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Some Reflections on the Rediscovery of Celtic Spirituality

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This evening I hope to give you some insights into what is called Celtic Spirituality.

A spirituality can be broadly described as an attachment to a specific set of religious values. We are all familiar with phrases such as Franciscan Spirituality, Benedictine Spirituality and Ignation Spirituality among others which are, generally speaking, patterns and methodologies of prayer and piety inspired in large part by the saints and their foundations with whose names they are identified. There are many others which over the centuries have adorned the history of Christendom and there are various spiritualities which are not Christian. In recent years scholars and others have been giving attention to the prayer forms and practices of the Eastern religions.

What then is Celtic Spirituality? In broad strokes this title covers what resulted and evolved when the Christian message merged with and gradually transformed the religious beliefs and ambience of the Celts, a division of an early Indo-European people which at one time was dominant in a wide swath from Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, to the western reaches of the Iberian peninsula, Spain and Portugal, as well as Britain and Ireland. Another way of looking at Celtic Spirituality is to identify it with that expression of Catholicism which existed in Ireland and, by transference, in those places where the Irish monks transplanted it by their missionary activity, in the five or six centuries after the arrival of St. Patrick in Ireland as a bishop. The generally accepted date for this latter event is 432 A.D.

This address speaks about the rediscovery of Celtic Spirituality. Celtic Spirituality was never completely lost but from a popular point of view it came very close to extinction. It would always have survived as an academic discipline but such would always have lacked the fine and grace-filled enthusiasm of a living and dynamic expression of faith. There were reasons for its decline, some ecclesiastical, many of them political just as there are many reasons for its resurgence at this time. Every expression of spirituality is always subject to the fact that the human articulation of God's Revelation in Christ can be communicated in a rich diversity of media. There is no one philosophy, no one theology, no one spirituality which fully embraces the total significance of the Good News. Some teachers may give voice to preferences, but nobody limits the creativity of the gospel message by claiming exclusivity. Most of us are familiar with the very personal experience of the great doctor of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas who, after celebrating Mass on December 6, 1273, the feast of St. Nicholas, laid aside his pens and declared, "I cannot go on All that I have written seems to me like so much straw compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me." (Tocco, Vita, 47; Fontes 4:376-377 cited in the New Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 14, P. 109)

Who were the Celts? What were their religious beliefs? What were their cultural traditions and

social customs? How advanced or how primitive were they as a civilization? What was it within their milieu which provided a fertile field for Christian evangelization?

If I had asked these questions sixty years ago the responses available to us would have been both brief and highly speculative. But times have changed and there has been an extraordinary flowering of scholarship in the area of Celtic studies. I believe that it is safe to say that we have uncovered more about the various Celtic tribes in the last half century than we did in the previous three millennia. I am indebted to a galaxy of first class scholars for most of my research and, for those who may be interested, I can supply a bibliography which is substantial though not comprehensive.

There is no doubt "that the Celts were one of the great founding civilizations of Europe. They were the first European people north of the Alps to emerge into recorded history". (Dictionary of Celtic Mythology, p. 58)

One of the reasons that it has taken so long to penetrate the secrets of this tribal people is that their religious leadership imposed a prohibition against recording their daily occurrences and historical events in written form. This unusual custom seems odd to those of us who live in our vaunted information age. Writing was known to them as literate samples have been recovered from funeral stones and pottery but their jealously guarded and rich oral traditions had to await the scribes of Christianity before they were given to us in abundance. It is probably for this reason that the Greeks gave the name of KELTOI to this tribe which appears to have established its European homeland at the headwaters of the three great rivers - the Danube, the Rhine and the Rhone. KELTOI means "the hidden people" and the three rivers still bear their Celtic names.

Sometime about the beginning of the first millennium B.C. the Celts began their expansion program. They were aided immeasurably by their amassed knowledge of iron working. This enabled them to clear the forests for farming and to quell any human resistance to their advances. One group gradually spread over the Valley of the Po in Northern Italy and then into France and Spain. Another major incursion brought them into Britain and Ireland. Their greatest military successes came in the 500 year period before the Christian era. They defeated the Etruscans and pushed south as far as Rome. They advanced south-east into Greece and established the state of Galatia in what is today central Turkey.

With the ascendancy of the Roman Empire they met their match. As Roman arms and influence extended, one by one the old Celtic kingdoms were suppressed and absorbed. They were relentlessly pushed back to the very edges of the Empire and a look at today's maps will in large measure, indicate where they survived two thousand years ago. In many ways the survival of their traditions and culture was an extraordinary miracle. They came extremely close to complete extinction and it is almost incomprehensible to fathom what would have happened had the Romans maintained the strength and ambition to push them into the Atlantic. The remoteness and the topographical unfriendliness of the western fringes of the European continent came to their rescue. You may recall that the Romans never conquered Ireland and they were disinclined to send their legions into the mountain fastnesses of Scotland and Wales. Today it is estimated that only about 16 million people live in a predominantly Celtic area "and, of these, only 2.5 million speak a Celtic language, as do, possibly, a further one million outside the Celtic areas." (Dictionary of Celtic Mythology, P.58.) In general the Celtic areas are Ireland, parts of Scotland and Wales, the Isle of Man, parts of Cornwall, Brittany in northern France and a narrow strip of the Basque coast in northern Spain bordering the Bay of Biscay.

For the purposes of this talk I am concentrating on the Irish experience but much of what I say can be equally applied to the other Celtic regions. Ireland's insular position made it somewhat easier to protect its Celtic heritage and the resiliency of the Christian conversion which absorbed the religious convictions of the Celtic residents helped to preserve the artifacts of which history is made.

There is no doubt that the early Patrician Church was built upon the Celtic civilization which was well established on the island. It was not, however, an entirely unadulterated Celtic culture because it carried within it remnants of the customs, languages and values of those settlers who had arrived on the island in the centuries before the Celts. They were not without considerable influence in the making of Ireland and it is important that we give them at least a brief mention.

The Ice Age, after a number of partial and perhaps premature attempts, finally loosed Ireland from its grip about 13,000 years ago. During the previous millennia Ireland was not the island as we know it today. It was joined to what we eventually called Britain which in turn was part of the European continent. Nor did the separation of these land masses take place overnight. It was a protracted event lasting over a number of centuries probably caused by flooding more than by volcanic upheavals. It is almost certain that during the gradual separation period there were land bridges whose existence and subsequent loss had a profound impact on the flora and the fauna on both sides of the divide. Much as I hate to admit it this geological process may have more to do with the absence of snakes in Ireland than all the prayers of banishment formulated by the great St. Patrick!

Scholars seem quite certain that they will eventually find evidence of human existence on Irish soil long before the currently accepted date which is between 8000 and 7000 years BC. If the land bridge still existed it is possible that the first settlers arrived using its convenience but bodies of water have never seemed to deter exploration in and around the European Atlantic seaboard.

Modern science with a whole new array of sophisticated technology from satellite photography to the dating of layers of pollen in archeological digs to the excavation of various types of megalithic tombs reveal the presence of human habitations which are of great antiquity. Less than sixty miles from where I grew up, at Lough Gur in Co. Limerick are the silent remains of a primitive village which dates back to a period over 27 centuries before the coming of Christ. Nomadic peoples left few traces of their existence but once they cleared the land for farming purposes and once they mastered the art of animal domestication villages, small towns and cemeteries, often with religious implications, were established. Despite the passing of the centuries tell-tale signs of a human presence were both ensconced and preserved by the unrelenting and recapturing growth of bog and marshland. This nature blanket is only now being carefully removed to give us extraordinary glimpses into the lives of those people who were our ancestors. In some ways there are parallels to the mission of the recently refurbished Hubble telescope which is probing the outer galaxies to discover the secrets and the vastness of the miracle of creation.

Some of the oldest manuscripts claim that there were no less than eight incursions into Ireland. That may be so but the exact number is not important. That there were many is indicated by the great variety of burial tombs found throughout the island. These early burial sites, carefully and ritualistically constructed in stone, had a perseverance which wood and thatch habitations lacked. The extraordinary passage graves in the Boyne valley, one of which, Newgrange, is

now fully restored was constructed by Neolithic farmers whose tools were still those of the stone age. These monuments are older than Egypt's pyramids. As the Bronze Age began the Beaker people arrived (so-called for their delicate pottery vessels). About 1300 years later the first wave of Celts arrived (c.600 B.C.) To be followed by another wave, more than likely from another part of Europe, about 350 years later. With their knowledge of iron weaponry they quickly overran the entire country and they made their own the highly-developed arts and crafts of their predecessors. Despite their setbacks on the continent their settlement of Ireland flourished and gradually many of the attributes we would associate with a civilized people came into existence. There were, in those centuries, many wars and battles among local Kings but, by and large, there was a long period of peace and, with no more islands to the west to be conquered, the people, along with their culture prospered. There were sophisticated legal and public administration systems. After the local king the poet, a cross between a storyteller, a musician, an oral historian and a chronicler of the passing scene, was honored. Religion, dominated by a priestly caste known as the druids, was highly developed. A quotation from the Irish scholar MacCanna includes both a warning and a description of these people.

Down the ages there is a remarkable consistency in the comments of foreign observers writing about the Celts. Thus, while the popular notion of them as reflected in modern literature has undoubtedly been coloured by eighteenth and nineteenth century romanticism with its susceptibility to mist, magic and melancholy, it certainly did not originate there. In fact, many of the attributes which it ascribes to the Celts - eloquence, lyric genius, volatile temperament, prodigality, reckless bravery, ebullience, contentiousness, and so on - have a much longer lineage, appearing in the accounts by classical authors of two thousand years ago. (Celtic Mythology, P. MacCanna, New York 1997, p.11.)

Somewhat more romantically Thomas Darcy McGee in his poem entitled *THE CELTS* described them as follows:

*Long, long ago, beyond the misty space
Of twice a thousand years;
In Erin old there dwelt a mighty race
Taller than Roman spears;
Like oaks and towers they had a giant grace,
Were fleet as deers,
With wind and waves they made their 'biding place,
These western shepherd seers.
Great were their deeds, their passions and their sports;
With clay and stone
They piled on strath and shore those mystic forts,
Not yet o'erthrown.*

(See the Minstrel of Erin, P. O'Hanlon, Dublin, 1930, pp. 81-82.)

When Patrick arrived in Ireland during the first half of the fifth century he demonstrated an unusual wisdom in his method of evangelization. He adopted a process of conversion which is reechoed in no less a document than that of Paul VI *EVANGELII NUNTIANDI*. In his booklet, *IRISH CATHOLICS*, the Redemptorist Father John Æ' Ríordáin sums it up rather briefly in the following phrases:

What both are saying in effect is this: take the people as you find them. Build on what you have. Disturb and change only where you must. Listen to the people for they have

wisdom in abundance. Graft in the message of Christ without destroying the stock because the people need roots. (Chapter 2, p. 6.)

That Patrick's genius worked is attested to by the results - the people of almost the whole island adopted a rather tenacious Christianity based largely on the religious foundations of the druidic beliefs and customs he inherited and, secondly, the whole metamorphosis was accomplished without bloodshed; there were no martyrs in the early Irish Church.

What was this religious sense which pervaded the Celtic culture? What was the spiritual foundation which Patrick respected so much?

During his six year captivity in Ireland, Patrick got ample opportunity to observe the role the druids and their religious beliefs played in the social order. He recognized it as paganism in comparison to his own Christian heritage now rehoned and more readily appreciated as he endured the climate, the hostility and the loneliness of living among strangers. Nevertheless, he was impressed by people who saw no distinction between the sacred and the secular. The Celts believed in some kind of an afterlife. They buried food and other provisions with their dead. The poet Lucan says of the druids: *From you we learn that the spirit animates the body in another world. If your songs are true, death is only the center of a long life.* (Celtic Religion and Celtic Society, Myles Dillon: from *The Celts*, p. 59.) One scholar claims that their religious instincts were endowed with "a profound feeling and adorable delicacy." Alexander Carmichael, who spent a lifetime collecting and studying the Celtic prayers of the Scottish highlands described them as follows:

"The people were sympathetic and synthetic, unable to see and careless to know where the secular began and the religious ended - an admirable union of elements in life for those who have lived it so truly and intensely as the Celtic races everywhere have done."

Perhaps Edward Sellner of St. Catherine's College in St. Paul provides us with the best succinct summary of the qualities of the pre Christian religion which dominated Ireland before the arrival of Patrick.

Their spiritual leaders were druids and druidesses who, like Native American shamans, functioned as mediators between the tribes of the spiritual realm: the world of tribal gods, goddesses and spirits. They taught that the supernatural pervaded every aspect of life, and that spirits were everywhere: in ancient trees and sacred groves, mountaintops and rock formations, rivers, streams and holy wells. Their lives were profoundly affected by the beauty of the landscape, the powerful presence of the sea and the swift passage at night of the full moon across open skies. The Celts also highly valued friendship and considered women to have many of the same rights as men. (Praying, September/October 1996, No. 74, p. 5.)

Indeed, now that we know so much more about the Celtic druids and their followers there are some scholars who maintain that the ancient Celtic mythology was ready-made for Christian evangelization. There is much truth in this statement when one considers that even during his own lifetime Patrick was able to boast that the children of his baptism were already dedicating themselves to God as monks and virgins of Christ. This is nothing less than a miracle of missiology.

What, then, resulted when the promise and the teachings of Christ came face to face with the incantations and the lore of the druids? The word fulfillment comes to mind. It was as if the druids were waiting for a messiah and they were intellectually primed to welcome him with open arms. The hospitality offered to Christ was in direct contrast to the lack of hospitality Christ himself encountered among his own people at Nazareth. There is something deeper than a pious legend when Patrick's paschal fire on Slane was spotted by the royalty and druids of Tara and one of them is reputed to have prophetically exclaimed that unless that fire was soon extinguished it would enlighten the whole island.

Patrick and his followers did not destroy the symbols or the prayers or the sacred places of the druids. They were replaced. The savage pagan god Crom Cruach and his twelve sub-gods became Christ and the twelve apostles. Other stone icons of the lesser gods found a new meaning in the symbols of the four evangelists. All the deep and oft times beautiful imagery and customs were assimilated into the scripture story. Pagan wells became baptismal fonts and thereafter Holy Wells dedicated to the saints. The oak tree was sacred to the druids and the oak grove was their place of sacrifice, perhaps at one time even human sacrifice. Along comes Brigit, the Mary of the Gael, and she establishes her monastic foundations, one for men and one for women, at CILL DARA, the modern day KILDARE, literally the CHURCH OF THE OAK! The circles, symbols of divinity, became the halos of the saints. While it can only be classified as a pious tale the legend that Patrick superimposed the cross upon the druid's circle of the sun to give us the classic Celtic cross, is in itself illustrative of the transformation which changed the religious ethos of the people.

What were the characteristics of the Christian Celtic spirituality which invigorated the faith in Ireland until the coming of the Normans in the twelfth century? What qualities of faith and worship and prayer existed with an extraordinary vitality for six centuries, so much so that today's spiritual writers, upon rediscovering them, suggest that within their essentials there may be at least one answer to the barrenness of spiritual living in our trumpeted technological age? At first glance the application of a spirituality nurtured in a simpler agricultural society would seem to be completely out of place in our highly sophisticated environment. Are we the victims of an overdose of nostalgia? On the other hand, have we lost all sense of the supernatural? Is self-sufficiency our god? Is there room for another miracle? Who knows?

In describing the characteristics of Celtic Spirituality logic forces me to deal with them one by one. Therein lies my first mistake. For the Christian Celt, all aspects of daily life were fully integrated: there were no artificial distinctions - prayer flowed into work and work was also prayer: all life, even of the beasts and the insects, was sacred because God was its author: the environment, also God's gift, was sacred and God was hidden in the mystery of his creation. It is essential that you keep in mind that the pervasive presence of God in persons, places and nature was taken for granted and this fact animated all behavior.

To fully understand the richness of Celtic Spirituality it is first necessary to adapt ourselves to the historical context of 1,500 years ago. This means pushing our 20th century concepts into the background until we are ready to make time-adjusted comparisons.

I intend to select and comment on some of the attributes of the religious nature of the Patrician legacy, a list which is neither complete nor mutually exclusive. In recent years volumes have been written on each of these aspects but we will have to content ourselves with little more than a mention. What immediately impresses one is the beauty, the wholeness and the practical and yet meditative quality of the prayer life of these early Celtic Christians. Hundreds of

prayer formulas have been recovered in two languages, Gaelic (or Irish) and Latin. Many of the English translations are excellent but the old adage is still true, some suffer in the linguistic transition precisely because there is often no English equivalent for certain words especially those which have spiritual or emotional overtones. In an age long before the discovery of printing the prayers, frequently written as poetry, were devised to be memorized and passed on from generation to generation. Litanies abounded and blessings, and even a few curses, to touch all the exigencies of a monastic and rural society. Above all else they emphasize creative use of the imagination. There were house blessings, blessings for the daily rekindling of the fire, blessings for the crops, blessings for the protection of children. The saints, in an order of local or hierarchical prominence were invoked to protect the traveler, the sacred writer and the poor. God was petitioned to ward off the onset of evil and those mysterious powers which lived in darkness. This would include, in latter years, the marauding Vikings who despoiled the abbeys and churches. The prayers are those of confidence in the all-powerful strength of the Trinity and the son who died for our sins. Let me show you a few examples.

These early Irish Christians were greatly impressed by the severity of Christ's passion and, in their own way, they identified with his suffering by adopting practices of penance and mortification which, by our standards, may be judged as just too much. They fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays: indeed, the Gaelic name for Thursday, DIARDAOIN (DIA-IDIR-DHA-AOIN) means "the day between two fasts." Some of the saints were associated with bodily self-imposed penances of extraordinary severity like praying all night submerged in the cold lake water with outstretched arms. A word of caution here: it is possible that some of these goose-bump-producing accounts were the hyperbole of their devoted followers who were playing a game we might entitle, "our saint is better than your saint!" However, those of you who are familiar with the annual pilgrimages to Lough Derg in Co. Donegal and the annual, barefoot if possible, climb of Croke Patrick in Co. Mayo have some idea of the penitential nature of religious expression.

The theological matrix of their intellectual and moral beliefs was overwhelmingly Trinitarian as illustrated, to use just one of many examples, the opening words of the so-called LORICA or BREASTPLATE OF ST. PATRICK.

I arise today:

*Vast might, invocation of the Trinity,
-belief in a Threeness,
confession of Oneness,
meeting in the Creator.*

I arise today:

*the might of Christ's birth and His baptism,
the might of His Crucifixion and Burial,
the might of His Resurrection and Ascension,
the might of His Descent to the judgment of Doom.*

I arise today:

*might of grades of Cherubim,
in obedience of Angels,
in ministrations of Archangels,
in hope of resurrection for the sake of reward,
in prayers of Patriarchs,
in preachings of Apostles,*

*in faiths of Confessors,
in innocence of Holy Virgins,
in deeds of righteous men."*

This prayer, incidentally, should not be attributed to St. Patrick. It was written some centuries after his death. You will notice it is almost like a creed and there is no doubt that the "other-worldly" beliefs, so much part of the ancient Celtic mythologies, made it easy for the Christian converts to accept the whole concept of the intangible, the unseen God, the role of the Holy Spirit and the existence of the angelic families.

Their knowledge and practical application of the Sacred Scriptures was little short of phenomenal and I use that description deliberately. Long before the advent of the FAX machine and the availability of E-Mail it is still difficult to discover how such an accurate catechesis of the scriptures reached and disseminated itself throughout the early church. Certainly the New Testament got pride of place and the four gospels were assiduously copied in highly illustrated manuscripts. No visit to Dublin is complete without a mini-pilgrimage to the repository of the Book of Kells, one of many such historical treasures, in Trinity College. But these books were for the elite - carefully and exclusively preserved within monastic walls. The poor man's Bible, the peoples' book was made of stone - the carved and paneled Celtic cross which stood in the village meeting place or the monastery garden. Here the people, led by their catechists, learned the story of creation, the transgression of Adam and Eve with its corporate implications, the episodes of the Old Testament, in panel after panel, down the back of the cross, up and down the sides and then the Christ-centered events of the New Testament culminating with the center-stage crucifixion and redemption.

The ordinary people owed allegiance first to their family and its many extensions and then to their community - they called it a TUATHA (a townland) and its king, then to the regional king and so on. In many ways it was not unlike the feudal system which came to dominate Europe for centuries. But beyond all these loyalties and allegiances and superseding them was their acceptance of God, in the person of Christ, as their great and unique Overlord. He was their great 3rd Rí, High King. However, despite the triumphalism of the title he was their friend: they shared the trials and the joys of his public ministry and they expected him to share their highs and lows, another evidence of the holistic nature of their faith commitment.

Mary had a special place in their hearts but she was always honored within the genuine mariological context of the Council of Ephesus, THEOTOKOS, the Mother of God. Some of the most beautiful and touching hymns, prayers and litanies of the Celtic church are directed to Mary, the nurturer of Christ. Even today it is noteworthy that of all the world's languages only the Irish language has a word, MHUIRE, exclusively reserved for the Mother of God. All lesser Marys, though named in her honor, have to share the word M}IRE or with the diminutive added, M}IR:IN (Maureen). Those who speak Gaelic do not greet each other with an "hello," much less a "hi!" The greeting is DIA IS MHUIRE DUIT! (God and Mary be with you!) to which the reply is DIA IS MHUIRE IS PADRAIG DUIT! (God and Mary and Patrick be with you!) Added to the honorable role assigned to Mary in Irish spirituality it is also worth mentioning that in Celtic Ireland women and men enjoyed a basic equality. The legal system, known as the Brehon Laws, guaranteed this. Women could hold property in their own names and they were entitled to a legal standing which subsequent legal systems ignored. This equality was also acknowledged to a certain extent in the Church. Now there is no evidence that women were ever ordained priests but there are letters which indicate that women were what we today call Eucharistic Ministers, distributing the Precious Blood to the congregation while the priest dis-

tributed the Body of Christ. This practice, you will note, was many centuries before the Second Vatican Council!

In our day we are familiar with the Trojan work of Mother Catherine McAuley and Mother Mary Aikenhead, founders of well-known communities of religious women. In the early Irish church a number of women founded "double monasteries", one for men and one for women. St. Brigit's "double foundation" in Kildare is probably the best known: her biographer indicates that "the monks and nuns lived in separate quarters but worshiped together in a common church in which the lay people joined them for liturgies." (Wisdom of the Celtic Saints, p.19)

Another word to be readily applied to Celtic spirituality is reverence. God's hand was everywhere so all creation, like the message of Genesis, was good because it was the handiwork of God. The land, the forests, the animals, wild and tame, the birds, the rivers, the coming and goings of the seasons were a reflection of God's goodness. All should be treated with reverence. Those who are legitimately concerned about the wasting of our environment and who advocate a more reasonable stewardship of natural resources will find an ecology with a valid theology in Celtic spirituality.

This reverence is also articulated in the work of their hands. Their art, metalwork, manuscript illustration, stone carvings and poetry were predominantly sacred in nature and they vied with each other to give voice to the transcendent. Many of these priceless artifacts were pillaged but enough remain to give us an insight into their ambitious desires to praise their God by allowing items of beauty to express the inexpressible. They were also humble enough to know that they could not compete with God's own handiwork as seen in the eyes of a child, the honesty of an upright man or woman, spring's budding greenness, the white frost on the fields, the mystery of the cleansing tides, the sparkling rainbow with its divine guarantee and the unforgettable sunset.

A love of learning was a distinctive quality of the Celtic church. Monastic in its organization because this concept ideally suited the way the people lived, many of the monasteries evolved into universities which attracted students from all reaches of the European continent. In comparison to the population of the island at that time many of these centers of learning were extremely large. Clonard, Clonmacnoise, Bangor, Glendalough, among others, had thousands of students of all ages and they became the schools of formation for the hundreds of monks who migrated east to reevangelize Britain and Europe after the influence of the Church had been drastically curtailed in the turmoil which followed the fall of the Roman Empire. This produced another characteristic of the Celtic church, the missionary vocation, the desire of the monk to go into perpetual exile for the sake of the gospel. It was known in Latin as a PEREGRINATIO PRO CHRISTO, a sacred wanderlust on Christ's behalf and it was tantamount to taking a fourth vow in addition to the classic three. It was called a "white martyrdom" to distinguish it from the courage of those who shed blood in witnessing to their faith. Not all the monks followed the missionary trail or sought spiritual contentment in community living; some sought out solitary hermitages far from the distractions of other humans and their stone beehive huts can be found today in the most inaccessible of places like 700 feet atop the Great Skellig Rock in the turbulent Atlantic off the Kerry Coast. Despite this penchant for the hermit's existence there was one other custom which merits mention. They were realistic enough to know that the acquisition of wisdom demanded guidance. Those who sought depth in their understanding of the spiritual life allied themselves to an anamchara, literally a soul-friend, somebody who was an experienced mentor, sponsor and spiritual guide, all in one. This role was not limited to the ordained and it was not a male preserve. Women who were known as soul-friends included Brigit

of Kildare, Ita of Killeedy and Hilda of Whitby in Britain.

Hospitality was another hallmark of Celtic Spirituality. It naturally flowed from the belief that God resided in every human being. There was always room for one more person at the table. To turn somebody away was considered seriously sinful worthy of receiving the same lack of welcome from Christ himself. A poet prayed as follows:

*O King of stars!
Whether my house be dark or be bright
It will not be closed against anybody;
May Christ not close his house against me. (ZCP I, 327)*
Generosity to the poor was given a priority over many other exercises of piety as we read in the following no-nonsense judgment:
*Altho' fasting and prayer are good
Altho' abstinence and fast are good,
Better it is to bestow a thing
And keep one's mouth shut. (ZCP. VII, 298)*

When Columbanus wrote to Pope Boniface in Rome he left no doubt about the loyalty of the Church in Ireland to the Holy See.

"For we - all of us Irish - who live at the edge of the world, are pupils of Saints Peter and Paul and of all the disciples who were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write the divinely directed scriptures, and we accept nothing beyond the teaching of the gospels and the apostles . . . Our possession of the catholic faith is unshaken: we hold it just as it was first handed to us by you, the successors of the holy apostles."

The notion of pilgrimage had a revered place in Celtic spirituality and there are numerous references to it in the literature. This referred to the personal pilgrimage embodied in his life's calling which everybody is called to discover and to follow. But it also refers to holy places associated with saints. There was a strong bond between the Irish church and Rome and no pilgrimage was more valued than one to the tomb of the apostles, Peter and Paul. It was a once in a lifetime venture and the rigors of the long and difficult overland journey claimed many a life. St. Malachy, one of Ireland's few formally canonized saints, died on the journey. It was customary for these pilgrims to bring back soil from the Eternal City. They scattered it in the Irish cemeteries so that the non-pilgrims could have the opportunity to be buried in the soil made holy by the blood of the martyrs. Cemeteries were often referred to as Rome.

I am conscious that I have only barely touched on some of the very obvious characteristics of Celtic spirituality. I would not want to leave you with the impression that the six centuries after Patrick constituted a kind of spiritual utopia. Certainly it was a blessed time: some have termed it a golden age but it was not without its blemishes. There were inter-tribal wars where peace-making was conveniently forgotten. The severity of the monastic penances had to be curtailed by the moderating wisdom of a Benedict. Nepotism and similar abuses became widespread as ruling families insisted on appointing the abbots - often from their own family. A lack of communication between the northwest corner of Europe and Rome led to a misunderstanding about the precise date of Easter so the two churches followed different ecclesiastical calendars. The Synod of Whitby was called to settle the matter and the Roman usage prevailed.

The age of classic Celtic spirituality came to an end with the arrival of the Normans, the growth

of towns, the diversification of occupations and the success of a number of local and national synods which legislated against the most obvious abuses and set up an organization of dioceses presided over by bishops in an effort to blunt the domination of the abbeys. The reform was needed but its necessity did not lessen the turmoil with which it was greeted.

The integrating and holistic aspects of Celtic spirituality were never the same again but, despite the religious persecution of centuries, the virtual loss of the language and the imposition of a political regime which sought to eradicate Catholicism, traces still survived. You can find them in the speech patterns of the people especially where the Irish language is still spoken. You can discern them in the language of the poets even in the cadences of the English language - read Yeats, who was not a Catholic, Patrick Kavanagh and Ireland's latest literature Nobel Prize winner, Seamus Heaney. The friendliness of the ordinary rural folk in Ireland still enshrines the innate goodness of those who live close to the soil and to God. That is why I recommend that those who visit Ireland should avoid the hotels and stay in the B & Bs. You can feel it too as I did when I sailed up the Shannon and jumped ashore at Clonmacnoise just like the Danes did in 842 AD: When I hopped on a ferry to the windswept Iona in the Scottish Hebrides where the exiled Columba prayed and died: when I joined the Presbyterians in a circle around the reputed grave of Ireland's national apostle in Downpatrick, Co. Down and we prayed for peace in that troubled province.

There is one other trait which weaves its way in and out of the tapestry of Celtic thinking. It is the ability not to take oneself too seriously. It is the profound realization that God is big enough to take a joke and that, indeed, his creation contains much which induces laughter. Some might call it a sense of humor.

Consider the anti-intellectual who had no time for the monastic professors and all their deep theology.

*'Tis sad to see the sons of learning
In everlasting Hellfire burning.
While he who never read a line
Doth in eternal glory shine.*

There are those in our Church today who miss the Mass in Latin and have little good to say about the vernacular. St. Columcille had the opposite problem: he resented the encroachment of the Latin on his beloved native tongue. He wrote:

*For every school will soon, I vow,
Be following Latin learning now:
Old wisdom now they scorn and sing
And babble Latin all day long.*

Peig Sayers, a native of the Blasket Islands, has a prayer in which she extends hospitality to God and his kin with the same warm generosity she extends to her neighbors:

*I would like to have the men of Heaven
In my own house:
With vats of good cheer
Laid for them. . .
I would like a great lake of beer*

*For the King of Kings,
I would like to be watching Heaven's family
Drinking it through all eternity.*

There is a tradition associated with St. Keyne's well in Cornwall. It is said that after a wedding whichever party, bride or groom, first drinks from the well will be forever the boss of the marriage. A ballad by Southey tells the sad story of the groom who planned a fast visit to the well after the vows were completed:

*I hastened, as soon as the wedding was done,
And left my Wife in the porch;
But i' faith she had been wiser than me,
For she took a bottle to church.*

All spiritualities can be weakened by exaggeration or reduction. Celtic spirituality is no exception in this regard. We must never forget the age-old philosophical principle that a spiritual methodology is a means to an end: it is not an end in itself.

Unless the central backbone of Celtic spirituality is maintained, namely, the primacy of the triune God and the pivotal role of Christ's Church aspects of Celtic mysticism can and do degenerate into what we know today as the New Age phenomenon or a vague pantheism. The popularity of these trends, especially among young people, should be seen as indicative of the continuing search for meaning in life. We should hope that those who find some satisfaction in their quest will dig deeper as experience leads to maturity.

Am I recommending that everybody should become involved in Celtic Spirituality? Of course not. Some of you may be interested in it academically and that in itself is a plus. Those who have roots in Ireland in recent years have shown an increasing awareness of their roots and a taste of Celtic spirituality often whets the appetite for more.]



It is far more important that our daily lives are animated by some semblance of spirituality inspired by some school, some saint, some religious methodology, some path of prayer which allows for frequent evaluation and perceptible growth. The great crisis, the great crime of our age is that so many are tottering on the edge of shallowness. Now spirituality is a very personal dimension of one's life - there is no one way which is ideal for everyone. What served us in childhood may not be resilient enough to help us face the challenges of adult living. Gaining religious knowledge may be appropriated to our younger years but spiritual formation is a lifelong

process. For whatever reason there are some who see no personal value in constructing a spiritual scaffolding within their lives.

Many, perhaps the majority, possess what I tend to call a "hit and miss" approach to their relationship with God. Sunday Mass frequently -because the concept of obligation still reigns; the recitation of prayers occasionally-but especially in time of panic; an odd charitable donation motivated by the tax deduction rather than the realization that one can be and should be Christ to those less fortunate. Perhaps more unfortunate are those whose religious leanings are closer to superstition than faith. And, make no mistake about it, there are such things as Catholic superstitions especially when one's relationship to Christ is based far more on the

trivia of religious accidentals than the substance of the incarnate mystery.

We live in an age where we have compartmentalized almost everything. Nationalism, racism and sexism all tend to divide us. The separation of Church and State, as useful as it is in our pluralistic society, frequently results in millions of our children getting little or no insight into religious values. Science and Religion often seem to be at loggerheads. Can a scientist be a Christian? Can a politician be a Christian? Upon analysis it would seem that the answer should be yes but it doesn't always seem to turn out that way. As we approach the new millennium I would suggest that we need a new synthesis something akin to what St. Thomas Aquinas did when he grafted God's revelation to the Greek philosophies which had been preserved by the Arabian intellectuals. Obviously much of what we have learned of Celtic spirituality may be totally unsuitable for our largely urban life styles. If it is only partially true that we are exhausting our physical energies by following fads in running up and down blind alleys then maybe there is some direction in the holistic and integrated God-centered world view which our Celtic ancestors nurtured and which scholarship has gradually rediscovered in our generation. Joseph Mary Plunkett, one of the signatories of Ireland's Easter Week Proclamation, embodied the Celtic spirit when he wrote the following simple but poignant description of his vision of Christ:

*I see His blood upon the rose,
And in the stars the glory of His eyes;
His body gleams amid eternal snows,
His tears fall from the skies.
I see His face in every flower;
The thunder, and the singing of the birds
Are but His voice; and, carved by His power,
Rocks are His written words.
All pathways by His feet are worn;
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea;
His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn;
His cross is every tree.*

The author, Joseph Mary Plunkett, was executed for his part in the Easter Rising. He died on May 4, 1916. He was 29 years old.