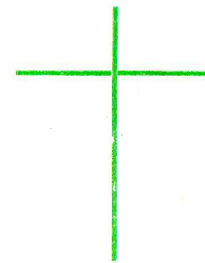


IRISH SPIRITUALITY

by

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Irish Spirituality

DIARMUID Ó LAOGHAIRE

SOME time ago we were honoured in this country by the visit of the well-known French author and historian M. Daniel-Rops.

Among other wise comments on Ireland he said: "I have been greatly interested by the efforts to revive the Irish language. I see it as a return to the culture in which the Irish Faith was rooted. Material progress is important—I have seen your industries—but in a world haunted by 'progress,' it is also important for a nation to preserve and draw strength from what is best in its past."¹ That is an attitude stressed repeatedly also by the present Pope. It is the attitude, not of a cosmopolitan, but of a European and more than a European, a Christian. It is not lacking in Ireland, thank God, but to have it brought forward in our midst by a man of the standing and sanity of M. Daniel-Rops is an encouragement to those who believe that it is vital even for Ireland's material well-being to steady and strengthen herself at her spiritual sources which are at once Irish and European in the fullest Christian sense.

In this short essay I intend to draw attention to some facets of our traditional Irish spirituality. There is an urgent need that every Irishman, whether at home or abroad, should have some knowledge and appreciation of that which is surely the best in our past, the traditional temper of our spirituality. From that best we can draw strength to face any future.

The liturgical life of the Church and the whole plan of our salvation cannot be understood apart from what we call the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. We know that where realisation of that doctrine waned, Christian life in society and in the individual also waned and disaster followed. We should expect then that in such a fervent and liturgically-minded community as the Irish Church that doctrine would be central, and indeed it is. We shall quote some examples almost at random.

If we go back to the famous glosses of the seventh or eighth centuries on the Epistles of St. Paul, now preserved in Würzburg, we will be struck by the number of times the glossators use the

¹ As reported in *Sunday Press*, 8 May 1955.

expressions “in oentid coirp Crist” and “in ellug coirp Crist”—in the union of Christ’s Body, meaning of course His Mystical Body. It is to be noted, too, that although the chief source of these glosses is the commentary of Pelagius on the Epistles, the glosses I will quote are not from Pelagius. Here then are a few typical extracts (I give the Scripture text and the Irish of the glosses in English translation):

The Mystical Body of Christ

Rom. 6,11. Do you reckon that you are dead to sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus.

Gloss: Be ye ever-living in Jesus Christ, because ye are members of His, *quia ipse est semper.*

Rom. 12,5. So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.

Gloss: We are a body to Christ and He is a head to us.

I Cor. 1,9. You are called to the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Gloss: In unity of Christ’s Body, *ut sitis filii Dei et vos.*

Eph. 1,22-23. He . . . hath made Him head over all the Church which is His Body.

Gloss: *Sancti et iusti*, they are a body to Him: (it is) *Christus* who is the head, the saints who are the body.

Eph. 5,1. Be ye therefore followers of God as most dear children.

Gloss: Since ye are members of Christ and ye are a body to Him.

Phil. 1,1. Paul and Timothy, the servants of Jesus Christ: to all the saints in Christ Jesus.

Gloss: In the unity of Christ’s Body (interesting, as that is the general meaning of “in Christ Jesus” in St. Paul’s writings).

Col. 3,10. Putting on the new, him who is renewed unto knowledge, according to the image of Him who created him.

Gloss: So that we shall be in Christ’s form, to wit, in unity of His Body.

I Thess. 1,4. Knowing, brethren, beloved of God, your election.

Gloss: Whereby ye have been called, so that ye are in Christ’s Body.

II Tim. 1,9. Who hath delivered us and called us by His holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose.

Gloss: Because it hath remained for us to be in union with Christ’s Body.

Tit. 2,14. Who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us

from all iniquity and might cleanse to Himself a people acceptable.

Gloss: In union with Christ’s Body.

It is interesting to find this Pauline doctrine in the archaic Irish homily preserved at Cambrai:

For this is its usage, if there be any little ailment on a man’s body, if it burns a place, whether in his foot or in his hand or in his fingers, the disease inflames the whole body. Thus it is fitting for us ourselves that every suffering and every ailment that is on his neighbours should inflame every part, for we are all members unto God, as saith the apostle: *Quis scandalizatur et ego non uror? quis infirmatur et ego non infirmor?* . . . the holy apostle has said this from the abundance of his charity; every one’s sickness was sickness to him, offence to anyone was offence to him, every one’s infirmity was infirmity to him. Even so it is fitting for every one of us that he suffer with every one in his hardship and in his poverty and in his infirmity. We see in these wise words of the sage that fellow-suffering is counted as a kind of a cross.

We can see what a reality this doctrine was for the ancient Irish when we read that the lovable Colmcille imposed fifteen years of penance on one who had sinned against another, “for that unfaithfulness and the contempt thou hast shown to a true member of Christ.” This attitude was characteristic of the great saint, according to the writings ascribed to him. We may put down at random some verses:

Woe to him who carps at a cleric
at the time of listening to the word of God;
it is not the cleric who is reviled thereby,
but the Son of Mary of the great churches.

Woe to him who finds fault with the man in orders
who is in the place of Christ the perfect;
whether it be true or false the statement,
its reward is hell!

Go to Communion
without finding fault with the man in orders;
tho’ he should do you every evil,
yield to the Body in his hand.

Naturally we should expect to find a similar echo in the monastic rules, and of course we do. In the rule of Ailbhe of Emly, for instance, we read:

Their Father is noble God,
their mother is holy Church;
let it not be mouth-humility,
let each have compassion on his brother.

In the long metrical Rule of Echtghus Ua Cuanáin of Ros Cré, which is really a treatise on the Blessed Sacrament, we find the doctrine clearly expressed. Of the mixing of the water with the wine in the Mass we read:

Thro' the water, fair the judgment,
is understood the body of the faithful;
Christ, the head of all without blame, is understood
thro' the smooth wine without peril.

As are joined together
the water and the truly fair wine,
so are joined, noble and perfect the message,
Christ and the Church.

The believers are the body,
Christ is the firm, beautiful head.
Of them both, it is no small matter,
did completeness come to the Church.

In the treatise on the Mass from the eighth or ninth century Talaght Missal we are told that the altar is a "figure of the persecution of the Christians, wherein they bear tribulation in union with the Body of Christ" ("in ellach Cuirp Crist," as in the glosses). If we come down now to a later age, the fourteenth century, when the great *Leabhar Breac* was put together, we find throughout the Passions and Homilies edited by Atkinson from that book, the same sense of community in the Body of Christ. In the homily on the Lord's Supper we read once more the familiar words:

For the wine signifies Christ, as He Himself says in the Gospel, "I am the true vine." What the water signifies, how-

ever, is the congregation of the believers who are accounted a body to Christ, as St. John affirms in the Apocalypse, when he says (17,15), "The many waters which were shown to me are the many peoples today in the New Testament" [Note here a gloss on St. John's words]. For it is fitting that the assembly of the believers remain always in Christ. That is why during the Sacrifice he will put wine and water into the mass-chalice.

In the same homily we have the following beautiful passage:

In three ways do the holy commentators understand the Body of Christ: the first Body is the humanity born from the Virgin Mary without loss to her virginity; the second Body is the holy Church, that is, the perfect assembly of all the believers whose head is the Saviour, Jesus Christ, Son of the living God; the third Body is the holy Scripture, in which is set forth the mystery of the Body and Blood of Christ.

The Influence of the Monastery

In any study of Irish spirituality and especially of the spirituality of the ancient Irish Church it is essential to take into account monastic practice. In the early Irish Church the spiritual life of monk and layman was of a common weaving. It is well known that the Irish took to the monastic life with enthusiasm from the beginning. It appears that generally the monastic and the parish church were identical. It was not surprising then that the faithful should imitate the devotions of the monks. We are familiar even today with the like. Wherever you have a church of one of the Orders, there you will have a large number of the laity who have attached themselves to the Order, by becoming members, for instance, of the Third Order, or by taking a special part in the devotions and good works of the Order. Significant of the close relations of the ancient Irish laity with the monastery is the common word for a people or community, *muintir*, which derives, according to the great Thurneysen, from the Latin *monasterium*.

Naturally, the chief duty of the monks in their church was liturgical, the proper celebration of Mass and the Divine Office, and we know from the detailed prescriptions for these ceremonies, especially for Mass, that they were exactly carried out. Negligence would be severely punished. Apart from these major ceremonies it is unlikely that the faithful would be found all gathered together in

the church. I do not intend to describe in detail the Mass or the part the people took in it. They did indeed, as did the ancient Christians in general, take a greater part in it than we do—at least externally—today. Of course when we remember how intensely Latin was cultivated in those days, we may be sure that a great part of the laity could understand the language and follow more easily the liturgy. The churches, even the largest of them, would not have been as big as so many of our immense modern ones, where the altar is distant from most of the congregation. From the number of small stone oratories still standing from ancient days we can see how small those centres of the Mass really were. The people would thus have a much better chance of seeing and hearing the ceremonies and of taking an active part in them.

When we consider the division of ancient Ireland into its eighty or more small *tuatha* or states, we can appreciate how closely the people of each state would be bound with their bishop or priests. They were so many close communities, but yet with a consciousness, as we have seen, of forming part of the greater community of the Church or Body of Christ. As with us on Good Friday, it was customary to offer prayers at Mass for the different classes in the Church. These prayers were said perhaps after the sermon, as was the custom in every liturgy except the Roman. We are told in the medieval satire, *The Vision of Mac Conglinne*, that Mac Conglinne, the wandering and satirising scholar, gave a sermon in the morning in the presence of the King of Munster and the monks of Cork and

when the sermon was ended, prayers were offered for the King, that he might have length of life and that there might be prosperity in Munster during his reign. Prayers were also offered up for the lands and the tribes and for the province as well, as is usual after a sermon.

In the Rule of Mochuda we have another instance of that community-consciousness:

Masses for Christians
and for all those in orders,
Mass for those in distress
from the least to the greatest.

We are told in one of the lives of St. Brigid that, although in Ireland, she

heard and beheld Masses celebrated in the city of Rome and at the tombs of the apostles, SS. Peter and Paul. . . . Daily do I experience a great joy of spirit while I hear through divine inspiration holy songs and spiritual canticles and the strains of heavenly organs. I am also able to hear every day those Sacred Masses which are offered to the Almighty in different parts of the world, as if I were present at their celebration.

All I have said or quoted so far merely goes to exemplify and confirm what Father Donnchadh Ó Floinn has so well said in his essay, *The Integral Irish Tradition*:

The Irish Church had a deep sense of communion with the Body of Christ at prayer: I mean that it had a congregational quality of worship. Yet I am not using the word *liturgical* to describe it, because that might be taken as meaning that it had developed forms of worship that were precise and concise and scrupulous in adhering to received forms.

The unknown homilist of the *Leabhar Breac* has given us the supreme moment of union in prayer and sacrifice:

What believer doubts that at the raising of his voice by the priest at the sacrifice, heaven opens and the choirs of angels come down there and the heavenly and earthly Church are joined and united?

As in every other Christian country, the Mass gave rise to certain idioms that found their way into everyday speech. We have a striking one which shows us how great a place the Mass had in the life of the people. This is an excerpt from the seventh Charter in the Book of Kells:

Gilla Críost mac Manchán bought from the sons of Beollán the land on thy gospel-hand going down towards Áth Catain or on thy blessing-hand up from the ford.

The gospel-hand was the left hand, because during Mass the missal is changed to the left side of the altar and there the gospel is sung or read. The gospel side long ago used to be in the north of the church, so that the gospel could be announced towards the north, in the direction of those peoples that were still in the shadow of

paganism, for in former times the north stood for cold and evil and was therefore regarded as being in the power of the devil. It is clear that the right hand was the hand of blessing, the Church following the Jewish custom.

The Psalter

We may now turn to another object of great veneration among our ancestors, namely the official and community prayer of the Church, the Psalter. Throughout Christendom this used to be the first reading book of the child. In the life of Colmán mac Luacháin we are told that four sons were born to Luachán and

those children were baptised by four pious priests . . . and at the end of a month were confirmed and at the end of seven years were taken to spiritual directors, and with them they read their psalms and hymns and all the order of the Church.

It is told of St. Ciarán of Clonmacnois that he used, as a child, to read his psalms with St. Diarmaid. The psalms were for long the spiritual food of the individual and the faithful as a body in Europe. The Irish had a vast respect for them and for David who composed most of them. We still possess some of their ancient commentaries on them; David himself is represented on many ancient stones and crosses throughout the country, usually with his lyre in hand. The number of the psalms—150—was much honoured, “na trí caogaíd,” the three fifties, as they used to say—“three fifties of warriors,” “three fifties of praises” and so forth. We know that Mary’s Psalter (i.e. the Rosary) was modelled on the Psalter itself, the three fifties of *Aves* for the faithful who could not, whether through lack of Latin or time, sing or recite the Psalter. In the year 1580 a visitor to Ireland, possibly a Spanish or Italian cleric, noted some customs that he found strange. He wrote in Latin. “At the Our Father during the Mass they rise and listen to it standing,” he said of the Irish. When the Our Father is sung during the Office it is customary to stand, and I suppose that gave rise to that fine custom during Mass. I do not know how old the custom was. We are told that the ancient Irish used to stand during the whole of Mass, except for the Consecration.

That same visitor mentions another custom of considerable interest: “At midnight they rise for prayer and meditation, to which some give a full hour, others half an hour.” And he adds the homely

detail, “and at the same hour they always light the fire.” It will be admitted that this practice is no small sign of fervour of faith. Lest, however, one might consider such testimony as an exaggeration or that our good visitor had his leg pulled by some serious-faced Irishman, we have other evidence to show that such a custom was in vogue among ordinary Irish people in the sixteenth century. In the year 1645 was published *Parrthas an Anma*, a book of catechetical instruction and devotion, and incidentally a book greatly prized in that and the following dark centuries, as the number of manuscript copies of it still extant testify. The author was Antoin Gearnon, O.F.M. We quote here in translation most of the eighth chapter:

Of Matins

Q. What should the Christian do at midnight?

A. He should perform matins and say the canonical hours or the Hours of Mary or the Crown of Jesus or the Rosary or the Litanies of Jesus, Mary or the saints or any prayer that God intimates to him, according to his disposition, and pray for the souls in purgatory; in addition he should spend some time thinking on the Passion of Christ, on his last end and on the souls in hell and in purgatory who sleep not, but are being burned in unquenchable fires.

Let him consider likewise that the angels and saints in heaven are not sleeping, but are for ever praising God, and let him imitate them especially at that time; for there is no better time for prayer than that, since the mind is then quiet and at rest and free from worldly care and trouble.

Q. Is there any other reason besides that for making these prayers at midnight rather than at any other time?

A. Yes: firstly, because at that hour Christ was born and also, according to some of the holy fathers, will come to judgment.

As well as that, in the Old Testament it was customary to pray at that time, whence the Psalmist and King, David, says that although many things demanded his attention: *Media nocte surgebam ad confitendum tibi*. Ps. 118—I rose at midnight to give praise to thee. Christ our Lord taught the same thing in the New Testament, as we find in St. Luke the Evangelist in the 6th c. *Erat Iesus pernoctans in oratione Dei* i.e. Jesus spent the night in prayer; and most of the saints of the Church imitated Him in this matter.

This fine custom is still kept up as a rule by the religious Orders and by other holy people. *It is not long since the same holy practice was common throughout Ireland among all sorts of people who loved God and had a care for the health of their souls* (Italics mine).

We have even earlier evidence that the laity in Ireland were given to this holy practice. The following extract from one of 150 poems attributed to Colmcille in the fifteenth century ms. Laud 615 is clearly advice for lay-people:

Go to matins,
we have great need of it;
you know not but that before prime comes
the King may bring you to death.

Attend Sunday Mass,
great is our awe of it;
you know not whether before Monday comes
the grave will not be your bed.

The bed in which you are
with your fair loving wife,
not more likely your rising
than your being dead tomorrow.

In a poem by Tadhg óg Ó hUiginn written in the fifteenth century we read:

I am slow to rise
in time for matins;
pardon me this, setting against it
every cold night he (Dominic) rose.

Going still further back, to the great religious poet of the thirteenth century, Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, we read:

Neglect not prayer-time
thro' love of sleep or pleasure;
the greater thy merit in rising
if matin time be cold.

and in another poem of his:

I am lazy to rise
for matins, nodding and sleeping;
weaken devil's bond on me;
relieve me of the misery of my sleep.

Of course, as happens with the holiest of devotions, there is a tendency to exaggerate the virtue of this practice, as we may read in these two marginal quatrains from the *Leabhar Breac*:

Altho' you do constantly much evil,
much of injustice and imperfection,
you will receive forgiveness of the Son of God
provided you do matins.

There is none of you, either old or young,
either pilgrim or pure,
who will look on the face of the Son of God
unless you do matins.

I do not think that we can doubt that matins was a common devotional practice in Ireland "among all sorts of people who loved God and had a care for the health of their souls," not only in medieval times, but even in the early days of the Faith here. We know that the custom prevailed from the earliest times in the Church. The ancient Christians called it *Vigilia*, the Vigil. They were filled with the idea of Our Lord's second coming, the *Parousia*, which they believed would take place at midnight. Early on Sunday too, Our Lord rose from the dead. Therefore, before the Mass of Easter Day and the other Sundays of the year the faithful were wont to watch and pray during the previous night. Should not the restored Easter Vigil find a deep echo in the Irish heart? Evidently at the time of that visitor of 1580 matins for lay-people were so unique as to call for comment from one who must have had a fair acquaintance with the Faith in Europe. The devotion appears to have been a community one and undoubtedly, *pace* our visitor and Antoin Gearnon, there was also private prayer and meditation. We can safely say that this is an outstanding instance of monastic influence on the spiritual life of the Irish faithful. In modern Ireland a communal Vigil is still observed, most fittingly, on Cruach Phádraig and at Loch Dearth. There are undoubtedly many generous souls who would add "Amen" to Antoin Gearnon's plea:

We pray everyone who has the love of God in his heart and a like care for his soul's health, not to give up this good custom through laziness or comfort, but to do matins with diligence, after the example of Christ and the saints, and to beg God with fervour to give grace to himself and to his neighbour in this life, and life everlasting in the next.

There was another devotion very much esteemed and practised by our ancestors, namely, private and communal prayer for the Church suffering in purgatory. We find very often in the old books reference to the "écndairc," that is, requiem or intercession for the dead, whether by the Mass or prayers. The 13th rule of St. Colmcille demands of the monk, "diligence in the performing of intercession, as if every dead Christian was a particular friend of yours." In this connection the old Irish were much given to the long psalm 118, to which they gave the name, "Biait", from the opening word, "Beati." "The Biait is the best prayer there is." "Better than every prayer is the Biait to save the soul from demons." An amusing story is told in the Book of Lismore (15th century) about the power of this psalm:

Mael Póil Ua Cinaetha, the abbot of the monastery of Cill Beagáin had been discussing astrology with another monk. Afterwards in his sleep he saw coming towards him a gospel-nun [i.e. apparently, a nun under the guidance of a spiritual director or soul-friend] who had died six months before. She raised a great complaint. "How are things there, woman?" he said. "Much you care," said she, "discussing astrology and not saying my requiem ('écndairc'). Woe to you," she said. "What requiem do you want from me, woman?" he said. "The Biait, of course," said she, "the Biait after the Biait, the Biait on the Biait, the Biait beneath (or above) the Biait," said she, all in one breath, demanding that the Biait be recited often for her. So that there is no requiem, except the Mass for the dead, that is held in greater honour by God than the Biait, as was said:

The best of wealth on earth
and that a man give it up for his soul's sake,
yet is God more grateful to him
for the continual recital of the Biait.

We know too of another ancient custom concerning the dead. It is related in the life of Colmán mac Luacháin (a life, by the way,

by no means trustworthy, but full of valuable information about religious and other matters in pre-Norman Ireland) that "after Mass a round was made of the graveyard." The custom is mentioned elsewhere also—an individual or a number "making the round of the graveyard on Sunday." Doubtless in procession such prayers as the Biait would be recited.

The Litany

Another type of liturgical and community prayer always beloved of Christians was the litany. The Irish too were greatly attached to this form of prayer. It seems to be (or to have been) a characteristic of the Irishman that he likes completeness and dislikes leaving gaps. That accounts for much of what is tedious in our literature. The writer or poet is not content to leave things to our imagination or sense of logic, but must describe or enumerate in detail things that needed but to be mentioned. That defect destroys form and balance in writing. In the best (and it is a big best) of our literature there is a notable discipline and economy of word and description. It is, I think, because of this passion for completeness (study some of those magnificent, crowded pages of the Book of Kells!) that the Irish took to the litany and composed such wonderful litanies themselves. Naturally too the litany is a form of prayer in itself soothing to soul and mind and capable of inspiring a Christian. Certainly no prayer apart from the Mass prayers emphasises more the solidarity of the Church.

None of our native litanies are more marvellous than the litanies of the saints of Ireland, in which groups of holy people in thousands, *living* and dead, both Irish and foreigners settled in Ireland, pilgrims, both incoming and outgoing, are called on. You would say that nobody with any claim at all to sanctity was left out! Here are a few examples:

The seven hundred and seventeen holy bishops of those in the grace of the Lord in great Cork, with Barra and Neassán, *quorum nomina scripta sunt in celis, hos omnes inuoco in auxilium meum per Iesum.*

The thrice fifty men of orders, true, royal heroes each one of the Irish, who went on pilgrimage in one company with Abbán mac uí Chormaic. *per Iesum.*

Three fifties of currachs of Roman pilgrims who settled in Uí Imele under Notal . . . *hos omnes inuoco, per Iesum Christum.*

The three thousand anchorites who assembled with Mumhu

(or in Munster) to discuss one question together with Bishop Ibhar, to whom the angels of God brought the great feast that St. Brigid made to Jesus in her heart, *hos omnes etc.*,

The foreigners in Saillide . . .

The Saxons in Cluain Mucceda . . .

Some of the titles given to Our Lord in these litanies are very beautiful and show true affection and personal love. In English alas! I am afraid they may not sound quite so warm or natural. From the litany *De Confessione*:

O Love above loves, forgive
 O first priest, o chief priest, forgive
 O true priest, true physician, true prophet, true friend, forgive.

O forgiving heart, forgive
 O Son of the sister [i.e. Mary our sister], forgive
 O true Brother, forgive.

From the Litany of Jesus (II in Plummer's *Irish Litanies*):

O holy Jesus
 O gentle friend
 O true, loving Brother
 O clement, meek and friendly One

For the sake of thy kindness and affection and charity and mercy, hear the entreaty of this poor one and miserable wretch, who on behalf of the whole Christian Church and on my own behalf, begs for the acceptance of this sacrifice.

For the sake of thy own Body and Blood which is sacrificed on all the holy altars which are in the Christian churches of the world.

It seems to me that this litany may have been recited at Mass. The second last invocation above would be fitting in the mouth of either layman or priest. We see again that awareness of the universal Church which we have been stressing in this essay as a dominant note of ancient Irish Catholicism.

Hospitality

There is yet another devotion of the Irish and it may truly be said that it is a devotion, or practice of piety, which is quite charac-

teristic. We may call it hospitality, although "almsgiving" or "charity" might describe it equally well. For the ancient Irish the guest was Christ. So it was also, for instance, among the ancient Egyptian monks. We have endless examples in Irish literature and the lives of the Irish saints of this devotion to Christ and the miracles that on occasion are said to have followed on it. We cannot stress enough the reverence the Irish had for the famous words of Christ at the Last Judgment as given by St. Matthew in the 25th chapter. Those words, understood so literally by our holy ancestors and followed out so faithfully, are the key to ancient Irish sanctity and all its missionary zeal. That is the deep motif in all our religious literature and helps to explain the lovable humanity of the saints, even if usually joined to great austerity. Once again, with this text a reality for the generality of the ancient Irish Christians, we see that the whole idea of Christ's Mystical Body was not for them a notional one.

There are six divisions [says the homilist in the *Leabhar Breac*] of that alms (that is given to the neighbour's body)—food to poor, drink to thirsty, clothes to naked, kindness and hospitality to those who need it, visiting the sick, humility and service towards those who are in prison.

Said Colmcille:

A share of what you have to the hungry man;
 it is Jesus who has demanded it of you.

And another:

O King of stars!
 whether my house be dark or bright,
 never shall it be closed against any one;
 may Christ not close His house against me.

And here is a modern echo of that from Seán Ó Conaill of Uíbh Ráthach:

I am Cian of the golden crests,
 more lasting my wealth than my life,
 I never put anyone from my house,
 nor was I myself put out of God's house.

Nothing could be more explicit than this from the ancient past:

If there be a guest in your house
and you conceal aught from him,
'tis not the guest who will be without it,
but Jesus, Mary's Son.

From the life of Colmán mac Luacháin:

Great is the harm,
Christ's guest-house neglected;
if it have but the name of Christ's house of fame,
it is as tho' Christ were houseless.

It is certain that that fine custom of hospitality spread from the monasteries. In the Latin life of St. Crónán there is related a pleasant little incident in which the "villain" is a type of the immature and rather censorious religious:

Once when St. Mochaemhóg came with many others to St. Crónán, St. Crónán made a great supper for him out of little material, for St. Crónán was generous and charitable and did not keep things in reserve. And the cellarer of the monastery had nothing that night but one container of ale and a modest dish of butter and a little meal. When these were placed before St. Crónán he blessed them in the name of Christ and ordered them to be prepared and served to the community and the guests. And at the supper, these things multiplying through the blessing of St. Crónán, one hundred and twenty men received their fill of what they wanted. While they were feasting thus far into the night, a certain novice (or lay-brother)² said in a loud voice, "I see there will be no matins celebrated in this place tonight." To whom St. Crónán said, "Brother, in the guest is received Christ; therefore at the coming of Christ we ought to feast and rejoice. But if you had not said that, the angels of God themselves would have prayed on our behalf here this night." And afterwards when the feasting was ended, the saints gave thanks to God and blessed His gifts.

One could multiply texts from all the ages of Irish literature to illustrate the native love of hospitality. We have it in verse and prose and proverb—"níor chuaigh fial go hifreann," they say in our day.

² *Conversus* or *athlaoch* i.e. ex-layman.

It can be truly said that that spirit of hospitality, especially towards Christ's poor, flourished—and flourishes—as long as the Faith meant personal love and service of Christ. It is clear, I think, even from the necessarily limited amount of evidence provided in this essay that the Irish were not accustomed to think of Christ apart from His members, i.e. His Church. One other quotation from the homilist of the *Leabhar Breac* will help to bring this most important point into relief:

Nature is against it [homicide], for we are the children of one father and one mother, Adam and Eve, and we have one spiritual father and mother, Christ and the Church. If so, since all of the race of Adam are doubly brethren, it is unnatural in us to murder one another.

And in another place he says, as St Augustine said before him:

For he truly possesses love who loves his friend in God and his enemy for God.

Space will not allow me to treat of other aspects of Irish spirituality, the attitude of the ancient Irish towards exile, for instance—and they had developed a whole theology or asceticism of exile. We can sum it all up by saying that in their mind there was no true exile or pilgrimage, save for love of Christ and His gospel.

Some of those who have written on ancient Irish Catholicism have tended to emphasise the bizarre and even pagan elements of it. As regards traces of paganism, certainly there are such here and there, but is that any wonder when paganism was still such a recent thing throughout the whole country and when we realise how attached the people were to their ancient traditions and so slow to break with the past? Whatever traces there were of paganism, we have no need to prove that Faith and practice were in the fullest sense Catholic. By their fruits you shall know them.

Ancient and Modern

If we compare ancient Irish piety with our own, we cannot fail to be struck by the difference. Popular devotions have increased greatly in modern times. Is it not strange that the faithful of today take a greater external part in minor devotions than in the major liturgical devotion of the Mass? The devotion of the Miraculous

Medal is proof that the people like to pray together with the priest in the Church. Long ago in Ireland—and throughout Christendom—it was at Mass that the people prayed together and made their common offering—for the Church and all its members, as we have seen.

We have seen too that the most popular prayer was the public prayer of the Church, the Psalter. The psalms left their mark on all other popular prayer, as anyone who is familiar with Irish prayer throughout the centuries will testify. One other characteristic of ancient Irish piety which I cannot treat of here was their great devotion towards and trust in their own saints—they even put the greatest of them in the Mass. Yet this by no means lessened their veneration for the great saints of the Church—their devotion to Sts. Peter and Paul, St. John the Baptist and the other apostles and early saints was surpassed by no other people. In fact they honoured their own saints by seeking parallels between them and the apostles etc. It is superfluous to mention their affection for the Mother of God: It is finally worthy of note that when Ireland was truly Irish then was she least insular and most Catholic.

Irish and European

As I began this essay with a quotation from a fine modern French thinker, I should like to end it with a quotation from another distinguished Frenchman. Although he speaks of his own country, I think that any thoughtful Irishman who has persevered till now in the reading of this essay will have no difficulty in applying the words to his own beloved country. The passage is from a paper entitled *Pérennité du Message de Saint Colomban*, read at the Congress held in honour of St. Colomban at Luxeuil a few years ago and the author is M. André Varagnac (Conservateur au Musée des Antiquités Nationales):

Are we not once again face to face with a materialism whose victory seems in the eyes of some to be a foregone conclusion, just like that won by Caesar and his land-surveyors over Vercingetorix and his druids? Have we not evidence before us, that, lacking an ideal, our beloved and most dear fatherland no longer possesses the vigour to be a fatherland and seems to be about to turn itself over to some distant fatherland, some imaginary fatherland?

In face of this dreadful uncertainty, has not the French intellectual a duty to question himself and to ask of himself in

the presence of the giant stature of St. Columban if he has fully assessed all that heritage of which he in common with the people of France is the bearer—but of which he is the *responsible* bearer?

Have we really defined the spiritual problem of France when we have proclaimed, even pledging our life to it, that our choice is Rome and Greece? For my part, I do not believe that they are the sole constituents of our West. Too many archaeological treasures show it to be at once richer and more fervent, fervent with an ever-ready faith, without which a thousand years later the flame of the Crusades would have been an historical impossibility; fervent with a Celtic idealism, without which the history of our France would have been but a miserable growth.

And (why hide it?) such an ancient idealism is more in keeping with our modern West, the West of tomorrow, than strict Romanism, than pure Latinism. If we really wish to seize an opportunity of making good the terrible material ruin of France and the Germanic countries, we must look for it, not merely in industrial statistics, but in a study of this Celtic spirituality, which within us and deep down in us, is more powerful and more creative than our Latin heritage.

And what vision will lead us more surely to this end than St. Columban, than that high message of the Celts which rests ever in the depths of the continental soul—than this hero of the Faith who marked out by his very life the bond that unites the distant Isles and the Latin country where he died?

DIARMUID Ó LAOGHAIRE

