

Celtic Monasticism - 3 (Hieromonk Ambrose)

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And so, thus it was that those blessed and hallowed monastics of Celtic lands modeled forth certain principles that we can still see, study, understand, and imitate today.

The Celts were masters of Christian simplicity. Nowadays there is a movement in our culture to recover some simple basics, but the model is often that of the Quakers or the Shakers or the Amish. Perhaps that's because those groups are easier and more attractive to imitate; I don't know. For the Celts, however, simplicity wasn't so much a question of externals-like furniture, architecture, and so forth. It was something internal, and it was founded upon the Lord's Prayer-in particular the phrase, «Thy will be done», as we find in the later commentaries of the Venerable Bede of Jarrow and Alcuin of the court of Charlemagne. This was crucial to living a simple Christian life: «Thy will be done» meant God's will, not our own-placing absolute trust in the Providence of God for everything-one's health, one's finances, the size of one's family or the size of a monastic community-everything. It meant dying to oneself, not having opinions and not judging others. This was where simplicity began, and from there it easily expressed itself in outward forms, such as not owning five tunics when just two or even one would be sufficient.



Clanmannoise-Ireland

Simplicity did not necessarily mean «plainness,» as we'll see shortly when we look at the intricate sacred art of the High Crosses. Celtic Christians were not «Plain People,» like Quakers or the Amish. But they were «Simple People,» in that they were single-minded and intensely focused on the other world and the journey through this life to God.

In common with all Christians at that time, the Celts had no concept of «private prayer» in the sense of spontaneously thinking of words or phrases to say to God. This practice belongs to a much later period in Christian history, when ideas of privacy and individualism had become more important than traditional ways of seeking God through prayer. This didn't mean that a Celtic Christian didn't pray outside the divine services, but for them, prayer was primarily liturgical, and this meant the Psalms. Most monks and nuns memorized the complete Psalter. Occasionally a particularly gifted monk would compose a prayer, such as the one I read by St. Columban at the beginning of this lecture. But in moments of need one remembered verses and phrases from the Psalms -such as «In my distress I cried unto the Lord, and He heard me,» from Psalm 120, and «Hide not Thy face from me, O Lord, in the day of my trouble» (Psalm 10, or)«In the Lord I put my trust» (Psalm 11).

Even in the 7th and 8th centuries there were so-called Christians who were uncomfortable with the Cross of Christ and chose to ignore it, just as there are today. The Celts, however, had a particularly clear-headed understanding of the

Cross. To quote Sister Benedicta Ward, a renowned scholar on the subject of the Desert Fathers as well as monasticism in the British Isles in the early Christian centuries: «The Cross was not something that made them feel better, nicer, more comfortable, more victorious, more reconciled to tragedy, better able to cope with life and death; it was rather the center of the fire in which they were to be changed.» **(op.cit.)** It reminded them that they must pick up and carry their own crosses in this life and follow Christ, for dying to oneself has always been the great secret of holiness.

Thus, these monks and nuns saw themselves as warriors of the spirit, for to die to oneself was considered a greater act of heroism than dying on a battlefield in defense of one's tribe. «The Celtic Church was a Church of heroes...of strong and fiercely dedicated men and women.» «The old Celtic warrior spirit was alive in them, [but now] put to the service of the Gospel and the following of Christ, the High King. Today [we might] find it hard to identify many [such] warrior Christians...[with] the active virtues of courage, strength, outspokenness, decisiveness, and the ability to stand up for something.» **(Joyce, op.cit.)**

Nowhere was the Cross more loved and cherished than in the monasteries, where highly-carved and richly symbolic great «High Crosses»-some of them 15 feet and taller- were set up-many of them still standing today.

These were not the suffering and bloody crucifixions found later in the West, particularly in Spain and Italy. Nor were these the serene and peaceful crosses of the Eastern Church. No, Celtic crosses were a genuine Christian expression all their own. Sometimes Christ is depicted, but often not; however, when He is shown, He is always erect, wide-eyed, and fully vested like a bishop, a great High Priest. In this form He is a symbol of victory over sin and death; He radiates invincibility.

«The way of the cross for [Celtic Christians] was the way of heroic loyalty, obedience, and suffering. It involved study and thought, doctrine and orthodoxy, art and imagination. It was a complete, unified way of life, lived intimately with God...[Our] fragmented modern world, both secular and religious, has a lot to learn from it.» **(Cavill, op.cit.)**

A common ascetic practice, even for the laity, was called **crosfhigheall** or «cross-vigil», and it consisted of praying for hours with outstretched arms. St. Coemgen sometimes prayed in this position for days. Once he was so still, for so long, that birds came and began to build a nest in his outstretched hands.

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Holy Spirit throughout existence-for God has no beginning and no end.

An example of the love and respect they had for the Cross may be seen in an Anglo-Saxon poem, «The Dream of the Rood» («rood» being an Old English word for «rod» or «pole», sometimes it also meant «gallows»). In the «The Dream of the Rood,» Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, is shone as a «serene and confident young hero...[who] prepares for battle. He strips...and climbs up on the gallows [the Tree of the Cross], intent on saving His people. He is in control, self-determining, expressing His lordship [And] the Cross trembles at the fearful embrace of its Lord.» **(Cavill, op.cit.)** Listen, now, as the Cross, personified, speaks of how it raised up Christ:

«Unclothed Himself God Almighty when He would mount the Cross,
courageous in the sight of all men. I bore the powerful King, the Lord of heaven;
I durst not bend. Men mocked us both together. I was bedewed with blood.
Christ was on the Cross. Then I leaned down to the hands of men and
they took God Almighty.»

(Ward, Ibid.)

The interlacing, knot-work, plaiting, weaving patterns and spiral designs, with animals and plants and saints, and scenes from Scripture, which decorate almost every surface of a Celtic High Cross, are so distinctive and profound in their symbolism that they are a study all to themselves. Today I can only point out a couple of things.

Scholars believe that these incredibly complex patterns probably came from Egypt, but also may have some Byzantine influences. It's important to note that there are no loose ends in these patterns; this symbolizes the continuity of the Holy Spirit throughout existence - for God has no beginning and no end; only Christ is the Alpha and the Omega. The same is true of knot-work patterns, which are endless and cannot be untied. Spiral designs symbolized the Most High God Himself, the «motionless mover,» around whom all things move. Some of these are what are called «Crosses of the Scriptures» because they are decorated with panels illustrating scenes from the Bible. High Crosses possess an almost dream-like quality in their complex geometric patterns, dignified and strong, heroic and towering over men, and yet also reminding those Christians of the Christian doctrine of kenosis, the self-emptying of Christ.

One of main factors contributing to the eventual decline and dissolution of a Celtic monastery was when the Cross began to no longer be a focus. «If monastic life...did not have at its center the reality of the Cross, it became a source of corruption....[for] 'Once a religious house or order cease[d] to direct its sons to the abandonment of all that is not God and cease[d] to show them the narrow way...it [sank] to the level of a purely human institution and whatever its works may be they are the works of time and not of eternity.'» **(Dom David Knowles, quoted in Ward, Ibid.)**

An essential dimension was asceticism (askesis) which, for the Celtic monk consisted of a kind of martyrdom. «A homily in archaic Irish, probably dating from the last quarter of the seventh century...speaks of [this]: 'Now there are three kinds of martyrdom, which are accounted as a cross to a man, to wit: white martyrdom, green and red martyrdom. White martyrdom consists in a man's abandoning everything he loves for God's sake, though he suffer fasting or labor therat. Green martyrdom consists in this, this, that by means of fasting and labor [a Christian] frees himself from his evil desires, or suffers toil in penance and repentance. Red martyrdom consists in the endurance of a cross or death for Christ's sake, as happened to the Apostles...'...For this reason, the Celtic tradition regarded monasticism as the Army of Christ (Militia Christi) and the monk as a soldier of Christ (miles Christi). Young men, in their effort to emulate the heroism of their ancestors, entered monasteries-the «Green Martyrdom.» Instead of fighting in the Fianna (the Celtic army), they joined the Militia Christi to wage war against the evil spirits and sin.» **(Fr. Gorazd Vorpatrny, op.cit.)** Not surprisingly, one writer calls these Celts «Ascetic Superstars.» **(Bitel, op.cit.)**

«I should like a great lake of ale for the King of Kings;

I should like the angels of heaven to be drinking it through time eternal!»

- St. Brigit of Kildare

And yet, with all of this sober asceticism, the Celts never lost their native enthusiasm, exuberance, and just plain cheer, as we see in a prayer written by the wonderful 5th century Abbess, Brigit, when she exclaims: «I should like a great lake of ale for the King of Kings; I should like the angels of heaven to be drinking it through time eternal!» How could anyone fail to be charmed by such a character – a woman who was a great leader of monastics, both men and women, who was baptized by angels, got out of an arranged marriage by plucking out one of her eyeballs, and fell asleep during a sermon given by the incomparable Equal-to-the-Apostles, St. Patrick!

Finally, the Celts were Trinitarian Christians par excellence. This is partly because even before they were Christian they already thought in terms of threes. And for them-unlike most Christians today-the Trinity was very real, very alive, not something vague and theoretical. What one scholar calls a «Trinitarian consciousness» (**Joyce, op.cit.**) completely shaped everything about them. As another has said: «'We are here at a central insight of Celtic theology....Christ comes not to show up or illuminate the deformity of a fallen world but rather to release a beautiful and holy world from bondage an affirmation, difficult but possible, of [that] which is the created image of the eternal Father and the all-holy Trinity.'» (**Noel Dermot O'Donoghue, quoted in Joyce, op.cit.**) «To follow the spiritual world-view of the Celtic Christians is to embrace a way of life that is a real commitment to the belief that the Trinitarian God is alive in this world.» In the Celtic world, «Jesus Christ is our hero, our sweet friend....The Father is High King of heaven, a gentle and beneficent father, a wise and just ruler. The Spirit is a tangible comforter and protectorThis God is never to be reduced to the 'man upstairs' or anyone we can capture and box in. And yet this wonderful, mysterious God is close to us....[This] God is extremely good.» (**Ibid.**)

Brothers and sisters: the sanctity of Celtic monastics is a model for us in that it combines heroism and joy in perfect and beautiful balance. For them, the heroic life was one completely dedicated to living intimately with the God-Man whom they described as «victorious,» «mighty and successful,» «the lord of victories,» a great warrior to whom they pledged undying, fearless, creative and exuberant loyalty. And yet, for all of their heroism, their monastic world-view, could be 'summed up as the 'Christian ideal in a sweetness which has never been surpassed.'» (**Nora Chadwick, quoted by Joyce in op.cit.**) To slip into their world, even for just a few moments, as we've done here this afternoon, is, I believe, is not just inspiring; it's almost breathtaking.

Just as I began my talk today with a prayer of St. Columban of Iona, I would like to

conclude with another prayer from this great Celtic monastic saint:

Prayer of St. Columban of Iona

Lord, Thou art my island; in Thy bosom I rest.

Thou art the calm of the sea; in that peace I stay.

Thou art the deep waves of the shining ocean. With their eternal sound I sing.

Thou art the song of the birds; in that tune is my joy.

Thou art the smooth white strand of the shore; in Thee is no gloom.

Thou art the breaking of the waves on the rock;

Thy praise is echoed in the swell.

Thou art the Lord of my life;

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