

The Celtic Spirit Echoing in Our Lives

Glory be to you, O God of the night,
For the whiteness of the moon
And the infinite stretches of dark space.
Let me be learning to know and love the night
As I know and love the day.
Let me be learning to trust the darkness
And to seek its subtle blessings.
Let me be learning the night's way of seeing
That in all things I may trace the mystery
Of your presence.

--J. Philip Newell, *Celtic Benedictions*

The Celtic spirit is older, broader, deeper, and more varied than I ever imagined when I agreed to give this talk. It's also sly, contradictory, and both down-to-Earth and brilliantly learned and artistic. Nothing ever goes in a straight line in the Celtic Christian world; everything moves in spirals, knots, and mazes without beginning or end. The Celtic spirit seems to me both enticingly strange and oddly familiar, as it echoes from a distant time and place into our world and our lives. Celtic spirituality honored and transformed the lives of the people of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and part of Britain and France. It could transform our lives as well—or maybe it already is doing so. What I can offer today is a mere taste of the Celts' expansive way of living in the world, loving God and all of God's creation.

First, a thumbnail history of Celtic Christianity

Healing Divisions and Ranked Dichotomies

The Celtic view of life erased or never knew anything about the deadly dichotomies that fragment much of western and Christian thought and life:

Spirit/soul	Body
Light/day/goodness/God	Darkness/night/evil/devil
Human	Nonhuman: animals, plants, rocks
Heaven	Earth
Sacred	Profane/secular
Men	Women

In illuminated manuscripts and in the poems, croons, prayers and blessings of Celtic Christians, polarities and ranked dichotomies disappear, not by erasing them or blurring their clarity but by bringing them together, saying that they belong together in the same illuminations, prayers, and lives. The differences, of course, are real—between day and night, darkness and light, humans and animals, body and mind and spirit, human and divine. But they live in a continuous, sinuous spiral of life that can't be untangled and dasn't be broken.

A Few Apparent Opposites, Held in Balance

Love of God, Christ, the saints	Love of the earth and all its creatures
Asceticism, penitence, “Green Martyrdom,” hermits	Sociability, monasteries, open-handed hospitality
Stability, home, rooted in place	Pilgrims, wanderers, on the road
Love of learning, creation of art	Love and respect for mundane, everyday life and activities

In common: an outdoor people who loved to laugh

*The Rune of Hospitality
(ancient Irish lyric)*

I saw a stranger yestereen:
I put food in the eating place,
Drink in the drinking place
Music in the listening place,
And in the name of the Triune
He blessed me and my house,
My cattle and my dear ones.
And the lark said in her song:
Often, often, often,
Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.

A monk's prayer by Saint Mancham of Offaly, one of Patrick's early converts:

Grant to me sweet Christ the grace to find—
Son of the living God---
A small hut in a lonesome spot
To make it my abode.

**A little pool but very clear
To stand beside the place
Where all men's sins are washed away
By sanctifying grace.**

**A pleasant woodland all about
To shield it from the wind
And make a home for singing birds
Before it and behind.**

**A southern aspect for the heat
A stream along its foot,
A smooth green lawn with rich top soil
Propitious to all fruit.**

**My choice of men to live with me
And pray to God as well
Quiet men of humble mind—
Their number I shall tell. . .**

**And all I ask for housekeeping
I get and pay no fees,
Leeks from the garden, poultry, game,
Salmon and trout and bees**

--Thomas Cahill,

***How the Irish Saved Civilization*, pp. 151-55**

Illuminated Manuscripts: *The Book of Kells*

The wonderful, almost shocking intertwining of God and all parts of life is evident everywhere in the *Book of Kells*. There, God is homey and wild, utterly beautiful and astonishing and also familiar. God isn't somewhere else. God is here, and every person and every atom of creation is in God.

Here, as in illuminated manuscripts from every tradition, the word is not a static black shape on a dead white background. For the illuminators, the word smelled like a rose; it was so potent that life exploded out of the word in brilliant colors and fantastic, fanciful, and sometimes funny shapes. "The Gospel candles shine" on the pages of *The Book of Kells*.

The Handling of My Hands

I'm not sure that the word *spirituality* accurately describes the Celtic way of living in the world. Everyone, including the monks and hermits, were earthly, in love with the mundane, the everyday things of this world. Everything was blessed and deserved a blessing. Those mundane, earthly things filled their prayers, right along with God and Christ, Mary and the saints. So, every morning the woman of the house prayed as she stirred the peat fire in the hearth to flame, asking God to stir to life in her and her household. When she went to milk the cow, sitting with her cheek against her warm flank, listening to the milk sing in the pail, she said a prayer of praise and thanks to God, for sure, but also to and for this gentle, faithful animal-friend, whom she saw as like her in many ways.

The prayers are also filed with the grandeur and wild beauty of Ireland's west coast, and the hills and moors of Scotland and Wales—the wild sky, the hills and mountains, the sea, a source of both sustenance and danger.

Prayer for Lighting the Firs

I will kindle my fire this morning
In the presence of the holy angels of heaven,
In the presence of Ariel of the loveliest form,
In the presence of Uriel of the myriad charms,
Without malice, without jealousy, without envy,
Without fear, without terror of any one under the sun,
But the Holy Son of God to shield me. . .
God, kindle thou in my heart within
A flame of love to my neighbor,
To my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all,
To the brave, to the knave, to the thrall
O Son of the loveliest Mary,
From the lowliest thing that liveth,
To the Name that is highest of all.

--*Carmina Gadelica, Vo. I*

Milking Croon

Come, Mary, and milk my cow,
Come, Bride, and encompass her,

**Come, Columba the benign
And twine thine arms around my cow. . . .**

**My heifer dear, generous and kind,
For the sake of the High King take to thy calf.
Come, Mary
Virgin, to my cow,
Come, great Bride, the beauteous,
Come, thou milkmaid of Jesus Christ,
And place thine arms beneath my cow,
Ho, my heifer, ho my gentle heifer. . .
My black cow, my black cow
A like sorrow afflicts me and thee,
Thou grieving for thy lovely calf,
I for my beloved son under the sea,
My beloved only son under the sea**

--Carmina Gadelica, Vol. I

What might the Celtic world say to our technological world, in which many of us are far removed from the natural world of cows and fire in the hearth and larks singing the day awake?

Write a prayer, blessing, poem, or song for some mundane, everyday task you do regularly or some object in your life that you've never thought to bless.

The Deer's Cry

*(Anon. eighth century, translated
from old Irish, sung by Rita
Connolly)*

**I arise today
Though the strength of Heaven.
Light of sun
Radiance of moon
Splendor of fire
Speed of lightning
Swiftness of wind
Depth of the sea
Stability of earth
Firmness of rock.**

**I arise today
Through God's strength to pilot me
God's eye to look before me
God's wisdom to guide me
God's way to lie before me
God's shield to protect me
From all who shall wish me ill
Afar and anear
Alone and in a multitude
Against every cruel
Merciless power
That may oppose my body and soul.
Christ with me, Christ before me
Christ behind me, Christ in me,**

**Christ beneath me, Christ above
me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my
left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ
when I sit down
Christ when I arise, Christ to shield
me**

**Christ in the heart of everyone who
thinks of me**

**Christ in the mouth of everyone
who speaks of me.**

I arise today.

For your further reading and delight

***Carmina Gadelica, 6 volumes, collected by Alexander Carmichael, print and
on-line***

The Book of Kells, in print and on-line

Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*

Esther de Waal, *God under My Roof, The Celtic Way of Prayer*

J. Philip Newell, *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation*

**Brigid Mary Meehan and Regina Madonna Oliver, *Praying with Celtic Holy
Women***

John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space between Us; Anam Cara*

