

The Spirituality of the Irish - by Sr. Margaret Dorgan, DCM

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THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE IRISH

If the Irish had crossed the sea and settled their tribes in Maine, the beauty of the state would have inspired them to poetry and prayer just as their own island did. The Celtic sensitivity to nature, to the wonder of things animate and inanimate, had made them in pagan times aware of powers beyond their ken to grasp. This awe of the world they inhabited stayed with them as they passed over to Christianity. When Patrick explained His God to pagan inquiries, he did not make metaphysical distinctions but described:

Our God, God of all men,
God of heaven and earth, seas and rivers,
God of sun and moon, of all the stars,
God of high mountains and lowly valleys,
God over heaven and in heaven, and under heaven.
He has a dwelling in heaven and earth and sea
And in all things that are in them.

-from The Questions of Ethne Alba

The sense of Divine Presence in everything created gave the Irish an awareness of God that penetrated all the circumstances of life, the flow of happenings, ordinary and extraordinary. For to the Gael, the ordinary was to some extent extraordinary and the extraordinary was somehow to be expected. One moved in an existence that was beckoning to what lay beyond, to a transcendent that was constantly shining through the immanent. The Celt did not live in a split-level universe at all. His perceptions were always awake to new possibilities of vision. Surprise was the order of things.

A theology that laid down clear boundaries of the natural and supernatural would never do for such a people. The sacred and the profane could not stand apart. Looking over the ocean, the Celt would gaze and listen as if in a cathedral: "That I might see the mighty waves of the gleaming sea, as they chant a music to their Father in endless movement."

St. Patrick came to a land divided into clans with a chieftain leader whose kingship was exercised upon underlings united to him in kinship and in companionship. Power was not remote but an authority close at hand that understood the situation of those who were ruled. When finally the power of Christ was acknowledged as supreme, it was seen as a power that worked in behalf of the Christian adorer—not a fearsome and condemning force. The Son of the Carpenter became the companion of the clansmen. One Whose might no one and nothing could withstand but Who bent his sovereignty to service.

The old time pagan epics were not cast aside when the message of the Gospel was accepted. Ancient narrative traditions were seen as good even if they had to give way to what was far better. A twelfth century monk who transcribed the pagan epic, the Tain, ended with the lines: "A blessing on everyone who shall faithfully memorize the Tain as it is written here and shall not add any other form to it." But good Christian that he was, he put his addendum in Latin: "But I who have written this story...give no credence to the various incidents related in it...some are probable, others improbable; while still others are intended for the delectation of fools." Even the delectation of fools could have its place in the order of things.

To foreign visitors the Irish have always seemed a remarkable race—"God intoxicated" as they have been described. Where does the secular end and religion begin? It is not a question to interest them. Everything can carry a blessing with it and everything can become the subject of prayers. Collections of prayers take in every aspect of the day and night, all the possible doings and journeyings. "If we are better today, may we be seven times better a year from today, in our possessions and our people, secure in the love of God and of the neighbors." A prayer to Jesus asks protection for the flocks: "Jesus, Jesus. keep the sheep in the smooth valleys and on the gentle grasslands." On going by a cemetery, these words are suggested: "I greet you, Christ's faithful, who are awaiting here a glorious resurrection."

One of the special qualities of Irish prayer is the characteristic familiarity of *muintearas*. When God or Jesus is addressed as *an Ri* or King, it is not a term that distances Him but one that brings Him closer. The King belongs by blood relationship to his clan or people. The fact that the Irish ecclesiastical structure was based for so long not on dioceses but on monasteries closely linked to the regional clans explains the strong sense of community in Irish spirituality. The word *muintir*, which speaks of love and familiarity, was a translation of the monastic *familia* or communal family.

Christ, Who is *an Ri* is part of the local scene. He is *MacMhuire* or son of Mary. Mary our Sister gives us Jesus our Brother. The thousand welcomes to the Child born in Bethlehem are a welcome to "your Mother's Son." But familiarity with the Mother of *an Ri* is combined with such great reverence that her name in the Gaelic is unique to herself and never given to an Irish daughter. Moira and Maura or the popular Maureen (little Mary) are all derivatives of the special name reserved for Mary alone. Still, Mary is so close, so much a part of the intimate gathering of kin and friends, that an eighth century poet tries to console her. "Come to me, loving Mary, that I may keep with you your dear One, that we may converse together in order to console your heart."

During the centuries of terrible persecution, the sense of community reached out to all who suffered. When almost everyone was threatened with hunger, there was still a concern for the weak and those in even greater destitution. A blessing before meals asked..."If there should be any poor creature on the road in hunger or thirst, may God send him in to us so that we may share the food with him."

In the dark days when it was death to shelter a priest, people whispered to one another the often repeated words, "Exchange not the Mass for anything. There is nothing in the wide world to surpass it."

Instruction in the Catholic faith was forbidden by law. Now the wonderful ability of a people who cherished the oral transmission of their tradition became invaluable. The

high regard of the Gael for the human power of memory helped to sustain them under oppressive restrictions.

To the son or daughter of Ireland, the most severe of all judgments, the most demanding of all sacrifices, was departure from land and people. To leave the homeland and go into exile was a kind of dying. A 16th century writer expressed it thus: "It is the parting of soul and body for a person to leave kindred and country and go from them to strange, distant lands." The enforced wanderings of the Irish, pressed by poverty, persecution and famine, account for the more than forty million descendants of Irish emigration who live in America today.

On March 17 on the Emerald Isle and every part of the globe where the Irish have made new homes, St. Patrick is invoked. "Bail Phadraig ar a ndeanfaimid—Patrick's bless in all we do."

CELTIC BENEDICTION

Deep peace of the Running Wave to you.

Deep peace of the Flowing Air to you.

Deep peace of the Quiet Earth to you.

Deep peace of the Shining Stars to you.

Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you.

Sister Margaret Dorgan, DCM