

The Church of the Good Shepherd
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It was a misty spring morning when the Irish monk Brendan set out in his small ship, with fourteen other monks, bound for parts unknown. He was in his early fifties and he had had a rather full and adventurous life. Born near Tralee in County Kerry in western Ireland, he had been ordained a priest, whereupon he took to founding monasteries across Ireland including Clonfert in County Galway and the Aran Islands. He had also visited Argyll off the coast of Scotland and travelled to Wales and finally to Brittany, on the northern coast of France. Between 512 and 530 Brendan built further monasteries at Ardfert and Shanakeel, at the foot of Mount Brandon. From the peak, the second highest in Ireland, he would pray, looking out at the open sea. Some time ago he had learned from an elderly monk a rumor about an “Island of the Blessed,” an earthy paradise. Unable to get the thought of it out of his head, he and a band of fellow monks set out in a small ship to find this promised land. The 9th-century tale of his journeys, the *Navagatio*, describes his fantastic voyage. The tale survives in 120 manuscripts and was immensely popular in Medieval times. This was in part due to the charming episodes it relates, such as the time he and the other monks stopped on an island to celebrate Easter Mass. Once ashore, they lit a fire, whereupon the island started to move. After running back to the ship, Brendan and his companions discovered that they had landed not on an island but on the back of a whale! All told, his seven-year voyage took Brendan and company to Scotland, England, Iceland and Greenland, and perhaps even North America. The jury is out on this last stop, but it's not impossible. For in 1978 a man sailed a similar boat along the route indicated in the tale and landed in Newfoundland thirteen months later.

The story of Brendan's voyage, as fanciful as it may be, illustrates an important characteristic of Celtic Christianity, namely the propensity of the Celts to wander, to roam, to go on pilgrimage. They seem forever to have been on the move, crisscrossing the Irish sea, the Minch, the Bristol channel and even the English Channel and the North Sea. Indeed, if someone were ever to make a movie about early Celtic Christianity, one would be tempted to call it “monks on the move,” if not “nuns on the run”! They even had a name for their wandering--*peregrinatio* in Latin. We get the name for the peregrine falcon from this word. The word itself is almost untranslatable, but its essence is caught in the 9th century story of three Irishmen drifting over the sea from Ireland for seven days, in a small ship without oars, coming ashore in Cornwall and then being brought to the court of King Alfred. When he asked them where they were going, they answered that they “stole away because we wanted for the love of God to be on a pilgrimage, we cared not where.” This wonderful response expresses well the motivation for these journeying saints: they journeyed out of an inner prompting, a passionate conviction that they *must* go wherever the Spirit might take them.

While the Celts as a race had long been a restless people, spreading gradually westward across Europe, we can't discount the influence of early missionaries like St. Patrick, who left their homelands to live among the Celts for the sake of Christ. Patrick, at age 48, the equivalent of 75 today, left his British homeland at the urging of a dream, to return to Ireland, where he had been enslaved as a youth, to serve Christ as an exile.

The wanderings of the Celtic pilgrims, Patrick's spiritual descendants, were undertaken for the same reason, as part of a desire to know and do the divine will. We see this radical form of pilgrimage in Genesis 12:1, which we just read: "Now the Lord said to Abram, go from your country and from your kindred in your father's house to the land that I will show you." When a Celtic monk responded to the same call, it meant that he became an exile, stripping himself of family and possessions, rooting out from his heart and mind all his own aims and desires, and becoming a stranger to his homeland. For the Celtic monks, this was part of a quest for holiness, a renunciation of the comforts and distractions of home. But for some at least it was also undertaken as a penance. This was undoubtedly the case for St Columcille.

Columcille was a highborn Irishman who could have been a king or even high king, but he instead became a monk. While forsaking the crown, he nevertheless remained a charismatic and strong leader, founding more than thirty monasteries in Ireland by one count, including those at Derry, Durrow, and Kells. He got into trouble, though, when he secretly copied a psalm book belonging to St. Finnian. The disagreement—the first case of copyright infringement—was resolved with Columcille returning his copied book. When tribal warfare broke out not long after and Columcille's side was victorious, he got his copied psalm book as part of the spoils. It was a pyrrhic victory, though, for he was then exiled, either as punishment inflicted by church leadership or as a self-imposed penance. And so Columcille, now 42-years-old, departed from Ireland in 563 along with several other monks. Sailing until he could see his beloved Ireland no longer, he and his companions landed on the island of Iona, off Scotland's west Coast. There, he established a monastery from which he and his fellow monks would evangelize the Picts, the Celtic peoples of Scotland. Columcille would go head-to-head with many native leaders to call them to faith and belief in his beloved Druid, Christ. And he acquired a reputation for many healing miracles and the taming of wild beasts—including the Loch Ness monster! Through his efforts and the efforts of his monks, Iona became a center of religious life for the entire Celtic world.

Indeed, from there another mission, this time to England, was undertaken. In 617 the Northumbrian king was ousted from the throne and his son Oswald sought sanctuary among the monks of Iona and was baptized there. Their hospitality was rewarded in 632, when Oswald regained the throne and, as his first action, invited the abbey to send a missionary down to convert his people. The task fell to a monk named Aidan who went and established an abbey on the tiny island of Lindisfarne off the Northumbrian coast. From Lindisfarne, his monks penetrated far down into the areas of England held by pagan Angles and Saxons, evangelizing and founding communities among them.

Yet the greatest of the Celtic missionaries has to be Columbán. Columbán was born in Leinster, southeastern Ireland in 543 and took on the monastic life in Bangor, Northern Ireland, becoming a learned theologian and instructor. In this monastery by the sea, he would watch the ship's coming and going to Scotland and elsewhere. After 30 years there, in his late 40s, the call to be a pilgrim came to him. With the usual twelve disciples, he set out for Burgundy, modern-day France, where he established monasteries at Annegray, Luxeuil, and Fontaines. These three monasteries in turn founded 53 other monastic communities in the ensuing years. When Columbán got into hot water with the local bishops and rulers for criticizing their excesses and moral laxity, Columbán and his entourage moved on to Switzerland and Austria. One of his

disciples, Gall, stayed behind in Switzerland to found the great community at Saint Gallen. Columbán himself moved on to found a monastery in Bregenz in Austria and probably others as well. Finally, in his 70s, he crossed the Alps into Italy where he settled at Bobbio near Milan, founding a monastery there that was to surpass all others in fame and achievement. He died there in 615, sadly never having made it to the Slavs in the east as he had hoped. I mean, talk about ambitious!

Wherever the Celtic missionary monks traveled, they set out to establish what Columcille called "colonies of heaven" within the land that was largely pagan, bearing the Gospel from Ireland to Scotland, and from there to England, and on to the Continent, ranging as far east as Poland and Romania and as far south as Taranto in the arch of Italy's boot. Their influence continued even after the missionary baton was passed from the Irish to their Anglo-Saxon (English) students, students like Boniface who evangelized tribes in Germany, and Alcuin who became a leading scholar and teacher at the court of Charlemagne, helping the Frankish king to establish the Holy Roman Empire and launch the Carolingian Renaissance. In this way, through several generations of sustained mission, Celtic Christianity re-evangelized Europe, and helped bring Europe out of the Dark Ages.

Fascinating, isn't it, this "forgotten history" of Europe? But aside from antiquarian interest, we may well ask what we might learn from these missionary monks, What we should take away? There are a number of things, but I want to focus on one in particular: the fact that for the Celts, mission was a group activity. In contrast to modern evangelistic efforts, which center around a lone evangelist, these missionary monks demonstrate the effectiveness of approaching mission as a *corporate* enterprise. While we know the names of particularly charismatic individuals, they did not travel or evangelize alone. Patrick had his entourage of priests, deacons and students. Aidan brought with him twelve monks when he established Lindisfarne, as did Columbán when he embarked on his mission to the Continent. Columcille took with him practically a whole diocese when he established Iona--20 bishops, 40 priests, 30 deacons, and 50 students! Each group was a community on the move, the whole group united in mission. It wasn't that they had an evangelism committee or hired a revivalist preacher. The whole congregation was involved, a monastery in mission.

This was key to why the Celts had such success in their spreading the Gospel to the pagan tribes of Europe, and how we can better share the Good News. Few congregations or clergy today think and act the way the Celts did. In most cities, the churches that are growing are only responding to people who take the initiative to visit the church. Imagine what it would be like if our church followed the example of the Celtic missionaries and went out as teams into the community around us, to the unchurched in our neighborhood, to the 20-somethings in the apartments, to the black and brown folks south of us. What would it look like if our church was "a mission" to them? What if we saw ourselves, like the Celtic monasteries, as a 'mission outpost' here on the south bank?

I read an article recently that asked: "Is your church a monument or a mission station?" It proceeded to give several signs in the tradition of "You might be a redneck if...", only it was, "Your church might be a monument if...." Your church might be a monument if it is visited infrequently, like only on Sundays; if it emphasizes sacred objects, not just the sacraments but

decorations and furnishing that were given by Great Aunt Edna thirty years ago and can thenceforth never be moved. Or your church might a monument if...it looks backward to past glories, and honors the dead more than caring about those who are alive today; if it is surrounded by ceremony and tradition; or if it is narrow in focus, doing only those things that it has always done. By contrast, a church that is a “mission station” is one that is practical, flexible, forward-looking, focused on the living, and is visited frequently because it is trying new things. We might quibble a bit with the particulars of this list, but you get the idea. Churches that are “mission outposts,” and not monuments to a dead faith, are ones that are passionate about passing on the Gospel, and “making Christ known,” and they look for opportunities to commend their grace-filled way of life to others.

Fact is, the Celtic Church had something that is sadly lacking in the modern church - a sense of adventure. Many become Christians because of the security there is in Jesus, but there are many others who long to take risks for Christ. Both young and old need the opportunity to *peregrinatio* - to venture new things for Christ. Indeed, I hope you noticed that Patrick, Columcille, Aidan and Columban were in all their 40s, past the average life expectancy at the time, when they set out on pilgrimage. Columbán was 71 when he founded his last monastery after crossing the Alps on foot! So don't tell me you're too old. I reckon you have at least one more adventure in you yet! Should you take that opportunity, let's be clear, you may achieve much or nothing. You may be hurt or helped in the attempt. But whatever happens, you will learn more of the ways of God, and inevitably grow closer to Him in the process. And that's reason enough to try. So, then who's ready for an adventure?