

Monastic Scribe XLVII: March 17, 2023

THE SAINTS COME MARCHING IN!

You don't have to be Irish to be attracted to Celtic Spirituality. Nor do you have to be Scottish, Welsh, Manx, Britton or Cornish who are also Celts. The Celts were never dominated by the Roman empire. They thus appear similar to us as aboriginal or indigenous people, as people of the first millennium predating the split of east and west, Catholic and Protestant. The remnants of the Celtic era show the people to be creation-centered, feminine as well as masculine sensitive, communal and hospitable, oral and poetic, appreciative of heroes, a pilgrim people, and mystical in expressions of nature and art.

The Celtic Saints especially portray many of these qualities. They are close to animals and nature. They have both feminine and masculine leaders. They are warriors but also poets and musicians as well as artists. I would like to share some thoughts on three of the great Celtic Christian personalities.

Saint Brigid (or Bridget) 452-524 is the secondary patron of Ireland. She was the abbess of a double monastery of women and men in Kildare. She was a feisty woman who gave away her father's belongings and wealth and coaxed the King of Leinster to give her property for her monastery. She had great concern for the poor. Her humanity and sense of humor are shown in a poem attributed to her where she desires to have all her friends in heaven sharing a vat of beer. She epitomizes both the feminine and pagan threads of the Celts. She has been called the patron of poetry, healing and the hearth. Nuns at her monastery kept an eternal flame burning in Kildare which endured until it was extinguished under Henry VIII. It has recently been re-lit by Brigidine Sisters. My friend, Sister Mary Minehan and companions have, in Brigid's spirit, ignited the town of Kildare to establish a pilgrimage center to good Brigid. And, though Ireland has become a largely secularized country, followers of Brigid, whom the Irish honor as "Mary of the Gaels," have been the force in making Brigid's feastday, February 1st, a national bank holiday in Ireland!

Other female Saints include Ita of Kileedy in County Limerick (died around 570) who educated Brendan and many Celtic Saints. Saint Hilda was also the abbess of a double monastery of men and women in the Celtic area of Northumbria in Britain. She hosted the infamous Synod of Whitby in 664.

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Let me tell you about Saint David (520-89), known as Dewi in his native Wales where he has become its national patron. David became the abbot of a monastery near his birthplace in Pembrokeshire. Here he became famous as preacher and evangelizer as well as a very ascetic man. He founded many other monasteries including contributing to Glastonbury where he built a church. The present Cathedral of David in the town named after him is Anglican. Nearby on a cliff overseeing the rough Atlantic is a chapel designating the place where the mother of David, Saint Non, gave birth to her son. Close to the chapel, and a sacred well, is a retreat house run by Sisters of Mercy. This was a memorable and dramatic place for us to celebrate the Eucharist. The feast day of Saint David is March 1st, a national feast day for all of Wales which is known to the locals as Cymru.

There are a lot of fanciful tales about Saint Patrick (387-461) but to know the real Patrick (Padraig) is to come to know and love a truly great man. He was a Roman Brit (please, he was not English. The Angles had not yet come to Britain). He was captured at the age of 16 by Irish pirates and taken to Ireland where he was a slave for six years. He was alone, cold and forsaken, but had mystical visions of the Triune God. Finally he escaped and fled to Britain and maybe France for education and ordination. Unexpectedly he heard a voice calling him back to Ireland, to love and care for the people who had enslaved him. He labored among them and respected their culture. Bishops back in Britain criticized him for his missionary openness, especially his acceptance of women. There is no real evidence of snakes nor shamrocks but Patrick left us two written works, not widely known even in Ireland until recently.

Patrick's "Confessio" is a brilliant, scripture filled, autobiography showing a very humble and loving man. He lived a simple life, endured imprisonment and criticism but persevered until his death. His other writing, "The Letter to Coroticus" is written to a Welsh chieftain who had kidnapped some Irish youths for slavery. Patrick remembered his own situation clearly and this letter is the earliest western document condemning slavery.

One June day some years ago my friend, Mairead, and I climbed Croagh Patrick, Patrick's holy mountain. A high conical mountain overlooking the plains of Mayo and the sea, I will never forget it. I felt the closeness of Patrick to God, the mystical transparency of a land full of God's people. It was Sinai. It was Tabor.

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Saints are important to me. The communion of Saints is one of the great traditions of Catholic Christianity. They walk with us, provide examples of love and heroism.

Patrick was the patron whose name I took when I received the sacrament of Confirmation. It is my pride and honor to have him in my name. I honor him and admire him. Do you have any Saints like that? You can contact me at:

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.