

Imaging the Word: Art & Theology

Celtic Metalwork



Ardagh Chalice, 8th Century

Some of the greatest artistic treasures that have survived from Celtic Christian Ireland are vessels for celebrating the Eucharist. The Ardagh chalice is one such treasury, ranking with the Book of Kells as one of the finest known works of “Insular art,” indeed of Celtic art in general. Thought to have been made in the 8th century, the chalice is part of the ‘Ardagh Hoard,’ that was discovered by accident in 1868 by two young local boys. It is now on display in the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin.

The chalice is a large, two-handled silver cup, decorated with gold, gilt bronze, brass, lead pewter and enamel. The complex construction, fusing 354 separate pieces, is typical of early Christian Irish metalwork, which at that time held unparalleled mastery in the Christian world of the West. The main body of the chalice is formed from two hemispheres of sheet silver joined with a rivet hidden by a gilt-bronze band. The width across its rim is 7.5 inches. The names of the apostles are incised in a frieze around the bowl, below a girdle bearing inset gold wirework panels of animals, birds, and geometric interlace. These were achieved by means of hammering, engraving, lost-wax casting, filigree applique, cloisonné and enamel. Even the

underside of the chalice is decorated.



The immediate impression that the chalice gives is a delicacy of workmanship and extraordinary beauty. Its decoration is a fine design, owing something in its use of strips of glass plaques to the Continental jewelry, but ultimately it remains simply the achievement of an artist who can use filigree work and enamel with such control that he brings to it and overall sense of consummate harmony. There is a feeling here of freedom, of color and invention and experimentation of form, and yet in the end we are left with a sense of unity. Everything is held together by an instinct of relationship and rhythm.



Derrynaflan Hoard

While the Ardagh chalice is the most famous, the Derrynaflan horde (a chalice, a pattern, a strainer, and a large bronze bowl) discovered in 1980 is even more interesting as it comes from a monastery important in the later 8th and 9th century reform movement. Much has been written about this hoard, as its components are magnificent works of art, and their beauty and richness are mute witness to the centrality of the Eucharist in the faith lives of monasteries.



Derrynaflan Paten

The paten is distinguished for being rather large. In contrast to modern paten, which are rarely more than 7-8 inches in diameter, the Derrynaflan paten is a good-sized dinner plate, over 14 inches in diameter. This measurement, along with other evidence, shows us that the Irish were still using a single bread, a loaf, at the Eucharist and then breaking it symbolically as part of the actual celebration. In the sermon included in the 10th century worship manual known as the

“Stowe Missal,” we find that the bread was broken symbolically into 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12 and 13 pieces, and each manner of breaking was to remind people of different aspects of their belief. And interestingly it was to show the links between that group and the communion of saints. All these breakings taken together allow the loaf to be broken into 65 pieces, which it says is the number for Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, from which we can extrapolate a possible number for the expected congregation. The size of the Derrynaflan paten suggests that they still had a practical appreciation of the symbolism of the “one loaf” broken into pieces to establish unity among all the partakers (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:17).



Derrynaflan Paten (*detail*)

Turning to the chalice, we find that its shape is eminently suited to the practical problems of having “one cup” that can provide communion to a sizable number of people. It does so without the inconvenience often found today where the chalice resembles a large stem glass. The handles allowed it to be easily given by a minister to the communicant, and then taken back without spilling. Doing rough calculations on the basis of the cup’s diameter--of around 8 inches and the bowl’s depth of around 4 inches, it is clear that if it is full, it would hold approximately 1.5 liters of wine, that is, holding just under two modern bottles of wine! A simple experiment shows that such an amount of liquid provides, on average, about 75 mouthfuls. This number fits well with the figure for the number of fractions of the loaf - assuming that the chalice was never fully filled and that there was also some leftover to be consumed in slightly greater quantity by either the celebrant, other minister or some of the congregation. More importantly it shows that the New Testament symbolism based on “one cup” indicating union between partakers is (1 Cor 10: 16-21; Mark 14:23; and Luke 22:17) was still part of their celebration.



Given the modern practice where the chalice is barely sipped, assuming a mouthful of the same amount one might take in drinking coffee might seem strange. However, we should remember that modern notions of the chalice are exceptional, fears about drinking from one cup, and worries that there would not be enough in the chalice for everyone if one took more than a sip are precisely that: modern notions, fears and worries. Before the arrival of these modern practices and attitudes, it was taken for granted that "drink" meant precisely that and not "sip." Moreover, if sipping was the norm, it would hard be hard to understand the penalty of six slaps imposed by the *Rule of Columbanus* for those who damage the chalice with her teeth!

Vessels like these famous ones from Ardagh and Derrynaflan were always exceptional. These items are of the highest craftsmanship and decoration and were made either as offering to the monastery or as prestige items used either only occasionally or not at all. Michael Ryan has written:

"It is questionable whether the Ardagh Chalice was ever watertight and therefore properly usable for the solemnities of the Eucharist. The Derrynaflan chalice, on the other hand, almost certainly was waterproof, and it could have been employed in a practical way in the liturgy." However, these exceptional items do show us the form that the more humble vessels and everyday use would have taken.