celtic Christians. **(Benedicta Ward, High King of Heaven)** Another example is in the life of St. Columban who, we are told, «leaped over his mother's grieving body, which was draped across her threshold, in order to head for a monastery.»

(Lisa M. Bitel, «Ascetic Superstars,» www.christianitytoday.com/ch/60h/60h022.html).

It is perhaps not surprising then, to learn that the brave stories of the valiant and heroic King Arthur (who was an actual person) originated among the Celts and were only later picked up and modified and expanded by medieval troubadours and scribes elsewhere in Europe. These included tales of the Round Table and the noble Quest for the Holy Grail, as well as accounts of Arthur's spiritual father, Merlin (who, by the way, was most probably a Celtic bishop named Ambrosius Merlinus, after St. Ambrose of Milan, and not a Druid priest, as used to be thought).

As an aside, may I say that Celtic hermit life «was no walk through a nature reserve or stay at a holiday camp. The hermit had deliberately chosen to live at the limits of existence, a human person containing both heaven and earth.» **(Ward, op.cit.)** Speaking of his own hermit days, St. Cuthbert testified that the demons constantly «cast me down headlong from my high rock; how many times have they hurled stones at me as if to kill me. But though they sought to frighten me away by one phantasmal temptation or another, and attempted to drive me from this place of combat, nevertheless they were unable in any way to mar my body by injury or my mind by fear.» **(Quoted in Ward, Ibid.)**

This account is amazingly close to the temptations suffered by St. Antony the Great in the Egyptian desert. But this is not surprising, because their Christianity – which is to say, their monastic life – was primarily influenced by and formed by the Christian monasticism of the Egyptian desert, and only incidentally from the continent of Europe. **This means that Celtic Christians were more like the Byzantine or Slavic Orthodox Christians than Latin or Northern European Christians.**

Early this last summer I had an appointment with a new diabetic specialist. Dr. Jennings was very intrigued and pleased to meet «a real live monk», «But,» he said, «you don't look like a monk.» I said, «What do you mean, I don't 'look like a monk'? I have a beard and wear a black habit.» He replied, «Well, you have to realize, Father, that my only images of monks have been formed by television

commercials-where the monks are all wearing brown robes, are clean-shaven, have a bald spot in the center of their heads, and are advertising either 'Beano' or computers.» I'm afraid this really is the popular image of monks in our culture, today. Most of these images are based upon stereotypical ideas drawn from medieval Western monasticism and applied to both Celtic and Orthodox Christian monastics: it's assumed that we all look like Francis of Assisi, and live in great stone monasteries with cloisters. But this is not an accurate image of Celtic. Rather, Celtic monastic communities were more a relatively modest 'monastic village' than a huge complex of buildings. The village had a stone wall around it to keep animals in and thieves out. Within the walls were many small huts, whether wooden buildings or crude structures of mud and wattle. Later, especially in the west of Ireland, stone buildings were erected. Remains of many «stone **clochans**, called 'beehive huts' in English, are scattered over the countryside....There is no indication that any large church buildings were ever built....» (Timothy Joyce, Celtic Christianity)

[To Be Continued]

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