

# **Pilgrimage 2018**

## **the United Kingdom & Ireland**



I thank you for this, my God:  
I am a traveller and a stranger in the world,  
like so many of your people before me.

*Prayer of St Columba of Iona*

**Notes on Celtic Christianity**  
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## **Celtic origins and an *approximate* chronology**

- The origin of the Celts is uncertain but they were possibly an Indo-European people from the East/Eastern Europe or Asia Minor. The Galatians to whom Paul wrote were Celtic in origin.
- The Celts were regarded as pagan, a word originally meaning 'a dweller in the country'. Paganism can be considered as pre-Christian humanism. The deeply religious Celtic nature was expressed in magic, ritual, sacrifice and myths. Christian missionaries (like St Paul in Acts 14) used this knowledge of the spiritual, building on the existing culture and 'god/gods' known of through the creation stories, and the Celts readily embraced the Christian faith.
- From 800 BC to the time of Christ there were numbers of highly hierarchical tribes/clans across Europe (150 in Ireland alone) bound by blood rather than land ties, and each ruled by an elected king. Class 1: the king and royal family; Class 2: nobles including the learned, Druids, senior craftspeople, poets and the clan historian; Class 3: called 'clients' and including the free who owned animals and the unfree; Class 4: slaves in bondage, captives and criminals.
- Celts were cattle and horse breeders and fierce fighting people. At one stage they overwhelmed Greece and later sacked Rome. At their height they ruled from Ireland to Italy, from Turkey to Spain and all central Europe. They loved storytelling and poetry, were strongly independent and kept no written records.
- The expanding domination of the Roman Empire forced the Celts to flee Europe to the margins of Britain (Scotland, Wales and Ireland). Here an early understanding of the Christian faith was preserved intact, along with the language.

- About 209 St Alban was the first Celtic martyr, murdered for giving a fugitive Christian shelter during savage persecution by Rome.
- AD 313 Edict of Milan – Christianity tolerated in Roman Empire
- 325 Council of Nicaea – first general Council of the Church
- 354-430 St Augustine of Hippo.
- 350-418 Pelagius – Celtic British Theologian, condemned and declared a heretic in 431.
- 389-461 St Patrick
- 410 Last Roman legions withdraw from Britain.
- 432 Patrick went to Ireland
- 450-523 Brigid of Kildare
- 480-550 St Benedict
- 521-597 St Columba, 565: founded Iona.
- 540-615 St Columbanus
- 570-632 Mohammed
- ?-588 St David
- 590 Gregory the Great becomes Pope
- 597 St Augustine arrives in Kent
- 600 – 750 Irish monks were most important religious influence in France and Western Europe.
- 612 - St Kentigern or Mungo
- 614 – 680 St Hild of Whitby
- 635 – 687 St Cuthbert
- ? - 651 - St Aidan; 634: founded Lindisfarne.
- 638 - Jerusalem captured by Moslems
- 664 - Synod of Whitby
- 700s: St Patricks Breastplate likely to have been written.

## **Features of Celtic Christianity**

The Celtic Church largely conformed to the orthodox credal position of the Roman Church, and other branches of Christianity. Three streams influenced Celtic spirituality and especially the monastic communities:

- The asceticism of the desert fathers and mothers who some Celtic monks would have associated with.
- The actual world in which the Celts lived; they were strong and passionate in character so this reflected in their missionary zeal.
- The Scriptures were greatly respected, especially as they revealed the person of Christ. The Celts referred to Christ as 'Christ the monk', and saw him as having many similar attributes to their warriors. The book of Psalms and the Epistle to the Romans were especially significant for the Celts. Memorising and illumination (artistic and symbolic writing out of whole sections of the Bible) were highly prized. Monks used 150 calfskins to write and illustrate the Book of Kells and, given the value of a single calf, this demonstrates the importance placed on the Scriptures. Patrick in his writings cites the Scriptures over 360 times from 44 of the books of the Bible.

It was not till the fourth century that distinct characteristics of Celtic Christianity began to emerge. The first teacher of note was a monk named Pelagius. For over 1,500 years he was identified with heresy and condemned (and some would still regard him as such). Pelagius emphasised that what is deepest in us is the image of God. Sin has buried the beauty of God's image, but not erased it. The Gospel is given to uncover the hidden wealth of God that has been planted in the depths of our human nature. He did not say, as he was accused of saying, that we therefore do not need grace.

Rather, in the Celtic tradition both grace and nature are celebrated as gifts of God. The gift of grace is given to restore us to all God intended us to be.

A long theological controversy between Pelagius and Augustine of Hippo resulted in Pelagius's ex-communication. Rome had not yet defined the doctrine of 'original sin' whereby humanity is declared essentially sinful and depraved, and creation as essentially flawed. To the Celts, the grace of God was seen as restoring humanity and creation to their God-given natural goodness. Repentance was a turning to what is deeply planted within us, the light that has not been overcome by darkness.

Pelagius reflected the spirituality of the young British Church at a time when the Roman occupying army was withdrawing from Britain to the continent. Over the subsequent separation between Roman and Celtic missions of nearly 200 years, Celtic spirituality was relatively free from the domination of Rome. During the fifth and sixth centuries there was large scale conversion to Christianity among the Celtic tribes. The emphasis was on the image of God at the heart of humanity; the essential goodness of creation; clerical marriage; the inclusion of women in the leadership of the Church; dispersed organisation with no central organising force allowing for local variation in liturgical practice and monastic rules and practice.

The starting point for Celtic Spirituality is not what separates one group from another but the gift that we have been given. Noel O'Donoghue writes "In the beginning was the gift, and the gift was with God, and the gift was God". Celtic Christianity originates from a self-giving God and a belief that all life is an expression of God. The roots of Celtic Christianity reach deep into the mysticism of St John the Evangelist in the New Testament and even further back to the Wisdom tradition of the Old Testament. Monks spent much

of their time reading the Bible and especially John's Gospel, the Magnificat and the Psalms.

When the Roman mission to Britain was launched in 597 under the leadership of Augustine of Canterbury, it was not surprising that conflict ensued. The Celtic mission was strong from Ireland to Iona, and from Lindisfarne to the southern kingdoms of the Angles and Saxons. When the Roman and Celtic missions met there was considerable disagreement from the superficial (e.g. the date of Easter and the style of clerical garb and hair) to the deeper radically different ways of seeing humanity. This conflict between the two missions led eventually to the Synod of Whitby in 664.

## Key themes in Celtic spirituality

- **Community:** Central to Celtic Christianity is community, modelled on the community of the Trinity.
- **Evangelism:** The Celtic Church was passionately missional with evangelism through integration and assimilation and built on cultural sensitivity and the transformation of an indigenous culture from within. The 'missionaries' confirmed what was good, and challenged what was not believing that God had been at work long before their arrival. Their task was to reveal the God who was already present by showing what God had been doing. They were gentle, respectful and sensitive in their approach and there was no discontinuity with the past. Celts preached a victorious message, often out in the open under the high cross. The crucifixion was central to the Celtic faith and they were very aware of Christ's suffering. Columba thought that the best way to defeat paganism was to 'take it over'. However, the Celtic missionaries were strategic and took a top down approach converting kings and princes first.
- **Commonplace Christianity:** The ordinary is seen as a frontier to another world with God accessible and eternity close. Routine and daily tasks are a source of God's glory and point to awareness of God's presence. Sacred and secular are not separate and distinct and this is reflected in their prayers. Prayers were mainly everyday prayers led by one person e.g. the mother who would say a 'smoothing' (every night the fire was covered to slowly smoulder) and 'kindling' prayer (reviving in the morning), or together e.g. weaving prayers.
- **Wariness towards institutions:** The focus of the Celts was relational i.e. people. The church was non-hierarchical and



non-sexist with both celibate and married clergy. It was decentralised into clans/families – there were 150 separate clans in Ireland, many with a monastery of their own. The dominant institution was neither parish, diocese nor cathedral but the monastery which was a centre for prayer, study, hospitality and manual labour. Monasteries were initially small, simple, wooden structures at the edge of the village. As Celtic missionaries came into contact with the other established Christian traditions, they found themselves pleading for the different traditions to exist side by side. They saw themselves as part of the one universal church – not necessarily the Catholic Church. The Celtic church sought to be inclusive and non-competitive. Some early Celtic leaders received their theological education in Rome or the Continent while others followed the Desert Fathers. For Rome, the ‘holy place’ was identified with the sanctuary of the church but for Celts it was more the sanctuary of earth, sea and sky: a true worship of God could neither be contained within the four walls of a sacred building nor restricted to the boundaries of religious tradition.

- **Pragmatic Christianity:** The Celts left no trace of systematic theology, there was no debated theology nor theorising. Their doctrine was lived out in practice.
- **Creativity:** There was a great emphasis on learning. When people became Christian they quickly learnt to read, hence Ireland was known as a land of saints and scholars. Monasteries were centres of learning and study was encouraged. The monks created very visual depictions of God’s story and symbols that expressed this e.g. the Holy Spirit as the wild goose, free and powerful; weaving to symbolise God weaving in and out of our lives. The arts were

fostered and valued in all forms: poetry, carving, illustration, song and dancing. Most of their prayers were sung and their religion was joyous. Celtic art, like their clan organisation, was fluid rather than rigid, unity coming from within rather than being imposed from without. It was usually abstract, and artists excelled in expressing faith in metaphors and images, with many expressions reflecting the stirrings of creative wildness. Wildness was not seen as essentially harmful as creation emerges from troubled waters. Suppression of such wild energy, whether emotionally, sexually or artistically, through fear, was viewed as destructive of creativity. Celtic tradition deeply affirms the unbounded side of life. It is not about lawless self-will or doing what we please but about responding to who we are in the image of God, the One who is passionate – Jesus (Luke 19:45; John 11:35).

- **Pilgrimage:** The Celts were great travellers, pilgrims and missionaries – however there is a Celtic saying: “we do not need to search for God or go on a pilgrimage to find him – for God is always with us”. Celts understood that nothing is static. Pilgrimage (both the outward path and inward journey) involved waiting, suffering, sacrifice and pain as well as consolations and companionship and the end was resurrection. The ideal of the pilgrimage was defined as ‘seeking the place of one’s resurrection’ and this often led them to the wildest and most elemental places. Remote islands and rocky outcrops were the Celtic equivalent to the desert places of silence and prayer providing a stripped-down awareness of God. This required a willingness to let go of or die to one’s home or other familiar/comfortable place in order to find new life. Pilgrimage involves searching the wild and untamed places within ourselves as well as within

nature. The impression given is that the Gospel of Christ leads us not into what we already know but into what we do not yet know. Associated with pilgrimage were three forms of martyrdom: Red, enduring persecution and ultimately death; White, abandoning everything for God with pilgrimage an important example of this; Blue, freeing oneself from evil desires by fasting, hard labour or forms of demanding prayer. There were no known 'red' martyrs in the Celtic Church.

- **Hospitality:** Like the God they followed, Celts valued hospitality highly. In the same way that they had experienced the welcome and hospitality of God towards them, Celtic Christians made God and other human beings welcome guests in their homes.
- **Relationship with God:** Celtic faith permeated the whole of life. They were very conscious of the continuous presence of God all around them and this knowledge generated the Caim prayer. This involved drawing a circle around themselves with the love, peace and joy of God filling that circle. We **are** because God **is**. In George MacDonald's words, "We are created, not out of nothing, but out of God's own endless glory". This is one of the points at which some see the Celtic tradition significantly diverging from Western tradition at large. The Celts believed that we are created out of the essence of God, not out of nothing. Jesus was liberator (from evil forces) and enabler rather than judge to reprove. The Celtic tradition often portrays grace as washing away the things that obscure the essential goodness of life. Grace is like a cleansing rain over the landscape of life, followed by a sunlight that restores our vision. Redemption then is the journey of being reconnected to the light of God within, recovering the treasure that is buried deep in the field of our

lives: A journey home that takes us through what seems like unknown land. From Psalm 43 “Send your light; let it bring me to your dwelling”. The failures of our lives and the falseness of what we have become do not have the power to undo what God has woven into the very fabric of our nature. The divine likeness within us may be hidden or forgotten or held in terrible bondage by wrongdoing. However the image of God remains at the heart of who we are, even though we may live at what seems an infinite distance from it. We have distorted the image not erased it.

- **Natural environment:** The Celts found God in nature, regarding it as ‘the primary scripture’: Panentheism versus pantheism. They believed that all life is interwoven, past and present, seen and unseen and that all creation joins in worshipping God. Deep love and concern for nature as part of God’s world and the imprint of God in nature were expressed in the Celts’ longing for completion and perfection. Celtic theology stressed the essential goodness of nature, including human nature, and saw Jesus as the one who was sent not so much to rescue the world from the consequences of the fall as to complete and perfect it. They had a deep sense of the sacredness of the earth and its closeness to humankind. This profoundly affects the way in which creation is responded to. What we do to ourselves and what we do to the cosmos is part of such spirituality. In the Celtic tradition all ground is holy, for within it is the goodness of God, and this knowledge helps sustain our commitment to care for the earth.
- **Awareness of evil:** The Celtic tradition defines evil as essentially destructive. The Celts had an acute consciousness of dark forces, the almost physical presence of evil. They were very aware of spiritual warfare. Their Christianity was

not a promise of an easy life, but involved challenge, struggle and battle. They were always conscious of sin, evil, and suffering and of an invisible army waiting to harm them but believed that the cross would protect them. St Patrick's Breastplate is probably the best known protection prayer.

- **Place:** The Celts had a strong sense of the sacredness of place, even though they were often wanderers. The high-standing crosses were gathering places and focal points of contemplation. They were often situated in wild, exposed places and depict that holy mystery of God that is unbounded.
- **Death:** There is strong belief in the 'thinness' of the veil which separates this world from the next produced. This produced a strong feeling of closeness towards the dead and the communion of saints (Heb 12:1) a world populated by angels and spirits.
- **Justice:** Pelagius said: 'Does it seem just to you then that one man should have an abundance of riches over and above his needs, while another does not have enough even to supply his daily wants?' God's generosity is to all humanity, and any inequality in the dispensation of these gifts is not due to God but to human injustice. Pelagius wrote: "For why would God want men to be unequal in the lesser things when he has made them equal in the greater? Let no man have more than he really needs, since the few who are rich are the reason for the many who are poor." He taught a type of redistribution of the gifts of nature. The Celtic mission's practice of sharing its gifts with the poor rather than amassing wealth for itself stood in sharp contrast to the increasingly rich and powerful Roman mission.

## **A smooth transition from paganism to Christianity**

Early Christian missionaries to the Celts latched onto existing pagan Celtic beliefs and built on these. The Celts had:

- A deep respect for the natural environment. God as Creator was obvious. They engaged with the original goodness of God – a God who was very approachable. God made the world and was pleased with it. They believed that beauty and love were from God.
- A concept of kingship that made Christ as High King understandable and appealing.
- A wild, passionate, warrior character that related to the wildness of God, expressed supremely in Christ's body and blood. With a passion of love he comes 'to bring fire to the earth': Luke 12:49. The circle of the Celtic cross is the circle of creation which surrounds and encompasses the cross of redemption.
- An affinity to 'threes' including a god with three heads that was better than one! Many daily tasks were also done three times or in threes with the Trinity a natural extension of this.
- Celts believed in a spirit world around them, and in the unity of the spiritual and material. They believed that the spiritual realm was close (thin), and accessible, but daunting and to be feared. They embraced the Christian God who was close, intimate and loving.
- Celts believed in miracles. Christianity had its heroes just as the pagan Celts had their warrior heroes.
- The Celts were a familial-based society so Christianity, and especially the church, was like a clan or tribe. The church was local, part of the family. However, Celtic tribes were based on relationship not status so who you were related to was much more important than what you did. Humility,

submission and obedience were very hard values for the Celts to accept.

- Celts believed in an honour price: a free bond man may have 5 cows, while a noble 50. It was impressive to the Celts that a God would pay a supreme honour price of sacrificing his son to buy back people.

## Revivals of Celtic Christianity

NB: The character and focus of each revival was a response to the needs and concerns of that particular age.

1. 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Century: Widespread dissatisfaction with institutional Christianity. Saints were idealised as superheroes to help monasteries with more 'powerful' saints gain power over other monasteries. Lives were exaggerated to be on a par with pre-Christian warriors. Biographies of saints were often unreliable.
2. 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Century: Medieval period. Anglo-Norman invaders embraced the Celtic faith to identify with those conquered. More new saints were created.
3. 16<sup>th</sup> Century: Reformation period. Both sides looked back. Protestants embraced the Celtic as a statement of independence from Rome and a return to a "pure British Christianity". The Catholic counter-reformation embraced the Celtic with a sense of nostalgia for the Golden Age of Christianity.
4. 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century: The romantic period in Britain revived interest in the folk ("Pagan") past and was a counter to the industrialisation of Britain. A time of transition with the Celtic past offering simplicity and stability, and a time of revolt against the rationalism of the enlightenment.
5. Late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Dawn of a new literary period e.g. Yeats with a focus on art, poetry, dance, literature, plays.
6. Current period: Both pagan (New Age) and Christian. Three new emphases; feminism, ecological, commodification of things Celtic (including cultural tourism!). There is a new openness to things Celtic in all streams of Christianity but also a danger of over-simplification, romanticism, and projection of contemporary needs onto the past.



## **The appeal of Celtic Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The appeal of Celtic Christianity to growing numbers of people in the Western world reflects:

- A desire to reintegrate our fragmented lives, especially our spirituality, and to not separate worship and work. For Celts all aspects of life were integrated.
- Longing for a wholeness that holds spirituality together with the love of creation and the Creator. Celtic Christianity challenges an exploitative approach. Some have speculated that a different outcome at the Synod of Whitby would have prevented the current environmental/ecological crisis.
- An appreciation of the arts as expressions of our God-given giftedness. Celtic Christianity embraces all the arts (song, dance, poetry, literature, sculpture) and encourages us to express faith in images. In contrast, the teachings of Augustine and the later Puritans saw beauty as a distraction from God and a temptation to sin.
- The non-materialistic attitude of the Celts. Goods exist for the benefit of all and without any thought of acquiring material things for their own sake.
- A willingness to embrace mystery. The Celts would not easily embrace a purely rational/scientific world view, Protestant rationalism or secular scepticism.
- Discomfort of many Christians today with 'the triumphant, imperialistic Christ of the Church' especially as inherited from the Roman medieval period. For the Celts Christ was High King but not an empire builder.
- A desire for more simple and locally-centred church structures. The Celtic church was built around villages and local communities and the Roman and Viking concept of towns and church dioceses was foreign. Adopting the Celtic

model could mean fewer committees, task groups and projects.

- A style of evangelism that intentionally builds upon people's current awareness of God as it and their existing religion - what may already have been revealed - without being 'popularist or inoffensive'. This is in stark contrast to Roman evangelism which was more confrontational and aggressive (e.g. the Crusades).

## **Saints and the early leaders of the Celtic Church**

The stories of the lives of the saints are less concerned with historical accuracy (there is minimal factual information) and more about enhancing aspects of a person's life for a particular purpose such as political expediency; the elevation of a monastery e.g. Patrick's federation of monasteries over Brigid's; superior spirituality over a pagan hero; or some aspect of a person's life the writer wanted to emphasise. Commentaries need to be read critically. At best the life of the saint was shown to be ascetic, humble, in harmony with the natural world, able to issue curses or perform miracles. Patrick's Confession is a rare and authentic example of a document actually written by a saint and shows the true nature of the man: humble, weak, struggling, intimate with God, and a persevering sinner being transformed by grace. Later writings were written by people who used the church for political ends. These often show Patrick as a heroic, wandering wonder worker, dispensing curses and in conflict with pagan kings, asserting his rights and power and making claims over church property to generate revenue.

**Patrick 389 to 461/3** is one of the only early Celtic figures to leave a direct document about himself. Although his Confessions reveal a humble and deeply spiritual person they tell very little about his life. He came from a well-to-do Romano-British family. His father was a deacon in the Roman Church and the owner of a substantial estate, a civil magistrate and a tax collector. He was not Irish and his birthplace is uncertain although possibly in Wales. At the age of sixteen he was captured by pirates and spent the next six years in slavery in North West Ireland looking after cattle, experiencing constant hunger and thirst, and isolated from other people. It was in this time he came to a strong faith. He escaped and possibly went to the south of France, Gaul or even Rome before returning to Britain where he was ordained. He had

a vision in which he was called back to Ireland as a missionary. In his own words: "I had a vision in my dreams of a man who seemed to come from Ireland... I seemed to hear the voice of men who cried out, 'we appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us.'" After being consecrated a bishop he travelled back to Ireland around 415 and spent the last thirty years of his life in fervent but risky evangelism.

Patrick's life was often under threat particularly from the tribal kings. When Patrick arrived at Tara it was Easter Eve and he lit a fire so he could keep vigil. However it was also a Druid Festival for which every fire must be put out. Patrick preached and many turned to Christ away from magic and the old religion. He was brought before the king, who, out of jealousy, tried to have him killed as he left Tara. However the would-be murderers saw only a company of stags pass by and it would seem the Breastplate prayer was answered. Patrick and his Christian companions passed through unseen, and he continued his mission in Ireland. He spoke out against slavery and the pagan practice of human sacrifice and called for the worship of the Creator rather than the creation.

When people in a region converted to Christianity Patrick would build a church and establish a monastery. Young people flocked to these places. By the time he died in 493 he had established a nationwide church organised in dioceses and with its headquarters in Armagh. This began one of the greatest missionary movements in history, for over the next few centuries small band of monks and nuns reached out across Scotland, northern England and Europe preaching the Gospel, establishing churches and building monasteries.

**Brigid:** 450-523. Many legends and few facts survive about this Irish woman who founded a community, primarily for women, at

Kildare. She was famed for her generosity and hospitality, and a fire burned continuously in her monastery. Her influence was widespread. As a young woman she gave freely of her father's possessions and food to the poor and needy. Her father became so frustrated that he decided to sell her to the king and bundled her into a chariot. He left her at the castle gate while he consulted with the king. Brigid was approached by a beggar asking for alms and she gave him her father's sword. Her father and the king were amazed, and the king said he could not buy her: "She is too good for me - I could never win her obedience". When she brought her group of women to be blessed before taking the veil she held back out of humility. However the Bishop saw the spirit of God descend on her and read the liturgy for the ordination of a bishop over her.

**Columba:** 521-597. Columba was from an Irish royal family. He quarrelled with King Diarmait, chief of the kings of Ireland, over two issues: giving sanctuary to a young man who had accidentally killed; and copying Psalms and removing them from the monastery. This conflict escalated into a war between clans in which thousands were killed or wounded. Columba was grief-stricken and on the advice of his holy man left Ireland as penance. "Rest not till as many souls are won for Christ's Kingdom as you have caused to fall by the sword". In 561, with twelve other men, he sailed until there was no glimpse of Ireland and settled on the tiny island of Iona. There he established a missionary base from which he travelled throughout the Scottish Islands. The first two years were spent in learning the language, tilling the soil, training followers, and organising the community. They lived in simple huts with a central hut upon rising ground that served as Columba's cell. He disdained the luxury of straw and lay on a stone, with another rounded stone for a pillow. In dairy, granary or the fields, each monk worshipped God in his appointed task,

and made toil a sacramental offering. Sacrament was linked with service, altar with hearth, worship with work. The community rapidly grew to about 150 monks who went on to evangelise most of Scotland and northern England. Columba's monastic rule required that the monks own nothing but bare necessities, live in a place with but one door, centre conversation on God and God's testament, refuse idle words, be prepared for suffering and death, offer forgiveness to everyone, pray constantly and until tears came, put almsgiving before all other duties, not eat till hungry, or sleep unless tired, and labour to the point of tears or till "thy perspiration come often". He sang in church, sometimes so well it could be heard five hundred paces off or even one thousand. In June 597 he died, full of joy. The last text he copied was Psalm 34: 10: "They who seek the Lord shall want no manner of thing that is good". A bard wrote at his death: "He was a prince among saints, gifted but always accessible – and disarmingly human". Columba's prayer was: "I thank You for this, my God: I am a traveller and a stranger in the world, like so many of your people before me."

**St Columbanus:** 540-615. Columbanus began his studies at the new monastery of Cleenish, on an island in Lough Erne, in the north of Ireland. These early monasteries were closer in appearance to the primitive desert monastic settlements: a collection of round wooden huts built around a small church surrounded by an embankment. For the Irish, the community and not the buildings was the heart of the monastery. Even the holiest of monks struggled, and in the early times of his calling Columbanus wrestled with his vocation and with celibacy. Columbanus was a tireless Irish monk who left Ireland around 590 when he was nearly fifty years old, with twelve monks, to work in Europe. His chief foundations were in Luxeuil and Bobbio. He was no stranger to hardship, persecution and controversy. He was also known for the strictness of the Rule of Life that he and

his followers observed, a rule that was widely adopted. Six times throughout the day and night the monks assembled in the church. Saturdays and Sunday mornings demanded double time in the church in preparation for the Day of Rest, and then the Lord's Day. Penalties were incurred for things like a cough, laughing or late arrival. His prayer was: "May we love You alone, desire You alone, contemplate You alone by day and night and keep You always in our thoughts." The biography *The Life of Columban* tells us he was a good-looking man, very aware of his weaknesses and increasingly disturbed by his own thoughts. His writings are the earliest by an Irish monk that have come down to us. He wrote an important document, *Letter to a young disciple*, in which he instructs the young disciple how to behave towards different sorts of people or how to behave towards the same people when they are at a different stage or have a particular attitude. Columbanus' cure for sin was the practice of the opposing virtue. George Goyau wrote: "The Celtic missionary genius had produced individuals of outstanding energy and had given the world magnificent apostolic personalities. Of these Columbanus was probably the greatest."

**St David:** ?-588. The main source of the life of St David was written around 1095. Tradition holds that a young woman, Nonita, was raped by a prince and that the product of that rape was David. After conceiving, Nonita, who remained celibate both before and afterwards, and lived on bread and water alone. When a preacher found himself unable to preach in the presence of the unborn child, this was taken as a sign that the child would be a great preacher. David was the founder of ten monasteries, mostly in Wales, and he imitated the ascetic ways of the Desert Fathers. His main monastery was in what is now the small Welsh city of St David's. His monks did heavy manual work and were fed only bread, vegetables and water. David said "They should labour so

hard that they want only to love one another. There should be no conversation beyond what is necessary.” When finished in the fields they returned to the monastery until the evening reading, writing and praying. When evening came, and the stroke of the bell sounded, whether only the tip of a letter or even half the form of the same letter was written, they rose quickly and left what they were doing. In silence they went into the church. When they had finished chanting the psalm, with voice and heart in complete harmony, they humbled themselves on bended knees until the appearance of the stars in the sky brought the day to a close. David taught that someone wanting to join the monastery should wait at the door for ten days and be treated with hostility: then, if he were patient throughout this treatment, he should be welcomed warmly and first put to serve under the elder who had charge of the gate. After he had toiled for a long time at this he was finally judged fit to enter the brethren’s society.

**Hild** 614 – 680 was a great niece of King Edwin of Northumbria and was baptised by Paulinus at the age of 12 or 13. She became a nun twenty years later and was urged by Aidan to live out her vocation in her homeland of Northumbria. After founding a small community at Wearmouth, she succeeded Heiu as Abbess of Hartlepool, a double monastery where men and women celibates lived side by side under her rule. Eventually she founded the great double monastery at Whitby, and there she was sought out for her wise counsel by ordinary people and rulers alike.

**Cuthbert** 635 – 687. Nothing is known of Cuthbert’s parents or early family life. They must have been well-off, though, as he was sent at age eight to be educated by a woman named Kenswith who acted as a foster-mother. Over these middle years there were many stories of miracles and prophecies of a life to come. Cuthbert was called by God to follow him on the very night Aidan



died. He was guarding sheep during the night when he suddenly saw a stream of light cut into the darkness. Angels descended and ascended taking with them a soul of exceeding brightness. The next day he learned that Aidan had died. He entered the monastery at Melrose and eventually became prior. He travelled, mostly on foot, and preached, especially in remote and rugged areas that others avoided. After the Synod of Whitby he was transferred to Lindisfarne. To learn solitude he would retreat to the tiny tidal island now known as St. Cuthbert's Island. Later he retreated to a more remote place on the island of Inner Farne. After nine years he was prevailed upon to leave and become a bishop, including two years as bishop at Lindisfarne. He was known as a man of prayer, and healing. Many came to him for advice. At times there were severe plagues that decimated the villages and monasteries. Cuthbert would travel around seeking to bring comfort and healing and hope. He was known too for his humour and sense of fun. At the age of 52, with previous illnesses recurring, he resigned his episcopal oversight and returned to Inner Farne in 686 to resume his life of prayer. He did not return alive. Against his own wishes he was buried on Lindisfarne. In 793 Vikings plundered the church though Cuthbert's shrine remained intact. Eventually the monks left Lindisfarne with Cuthbert's body, and moved to a safer place. They continued to move from place to place till, in 999, a stone Saxon church was built in Durham and Cuthbert's remains were placed in it.

**St Aidan** ? – 651. In 634, on Iona, a meeting was called in which an angry brother, Cormac, spoke about his failure to convert any person in the Kingdom of Northumbria. He was convinced that they were a stubborn, unreachable people. One man listened and his heart stirred with compassion. In his heart he heard the cry: "Come over in Northumbria and help us." Aidan prayed "O Lord, give me springs and I will water this land. I will go Lord. I will

hold this people in my heart.” He addressed Corman: “Perhaps, my brother, if you had spoken with more gentleness, and of the love of Christ, giving them the gospel to nourish them like milk is given to a tiny baby, then you would have won them and remained among them.” The Abbot offered Aidan the opportunity to go as a bishop, with a group of monks. Oswald, a Christian and the king, was delighted to welcome the new group and offered them any place in his Kingdom to establish a monastery. Aidan saw some rocks and an island and asked about that. It was then given by the king with all the timber and labour to build the monastery along with a school, farm, church, scriptorium, dairy and refectory. On one Feast of Easter, Oswald sat down to dine with Bishop Aidan. Just as Bishop Aidan raised his hand to bless the silver dish of rich food set before him, a servant who was appointed to relieve the needs of the poor came in and informed the king that a great crowd of needy folk were sitting in the road begging alms. Oswald at once ordered his own food to be broken up and distributed among them. Then the king paused and said: “Give them the silver dish on which the food is served. See that it is divided among them so that they will be able to purchase food for another day.” In any conflict between neighbouring kingdoms Aidan sought to be a broker of peace. It was Aidan who persuaded Hilda to become a nun, and when she was 33 to establish a monastery in England rather than go to France. On the night Aidan died, a shepherd lad was tending his flocks on the Northumbrian hills. As he gazed at the stars in the sky: “Methought I saw a dazzling radiance shine out of darkness, and in the midst of the streaming light a choir of angels descending to earth and lo! They were bearing away as in a globe of fire a happy soul.” The shepherd boy was Cuthbert, who later became one of the loved bishops of Lindisfarne.

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NB: a number of the texts below provided material for the notes above.

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