



## Celtic Spirituality: A World Alive with God's Presence by verna todd

In the midst of today's world of sport utility vehicles, Internet stocks, and designer genes, many people are fascinated with another world, the ancient world of Celtic spirituality. Thomas Cahill's *How the Irish Saved Civilization* topped book lists recently, Sinead O'Connor's Celtic imagery pumps her appeal, and tours to Celtic lands fill with folk who hope to see the legend come true that the sun dances on Easter morning.

What is Celtic spirituality—or perhaps more to our point, Celtic Christianity? Why does it draw us? What relevance does it have for the serious Christian?

### **a Christian tradition developing far from Rome**

The roots of Celtic Christianity help define it. Legends whisper of visits to Celtic lands by Joseph of Arimathea and the apostle Andrew. Lovely stories tell of Jesus and Mary appearing to pre-Christian Celtic heroes. But the first to bring the faith were most likely Christians in the Roman armies at the end of the first century.

To the Celts, this new religion smelled of their oppressors. Christianity took another 200 years to gain a foothold, and then it was through the efforts of bare

foot native missionary monks. The most famous, Patrick, began his work in Ireland in 432 C.E. (A.D.).

As barbarians threatened and then overran Rome, the Roman church had its hands full. It scarcely noticed what was happening in faraway Britain. Without Rome's control, the faith here grew up with a distinctly different flavor. For example, it was organized around tribal abbots and abbesses and monasteries, instead of a centralized church structure. Believers understood that they were answerable directly to God, not to the church. And the calendar of the Eastern (Orthodox) branch of the church determined holy days. By the time the Pope noticed, Celtic spirituality had taken on its essential character.

Also as a result of the fall of Rome, while the Continent languished in the Dark Ages, Ireland's monasteries "saved civilization" by keeping classical learning alive. Functioning like universities, the monasteries taught Latin, Greek, and mathematics. At this peak of Celtic creativity, monks lavishly decorated Biblical manuscripts and intricately ornamented religious objects.

Viking harassment and then the Norman conquest began the decline of Celtic culture, but the Celtic flame was never snuffed.

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## Editor's Reflections

I have perhaps a special interest in things Celtic by virtue of my genealogy. But I am not the only Presbyterian to feel a kinship with the religious heritage of Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and Brittany – collectively known as Celtic. Some feel a connection because of the prevalence of Scots Presbyterian communities in some parts of our country, where you can still find bagpipers and special worship services on Saint Andrew's Day, and the Kirkin' o' the Tartans. American Presbyterianism traces its roots back not only to John Calvin but also to the Scotsman John Knox.

But the current interest in Celtic culture and spirituality goes beyond a fascination with one's own lineage, be it ethnic or ecclesial. There is something about the Celtic ethos that speaks deeply to contemporary yearnings.

Verna Todd's article provides a splendid introduction to the history and particularities of Celtic spirituality, helping us to understand the special resonance that this part of the church's life has for believers today.

Her article also rekindled for me a sense of gratitude for the opportunity I had last summer to participate in a conference on Celtic spirituality. Led by Howard Rice, the conference/retreat was part of the ongoing series begun 18 years ago and sponsored by San Francisco Theological Seminary which all share the title "Companions on the Inner Way," although each has its own unique theme.

One of the elements of that week was learning about a typically Celtic aspect of prayer sometimes called "everyday blessings." Similar in many ways to the Jewish tradition of blessings for all manner of daily experiences and ordinary objects, Celtic believers invoked God's blessing of all kinds of mundane things – fires and milk cows, fishing boats and sunshine and all manner of plants. In that spirit of consecrating the ordinary, our conference attendees were invited to create their own "everyday blessings" for things that were part of their daily life. There were wonderful (and sometimes hilarious) prayers for computers and monitors, coffeemakers, gardening tools, automobile transmissions and the like. I chose to write a blessing about my houseplants, which fill a corner of my livingroom with wonderful greenness and lend a special peacefulness to my prayer space. You'll find it printed in this issue.

What about your ordinary experiences and the objects that you use and rely on daily? As the summer winds down, before the pace picks up again in September, why not take a lesson from the Celts and try your hand at writing an "everyday blessing"?

Kris



May the Spirit satisfy you  
With the water of grace.



### *Hungryhearts*

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### Three strands intertwined

Celtic spirituality twines three strands, combining elements of local pre-Christian religion and eastern orthodoxy with Western Roman Catholicism. Scholars say that Druidic beliefs foreshadowed those of Christianity. Druid divinities formed a trinity headed by the sun god, represented on stone monuments as a circle. The missionaries adopted the symbolism and explained that the sun god, the light of the world, had come to give them immortality. They united the Celtic symbol for the sun and the Christian symbol of the cross to form the Celtic cross used by Presbyterians today.

Rather than destroy the old religion, the missionaries baptized and transformed it. Over the years, gods and goddesses became saints. For example Bridget, associated with the mother goddess, became a helper of Mary. Such pagan feasts as Samhain and the spring equinox became the feast of All Hallows and Lady Day. Pope Gregory counseled that Celtic temples in good repair be sprinkled with holy water and dedicated as churches. Druidic influences that found their way into Christianity include a world alive with spiritual presence, a tendency to see things in three's, extreme ascetical practices, and a love of the mystical or intuitive.

The influence of the Eastern strand began very early. Trade routes between Egypt, Britain, and Scandinavia apparently existed in megalithic times, and Eastern Orthodox (Coptic) Christians from Egypt report sending missionaries to Britain. St. Martin of Tours seems to be responsible for transmission to Celtic lands of both Eastern Christian beliefs and the monastic system, which developed in Egypt.

As a method of evangelizing, the monastic system proved to be a perfect vehicle. The Celts did not live in organized cities or states, but in family or clan groups. Trying to impose a Roman church system with hierarchies would have been a losing proposition. But monasteries, independent and organized like a family or tribe around an abbot or abbess, fit like hand in glove—and followed in the Druidic tradition of centers of learning organized around a priest or priestess.

### The celtic vision

A special vision permeates Celtic spirituality. It is not a factual, literal, and scientific way of seeing, but an intuitive, symbolic, and poetic one. For the Celt, nature is the mediator that bears God's presence to humanity, and the Celtic vision "sees into" nature and finds God. "The mountain is alive as all nature is alive. From the worm under the ground to the lark and the eagle that inhabit the sky and the high places, there is the one life everywhere..."<sup>1</sup>

Not only is the natural world alive with the presence of God, but angels stir all around us. The saints who have gone before witness our every act and may intervene on our behalf. The story is told of a researcher gathering information from an old shepherdess living alone in a rough, remote area. The researcher asked, "Don't you get lonely here by yourself?" She replied, "Lonely? How could I be lonely? Mary and all the saints are here, and we talk together all through the day."

Prayers, handed down orally from generation to generation, open a window to one of the most glorious insights of Celtic spirituality — the reality of each moment of each day in the presence of God. They accompany getting up in the morning, kindling the fire, putting eggs under a hen to hatch, weaving, preparing and eating food, bathing, "smoothing" (banking) the fire at night, and going to bed. A smoothing blessing reads,

**Lord, preserve the fire,**

**as Christ preserves us all.**

**Lord, may its warmth remain in our midst,**

**as Christ is always among us.**

**Lord, may it rise to life in the morning,**

**as we shall rise with Christ to eternal life.<sup>2</sup>**

### Not sin but death<sup>3</sup>

Celtic spirituality displays striking differences from our Western theology bequeathed to us through Augustine. Augustine was the nemesis of Pelagius, a British lay monk who, in his argument with the man,

stated beliefs he taught in his home country. Key among them was his rejection of the idea of original sin and his faith in a person's ability to avoid sin with the help of God. The Roman church decided in Augustine's favor.

Augustinian Christianity views sin as the basic human problem. Because Adam and Eve bit into the apple and broke God's law, they were guilty. And this original sin transmits guilt to every generation after them. Inherently sinful, we cannot through our own effort set things right between us and God. God sent Jesus to pay the price we could not pay for our sin. Jesus saves!

In Celtic Christianity, as in Eastern Orthodoxy, the basic problem is not sin but death. God made creation in order to love it and receive love in return. But, since love cannot be commanded, God gives humans choice. Adam and Eve could choose God or not-God, represented by the tree in the middle of the Garden. To eat of that tree was to choose what God had not blessed or made life-giving; it was to choose death. Because they chose the tree, death entered creation, and no action on our part can change that. But Jesus came, did battle with the forces of death, and conquered—for all of humanity. Christ is risen!

In addition to viewing the basic problem differently, Celtic spirituality also views differently our ability to choose good or evil. In Augustinian theology, because we are inherently evil, we are unable to make the right choices. The only way we can enter into fellowship with God is to accept the salvation God has provided.

In Celtic spirituality, God has given each of us the ability to choose good or evil, to love or reject God. Every day is an opportunity to say yes to God, who is all around us and deep within us. All of nature is filled with God's grace and with saints and angels assisting us in our choice. Deep within us, no matter how we degrade ourselves or harm others, the image of God remains, moving us to choose life.

## Spiritual values for our age

While it may seem that popular forms of Celtic spirituality — *a la* unicorns and crystals — are a New Age fad, the current appeal of Celtic Christianity is not just the theological equivalent of the hula hoop. Its values answer fundamental spiritual cravings in the gut of our society.

In our world of concrete and glass, it calls us back to nature where we can experience grace, healing, and peace. In our scientific rationalism, it opens us to the mystery of God's presence all around us in each moment. As we eye the bottom line, it lets imagination play, puts thoughts into poetry and sets them to music. As we race headlong to exploit resources, it calls us to care for the trees and streams in which the sacred shines.

Celtic spirituality has a special draw for women. In Druid times it revered both gods and goddesses and gave priestesses and priests equal status. In Christian times it revered both men and women saints and saw women appointed to head monasteries. Valuing intuition, music, and poetry, it has always encouraged pursuits often associated with the feminine.

For both women and men, Celtic spirituality grants respect that can put starch in our spines. Its more

**Spiritual formation is the activity of the Holy Spirit which molds our lives into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This likeness is one of deep intimacy with God and genuine compassion for all of creation. The Spirit works not only in the lives of individuals but also in the church, shaping it into the Body of Christ. We cooperate with this work of the Spirit through certain practices that make us more open and responsive to the Spirit's touch, disciplines such as sabbath keeping, works of compassion and justice, discernment, worship, hospitality, spiritual friendships, and contemplative silence.**

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positive view of humanity offers an alternative to the guilt package of Augustine. In understanding God as granting us the right to say yes or no and honoring our choice, it views us not as forever children, “worms,” depraved, guilty, and incapable of choosing good, but as created good, intrinsically worthy of God’s favor, and able to love God as God created us to do.

While this discussion has contrasted the Celtic view with the theology that is more familiar to us, the point is not to say one is right and the other wrong. It is rather to open us to a counterbalancing alternative. Joyously, we can follow our hearts to claim the Celtic spirit—and our own rich tradition. We can hold both in the creative tension that invites us to see God anew. And perhaps we will one day delight to see the sun dancing on Easter morning. In the meantime,

May God make safe to you each steep,  
May God make open to you each pass,  
May God make clear to you each road,  
And may He take you in the clasp of His  
own two hands.<sup>4</sup>

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## Notes

1. Noel Dermot O’Donoghue, *The Mountain Behind the Mountain*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), p. 30.
2. Robert Van de Weyer, compiler, *Celtic Fire*. (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd Ltd., 1990), p. 78.
3. Based on information from Dr. Bruce Rigdon, authority on Orthodox and Celtic Christianity and Senior Pastor of Grosse Pointe Memorial Presbyterian Church, Grosse Pointe, MI.
4. From the *Carmina Gadelica*, a collection of Gaelic blessings and prayers gathered and translated by Alexander Carmichael; first volumes published in 1899.

## an everyday blessing

by kris haig



Bless to me my potted plants, O God.  
Bless to me their green leaves  
Bless to me their sturdy stems  
Bless to me their ghostly roots  
that stretch deep  
into the secret loam.

Bless the pots that encircle them  
Bless the water I pour on them  
Bless the rivers and reservoirs  
the pipes and spigots  
and the sea-green glass pitcher  
that catches and carries  
your water of life.



Bless the sun  
that draws my plants to itself  
and bless you, O Christ,  
who draw me to yourself.

