

Celtic Monasticism - 2 (Hieromonk Ambrose)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



“Other monks and nuns lived out their days alone....in small wood-and-mud huts; they kept a cow or two, and accepted gladly the gifts of an occasional loaf or basket of vegetables from local farmers. The desire for a solitary life and time to spend simply yearning for God...must have drifted through the hearts of even the busiest abbot in the most bustling monastery.” **(Bitel, op.cit.)**

Monastic life was seen as an absolutely essential part of Christian life-the norm for all Christian life, not the exception-, and monks and nuns, hermits and hermitesses were the great heroes of the common people, who saw them, as St. Guthlac put it, as “tried warriors who serve a king who never withholds the reward from those who persist in loving Him.” **(Quoted in Bitel, Ibid.)** Indeed, it is this quality of persistent, even stubborn heroism that particularly stamps the character of Celtic Christianity and, particularly, monastic life – for these were a people whose heroes were monks and nuns, not political leaders or other cultural figures.

St. John Cassian, who is still carefully read and studied by Eastern Orthodox monastics today, was well known to Celtic monks. St. John had spent years as a monk in Bethlehem and Egypt-and recorded his conversations with the Egyptian Fathers-later establishing a monastery near present-day Marseilles, France. The

Life of the Egyptian Father, St. Anthony the Great was translated into Latin around the year 380, and we know that this was studied by Celtic monks, who depicted St. Anthony and St. Paul of Thebes on some of the great Irish “High Crosses” (about which I’ll say more, shortly).



There is speculation that Iona was a sacred island to the Iron Age inhabitants before the 500s. This is just speculation with no evidence, but it is offered as a possible reason for Columba’s settling here.

Saint Columba, or Gorm Cille as he would have called himself in Gaelic, was exiled from his native Ireland in 563. He founded a monastery on Iona, along with twelve companions.

There was phenomenal literacy and very high culture among these monks. In addition, they also learned from the monks of the Egyptian desert how to practice daily “Confession of Thoughts.” Their monastic clothing was primarily made from animal skins, so that in appearance they actually resembled St. John the Baptist out in the wilderness – a far cry from the monastics of Europe in their sometimes rather elaborate woven cloth habits.

Now we come to the interesting part: There are records of any number of Christians traveling to the Desert Fathers from the British Isles, and an old Celtic litany of the saints mentions seven Egyptian monks who came to Ireland and died and were buried there. Scholars believe that most of the contact between Ireland and Egypt occurred before the year 640. On an ancient stone near a church in County Cork, Ireland, there is the following inscription: “Pray for Olan, the Egyptian. Also interesting is the fact that even though there are no deserts in the British Isles, the Celts called their monastic communities diserts or “deserts.” This was particularly true of island monasteries or hermitages -those spiritual fortresses- , where the sea

itself was like a desert, as an ancient poet said of St. Columban's island hermitage:

"Delightful I think it to be in the bosom of an isle on the peak of a rock, that I might often see there the calm of the sea...That I might see its heavy waves over the glittering ocean as they chant a melody to their Father on their eternal course."

We have a wonderful description of a visit to the monks of Egypt near the close of the fourth century, written by Rufinus of Aquileia. He wrote: "When we came near, they realized that foreign monks were approaching, and at once they swarmed out of their cells like bees. They joyfully hurried to meet us." Rufinus was particularly struck by the solitude and stillness of life among these monks. "This is the utter desert," he observed, "where each monk lives alone in his cell....There is a huge silence and a great peace there." **(Quoted in Celtic Saints, Passionate Wanderers, by Elizabeth Rees)**

St. David of Wales lived in the 6th century. He came from a monastery which had been founded by a disciple of St. John Cassian. So great is St. David that he deserves a whole lecture to himself, but today I'll just mention him in connection with the wisdom of the Egyptian desert: he possessed the gift of tears, spoke alone with angels, subdued his flesh by plunging himself into ice cold water while reciting all of the Psalms by heart, and spent the day making prostrations and praying. "He also fed a multitude of orphans, wards, widows, needy, sick, feeble, and pilgrims." **(Edward C. Sellner, Wisdom of the Celtic Saints)** The Roman Catholic scholar, Edward Sellner, adds: "Thus he began; thus he continued; thus he ended his day. He imitated the monks of Egypt and lived a life like theirs." **(Ibid.)** The same writer assures us that "because of its [the Celtic Church's] love of the desert fathers and mothers, it has a great affinity with the spirituality of the Eastern Orthodox [today]."

There are many other evidences of Eastern and Egyptian contact and influence, too numerous to list now. But in his interesting study, ***The Egyptian Desert in the Irish Bogs***, Fr. Gregory Telpneff mentions also the fascinating interlacing knots and complex designs found on the famous standing High Crosses, which show Egyptian or Coptic influence. "Celtic manuscripts show similarities to the Egyptian use of birds, eagles, lions, and calves....In the Celtic Book of Durrow, one can find not only a utilization of the colors green, yellow, and red, similar to Egyptian usage, but also 'gems with a double cross outline against tightly knotted interlacings,' which recall the 'beginnings of Coptic books.' **[Henry, Irish Art]**. There is at least one instance of the leather satchel of an Irish missal and the leather satchel of an Ethiopian manuscript of about the same period which "resemble each other so closely that they might be thought to have come from the same workshop' **[Warren, Liturgy]**." (Telpneff)

Culturally, then, I suggest that Celtic culture was a unique and intriguing blend of Egyptian and other Middle Eastern influences with native or indigenous cultural elements.

Before going further I want to say a few words about the term "spirituality." In our time this has become a wastebasket word into which we put whatever we want the word to mean. Our English word, "spirituality", comes from the French, and originally described someone who was clever, witty, or perhaps even mad! But our ancient Christian ancestors, whether from Russia, Europe, the Middle East, or the lands of the Celts, did not have such a concept. Certainly they did not see spiritual life as something separate from the rest of life. For them, spirituality was how they lived, how they prayed, how they worshiped God-and it was all bound up together, not separated out. Today, however, we have managed to artificially compartmentalize ourselves and our lives, making "spirituality" something that we do in addition to or separate from regular life. This has made possible a very artificial approach to the Celts.

Thomas O'Loughlin, one of the best of our present-day writers on the subject of Celtic Christianity, makes the following sage observation in his book, *Journeys on the Edges*:

"In the last decade interest in the attitudes and beliefs of the Christians of the Celtic lands in the first millennium has swollen from being a specialist pursuit among medievalists and historians of theology into what is virtually a popular movement. In the process more than a few books have appeared claiming to uncover the soul of this Celtic Christianity in all its beauty....[Many writers] operate by offering their own definitions of 'Christianity' past and present, and then setting

these against their definition of 'Celt' or 'Celtic'. In this way they can reach the conclusion they want."

Typical of our modern arrogance and intellectual-spiritual poverty, we project our own feeble ideas back onto a more robust and spiritually rich time, treating the world of Celtic Christianity like a smorgasbord, where we take those things we happen to already "like," and put them together to form our own very distorted and sometimes even perverted "version" of the Celts. An example: It is a fact that in the early Christian centuries, Ireland, Scotland and parts of Wales were never subject to Roman rule-neither the old Roman Empire nor the Church of Rome held sway over "Celts." But some modern writers interpret this to mean that Celtic Christians, since they were "non-Roman," were therefore anti-Roman or even anti-authority and against the idea of an organized, patriarchal Church. There is absolutely no evidence for such a conclusion, although in fact Celtic Christians did have a quite different way of organizing communities than did Christians on the continent-but this was not out of rebellion, but because their own models were from Egypt and the East, not from Europe! The simple fact is that "the Irish church had always been at the edges of Roman Christianity, [and considered to be a] a barbarian church of limited interest to the Popes." **(Paul Cavill, Anglo-Saxon Christianity: Exploring the Earliest Roots of Christian Spirituality in England)** "Although the climate and situation of Britain were very different from the hot deserts of Egypt, there were principles-simplicity, prayer, fasting, spiritual warfare, wisdom, and evangelism-that were easy to translate to the communities of these isles."**(Michael Mitton, The Soul of Celtic Spirituality in the Lives of Its Saints)** But this means that entering into the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical world of a Celtic Christian monk is difficult-not impossible, but difficult.

First we must realize that the Celts had no concept of privacy or individuality such as we have today. Families did not live in separate rooms, but all together; no one thought about the idea of “compartmentalizing space” and only hermits and anchorites felt a calling to be alone in spiritual solitude with God, although monks had separate cells, just as monastics did in the Egyptian Thebaid. The idea that people are separate individuals from the group was not only unheard-of, but would have been considered dangerous, even heretical. Self-absorption, “moods,” and being temperamental—all of these things would have been considered abnormal and sinful. It wasn’t until the 13th and 14th centuries that people in the West started keeping journals or diaries, and there were no memoirs—also signs of individuality and privacy, of singling oneself out from the family, group, or community—nor were there actual real-life portraits of individuals, until the 14th century. (The art of realistic portraiture developed in response to the medieval idea of romance—for an accurate portrait was a substitute for an absent husband or wife.)

Furthermore, “the dominant institution of Celtic Christianity was neither the parish church nor the cathedral, but the monastery, which sometimes began as a solitary hermit’s cell and often grew to become a combination of commune, retreat house, mission station...school [and, in general] a source not just of spiritual energy but also of hospitality, learning, and cultural enlightenment.” **(Ian Bradley, quoted in Mitten, Ibid.)** It was only much later that people began to be gathered into separate parishes, and even later before bishops had dioceses that were based on geographical lines rather than just being the shepherd of a given tribe or group, “being bishops of a community, rather than ruling areas of land. The idea of ‘ruling a diocese’ was quite foreign to the Celtic way of thinking.” **(Ibid.)**

If you think about what all of this means in terms of how we today view ourselves, the world in which we live, and the values that we have today, you can see how difficult it’s going to be for us to enter into the world of the Celts. Today we are quite obsessive about such things as privacy and individuality, of “being our own selves” and “getting in touch with the inner man” and other such self-centered nonsense. But the Celtic Christian understood, just as did and do Eastern Christians, that man is saved in community; if he goes to hell, he goes alone.

So the orientation of those Christian Celts to God and the other world was very different than the orientation of our modern world, no matter how devout or pious we may be, and this makes the distance between us and the world of Celtic monasticism far greater than just the span of the centuries. A renowned scholar, Sir Samuel Dill, writing generally about Christians in the West at this same period of time, said: “The dim religious life of the early Middle Ages is severed from the

modern mind by so wide a gulf, by such a revolution of beliefs that the most cultivated sympathy can only hope to revive in faint imagination[for it was] a world of...fervent belief which no modern man can ever fully enter into....It is intensely interesting, even fascinating...[but] between us and the early Middle Ages there is a gulf which the most supple and agile imagination can hardly hope to pass. He who has pondered most deeply over the popular faith of that time will feel most deeply how impossible it is to pierce its secret.” **(Quoted in “Vita Patrum”, Fr. Seraphim Rose)**

But is it really “impossible”? To enter their world-the world of Celtic Christianity, which is the same as Celtic monasticism—we must find a way to see things as they did—not as we do today—; to hear, taste, touch, pray, and think as they did. And this is what I mean by the word “spirituality”—a whole world-view. We must examine them in the full context of their actual world—which was a world of Faith, and not just any Faith, but the Christian Faith of Christians in both the Eastern and Western halves of Christendom in the first thousand years after Christ. Spirituality is living, dogmatic, theology. This is the only way we can begin to understand how Celtic Monasticism can be a model of sanctity for us living today, more than a millennium after their world ceased to be. Remember, I said it would be difficult to enter their world; difficult, but not impossible... When we speak of someone or something being a “model,” what do we mean? In this instance—speaking about Celtic monasticism as a “model”—we mean something that is a standard of excellence to be imitated. But here I’m not speaking of copying external things about Celtic monasteries—such as architecture, style of chant, monastic habit, etc., which are, after all cultural “accidents.” I’m speaking of something inward, of an inner state of being and awareness. It’s only in this sense that Celtic monasticism can be, for those who wish it, a “model of sanctity.”

But what do I mean by “sanctity”? We must be careful not to slip into some kind of vague, New Age warm “fuzzies” which are more gnostic than Christian and have more to do with being a “nice” person than encountering the Living God in this life. By sanctity I mean what the Church herself means: holiness—which is nothing more or less than imitation of Christ in the virtues, and striving to die to oneself through humility, so as to be more and more alive to Christ, successfully cutting off one’s own will in order to have, only the will of Christ, as St. Paul says in his epistle to the Galatians (2:20): “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me...” So, holiness means dying to oneself and especially to one’s passions, more and more, so as draw closer and closer to the Lord God Himself, through Jesus Christ, and Him crucified and risen. In addition, Celtic Christians had the concept of “hallowing” or “hallowed”—an old fashioned term that today has survived only in the unfortunate pagan holiday called “Halloween” (from “All

Hallows Eve"-which began as the vigil for the Western Feast of All Souls Day and later took on vile pagan overtones). To early British Christians, something or someone that was "hallowed" was "set apart" from others and sanctified for service to God. Thus, a priest's ordination or a monastic's tonsuring was his "hallowing."

[To Be Continued]

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