

## Opening Up a New World: Patrick Hart and the Celts

In his May 27, 1966 letter to Dom Samson Wicksteed, abbot of the island monastery of Caldey off the coast of Wales and recently-appointed founding editor of *Cistercian Studies*, the Order's new English-language magazine, Thomas Merton responds to the abbot's request for names of potential American contributors. After mentioning various other "possible collaborators," Merton writes: "Our Bro. Patrick now in Rome is really very good and is developing an interest in Celtic monasticism. He has done a couple of bulletins on it in past *Collectaneas*. I would keep in touch with him and perhaps let him review books in his field; he would be delighted and is quite competent."<sup>1</sup> In each of the first three volumes of *Cistercian Studies* (now *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*), a substantial article by Brother Patrick on an aspect of Celtic monastic life appeared: "The Heritage of Celtic Monasticism" (*Cistercian Studies* 1.1 [1966] 39-53); "Irish Monastic Art and Poetry" (*Cistercian Studies* 2.2 [1967] 150-65); and "Eremitism in the Celtic Church" (*Cistercian Studies* 3.2 [1968] 124-36). In his October 14, 1967 letter to Brother Patrick, Merton comments on the second of these, calling it "a very nice job" and noting that it deals with "such fine material anyway" (*SC* 350). Brother Patrick's plans to continue his work in this field were put on hold in the summer of 1968 when, instead of a planned trip to Ireland, he returned from Rome to Gethsemani to serve at Merton's request as his secretary while he was on his Asian pilgrimage. In the aftermath of Merton's death in Thailand on December 10, Brother Patrick took on the role of principal representative of the monastery on Merton matters, including the editing of numerous posthumous Merton writings, while simultaneously serving as secretary of successive Gethsemani abbots over the course of more than four decades. Consequently he was unable to continue his own research in Celtic studies, and his early articles in this field have remained virtually unknown. As part of this memorial issue celebrating Brother Patrick's long and blessed life, his three early articles for *Cistercian Studies* are once again made available, slightly edited for consistency of format – first fruits of an interest that might have resulted in a rich harvest of its own had his monastic obedience and generosity of heart not led him in a different direction, but fruits still providing spiritual and intellectual nourishment and well worth tasting.

1. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 303; subsequent reference will be cited as "SC" parenthetically in the text. For Brother Patrick's early reviews on Celtic topics, see the bibliography later in this issue.

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## The Heritage of Celtic Monasticism

### Introduction

In an age of renewal in the Church, it is not surprising to find monks looking seriously at their lives in an effort to make their witness more authentic and meaningful as men of the twentieth century. Instinctively they search monastic tradition – they return to the sources of monasti-

cism. Research in recent years on the teachings of the Desert Fathers of Egypt, Palestine, Arabia and Syria, has shown clearly the extent of their influence on St. Benedict and the monks of the West. However, comparatively little has been written on an equally important phenomenon, which developed almost simultaneously – namely, Celtic Monasticism.

But why look to the past? Surely, not to try to imitate it. Rather, the monk searches the past with the future in mind. “He [the monk] is rooted in tradition, not to copy it, but to live by it. He cannot live by it so long as he does not understand it. That is what makes him a historian. A man of the present, he searches the past that he may better witness to the truth of the life he has embraced forever.”<sup>21</sup>

It is well-known that Celtic Monasticism had its roots in Eastern Monasticism, and that there were contacts between the early Irish monks and their counterparts in the Egyptian desert, especially through the intermediaries of Lérins and Tours. Although they resembled each other in some respects, there were notable differences. “Unlike the Desert Fathers, the Irish monks from the outset valued letters and learning, and almost from the beginnings the Irish monastic movement was a missionary movement.”<sup>22</sup> Yet, paradoxically, this apostolic tendency was combined with an equally pronounced leaning towards the eremitical ideal. “Thus, though the body of Irish Monasticism was predominantly cenobitical, the spirit which animated it was everywhere anachoretical [*sic*].”<sup>23</sup>

Two features are noteworthy in the monasticism of the early Celtic Church: “The first is the austere form of its discipline. The second is its intellectual activity, and especially its abundant flowering of a special class of poetry.”<sup>24</sup> (By the Celtic Church we mean the Catholic Church in territories whose people spoke one of the Celtic languages, during the period which extended from the time of its early missionaries until the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland. The orthodoxy of the Celtic Church has sometimes been held in suspect, yet there is no reason to question the Catholicity of Celtic Christianity – it had seven sacraments, used rites of Catholic derivation, and sent its bishops to Catholic synods.)

Perhaps one of the most moving eulogies of the early Celtic Church has been written by Chadwick in the following passage: “The Celtic Church of the Age of the Saints, as we see it in their gentle way of life, their austere monastic settlements and their island retreats, the personalities of their saints, and the traditions of their poetry, expresses the Christian ideal with a sanctity and a sweetness which have never been surpassed . . .”<sup>25</sup>

It is significant that the Celtic monks’ attraction to austerity of life, solitude and learning, was to perdure throughout the ages, and would exert no slight influence on monastic reforms. As Ryan observes in his classic work on Irish Monasticism: “The older monastic tradition, abandoned by St. Benedict made itself felt again in the later centuries, when the Benedictine Rule was supreme upon the Continent. The reforms connected with the names of St. Benedict of Aniane and the monks of Cluny are very largely a return to the Irish system . . .”<sup>26</sup> This same spirit remained alive even to the coming of the Cistercians to Ireland in the twelfth century: “The Irish system was sufficiently strong in organization to survive at home for almost seven centuries. When at last it collapsed and an influx of new religious life had to be sought from abroad, it was not the Benedictine Rule, but the more austere Rule of the Cistercians [*sic*] that appealed to the Irish churchmen.”<sup>27</sup> Through St. Malachy’s friendship with St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the Cister-

cians were introduced into Ireland in 1142 where the first monastery was established at Mellifont. And this fundamental attachment of Irishmen to the old system was to continue.

The purpose of this article is to trace briefly the development and expansion of Celtic Monasticism from its beginnings, and to indicate, however inadequately, the salient features of this monastic tradition and the richness of such a heritage.

### **St. Patrick and the Early Celtic Church**

It has been suggested that the “real turning point in the history of Latin Christianity was the missions of Palladius and Patrick.”<sup>78</sup> This was to be the first conquest beyond the Empire (c. 432). The very physical structure of the Celtic communities contributed considerably to St. Patrick’s success in the spread of the Faith. “The growth of Christianity in Ireland was aided by the traditional division of her people into clans; a converted chieftain meant, naturally, the Christianizing of those over whom he ruled.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, too, the innumerable bards of Ireland, upon their conversion, dedicated themselves to sing the deeds of the saints and apostles of the Lord.

Interestingly enough, this same natural framework helps to explain how the Celtic Church was monastic in character for the first six centuries of its existence. “The monastic basis of the Celtic Church was probably largely determined by the existing organization of the country itself. Ireland had no towns; its population was exclusively rural and lived scattered amongst the fields and pastures.”<sup>10</sup> Each large landowner had his self-supporting community with a complete staff to perform all the necessary work entailed. “The Celtic monastery was this secular grouping carried over into the Church. The early Celtic monasteries are very much like the early Celtic fortified homesteads, the circling wall, the small rough huts inside with, in the case of the monasteries, the addition of a church or churches.”<sup>11</sup>

St. Patrick speaks of monks with honor in his *Confessions*, as proof of his successful apostolate, in these often quoted lines: “The sons of the Irish and the daughters of their kings are monks and brides of Christ.”<sup>12</sup> However, he does not mention the existence of monasteries, as such. From this it has been concluded that “the monks probably lived as hermits, either singly, or in small colonies.”<sup>13</sup> At any rate, it is evident from the writings of St. Patrick, that he was familiar with the monastic tradition of Lérins, where some historians believe he was trained prior to his episcopal consecration.<sup>14</sup> Be that as it may, by the early sixth century, the spark of monasticism ignited, and began to spread like a prairie fire across the expanses of Celtic territories.

### **The First Monastic Foundations**

St. Martin of Tours forms the bridge between the desert ideals of solitude and uninterrupted contemplation of God, and the ideal of the monks of the Celtic Church, which tended to embrace, as a general rule, a more active apostolate. This man, whom the Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee (c. 800) described as “the mount of gold of the western world,” was to be one of the chief inspirations of Celtic Monasticism. “The principal link seems to have been through St. Ninian, though there were many other subsidiary channels as well. Ninian was a Romanized Briton from the south of Scotland (362-432). It was then still possible to move freely about the area of the now disintegrating Roman Empire, and young Ninian went south to Rome to complete his education.”<sup>15</sup>

Having received his episcopal consecration from the reigning pontiff in Rome, he returned to Scotland by way of Tours, where he probably visited St. Martin, and was evidently impressed by

the monastic life he saw at Tours. This experience helped him form his own monastic school and episcopal see at Whithorn, the *Candida Casa*, which he dedicated to St. Martin's memory. Here was laid the foundation for what was to be the springboard for further evangelism, as well as monastic establishments in Ireland.

It must be remembered that the southern Picts converted by Ninian did not persevere in the Faith. St. Patrick, in his second *Epistola*<sup>16</sup> speaks of them already as apostates in the middle of the fifth century. "It was the lot of St. Columba and his disciples and successors, the monks of Iona and Lindisfarne, to take up the work begun by Ninian among these uncivilized tribes and to extend the dominion of the Gospel further north."<sup>17</sup>

Because of the renown of the *Candida Casa*, which soon became known across the sea, Irishmen came to study under Ninian. Although there were other routes by which monasticism came to Ireland – for example, through the southern ports of the island, not to mention the normal development of St. Patrick's own teaching and organization – yet, St. Ninian's monastic school at Whithorn seems to have been the principal source of inspiration. Further light has been shed on this question in a recent work on Ninian,<sup>18</sup> which takes into account the discovery in 1920 of an anthology of Alcuin, which includes a poem and hymn in Ninian's honor, as well as the usual references in Venerable Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and the *Vita Niniani* by St. Aelred of Rievaulx.

Tradition says that St. Enda, founder of the first great Irish monastery of Killeany on the largest of the Aran Islands (Ara-mor) in Galway Bay, was trained at Whithorn. Thus, early in the sixth century, a new era opens with St. Enda of Aran and St. Finnian of Clonard. The first of these in the order of time, Enda, probably died about 530. With him, monasticism in the strict sense – which included vows, complete seclusion from the world, and an astonishing system of discipline – began in Ireland. Undoubtedly, Enda drew considerable inspiration from Ninian. Yet, his foundation at Aran "did not rest content with slavish imitation. The organization at Aran had a character very much its own."<sup>19</sup>

Early in the sixth century St. Finnian, who had spent some time with St. David in Wales, and had collaborated with St. Gildas, transformed the Patrician Church of Clonard into a monastery which rapidly acquired great renown, and in fact, dwarfed even St. Enda's monastery of Killeany. From then on monastic foundations spread quickly to every corner of Ireland. So much so, that by the end of the sixth century, the Irish Church had become a church of monks.

### **Celtic Monastic Expansion**

Before the sixth century drew to a close Irish Monasticism had begun to expand beyond the shores of Ireland. The goal of this emigration was not only Scotland and the islands of her western and northern coast, but also the Continent of Europe. It is significant that the natural inclination of the Irish for sea voyage and wandering should be a contributing factor in its monastic missionary expansion. "*Peregrinatio*, or 'going forth into strange countries,' was a characteristically Irish form of asceticism. The Irish *peregrinus* or pilgrim set out on his journey not in order to visit a sacred shrine, but in search of solitude and exile."<sup>20</sup> It turned out, however, that many of these pilgrimages brought Irish monks into inhabited places where the natives were willing to receive the Christian message. The monks then became missionaries, although the main reason for their journeys was not missionary apostolate, but the desire for voluntary exile.

However, this exile from one's homeland was not an aimless wandering for the sake of wandering. For the early Celtic monk it had a deeper meaning. "The pilgrimage of the Irish monk was therefore not merely the restless search of an unsatisfied romantic heart; it was a profound and existential tribute to realities perceived in the very structure of the world, and of men, and of their being . . ." <sup>21</sup>

The legend of St. Brendan in all probability started from the saint's intention to retire to a remote island in the ocean, and the later *Navigatio Brendani* has as its historical nucleus the emigration of Irish monks of the Hebrides, the Faroe Islands and Iceland. It is not improbable, as some scholars maintain, that Brendan reached the shores of America as early as the sixth century. The story of his heroic adventures, amusing as they are fantastic, had been quickly translated into many languages and widely diffused. It was still very popular in the Middle Ages, and influenced Christopher Columbus not a little nine centuries later, as subsequent events of history would verify.

One of the earliest and most widely-known emigrations was that of St. Columba (or Columcille) to Iona in 563 or 565, after having established a number of monasteries in Ireland – notably Derry and Durrow. At Iona he spent thirty-four years, and formed a mission center, or a federation of monastic foundations which was called "Columba's Family." It is estimated that nearly sixty churches and monasteries in the territory of the Picts can be attributed to Columba. "It was from Iona that Christianity, a little later, reached the Angles of Northumbria. And on the east coast, opposite Bamborough, in the islet of Lindisfarne (today Holy Island), in 635, the monk Aidan laid the foundations of a monastery that was to become famous." <sup>22</sup>

Another equally important emigration was that of St. Columban (St. Columbanus) and his companions to the Frankish kingdom in about 590. As in the case of St. Columba of Iona, <sup>23</sup> St. Columban was also a scholar and a poet. Inspired not so much by "wanderlust," which was indeed prevalent among some of the Celtic monks, but out of a desire to "live in exile for Christ," Columban left behind him many monasteries as he traveled through France, Switzerland and finally Italy. At Bobbio he found his resting place.

It is estimated that St. Columban and his immediate disciples, or those directly influenced by him, founded forty monasteries. Among the flowers of their labors were Luxeuil, Bobbio and St. Gall, although there were many others, including Rebais, Jumièges, Fontenelle (St. Wandrille), Chelles, Faremoutier, Corbie, St. Omer, St. Bertin, Remiremont, Hautvillers, Montierender, St. Valery-sur-Somme and Solignac. A modern historian has with reason called this phenomenal expansion: "the fruits of what was rightly described as the Irish miracle." <sup>24</sup>

The Rule of St. Columban, which resembled that of St. Basil and Cassian, was excessively severe, and as history testifies, it was not to endure. At Luxeuil itself, which was conservative by Celtic standards, the Rule had to be mitigated at a very early date. As Dawson significantly remarks in regard to the Rule of St. Columban and its amalgamation with that of St. Benedict: "It was gradually tempered by the influence of the Rule of St. Benedict, so that the use of both Rules as coordinate authorities became characteristic of the Hiberno-Gallican monasticism of the seventh century. It was in this way that the Benedictine Rule first became widely known and followed in Gaul . . ." <sup>25</sup>

However, both St. Columba and St. Columban left their marks on subsequent history. "The work of these two monks and their successors shaped decisively the religious and cultural life of

England and of Western and Central Europe for several centuries.”<sup>26</sup> It is fortunate for the historian that the biographers of both saints were of higher caliber than the ordinary level of hagiographer at the time. Adamnan’s *Life of Columba*, written between 680 and 690, is now available in excellent translation with Latin facing text. The *Vita Columbani* by Jonas, a monk of Bobbio, was written shortly after Columban’s death (+ 615).<sup>27</sup> Since Jonas was secretary to the first two successors of the founder, his testimony can be trusted. Likewise, the writings of Adamnan on Columba are reliable, although written in the style of the period. Yet, both works have considerable historical value.

It is interesting to note that although St. Augustine of Canterbury is generally credited with the conversion of England, yet in writing of this period of history, Montalembert gives due credit to the work of the Celtic monks:

Of the eight kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxon confederation, that alone of Kent was exclusively won and retained by the Roman Monks, whose first attempts among the Saxons and the Northumbrians ended in failure. In Wessex and East Anglia the Saxons of the West and the Angles of the East were converted by the combined action of the Continental missionaries and the Celtic Monks. As to the two Northumbrian kingdoms, and those of Essex and Mercia, which composed in themselves more than two-thirds of the territory occupied by the German conquerors, these four countries owed their final conversion exclusively to the peaceful invasion of the Celtic Monks, who not only rivalled the zeal of the Roman Monks, but who, the first obstacles overcome, showed much more perseverance and gained much more success.<sup>28</sup>

The Irish schools achieved a reputation of being the best in Europe by the end of the sixth century. Scholars came from England and the Continent to Ireland for the love of God and the desire for learning, which had become a common-place of biography. The Venerable Bede, writing of the great plague of 664, mentions its effects on the English, who came to Ireland seeking either learning or a more austere life. “All these the Irish willingly received, and saw to it to supply them with food day by day without cost, and books for their studies, and teachers, free of charge.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Life in the Celtic Monasteries**

One of the best descriptions of the early Celtic monasteries is the picture given by Gougaud, which is extremely relevant for monks today, who are desirous of a more primitive simplicity in their lives no less than in their monastic buildings and furnishings:

It would be a very false conception to imagine them built in the style of the medieval European monasteries, with lofty and spacious buildings, symmetrically arranged round a central cloister. The architecture of the Celts of that age was far different in its primitive simplicity. Their cenobitic establishments resembled rather the settlements of pioneers in territories newly opened to exploration. They comprised a large number of separate cells, each forming the abode of one or more cenobites, and constructed sometimes of wood, sometimes of stone. Those of the latter class, round, oval or rectangular in shape,

were built without mortar, the roof being formed by the gradual convergence of the walls corbalwise. At Iona the abbot inhabited a small lodge situated on a hillock. Besides the cells of the monks, the monastic city included one or more oratories, likewise very modest in construction and dimension, and, in addition, a kitchen, a refectory, a guest-house and workshops.<sup>30</sup>

The Celtic monks formed a community in the fullest meaning of the word. The monastic community was self-supporting, and its internal life was governed by principles of charity, common property, and obedience, which was due not only to the abbot, but also to the seniors. The fundamental monastic virtues were quite rigorously practiced: silence, humility, chastity, mortification of body and will. Although the primary mortification was manual labor, yet vigils, fasting, prostrations, genuflections and especially the retaining of the posture of arms outstretched in the form of the cross for days at a time, was characteristic of the early Irish monks. In general, all the various Celtic rules divided the monks' day into prayer, study and manual work.

Penance was privately imposed by the confessor in the Celtic monasteries, as well as in the Celtic Church as a whole, "and it was privately performed by the penitent, which would seem to be a natural development in a Church which was not an urban institution, and especially one in which eremitism was so important a feature."<sup>31</sup> In fact, we today owe our present method of sacramental confession to the Celtic monks, for as Chadwick observes: "It is also claimed that the system of private confession and penance was eventually introduced into both the Anglo-Saxon and the Continental Church by Irish missionaries and their penitential books."<sup>32</sup>

Although the Lenten fast was extremely strict, yet upon the arrival of a guest, for example, the abbot would give permission for an earlier meal. One of the most attractive features of early Irish monasticism, no less well-known than its asceticism, was the importance attached to the practice of hospitality. Here a monastic virtue coupled gracefully with a traditional Irish one. Any stranger was sincerely welcomed, and he could be certain of being introduced to the abbot and of receiving his kiss of peace. "If a guest was expected, the brethren would go down to the harbour to receive him, and then lead him in procession to their church. After a prayer of thanksgiving for the happily completed journey, the guest was led to his quarters and was well looked after."<sup>33</sup>

At large monasteries, such as Iona and Lismore, special houses for the guests were constructed. During the course of Irish expansion on the Continent during the seventh century, this tradition was transplanted by the monks who built and took care of hostels for pilgrims, and in particular pilgrims to Rome and the Holy Land, who were always in abundance. This same loving acceptance of the stranger and pilgrim as "another Christ" found an echo in the Rule of St. Benedict in his Chapter 53 "On the Reception of Guests."

There can be no doubt, according to Ryan, "that the Irish monks regarded the solitary as more perfect than the cenobite."<sup>34</sup> Hermits were frequently consulted before important ecclesiastical decisions were made, such as, for example, in the case of the Council of Whitby in 663 when the questions of the Paschal cycle and the Celtic tonsure were finally settled.

It was a rather common occurrence for cenobites who sought union with God more earnestly, and without the inevitable distractions of community life, to be granted permission by their abbot to retire into greater solitude. This was usually only allowed after many years in the community,

and the hermit was still under the jurisdiction of his abbot, living close to the monastery in a wooded or solitary place. Some of the poetry of this period extolling the eremitical life has come down to us, as well as a distinctive type of Celtic nature poetry. Here is an example of a little poem by an Irish scribe written in the margin of a Latin grammar:

A hedge of trees surrounds me,  
A blackbird's lay sings to me;  
Above my lined booklet  
The trilling birds chant to me.

In a grey mantle from the top of bushes  
The cuckoo sings:  
Verily – may the Lord shield me –  
Well do I write under the greenwood.<sup>35</sup>

This brings us to another admirable trait in the early Celtic saints – namely, their love of animals, and the power they exercised over them. St. Kevin is especially known for his miraculous contacts with the wild boar and the blackbird.<sup>36</sup> Legend has it that a sparrow once built its nest in St. Kevin's outstretched hands, and the saint kept his arms in this prayerful position, obligingly, until the eggs were hatched!

The tender consideration of the Celtic saints, who foreshadowed St. Francis of Assisi, is exemplified in this appealing story of St. Patrick. As the workmen were about to build the new church at Armagh, a deer and its fawn were discovered on the site. The workmen wanted to kill it, but the saint would not allow this. He took the fawn in his own arms and carried it off to another hill nearby where it could be left in safety.

The biographer of St. Columban relates how as the saint was passing through the forests, the squirrels and the birds would come to be caressed by him, and “would frisk about and gambol in great delight, like puppies fawning on their master.”<sup>37</sup> Doubtless many of these stories are pure romance, but the basis is in the reality of the Celtic saints' love of all creation, with its magnificent diversity in both animal and plant. There is, however, a deeper level in this love of nature than meets the eye. Living so close to God's creation developed a remarkable sense of the supernatural world, which included both angels and demons.

### **The Bible, Learning and the Liturgy**

The liturgy of the monks, too, conditioned them to appreciate the work of creation, and this is evidently true in reference to the Book of Psalms. “Nobody can sing the psalms or read the Bible without to some extent appreciating their references to natural beauty, to mountain and spring and torrent, but equally, one can be led to a sense of their symbolism of other spiritual realities.”<sup>38</sup>

The Celtic monks loved to penetrate the meaning of the psalms, not content with the mere surface of the text – the literal and historical sense – but rather reached out after the spiritual senses, applied to Christ and to the life of every Christian. The Psalter, for the most part, was committed to memory. After the psalms would come other portions of the Sacred Scriptures – for example, St. Matthew, St. John, or the Acts of the Apostles. It is believed that the Celtic monks knew and used most of the Latin commentaries of the Fathers on the psalms.



One cannot overestimate the place which the Bible held in the monastic system in Ireland. As the Scriptures were the chief subject of study, it follows that the books of the Old and the New Testaments were the most common volumes to be transcribed, and this brought about a wonderful flowering of calligraphy and manuscript illumination, which has never been surpassed. The finest examples of early Celtic script and illumination, which have come down to us, can be found in the Book of Kells, the Book of Armagh, the Lindisfarne Gospels, the St. Gall Gospels, and the Book of Durrow.<sup>39</sup>

As regards the Celtic liturgies, there was almost certainly no strict uniformity of rite throughout the Celtic Church. The “Bangor Antiphoner” and the Missals of Stowe and Bobbio give a general structure of the Irish Office and Mass, but only after they had been subjected to direct Roman influence. The Celtic rite belonged to the Gallican family of liturgies, whose origin is unknown.<sup>40</sup> It is interesting to note, in passing, that the Celtic liturgy had the custom of kindling the new fire on the Paschal Vigil long before it was adopted by Rome in 855. It is believed that Rome received this legacy from Ireland.

The study of profane authors was not neglected in the Celtic monastic tradition, but had its rightful place. The works of St. Columban show evidences of his acquaintance with Virgil, Horace, Ovid, as well as such Christian poets as Juvenius, Prudentius and Ausonius. “It is therefore extremely likely that patristic, ecclesiastical and profane writings were copied by the Irish scribes from the earliest days of monasticism.”<sup>41</sup>

Although all the Celtic monks were given a solid monastic formation, yet only a relatively few were ever ordained to the priesthood. Like the solitaries and ascetics of the Egyptian desert, who fled “bishops and women,” these Celtic monks preferred to remain “laymen” (that is, non-clerics), but monks in the fullest sense of the word. It was necessary, however, that every monastery of any size have one or more priests, as well as a deacon and subdeacon, to meet the liturgical needs of the community. In this, as in many other respects, monks of the twentieth century can profit from the experience of their Celtic predecessors.

### **Conclusion**

Obviously, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, in an article of this size, to enumerate all the various significant contributions which Celtic Monasticism made to posterity. Without, however, claiming to be exhaustive, we have attempted to summarize the more important influences. We have seen how the Celtic monks kept learning alive, and preserved early Christian culture for the centuries that were to follow. “That fierce and restless quality which made the pagan Irish the terror of Western Europe, seems to have emptied itself into the love of learning and the love of God; and it is the peculiar distinction of Irish medieval scholarship and salvation of literature in Europe that the one in no way conflicted with the other.”<sup>42</sup>

The Irish Christians formed a distinct school of thought, which was passed on to Anglo-Saxon scholars, as we have seen, and through them to Carolingian France. “Long before this time the Celtic influence had spread over Europe as far as Wurtzburg, Salzburg and Bobbio, so that the predominant part in the presentation of classical culture in the West during the period may justly be ascribed to the ‘unorthodox’ Celtic Church.”<sup>43</sup>

Irish art, too, has claimed a place in European civilization entirely on its own merit. “This art, whether in metal and stone or on the illuminated pages of manuscripts over the wide field of

Irish expansion from Scotland to Franconia and Italy, is not only unique in the Middle Ages, it is also the first, and in the West the only, example of an abstract art in an articulate civilization which was still spiritually integrated.<sup>744</sup>

Above all, it was the message of the Gospel, “the Good News,” that the Celts indefatigably preached, both at home and abroad, to all who would listen, for which we owe them the greatest debt of gratitude. As Daniel-Rops has so aptly phrased it: “For a long time, through the centuries, and especially through the agency of the religious houses, which came from them, the West knew what it owed these Irish missionaries, thanks to whom the Gospel had been sown once again in the old land of Europe, after the rough ploughing up of the Barbarian invasions.”<sup>745</sup>

As an encouragement for others to drink from the refreshing spring of early Celtic Monasticism, let us close with a final quotation from Bieler, which sums up everything I have tried to say in these pages. May it stimulate further study and exploration in a neglected, but truly rewarding, area of early Christian monastic culture:

Ireland might indeed be called a harbinger of the Middle Ages . . . During the centuries between Christian antiquity and the Carolingian revival, when the foundations of medieval Europe were being laid, only the Irish had something to contribute that was new as well as it was lasting . . . Christianity had come to the Irish under conditions that were as extraordinary as they were unique, its integration into Ireland’s national culture is without parallel. Early Christian Ireland, in turn, has for centuries been unrivalled as a spiritual power in Continental Europe. All over Western Christendom the traces of Irish monk teachers bear witness to their country’s historic mission.

1. D. Winzen, from the Foreword to J. Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York, 1961) p. x.
2. M. and L. de Paor, *Early Christian Ireland* (London, 1958) p. 52.
3. J. Ryan, *Irish Monasticism* (Dublin, 1931) p. 408.
4. N. Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints of the Early Celtic Church* (London, 1961) p. 90.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
6. J. Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 412.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 413.
8. Cf. P. Grosjean, *Analecta Bollandiana*, 1936; L. Bieler, “The Mission of Palladius,” *Traditio* (New York, 1948); L. Bieler, “St. Patrick and the Irish People,” *Review of Politics* (Notre Dame, 1948).
9. E. Duckett, *Monasticism, Gateway to the Middle Ages* (Ann Arbor, 1961) p. 63.
10. P. Mould, *The Celtic Saints* (New York, 1956) p. 42.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
12. St. Patrick, *Collected Works*, Ed. L. Bieler (London, 1953) p. 34.
13. L. Bieler, *Ireland, Harbinger of the Middle Ages* (London, 1963) p. 25.
14. Cf. C. Dawson, *The Making of Europe* (New York, 1952) pp. 196-197.
15. P. Mould, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
16. Cf. St. Patrick, *op. cit.*
17. L. Gougaud, *Christianity in Celtic Lands*, Tr. M. Joynt (London, 1932) pp. 26-27.
18. Cf. M. Anderson, *St. Ninian, Light of the Celtic North* (London, 1964).
19. J. Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 106.
20. T. Merton, “From Pilgrimage to Crusade” (*Cithara* St. Bonaventure N.Y., 1964) p. 5.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
22. J. Decarreux, *Monks and Civilization* (New York, 1964) p. 190.
23. Cf. Adamnan’s *Life of Columba*, Ed. by A. and M. Anderson (London, 1961).

24. J. Decarreaux, *op. cit.*, p. 202.
25. C. Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (New York, 1950) p. 58.
26. L. Bieler, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
27. Cf. Jonas, *Life of St. Columban*, Ed. Krusch.
28. C. Montalembert, *The Monks of the West* (London, 1896) Bk. III, p. 369.
29. Ven. Bede, *Hist. Eccles.* iii, 27.
30. L. Gougaud, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
31. N. Chadwick, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
33. L. Bieler, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
34. J. Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 260; Cf. P. Anson, "The Solitary Life in the Celtic Churches," *The Call of the Desert* (London, 1964) pp. 54-57.
35. K. Meyer Ed., *Ancient Irish Poetry* (Dublin, 1962) p. 99.
36. Cf. H. Waddell, *Beasts and Saints* (London, 1931).
37. Jonas, *Vita Columbani*, I.17.
38. P. Mould, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
39. Cf. F. Henry, *L'Art Irlandais*, 3 Vols., 1963 and 1964 (Zodiac).
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41. J. Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 381.
42. H. Waddell, *The Wandering Scholars* (London, 1927) pp. 30-31.
43. H. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages* (London, 1935) p. 272.
44. L. Bieler, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
45. H. Daniel-Rops, *The Miracle of Ireland* (Baltimore, 1959) p. 18.

*Gethsemani*

*Patrick HART, ocsso.*

## Irish Monastic Art and Poetry

### Introduction

If St. Augustine could "Christianize" Plato, and St. Thomas Aquinas draw heavily on Aristotle in forming his philosophical synthesis, we should not be scandalized when we discover that early Christian Irish art forms were considerably influenced by a highly developed pagan art. This applies both to the decorative arts and to poetry, which had their roots in a long pagan tradition that supplied the first elements and the essential principles of an art which flourished in the monasteries after the fifth century.

What strikes one immediately is the remarkable continuity of Irish art and poetry. One of the main reasons for this seems to have been the fact that Ireland, during the first centuries of her existence, was a country in a strange isolation from the Roman Empire and the rest of the world. In this seclusion, she was free to foster and develop the age-old prehistoric tradition which had been handed down to her. "She [Ireland] did not have the Roman conception of law, state and organization stamped on her mind, nor the cold rectitude of Latin thought. She was to preserve to the Middle Ages a prehistoric fluidity of mind."<sup>1</sup>

However, during the period from the fifth to the seventh and eighth centuries, as Celtic art adapted itself to meet the growing needs of society, Irish epics and Irish law were beginning to be recorded and attempts made to set the historical traditions of the country in line with world