

THE UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

*Critically Assess the Impact of the Spirituality of the
Celtic Peregrini on Expressions of Contemporary
Christian Practice.*

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MA in Christian Spirituality

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This Independent Study has been completed as a requirement
for a higher degree
of
The University of Winchester

DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

This independent study critically assesses key aspects of the spirituality of the Celtic *peregrini*—spiritual attributes that to some extent, are becoming useful disciplines and supports for contemporary Christian practice. Between the sixth and tenth centuries, the Celtic *peregrini* set forth into the unknown, following God’s call, to establish new monastic centres for mission and evangelism, whilst seeking their ‘places of resurrection.’ The journeys and spirituality of three of the best known *peregrini* are followed—Columba to Iona—Columbanus to Europe—and Aidan to Lindisfarne. Although the Celtic *peregrini* were to some extent a product of their age, they developed and enhanced a number of useful spiritual practices. Laying aside the more extreme Celtic beliefs in martyrdom, asceticism and penance, the Celtic *peregrini* developed rhythmic **frameworks** of daily prayer and Scripture reading, based on the Psalms. They were bound by life-long vows, using a **scaffolding** of shared values and *Rules of Life* to call themselves back to constant prayer. *Peregrinatio* and **risky living** took them on both physical and inner spiritual journeys—called to unknown destinations. They were intensely aware of the surrounding **Presence of God** through the people they met and throughout all creation. The *peregrini* were subject to long periods of **seasonal spiritual formation** as well as adhering to a rhythmic **ebb and flow** of breathing in through prayer and exhaling into action. Protection of their spiritual lifestyles was enhanced by the drawing of **boundaries**—encircling the sacred core. Contemporary expressions of these spiritual attributes can be found to varying degrees in three modern New Monastic movements—the *Iona Community*, the *Community of Aidan and Hilda* and the *Northumbria Community*. Much broader acceptance of these key spiritual attributes of the Celtic *peregrini* would help all Christians draw closer to God in our complex and increasingly distracting post-modern world.

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Critically Assess the Impact of the Spirituality of the Celtic Peregrini on Expressions of Contemporary Christian Practice.

Introduction

The purpose of this independent study is to critically assess key aspects of the spirituality of the Celtic *peregrini*—attributes that could provide useful disciplines and supports for modern contemporary Christian practice—particularly for dispersed adherents of today’s new monastic expressions. However, study of Celtic Christianity in recent years has raised a number of issues—issues that have led some academics to question the originality and authenticity of the Celtic tradition, and therefore the Celtic *peregrini*.¹ One of the biggest problems is the paucity of primary literary sources.² The Celtic tradition was, at least at the outset, an oral tradition—nothing was written down—the ‘corporate memory’ of the tribe was coveted by the oral schools of the druids and bards—the *filid*.³ Although this changed from the fifth century onwards—no doubt with the assimilation of literate

¹ One criticism brands the ‘Celtic Church’ as ‘non-constitutionally distinct, but rather an eco-friendly, Augustine-free zone without formal theology or law,’ see, Thomas O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings* (London: Continuum, 2000), 17-21, quoted on p19, and for further critical review see; Kathleen Hughes, "The Celtic Church: Is this a Valid Concept?," *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 1, Summer (1981): 1-20; Wendy Davies, "The Myth of the Celtic Church," in *The Early Church in Wales and the West*, ed. Nancy Edwards, and Alan Lane (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1992), 12-21, and; P. Simms-Williams, "Celtomania and Celtoscepticism," *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 36 (1998): 1-35.

² A good summary of the available texts on Celtic Christianity is presented in: Ian Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity* (London: Dalton Longman & Todd, 2018), Chapter 3 - The Sources, 25-39.

³ See, Peter Berresford-Ellis, *The Druids* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1994), 13-14 & 199; Oliver Davies, (Trans.), *Celtic Spirituality*, ed. Lawrence Boadt, The Classics of Western Spirituality Series, (New York, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 14, and; Tim Clarkson, *Columba: Pilgrim, Priest & Patron Saint* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2012), 61.

and educated individuals as the Roman Empire collapsed—the vast majority of what was written, was scribed in monasteries, introducing a literary bias towards liturgical texts, Penitentials and monastic *Rules*, with some poems and prayers.⁴ The scarcity of original material was further exacerbated by the significant loss of manuscripts, especially in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries during the Viking invasions. The Viking raiders specifically targeted the remote, coastal monasteries—soft targets and often the main repositories of manuscripts—destroying and burning everything they found.⁵ Yet another key impediment has been the at least partial distortion of the narrative by hagiography. Most of the available manuscripts today—in terms of the number of texts—were written several centuries after the death of the Celtic Saints in the form of the *Vitae* or *Lives of the Saints*—a genre that was not necessarily historically accurate.⁶ According to John Duke: ‘Where history is silent, the field is open for invention,’ and ‘in no other age had the patriotic or pious imagination been busier than in the early centuries of Christianization of Europe and Britain.’⁷ In the *Vitae* tradition of the Middle Ages, hagiographers wrote with a specific agenda—their writings were shaped by the Bible and earlier Saints’ *Lives*—they used the parts of the Saints’ life that fitted their emphasis.⁸ Therefore, in order to uncover the authentic Celtic spirituality, it is necessary to concentrate on the few contemporary sources that remain—to seek to

⁴ Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 25-26.

⁵ The first Viking attack on Lindisfarne was recorded in 793, see Michael Swanton, J. (Edit.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), and for more context on the Vikings and their raids; James Graham-Campbell, *Cultural Atlas of the Viking World*, Time Life Books, (Oxford: Andromeda, 1994), 124.

⁶ Edward C. Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints* (St Paul, Minnesota: Bog Walk Press, 2006), 23.

⁷ John A. Duke, *The Columban Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), 1.

⁸ Kate Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2010), 13.

understand the degree of hagiography—and only then to distil the fundamental elements of the spirituality of the Celtic Saints and *peregrini*.

The methodology used in this dissertation follows closely that of Sandra Schneiders, emphasising the historical-contextual approach—involving a ‘thick description’ of the history, theological and ecclesiological setting, followed by a critical assessment of the spirituality of the Celtic *peregrini*, with the concluding section assessing the contemporary environment.⁹ Following Walter Principe, this work seeks to use history to instruct—to relate the historical record to contemporary ideas and issues—to use the past ‘as a launch-pad’ into a new understanding of Celtic Christianity today.¹⁰

In the introductory section of this dissertation, I set out the contemporary context before presenting a definition of terms for the Celtic *peregrini*. Various aspects of Celtic hagiography are then laid out to heighten awareness of potential distortion in the original texts. In an attempt to minimise the effect of hagiography, I have focussed on three carefully selected Celtic *peregrini*—Columba, Columbanus and Aidan—using the relevant primary texts and sources to help define the spirituality of the Celts and the Celtic *peregrini*.

The first section defines the Celtic *peregrini* and their significance addressing the question who were the Celtic *peregrini*? The motives of the *peregrini* are set against their wanderlust and the ancient seafaring and voyaging traditions of the Celts. In order to better understand the spirituality of the *peregrini*, it is necessary

⁹ Sandra M. Schneiders, "A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality," in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer, and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 49-60.

¹⁰ Walter H. Principe, "The History of Theology: Fortress or Launching Pad?," in *The Sources of Theology*, ed. John P. Boyle, (Edit.) (Chicago: The Catholic Theological Society of America, 1988), 39.

to trace the origins of Celtic monasticism back through Europe to the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Egypt and Syria. To address the question of why the *peregrini* wandered, I have provided a brief outline of the lives of the three chosen *peregrini*. The era of Celtic *peregrinatio* came to a conclusion as the Viking raids became more intense and amid increasing friction between the wandering scholar-saint and fixed diocesan ecclesiastical structures.

The second section of the dissertation seeks to critically assess the spirituality of the Celtic *peregrini*, giving specific examples. Some unique features of Celtic spirituality are discussed initially, including the concepts of Red Martyrdom and the ascetic exile of White and Blue/Green Martyrdom. The Celtic obsession with asceticism and self-denial is linked to the practice of penance and the development of the Penitentials. The Celts mirrored some of the more traditional monastic practices including sharing a framework of daily rhythms of prayer and Bible reading and the scaffolding of common values, vows, and *Rules of Life*. The key spiritual principles of the Celtic *peregrini* themselves are presented including the concept of a sacramental universe, seasonal formation and the ebb and flow of episodes of quiet contemplation alongside an active life. The importance of prophesy, patience, perseverance, pastoral care and peace-making are discussed, along with the drive of the Celts for justice through advocacy.

The final section analyses modern expressions of the spirituality of the Celtic *peregrini*, specifically the Scottish Iona Community,¹¹ the Community of Aidan and

¹¹ The *Iona Community* website: <https://iona.org.uk/>, accessed November 6, 2022.

Hilda¹² and the Northumbria Community.¹³ Each movement is compared to the identified spiritual attributes of the Celtic *peregrini*, with the varying degree of adoption defined.

Contemporary Context

In Great Britain today, ordinary people are seeking more holistic expressions of culture and spirituality.¹⁴ There is widespread disillusionment with the prevailing materialistic, ‘market-driven culture of acquisitive individualism,’ and a need, both personal and communal, for a greater sense of purpose and belonging.¹⁵ The prevailing ‘Institutional Church’ has largely been side-lined—viewed as ‘a bureaucratic, outdated culture.’¹⁶ The Church is becoming less and less relevant, treated by an increasing number with either amused tolerance, indifference, or apathy.¹⁷ Over a twenty year period, according to the official ONS statistics in the nationwide censuses of 2001,¹⁸ 2011,¹⁹ and 2021,²⁰ the number of British

¹² The *Community of Aidan and Hilda* website: <https://www.aidanandhilda.org.uk/>, accessed November 6, 2022.

¹³ The *Northumbria Community* website: <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/>, accessed November 6, 2022.

¹⁴ Ray Simpson, *High Street Monastries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity* (Stowmarket, Suffolk: Kevin Mayhew, 2009), 99. A trend clearly identified and highlighted, at least in a British context, in the seminal study by Paul Heelas, and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

¹⁵ Norman Shanks, *Iona - God's Energy: The Spirituality and Vision of the Iona Community* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1999), 4.

¹⁶ Ray Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality* (Stowmarket, Suffolk: Kevin Mayhew, 2004), 37.

¹⁷ Shanks, *Iona - God's Energy: The Spirituality and Vision of the Iona Community*, 31.

¹⁸ Office of National Statistics (ONS) 2001 Census: <https://www.data.gov.uk/dataset/17080d4d-793d-4931-9254-a9f6c7652c3e/religion-2001-census>, accessed on November 17, 2022.

¹⁹ Office of National Statistics (ONS) 2011 Census - Article based on the 2011 Census: *Exploring Religion in England and Wales*: February 2020: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/explorin-greligioninenglandandwales/february2020>, accessed on November 17, 2022.

²⁰ Office of National Statistics (ONS) 2021 Census: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021>, accessed on December 1, 2022.

individuals claiming themselves 'Christian' dropped from 72%, to 59%, to 46%, respectively.²¹ In the typical pithy summary of George MacLeod, 'the trouble with the Church these days is that no one any longer thinks it's worth persecuting.'²² One of MacLeod's greatest criticisms of the modern Church is the focus on Sundays—when he strongly reinforced that our faith should be holistic—for weekdays as well:²³

...but the thing most happens on a Sunday. It is the week-day life of [people] that lies in ruins. The economic structure—the industrial, the international—these are the grave concerns bereft today of [the Holy] Spirit. These are the places where [ordinary folk] have to live and move and have their being—and the roof of them is falling in!²⁴

According to Ray Simpson—the principal founder of the *Community of Aidan and Hilda*—contemporary spiritual searchers are looking for anchors outside today's Church—towards new expressions of spirituality.²⁵ The challenge for the modern Church is to find purer, untainted models of Christian community—based on our Christian roots—rather than outmoded 'Medieval liturgies and practices.'²⁶ As Scottish, Celtic academic Ian Bradley comments:

How do we begin to keep in time with the deep pulsations of Eternity and establish 'Colonies of Heaven' in a society that is profoundly earthborn, materialistic and secular? One way is by establishing communities which

²¹ Nigel Rooms suggests caution in the interpretation of these figures, as many people, although ceasing to identify with the institutional Church, would still regard themselves as spiritual, see, Nigel Rooms, *The Faith of the English: Integrating Christ and Culture* (London: SPCK, 2011), 118, and for a more detailed analysis of why Christians are leaving the Church, see, Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond the Churches* (London: SPCK, 2002).

²² Quoted in: Shanks, *Iona - God's Energy: The Spirituality and Vision of the Iona Community*, 31.

²³ Ronald Ferguson, *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Story of the Iona Community*, Revised ed. (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1998), 14.

²⁴ From a sermon preached by George MacLeod in Iona Abbey, quoted in Ferguson, *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Story of the Iona Community*, 61.

²⁵ Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, 40-41.

²⁶ Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, 57, and; Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Tunbridge Wells, UK: Burns & Oates, 1995), 180.

embrace many of the disciplines of monasticism...a spirituality found in the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon monasteries.²⁷

In a letter to his brother Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer in 1935, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

The restoration of the Church will surely come from a sort of new monasticism which has in common with the old only the uncompromising attitude of a life lived according to the Sermon on the Mount²⁸ in the following of Christ. I believe it is now time to call people to this.²⁹

In recent times a broad range of monastic-oriented experiments have emerged—movements seeking to offer a challenging alternative to today’s ‘Church’—under the title of ‘New Monasticism.’³⁰ Monastic spirituality, and particularly the Celtic monastic tradition, has been identified as having a great deal to teach us about how to live more balanced spiritual lives today—enabling us to oscillate more ‘naturally between...outward mission and inward prayer.’³¹ The Celtic *peregrini* were wanderers from monastic backgrounds who embraced ‘risky living,’ and successfully maintained their faith and mission as they travelled through pagan lands.³² If the dispersed New Monastic communities of today are to survive the test

²⁷ Ian Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000), 44-45, and; Andy Freeman, and Pete Greig, *Punk Monk: New Monasticism and the Ancient Art of Breathing* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 2007), 13.

²⁸ The Gospel of **Matthew 5-7**.

²⁹ Letter to Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer: London, January 14, 1935: in Geoffrey B. Kelly, and F, Burton-Nelson, (Edits.), *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: HarperOne, 1995), 424.

³⁰ Simpson, *High Street Monasteries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*, 9.

³¹ Freeman, *Punk Monk: New Monasticism and the Ancient Art of Breathing*, 20.

³² John Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 43-44.

of time, they would do well to embrace some of the key practices of the Celtic *peregrini*.³³

Definition of Terms

Peregrinatio and Pilgrimage

Before analysing who the Celtic *peregrini* were and their spirituality, it is important to first make the distinction between a ‘pilgrim’ and a ‘*peregrini*.’³⁴ Pilgrimage, which became a significant pastime for Christians in the mid to late Middle Ages, involved travelling to a famous shrine to venerate saints and their relics, and then to return home refreshed and edified.³⁵ In contrast, the *peregrinus*—the root of the Latin word meaning ‘stranger’—withdrew from home, family and community, in the search of solitude—in order to draw closer to God.³⁶ Following the tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the primary motive of the *peregrini* was ascetic—rather than as mission, for exploration, or to venerate. The monk left his home and kindred for ever to detach himself, or more rarely herself, from human ties, to seek solitude and God’s direction.³⁷ To become a *peregrinus*—a stranger and an exile—was ‘for the love of Christ’—to leave one’s home, to strip oneself of family and possessions, to root out from heart and mind all one’s own aims and desires, and—for a Celt the uttermost self-denial—to forsake one’s native land for some lonely remote spot, and there to abide with no

³³ Freeman, *Punk Monk: New Monasticism and the Ancient Art of Breathing*, 20.

³⁴ Singular: *peregrinus*, plural: *peregrini*, and the tradition itself: *peregrinatio*.

³⁵ Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 26.

³⁶ Nora K. Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, The Riddell Memorial Lecture Series: 1960, (Felinfach, Dyred: Llanerch, Publishers, 1960), 82.

³⁷ Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality*, 43.

thought of return, with no agenda, not even a plan of mission—to go out to be utterly available to God.³⁸ It was to hear with one's own voice the words spoken in the Old Testament to Abraham: 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.'³⁹ The longing for solitude as a part of the ascetic life—common as it was to all followers of the monastic way—was inherent in the very nature, temperament, and character of the Celt.⁴⁰ The *Old Irish Life of St Columba*, defined three types of *peregrinus*,

Now, three ways there are in which one leaves his fatherland when he goes into pilgrimage [*peregrinatio*]...when he leaves his fatherland in body only, and his mind doth not sever from sins and vices (Lines 700-1)...one leaveth his fatherland in desire of heart and in mind, though he leaveth not in body (Lines 713-4)...one leaves his fatherland completely in body and in soul even as the twelve apostles left (Lines 720-1)...these [latter servants] in sooth, are they of the perfect pilgrimage [*peregrinatio*]...⁴¹

Charles-Edwards⁴² advocated two types of *peregrinatio*⁴²—a '*peregrinationis locus*' as a wanderer who left home and stayed locally, with this phenomenon much more available to women⁴³ and common in South Wales and southern Ireland.⁴⁴ The second grade of '*potiorus peregrinationis locus*'—leaving home and migrating

³⁸ Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 29.

³⁹ **Genesis 12:1**, and, Eleanor S. Duckett, *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages* (New York: The Norton Library, 1964), 24.

⁴⁰ Duckett, *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages*, 23.

⁴¹ The *Old Irish Life of Columba*, Whitley Stokes, (Trans.), *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), translation on Lines 698-726, 295-96, accessed on December 12, 2022, <https://archive.org/details/livessaints00stokuoft/page/n3/mode/2up>.

⁴² T. M. Charles-Edwards, "The Social Background to Irish Peregrinatio," *Celtica* 11 (1976): 43-59.

⁴³ Especially young women fleeing forced and arranged marriages.

⁴⁴ As evidenced by the denser distribution of place names including the place-names, desert/dysart/diseart and teampall sites, see, E. G. Bowen, *Saints, Seaways and Settlements in the Celtic Lands* (Cardiff, Wales: University of Wales Press, 1969), 64-65 - Figures 13 & 14, and 133 - Figure 31. This local *peregrinatio* tradition essentially reinforcing linguistic, cultural and kinship links across South Wales and southern Ireland during the fifth to seventh centuries, see, Chalwyn James, *An Age of Saints: Its Relevance for us Today* (Felinfach, Dyfed: Llanerch Publishers, 1996), 39-40.

overseas—which was more the norm in the north of Ireland and Scotland, as evidenced by Columba who left from Donegal to found Iona, Columbanus leaving from Bangor in Armagh to establish several monasteries in Europe, and the indigenous Irish monk Aidan, who departed Iona for Lindisfarne.⁴⁵

Celtic Monastic Familia

Irish and Celtic society easily absorbed Christianity, particularly the monastic form, which was in effect the Christianisation of the pre-existing status quo—mirroring the role of the extended kinship units in early Celtic society.⁴⁶ Christianity penetrated the Irish tribal system of ‘innumerable splintered agrarian tribes’—the *túaths*—with a form of Eastern monasticism first modified in Gaul and then adapted to the Irish tribal system.⁴⁷ Each monastery or group of monasteries, set-up by a strong founder with its own ‘foundation charism’ or ‘distinctive spirituality,’ became to varying degrees a separate and autonomous tradition—they were known as monastic *familia*, or *paruchia*.⁴⁸ The structure of the monastic *familia* paralleled and then infused the *túaths*, becoming their spiritual centres.⁴⁹ Each monastery, or group of monasteries were dynastic—answering to an Abbot, who was usually the founder—or his or her relative.⁵⁰ In the Celtic monasteries, unlike

⁴⁵ Charles-Edwards, "The Social Background to Irish Peregrinatio," 43-59.

⁴⁶ Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 33.

⁴⁷ Neilson W. Hancock, et. al, *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, 6 vols. (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1865-1901), Volume 5, 25 <https://archive.org/details/ancientlawsirel01hancgoog/page/n22/mode/2up>. Accessed online December 3, 2022, and Leslie Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain* (New York: Teach Services Inc., 2005), 157.

⁴⁸ Thomas O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, ed. Philip Sheldrake, Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series, (London: Dalton, Longman & Todd, 2000), 160.

⁴⁹ Esther De Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer: The Recovery of the Religious Imagination* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010), 137, and; Ian Bradley, *Columba: Politician, Penitent, and Pilgrim* (Glasgow, Scotland: Wild Goose Publications, 2021), 95.

⁵⁰ Bradley, *Columba: Politician, Penitent, and Pilgrim*, 121.

in their Anglo Saxon counterparts, bishops took on subsidiary roles focussed on liturgical ritual and the administering of the Eucharist.⁵¹ For example, Columba was the founding Abbot of Iona—he was also head of the Columba *familia*, and leader of the wider Celtic Church in the Dál Raita region of Scotland—but he was never made a Bishop.⁵² There was no central Celtic ecclesiastical authority—their monastic leadership structure was devolved—typical of Celtic mentality—leading to common differences between Irish monastic centres.⁵³ A phenomenon which led Bede, in his reflections on the Synod of Whitby, to point-out that there were greater divisions between ‘Celtic Christians’ within Ireland and Scotland than between the main Roman and Celtic Church factions facing-off against each another at the Synod.⁵⁴ For example, the Columba *familia* tradition—which included Iona, Derry, Kells, Durrow and Lindisfarne—was known particularly for its *scriptoria*, the hand copying of religious texts and the production of the great illuminated manuscripts of the Books of Kells, Durrow and Lindisfarne.⁵⁵ Although Columbanus had his roots in Bangor in Armagh—part of the Columba *familia*—he was distinctive enough to develop his own group—the Columbanus *familia*—the

⁵¹ Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 77.

⁵² For the monastic *familia* of Columba and Iona see, Maire Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), also; Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 78.

⁵³ O’Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 150.

⁵⁴ O’Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 149-50. This is a strong statement made by Professor Thomas O’Loughlin, no doubt distilled from his thorough knowledge of Bede and his texts—it is difficult to find a specific reference in Bede, although O’Loughlin points to, Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, abbreviated, *EH III.25*, in Judith and Roger Collins McClure, (Edits.), *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede’s Letter to Egbert*, The World’s Classics, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 152-59.

⁵⁵ For the *Book of Kells*, see, Bernard Meehan, *The Book of Kells* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994), and the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, see, Michelle P. Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality & The Scribe* (London: The British Library, 2003), and; Janet Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels* (London: Book Club Associates, 1981), and also; James, *An Age of Saints: Its Relevance for us Today*, 70; Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba*.

three Luxeuil foundations and Bobbio. They were known for their rigid adherence to the strict *Rule of St Columbanus* and his *Penitentials*.⁵⁶ All the Irish monastic *familia* embraced the rigor of learning—the Celts converting from an oral tradition to become renowned centres of Latin scholarship—in some cases they were also fluent in Greek—a feat accomplished in just a few short decades, at the start of the Age of the Celtic Saints and Irish monasticism.⁵⁷ Given the diversity of the Celtic monastic *familia*—rather than the concept of a single ‘Celtic Spirituality’—a more accurate assessment would probably be to discuss ‘the Christian spiritualities of Celtic lands.’⁵⁸

Hagiography & Sources

An understanding of the methods and techniques of hagiography is necessary in the quest to uncover the authentic Celtic Christianity. Hagiography—‘to write about the holy’—became the most popular form of narrative during the Middle Ages, with almost nine thousand *Vitae* of the Celtic Saints written.⁵⁹ Most of these *Lives*, particularly those of the Irish, were written three, four or even five centuries after the Saint died.⁶⁰ Ardent hagiographers wrote to promote their particular Saint or institution, or to claim orthodoxy—usually ‘lessening the particular, if it endangered representations of the divine.’⁶¹ Even the *Life of St Antony* by

⁵⁶ Tomas O-Fiaich, *Columbanus: In His Own Words* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2012), 67-72.

⁵⁷ The *Age of the Celtic Saints* according to James was mid-fifth to mid seventh century, see James, *An Age of Saints: Its Relevance for us Today*, 1.

⁵⁸ O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 161.

⁵⁹ Philip Sheldrake, *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 332-33.

⁶⁰ Louis Gougaud, *Christianity in Celtic Lands: A History of the Churches of the Celts, their Origin, their Development, Influence and Mutual Relations* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1992), 52.

⁶¹ Sheldrake, *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 333.

Athanasius, one of the first *Vita* of a Saint, was panegyric—written to publicise the spirituality and ascetic principles of the Alexandrian School, claiming the thinking of Origen as orthodox.⁶² In Ireland the *Life of St Antony* and the *Life of St Martin* by Sulpitius Severus,⁶³ became popular templates.⁶⁴

The earliest form of a Saint's *Life*, and largely historically accurate, was the commemorative sermon preached on the anniversary of his or her death, which usually included a chronology of milestones and main achievements, grouped under various headings.⁶⁵ Later *Lives* became less historically accurate, presented as 'a series of episodes, nearly always miraculous in nature, interspersed with prophecies, benedictions and maledictions, all intended to glorify the subject of the biography and demonstrate their power.'⁶⁶ According to Louis Gougaud, *Vita* authors embroidered the bare background of their writings—'narratives abounding in marvellous incidents or striking traits of virtue, calculated to impress the mind of the readers and stir-up their feelings to reverence and emulation.'⁶⁷ The scribes were monks who, holding the deepest reverence for their own Founder and Patron, would gather whatever material best promoted their subject—all was focussed on the edification of the pilgrims, aspirants, and novices.⁶⁸

⁶² For St Athanasius's *Life of St Antony*, see, Robert T. Meyer, *St Athanasius: The Life of Saint Antony*, ed. Johannes Quasten, and Joseph C. Plumpe, Ancient Christian Writers, (New York: Newman Press, 1950), and; Philip G. Bochanski, *Wisdom of the Desert Fathers and Mothers: Ancient Advice for the Modern World* (Gastonia, North Carolina: TAN Books, 2019), 58.

⁶³ *Life of St Martin* by Sulpitius Severus in, Alexander Roberts, (Trans.), "The Works of Sulpitius Severus," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Sulpitius Severus, Vincent of Lerins, John Cassian*, A Select Library of the Christian Church (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1894 & 1994), 3-17.

⁶⁴ Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 154.

⁶⁵ Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 154.

⁶⁶ Gougaud, *Christianity in Celtic Lands: A History of the Churches of the Celts, their Origin, their Development, Influence and Mutual Relations*, 53.

⁶⁷ Gougaud, *Christianity in Celtic Lands: A History of the Churches of the Celts, their Origin, their Development, Influence and Mutual Relations*, 53.

⁶⁸ Duckett, *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages*, 17.

A popular theme was to portray the Celtic Saints as ‘a living image of Christ’—borrowing wholesale from the Gospel stories of Jesus.⁶⁹ Imitating Jesus, there were stories of healing the sick, feeding the hungry, praying in solitude, calming the sea, even raising the dead—although no doubt some of these stories may have been true, the pattern of their *Lives* often followed Jesus’s ministry.⁷⁰ Many *Vitae* describe their Saint as making a pilgrimage to Rome to ‘pay homage to the ruling Pope’—according to Elizabeth Rees, ‘often this was simply a concern for accreditation by Rome on the part of the Medieval author’—to claim orthodoxy and authority.⁷¹ The scribes of the *Vitae* worked in monasteries that held libraries—books that were frequently referenced—if insufficient material or hearsay stories were available, then the compilers borrowed them ‘without scruple.’⁷² Some material was simply plagiarised—copied and pasted—with some Saints’ *Vitae* becoming no more than a patchwork of the stories from other *Vitae*.⁷³ For example, Eddius Stephanus’s prologue to his *Life of Wilfrid* was lifted *verbatim* from the *Life of St Cuthbert*, itself ‘a florilegium of quotations from Evagrius’s translation of the *Life of St Antony*’⁷⁴—yet according to Philip Sheldrake, both Northumbrian *Lives* are nevertheless indispensable for our knowledge of the politics of the

⁶⁹ Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 37, and; Elizabeth Rees, *Celtic Saints Passionate Wanderers* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 8.

⁷⁰ Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 37, and; Duckett, *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages*, 15.

⁷¹ Rees, *Celtic Saints Passionate Wanderers*, 8.

⁷² Duckett, *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages*, 17.

⁷³ Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints*, trans. Donald Attwater (New York: Fordham University Press, 1962), 75.

⁷⁴ See Bertram Colgrave, (Trans.), *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus*, Second ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and; Bertram Colgrave, (Trans.), *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede’s Prose Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), and; Meyer, *St Athanasius: The Life of Saint Antony*.

seventh century English Church.⁷⁵ Although similar patterns and some embellishments were undoubtedly made, much of the material in the *Vitae* may well have been accurate.

Sometimes *Vitae* material was drawn from older traditions, mythological or tribal, or from secular legends—often quoting similar miracle-working to ‘those of the magician and druid of pre-Christian times.’⁷⁶ Celtic hagiography was full of mythic components—the language of folktales, fairy tales, and dreams—using the transforming power of symbols and sacred numbers.⁷⁷ Nature was a recurring theme⁷⁸—animals and birds were revered as ‘tutors of humanity.’⁷⁹ Bees, for example, were a symbol of wisdom in both Roman and Celtic literature—producing honey, one of the foods of the Promised Land.⁸⁰ Ninian’s twelfth century biographer Aelred of Rievaulx, compared Ninian to a bee: ‘Like a bee he formed for himself the honeycombs of wisdom.’⁸¹ To the Celt the crane was a symbol of justice, longevity, and diligence—Columba was named ‘the crane-cleric’—a purveyor of justice.⁸² The horse was a symbol of fertility, sanctity, strength and speed⁸³—Aidan giving away his horse was a symbolic act of renunciation and

⁷⁵ Sheldrake, *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 333.

⁷⁶ Gougaud, *Christianity in Celtic Lands: A History of the Churches of the Celts, their Origin, their Development, Influence and Mutual Relations*, 53.

⁷⁷ Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 42.

⁷⁸ Gougaud, *Christianity in Celtic Lands: A History of the Churches of the Celts, their Origin, their Development, Influence and Mutual Relations*, 56.

⁷⁹ Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 42.

⁸⁰ Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 42-43.

⁸¹ Chapter 2 of Aelred of Rievaulx’s *Life of St Ninian*: in Iain MacDonald, (Edit.), *Life of St Ninian: by Aelred, Abbot of Rievaulx* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1993), 26.

⁸² Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 43 the original story of Columba and the crane is in the *Life of St Columba*, Book 1, 48 in, Richard Sharpe, (Trans.), *Life of St Columba: by Adomnan of Iona*, Penguin Classics, (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 150.

⁸³ Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 44, and; Dermot Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," *Journal of Christendom College* XXIV-XXV, no. 1999-2000 (2000): 12.

humility⁸⁴—and for Columba to be mourned by a horse on his deathbed was a representation of his saintly and noble character.⁸⁵

Even though the Venerable Bede ‘found [the reading of] Saints’ *Lives* to be enjoyable and relaxation after serious theology...’,⁸⁶ it has been widely acknowledged that a ‘gritty truth’ lies behind them⁸⁷—the *Lives* being the stories written about the spiritual heroes of the time. Used critically, they can prove to be valuable literary sources—especially if the time gap between the Saint’s death and the *Vita* is short.⁸⁸

With the minimisation of hagiography a key concern, this dissertation draws on the early texts of the three chosen Celtic *peregrini* as principal sources. According to Brendan Lehane, ‘out of the cast of hagiography in which he is set, Columba (c521-597) emerges still as a man of greater stature than any of his typecast predecessors.’⁸⁹ He has been described as the first true *peregrinus*, and is relatively unusual among the Celtic Saints in having been written about soon after his death.⁹⁰ There are in fact three poems which provide useful information: the *Amra Choluimb Chille* written by Dallán Forgaill, an Irish poet, in 600,⁹¹ in effect a eulogy highlighting Columba’s aristocratic background and praising his main achievements,⁹² and two poems by the Iona-linked hermit Beccán mac Luigdech in

⁸⁴ Bede, *EH III.14*, in McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 132-33.

⁸⁵ *Life of St Columba*, Book III.23: in Sharpe, *Life of St Columba: by Adomnan of Iona*, 227.

⁸⁶ O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 31.

⁸⁷ Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 11.

⁸⁸ Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 156.

⁸⁹ Brendan Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity* (London: Continuum, 2005), 116.

⁹⁰ Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 31.

⁹¹ For a translation of the *Amra Choluimb Chille* see, Thomas Clancy, O., and, Gilbert Markus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 96-128.

⁹² Clarkson, *Columba: Pilgrim, Priest & Patron Saint*, 17.

c650.⁹³ The main source for Columba is the *Vita Columba* by Adomnán the ninth Abbot of Iona—based on a missing earlier *Life* by Cumméne Albus, seventh Abbot of Iona.⁹⁴ The *Vita Columba* was written in the closing years of the seventh century, roughly one hundred years after Columba died,⁹⁵ and is ‘a work of hagiography to extol the spirituality of his subject,’ but written so soon after his death, it still contains valuable information.⁹⁶ Adomnán wrote Columba’s *Life* following his visit to see Ceolfrid, Bede’s abbot in Jarrow, Northumbria—his work principally recorded for the Columba *familia*, to reinforce the primacy of Columba’s legacy.⁹⁷ A much later *Old Irish Life* of Columba was compiled in Derry in the twelfth century, but much of this material has been questioned by academics.⁹⁸

About Columbanus (540-615), we know much more, as several manuscripts written in his own hand have survived.⁹⁹ There are six letters—the last more like a

⁹³ Beccán mac Luigdech poems are *Fo Réir Choluimb* and *Tiugraind Beccáin*: in Clancy, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery*, 129-63.

⁹⁴ *Vita Columba* see, Sharpe, *Life of St Columba: by Adomnan of Iona*, see; Ian Finlay, *Columba* (Glasgow, Scotland: Richard Drew Publishing, 1979), 15. Cumméne Albus was the nephew of the previous abbot, Ségéne, and he wrote the original *Vita of Columba*, ‘*De uitutibus sancti Columbae*’ – what little remains of this primary text was inserted into Schaffhausen’s manuscript of Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae* for political reasons in the eighth century, see, Alan O. and Marjorie O. Anderson, (Edits.), *Adomnan's Life of Columba* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1961). For an online version of *Vita Columba* see, accessed online December 21, 2022, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/columba-e.asp>.

⁹⁵ Clarkson, *Columba: Pilgrim, Priest & Patron Saint*, 5.

⁹⁶ Brian Lacey, *Colum Cille and the Columban Tradition* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), 56.

⁹⁷ Reginald B. Hale, *The Magnificent Gael: St Columba* (Brandon, Manitoba: World Media Productions, 1976), 183.

⁹⁸ The *Old Irish Life of Columba—Betha Coluim Chille*—composed in the twelfth century was incorporated in the *Leabhar Breac* completed in 1532, see Whitley Stokes, (Trans.), "Bertha Choluim Chille: On the Life of Saint Columba," in *Three Middle-Irish Homilies on the Lives of Saints Patrick, Brigit and Columba (1877)*, ed. Whitley Stokes (Calcutta: Kessinger's Rare Reprints, 2007), and; Clarkson, *Columba: Pilgrim, Priest & Patron Saint*, 20.

⁹⁹ All Columbanus’s works are available in a scholarly edition, in both Latin with English translation, in, G. S. M. Walker, (Edit. & Trans.), *Sancti Columbani Opera* (Dublin: Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 1957). For a brief summary of Columbanus’s writings see, Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 10-12.

sermon to young monks,¹⁰⁰ two monastic *Rules*,¹⁰¹ the *Penitential of St Columbanus* compiled in the early seventh century,¹⁰² thirteen sermons penned as a coherent last testimony of his spirituality,¹⁰³ plus two attributable poems preserved in the *Antiphony of Bangor*.¹⁰⁴ The *Vita Columbani* written by the Bobbio monk Jonas, within two years of Columbanus's death, contained first-hand information from Eustatius, who succeeded Columbanus as Abbot of Luxeuil—and from Attala, second Abbot of Bobbio¹⁰⁵—but Jonas happily 'did a little whitewashing' to embellish the story.¹⁰⁶

The third Celtic *peregrinus* highlighted is Aidan of Lindisfarne (c590-651), whose only source is the Venerable Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English*

¹⁰⁰ The question of authenticity of Columbanus's writings has been addressed in detail in Lapidge, 1997—specifically on Columbanus's Letters, see, Neil Wright, "Columbanus's Epistulae," in *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings*, ed. Michael Lapidge, Studies in Celtic History (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1997), 29-92.

¹⁰¹ The *Monk's Rule* dealing with monastic principles and life in the monastery, and the *Community Rule*, a series of penalties for failures, see Jane B. Stevenson, "The Monastic Rules of Columbanus," in *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings*, ed. Michael Lapidge, Studies in Celtic History (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1997), 203-16, and; Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 65-66.

¹⁰² In Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera*, 168-81, see; T. M. Charles-Edwards, "The Penitentials of Columbanus," in *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings*, ed. Michael Lapidge (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1997), 217-39, and; Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 32.

¹⁰³ Translation in, Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera*, and see; Clare Stancliffe, "The Thirteen Sermons attributed to Columbanus and the Question of their Authorship," in *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings*, ed. Michael Lapidge, Studies in Celtic History (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1997), 93-202.

¹⁰⁴ The *Mundus iste transibit* 'That world will pass away,' Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 57-58, and *Precamus patrem* 'We pray to the Father,' Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 35. For a modern translation of the canticles and prayers of the *Antiphony of Bangor*, see, Paul C. Stratman, (Trans.), *The Antiphony of Bangor and The Divine Offices of Bangor: The Liturgy of Hours of the Ancient Irish Church* (Sacramento, California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018). Also Columbanus's Boat Song, see <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/columban1.asp>, accessed online December 21, 2022.

¹⁰⁵ The Monk Jonas, *Life of St Columban*, ed. Dana Carleton Munro (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, 1993), and see; Eleanor S. Duckett, *The Gateway to the Middle Ages: Monasticism*, Ann Arbor Paperbacks, (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1961), 90. Available online – accessed on December 21, 2022, at, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/columban.asp>.

¹⁰⁶ Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 147.

People, Book III,¹⁰⁷ completed in 731, almost two hundred years after Aidan's death.¹⁰⁸ Ironically, here we have the Anglo-Saxon monk Bede, emphasising the saintly attributes of the Celtic *peregrinus* Aidan, in an attempt to urge his fellow Anglo Saxon monks towards greater purity.¹⁰⁹

Who were the Celtic *Peregrini*?

One of the key characteristics of the early Celtic Church in the sixth and seventh centuries was the eagerness of the Saints to travel far and wide. Driven forward by an inner prompting, they became 'pilgrims for God' crossing the Western Seas—'lashed by storms, their frail coracles bore them from Ireland to pagan lands.'¹¹⁰ Without credentials or material support, self-reliant and trusting in God, they accomplished much.¹¹¹ *Peregrinatio* was one of the great driving forces in Irish Christianity—some put to sea without knowing or caring where they were going¹¹²—just a widespread feeling that 'somewhere in the middle of the ocean there was an island of paradise,'

...sudden[ly] a cloud came around them, ...they were in darkness the whole of the day, till by the will of our dear Lord the cloud passed away and they saw before them a shining lovely island. There was enough of joy and of rejoicing in that island, and every herb was full of blossom and

¹⁰⁷ McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*.

¹⁰⁸ Ray Simpson, *Aidan of Lindisfarne: Irish Flame Warms a New World* (Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2014), 165.

¹⁰⁹ J. Campbell, "Bede," in *Latin Historians*, ed. Thomas A. Dorey (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 170-71 & 75, see; Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, Third ed. (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 44 & 94.

¹¹⁰ Kathleen Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 11, no. 2, October (1960): 146, and; Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain*, 8.

¹¹¹ Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain*, 15.

¹¹² Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 90.

every tree was full of fruit, and as for the ground it was shining with precious stones on every side, and heaven itself could hardly be better.¹¹³

Typical was the ‘wandering Ciaran,’ a restless early Irish Saint, constantly moving from place to place—his journeys were not well planned, with no definite temporal destination, his aim was to live the ascetic life in exile, so he set out in pilgrimage for the ‘Lord of the Elements,’ sometimes even entrusting himself to the seas without oars or rudder.¹¹⁴ In his *Life of St Columba*, Adomnán gives an account of the three attempts of Cormac Ua Liatháin, Abbot of Durrow—‘who set sail over the boundless [sea] with his sails full...to find a place of retreat in the ocean’—he went astray in Arctic waters before finally landing on Iona.¹¹⁵ Famous from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, is the story of the three Irishmen who arrived in Cornwall in 891 in a curragh¹¹⁶—‘because they wanted to go into exile for the love of God, they cared not whither:’¹¹⁷

And three *Scotts* [Irishmen] came to King Alfred from Ireland in a boat without oars. They had left home bent on serving God in a state of pilgrimage [*peregrinatio*], they cared not where. Their boat was made of two and a half hides and contained enough provisions to last them seven days, and within a week they landed in Cornwall and shortly afterwards came to King Alfred. They were called Dubslane, Macbethu and Maelinmun.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ From *The Life of St Brendan, First Voyage*, see Iain MacDonald, (Edit.), *St Brendan* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1992), 13-14, translation from <https://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/celt/saw/saw06.htm>, accessed December 14, 2022, see also Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 90.

¹¹⁴ Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," 143.

¹¹⁵ Adomnán *Life of St Columba*, I:6 & II:42; in Sharpe, *Life of St Columba: by Adomnan of Iona*, 118 & 96-98. and; Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 80-81.

¹¹⁶ Similar to a coracle, a curragh was a light boat with a stick frame covered in cowhides and with no steering device.

¹¹⁷ Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 80.

¹¹⁸ From the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in the year 891, see, Swanton, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, and; Seward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality*, 43, and; Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 90.

These Celtic *peregrini* were ‘not adventurous youngsters with wanderlust,’ for they had mostly spent ‘a score of years under strict monastic rule’ with their characters fully tested.¹¹⁹ The *peregrini* were usually more scholarly than those they met, having a better grasp of Latin—they were individuals obeying an inner command—with a sense of purpose and obedience to Christ—they were guests in the world, not entangled in earthly desires.¹²⁰ Towards the peak of the age of the wandering monks in the ninth century, the flood of Irish *peregrini* into Europe caused the Bishop of Auxerre to comment, ‘Almost all of Ireland, disregarding the ocean crossing, is migrating to our shores in a herd of philosophers.’¹²¹

The Voyage Literature & Immrama

Living on an island and at the margins, the Irish knew and loved the sea, with many tales of voyages and wandering.¹²² Some of these stories were pre-Christian—the *echtrae* ‘outing,’ dating before the seventh century—and some later Christian tales—the *immrama* ‘rowing.’¹²³ Both types of story involved a hero's journey through many hardships to an ‘otherworld,’ whether a Christian paradise, a fairyland, the land of the gods, or a utopia—encapsulated by the Anglo-Saxon poems of the *Wanderer* and the *Seafarer*.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Hale, *The Magnificent Gael: St Columba*, 177.

¹²⁰ Hale, *The Magnificent Gael: St Columba*, 177-78.

¹²¹ A complaint made by Bishop Heiric of Auxerre in 870, likely from, *Miracula sancti Germani* - see, John O'Beirne Ranelagh, *A Short History of Ireland*, First ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 26, and; Hale, *The Magnificent Gael: St Columba*, 179-80.

¹²² Duckett, *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages*, 25.

¹²³ Philip Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality* (London: Dalton, Longman & Todd, 1995), 61.

¹²⁴ Both *The Wanderer* and *Seafarer* poems are preserved in the tenth century anthology known as the *Exeter Book*, [fol. 76b - fol. 78a and fol. 81b - fol. 83a, respectively], see, Israel Gollancz, *The Exeter Book: An Anthology of Anglo-Saxon Poetry Presented to Exeter Cathedral by Loeferic, First Bishop of Exeter (1050-1071)* (London: Legate Street Press, 2015), also in the section

I have spent my winter on the ice-cold sea,
wretched and anxious, in the paths of exile,
lacking dear friends, hung around by icicles,
while hail flew past in showers. There heard I nothing
but the resounding sea, the ice-cold waves.
Storms beat the rocky cliffs, and icy-winged
the tern replied, the horn-beaked eagle shrieked.
No patron had I there who might have soothed
my desolate spirit.¹²⁵

The most famous of the Christian *immrama* is the *Voyage of St Brendan*—closely linked to the earlier pagan *Voyage of Bran*.¹²⁶ Brendan's story the *Navigatio Brendani*, written around 850—even though the Saint lived between 500 and 583—became very popular in the Middle Ages.¹²⁷ It is a classic *immrama* of the voyage literature, full of incident, adventure, and moral exhortation—dressed in a language of saga and heroic myth.¹²⁸ Prompted by his foster-mother St Ita, Brendan sailed for the 'Island of Promise' in c545—'Trusting in the direction of providence, they cared not from what quarter the wind blew, and were even ignorant of the course their vessel took.'¹²⁹ The ultimate destination—heaven—is described in the Irish *Life of St Brendan* as,

A place wherein you will find health without sickness, delight without quarrelling, union without wrangling, princedom without dissolution, rest without idleness, freedom without labour, luminous unity of angels,

entitled *The Elegies*, in, Michael Alexander, (Trans.), *The First Poems in English* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 46-58; Ida Gordon, L. (Edit.), *The Seafarer*, ed. G. L. Brook, Old and Middle English Texts, (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1979); D. Whitelock, "The Interpretation of the Seafarer," in *The Early Cultures of North-West Europe*, ed. Cyril and Bruce Dickens Fox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), and; Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 80.

¹²⁵ From the poem *The Seafarer*, in the *Exeter Book*, fol. 81b - fol. 83a, see, Gordon, *The Seafarer*, 34-36 - Lines 14-19 & 24-26.

¹²⁶ Original ninth century text "*Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*" in The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages, see John J. O'Meara, *The Voyage of Saint Brendan: Journey to the Promised Land* (Colin Smythe Ltd., 1991), and; Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 81.

¹²⁷ Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*, 62.

¹²⁸ Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 4.

¹²⁹ Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 5.

delights of Paradise. Service of Angels, feasting without intoxication, avoidance of pain, faces of the righteous, partaking of the Great Easter. A life blessed, just, protected, great, loveable, noble, restful, radiant, without gloom, without darkness, without sin, without weakness, in shining, incorruptible bodies, in stations of angels, on plains of the Land of Promise.¹³⁰

Before the Vikings came, the Irish *peregrini* travelled to the islands well north of Scotland—occupying the Faroes and Iceland,¹³¹ where the ancient *Norwegian Chronicler* noted that: ‘these islands were first inhabited by Picts and *Papae*’—the *papae* or *parpar* being named for their white habits.¹³² In c825 the Irish geographer Dicuil wrote, ‘for nearly a hundred years hermits dwelt [in the Faroes], from our Scottia [Ireland]...but the Norsemen had slain every one of them,’¹³³ ‘they left behind their books, bells, croziers and pastoral staffs, from which one can conclude that they were Irishmen.’¹³⁴ There was a very close connection between the *peregrini* and the fantasy of the voyage tales.¹³⁵ In the modern stories, the navigators were replaced by the *peregrini*—yet these voyage tales continued to enshrine the imaginative essence of the native tradition—the increased dangers of

¹³⁰ J. F. Webb, (Trans.) and, Farmer, D. H. (Edit.), *The Age of Bede: Bede: Life of Cuthbert: Eddius Stephanus: Life of Wilfrid: Bede: Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow: The Anonymous History of Abbot Ceolfrith: with The Voyage of St Brendan*, ed. Betty Radice, Penguin Classics, (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 233-67, see; Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality*, 44.

¹³¹ Bowen, *Saints, Seaways and Settlements in the Celtic Lands*, 78.

¹³² *A History of Norway, The Orkney Islands*, in Devra Kunin, (Trans.) and Carl Phepstead (Edit.), *A History of Norway and The Passions and Miracles of the Blessed Olafr*, XIII (London: University College London, 2008), Accessed online <http://www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Text%20Series/Historia%26Passio.pdf>. also, Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain*, 11.

¹³³ From Dicuil's *De mensura Orbis terrae*, 8.18, a geographical work published in 825, see Mario Esposito, "An Unpublished Astronomical Treatise by the Irish Monk Dicuil," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy Section C*, no. 26 (1906): and; Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain*, 12.

¹³⁴ From Dicuil, Esposito, "An Unpublished Astronomical Treatise by the Irish Monk Dicuil," see; Duckett, *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages*, 27, and; Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 80.

¹³⁵ Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," 149.

the Viking era in no way detracting from their appeal.¹³⁶ One curiosity of the voyage literature is the combination of fantastic embellishment and precise detail, making an unbelievable story more real.¹³⁷ The author invites us to engage with some paradoxes—he has no modern desire to ‘know exactly what happened.’¹³⁸

Shall I abandon, O King of Mysteries, the soft comforts of home?
Shall I turn my back on my native land, and my face towards the sea?
Shall I put myself wholly at the mercy of God, without silver, without a horse, without fame and honour?
Shall I throw myself wholly on the King of Kings, without sword and shield, without food and drink, without bed to lie on?
Shall I say farewell to my beautiful land, placing myself under Christ’s yoke?
Shall I pour out my heart to Him, confessing my manifold sins and begging forgiveness, tears streaming down my cheeks?
Shall I leave the prints of my knees on the sandy beach, a record of my final prayer in my native land?
Shall I then suffer every kind of wound that the sea can inflict?
Shall I take my tiny coracle across the wide, sparkling ocean? O King of the Glorious Heaven, shall I go of my own choice upon the sea?
O Christ, will you help me on the wild waves?¹³⁹

The Irish Spirit

Dermot Quinn, in remarking on a diary of Irish travels made in 1183 by the Welsh Chronicler Giraldus Cambensis, highlights two oddities of the Irish—their ‘ancientness’ and their ‘national addiction to exile.’¹⁴⁰ Perhaps the Irish urge to wander came from the migratory nature of their Celtic ancestors who in the second

¹³⁶ Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," 148.

¹³⁷ Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 5.

¹³⁸ Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 5.

¹³⁹ From *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, (Voyage of St Brendan): *Brendan’s Prayer on the Mountain*: translated in Robert Van de Weyer, (Edit.), *Celtic Fire: The Passionate Religious Vision of Ancient Britain and Ireland* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 57-58, see; Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 35-36, for an explanation of the various sources.

¹⁴⁰ In Thomas Wright, *The Historical Works of Giraldus Cambrensis* (BiblioLife, 2009), see; Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 2.

century BC had been the dominant race across Europe?¹⁴¹ Or perhaps it was their living in close proximity to the sea and the natural rhythms of the tide and seasons?¹⁴² Or more likely for the monastic *peregrinatio*, it was a way of imitating and growing in union with the humiliated Christ—as Dom Jean Leclercq put it, ‘*Peregrinatio* is also a form of solitude, a quest for exile and destitution, a way of imitating Christ in His poverty, an authentic evangelical life—did not the Lord praise, in the Gospel, the one who becomes a stranger for Him?’¹⁴³ It was a perfect justification for their restlessness—they clearly saw Christ’s life on earth as a sacrificial pilgrimage from heaven.¹⁴⁴ The wandering Saints were, ‘longing for a better country—a heavenly one’¹⁴⁵—the New Jerusalem.¹⁴⁶ Chadwick describes this ‘wanderlust’ and ‘passion to travel far and wide’ as a distinctive characteristic of the Irish Church.¹⁴⁷ Wandering, or *peregrinatio*, has been described as ‘the chief legacy’ of Irish monasticism.¹⁴⁸ In the early ninth century, Wahlafrid Strabo wrote that wandering was ‘the condition of the Irish.’¹⁴⁹ They became *peregrini* out of their deep devotion to Christ, but also because of their genuine appreciation of

¹⁴¹ Miranda J. Green, *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers* (London: British Museum Press, 1995), 8.

¹⁴² Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 32.

¹⁴³ Jean Leclercq, *Aux Sources de la Spiritualite Occidentale* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1964), 51, and; Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality*, 44. ‘And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters of father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life’ - **Matthew 19:29**; see also: Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 110.

¹⁴⁴ Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 110.

¹⁴⁵ **Hebrews 11:14.**

¹⁴⁶ O’Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 81.

¹⁴⁷ Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 79.

¹⁴⁸ Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 82, and; Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality*, 43.

¹⁴⁹ Wahlafrid Strabo was a ninth century Benedictine monk who wrote a *Life of St Gall—Vita sancti Galli*, from which book this quote likely came: see, Maud Joynt, *The Life of St Gall* (Dyfed: Llanerch Publishers, 1927), which includes Strabo’s Life, and see also; Rees, *Celtic Saints Passionate Wanderers*, 7.

God's mysterious creation.¹⁵⁰ The Welsh and English did undertake *peregrinatio* but to a lesser extent.¹⁵¹ This difference may be because the Irish had never known the constraint of the Roman governors, their officials and legions—and were therefore free to wander. In contrast, the Celtic British developed their monastic life in its fullness amid their valleys and moors, after the Romans had abandoned Britain.¹⁵² The monk trained in the Roman ways of order and government was more likely to be content with his life in a community disciplined by a common *Rule*.¹⁵³

Origins of the Celtic Peregrini

The ritual act of ascetic exile—or *peregrinatio*—was understood by the Celts and the Irish in particular, as an extreme act of piety that was akin to martyrdom.¹⁵⁴ It was a heroic act and a commitment to live the rest of one's life away from home and kin—leaving with no destination in mind but to rely entirely on God to guide and protect.¹⁵⁵ It was a phenomenon with its roots firmly in the monastic experiments of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Antiquity. In order to fully comprehend this radical spirituality, it is necessary to briefly explore its very beginnings.

¹⁵⁰ Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 32.

¹⁵¹ Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*, 59, and; Bowen, *Saints, Seaways and Settlements in the Celtic Lands*, 70-73.

¹⁵² Duckett, *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages*, 24.

¹⁵³ Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 110.

¹⁵⁴ Alexander O'Hara, *Saint Columbanus: Selected Writings* (Dublin, Ireland: Veritas Publications, 2015), 20.

¹⁵⁵ O'Hara, *Saint Columbanus: Selected Writings*, 20.

Origins in the Desert

The Celtic *peregrini* emerged from the strongly ascetic monastic communities on the fringes of the Roman Empire—at the edge of the then known world. Originating in Egypt and Syria, moving to France then to Britain, this early monasticism swept towards Ireland with astonishing speed and force in the sixth century.¹⁵⁶ It was essentially a tradition based on the ascetic ‘desert life,’ a spirituality not only rooted in both the Old and New Testaments but also in the Early Church.¹⁵⁷ In the second and third centuries, the inspiration to answer the call of the desert was widespread, driven by the ever-increasing corruption of Roman society.¹⁵⁸ The desert was considered a place where God dwelt, where He would gather His people in the wilderness and speak ‘words of comfort’ to them¹⁵⁹—God would cover the desert mountains with His glory.¹⁶⁰ The desert became the place where the faithful sought solitude, silence, and complete abandonment of self, with full dependence on God—as an enactment of the Gospels.¹⁶¹ The climax came in c250 when Emperor Decius ordered that all his subjects must sacrifice to the Roman gods under pain of death¹⁶²—a vast number of men and women who had been leading ascetic lives in their own homes, fled to the wilderness.¹⁶³ From the

¹⁵⁶ Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 3.

¹⁵⁷ **Hebrews 11:37-40** and see, Peter F. Anson, *The Call of the Desert: The Solitary Life in the Christian Church* (London: SPCK, 1973), 8.

¹⁵⁸ Anson, *The Call of the Desert: The Solitary Life in the Christian Church*, 9.

¹⁵⁹ **Hosea 2:14.**

¹⁶⁰ **Habakkuk 3:3**, and see, Anson, *The Call of the Desert: The Solitary Life in the Christian Church*, 2.

¹⁶¹ Jon M. Sweeney, (Edit.), *A Course in Desert Spirituality: Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2019), 24.

¹⁶² For further detail of the *Decian Persecution* see, W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 318-24.

¹⁶³ Anson, *The Call of the Desert: The Solitary Life in the Christian Church*, 9.

Edict of Milan in 313 onwards,¹⁶⁴ the emphasis switched from actual martyrdom to what was considered the next best thing—self-mortification and asceticism. From salvation gained by heroic resistance in the face of Roman execution, into a new model of achieving grace through the practice of regular asceticism.¹⁶⁵ This was the origin of the Celtic, and particularly Irish, practice of extreme asceticism.

The monastic ascetics who became the Celtic *peregrini*, with their spiritual roots in the tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Egypt and Syria, modelled themselves on the eremitic hermit St Antony, and subsequently, on the cenobitic monastic *Rule of St Pachomius*.¹⁶⁶ In Antony (251-356), they saw monasticism in its purest and most primitive form, that of the anchorites—in both eremitic and semi-eremitic formats. These forms were free, unorganised, and perhaps the highest ideal of monasticism, but were not a sustainable model going forward.¹⁶⁷ St Pachomius (292-348) moderated the asceticism of Antony, stressing the obedience of the monk to God and the Abbot. His monastic *Rule*, one of the first, pioneered the format and detail of the cenobitic life.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ In the *Edict of Milan* in February 313, the Emperor Constantine declared the Roman Empire to be tolerant of the Christian faith—see, Anson, *The Call of the Desert: The Solitary Life in the Christian Church*, 9, and; Andrew Louth, *The Wilderness of God*, Second ed. (London: Dalton, Longman & Todd, 2003), 45.

¹⁶⁵ Sheldrake, *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 333.

¹⁶⁶ Important background information on St Pachomius can be found in, Philip Rousseau, *Pachomius: The making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt*, ed. Peter Brown, vol. VI, *The Transformation of the Classic Heritage*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1985), also see; Patrick F. O'Connell, (Edit.), *Thomas Merton: Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, vol. 1, *Monastic Wisdom Series*, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2005), 39.

¹⁶⁷ O'Connell, *Thomas Merton: Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, 1, 39.

¹⁶⁸ Comprehensive studies on the *Lives*, the *Rule* and works of Pachomius can be found in the trilogy, Armand Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia 1: The Life of Saint Pachomius and his Disciples*, vol. 45, *Cistercian Studies Series*, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1980); Armand Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia 2: Pachomian Chronicles and Rules*, vol. 46, *Cistercian Studies Series*, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1981), and; Armand Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia 3: Instructions, Letters, & Other Writings*, vol. 47, *Cistercian Studies Series*, (Kalamazoo, Michigan:

Monasticism takes Root in Gaul

The monastic tide flowed from East to West and into Gaul in the fourth century, through St Martin of Tours (316-397), who founded the first Gallic monastery, near Poitiers in c350.¹⁶⁹ His communities at Liguge and Martmoutier were semi-eremitic rather than cenobitic, inspired by Athanasius' *Life of St Antony*.¹⁷⁰ The popularity of these new monastic foundations became legend—on Martin's death in 397, two thousand monks were present.¹⁷¹ In the mid-420s the influential monastery of Lérins in southern Gaul was established by the Gallo-Roman nobleman St Honoratus (350-429) and his associates.¹⁷² Attracting many learned senior Roman officials as the Roman Empire in Gaul collapsed, Lérins became, not only a sanctuary, but a key centre of learning.¹⁷³ Although based on the Egyptian model, they followed Cassian's lead, embracing the less ascetic *Rule of St Pachomius*.¹⁷⁴ As an off-shoot of Lérins, John Cassian (360-435), having spent some fifteen years touring the monastic experiments of the Desert Fathers and Mothers in the Egyptian and Syrian deserts, set-up the famous monastery of St Victor, opposite the busy Mediterranean port of Marseilles.¹⁷⁵ In c420, at the

Cistercian Publications, 1982), see also; O'Connell, *Thomas Merton: Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, 1, 40-41, and; Duckett, *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages*, 21.

¹⁶⁹ See Sulpitius Severus's *Life of St Martin* in, Roberts, "The Works of Sulpitius Severus," 3-17, and see; Duckett, *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages*, 22.

¹⁷⁰ Anson, *The Call of the Desert: The Solitary Life in the Christian Church*, 48.

¹⁷¹ John Ryan, *Irish Monasticism: Origins and Early Development*, Second ed., Celtic Studies, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1972), 54.

¹⁷² For more on the history and spirituality of the Lérins monastery see, A. C. Cooper-Marsdin, *The History of the Islands of the Lerins: The Monastery, Saints and Theologians of S. Honorat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), especially 128-36, re-issued by Cambridge University Press in 2016, and see; Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain*, 155.

¹⁷³ Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 84.

¹⁷⁴ Ryan, *Irish Monasticism: Origins and Early Development*, 406.

¹⁷⁵ John Cassian's writings and theology are best described in, Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, ed. David C. Steinmetz, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology, (Oxford: Oxford University

request of the Bishop of Apt, Cassian wrote his reflections on the eremitical and cenobitic life in his instantly acclaimed *Institutes and Conferences*.¹⁷⁶

Celtic Monasticism

According to Nora Chadwick, it was largely through books that the knowledge of Eastern asceticism and monasticism—the anchorism of the East—came to the Celts of Britain and Ireland.¹⁷⁷ The principal book was Athanasius's *Life of St Antony*,¹⁷⁸ written a year after his death in 357, and translated from Greek into Latin by Evagrius of Pontus in c360.¹⁷⁹ The *Life of St Antony* was described by Thomas Merton as one of the greatest documents in the monastic tradition, in his view even greater than the *Rule of St Benedict*.¹⁸⁰ The influential *Life of St Martin* written by his friend Sulpitius Severus in c398, followed the pattern of Athanasius' *Life of St Antony*.¹⁸¹ With Cassian's contributions of the *Institutes and Conferences*, these collective writings kindled the inspiration for Celtic monasticism in both Britain and Ireland.¹⁸²

Press, 1998), also see; Ryan, *Irish Monasticism: Origins and Early Development*, 55, and; Anson, *The Call of the Desert: The Solitary Life in the Christian Church*, 50-51.

¹⁷⁶ All twelfth books of John Cassian's *Institutes* can be found in, Jerome Bertram, (Trans.), *John Cassian: The Monastic Institutes: On the Training of a Monk and The Eight Deadly Sins* (London: The Saint Austin Press, 1999), and a shortened version of Cassian's *Conferences* in, John Cassian, *Conferences*, ed. Kevin A. Lynch, trans. Colm Luibheid, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985), also; O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 41.

¹⁷⁷ Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 50.

¹⁷⁸ See Meyer, *St Athanasius: The Life of Saint Antony*.

¹⁷⁹ For more on Evagrius of Pontus otherwise known as Evagrius the Hermit see, Angela Tilby, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Their Origin in the Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius the Hermit* (London: SPCK, 2009).

¹⁸⁰ O'Connell, *Thomas Merton: Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, 1, 39.

¹⁸¹ Ryan, *Irish Monasticism: Origins and Early Development*, 54.

¹⁸² Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain*, 156, and; O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 42-43.

Why did the Peregrini Wander?

The reasons the Celtic *peregrini* travelled far and wide were often complex—they were essentially wandering hermits who, rather than going to the desert, went out to find God in woods, fields and in the sea.¹⁸³ Their primary concern was to seek out remote places to lead a life of prayer and asceticism—rarely did they set out just to preach, to convert and minister to the pagans.¹⁸⁴ For example, Columbanus at one time had considered the idea of missionary work in wholly pagan territory, but instead he focussed on setting-up monastic institutions, from which the message later propagated,

Once Columban thought of going to the land of the Wends, who are also called Slavs, in order to illuminate their darkened minds with the light of the Gospel...When he purposed to make his vows, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a vision, and showed him in a little circle the structure of the world, just as the circle of the universe is usually drawn with a pen in a book. 'You perceive,' the angel said, 'how much remains set apart of the whole world. Go to the right or the left where you will, that you may enjoy the fruits of your labours.' Therefore, Columban remained where he was, until the way to Italy opened before him.¹⁸⁵

Going into the unknown had a long and awesome tradition in Ireland—forceable exile in a boat without sail or oar was an old and severe civil punishment. Many of the islands around Britain, which were colonised by monks and hermits, had been Roman penal colonies.¹⁸⁶

Perhaps the primary reason the Celtic *peregrini* travelled was to seek solitude—to be with their God—as Adomnán states in the *Life of St Columba*, the

¹⁸³ Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 110.

¹⁸⁴ Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 91.

¹⁸⁵ Jonas, *Life of St Columban*, 94, also; Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 116.

¹⁸⁶ Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 110.

Irish *peregrini* sought ‘a solitude in the pathless sea.’¹⁸⁷ Above all they desired to be utterly alone—‘to find a *desentum* [quiet place] wherein to repair the soul.’¹⁸⁸ They saw the Christian life as a journey towards Christ.¹⁸⁹ The followers of Columbanus went abroad ‘for the love of Christ’—leaving home behind them, either as penitents, missionaries or students/scholars.¹⁹⁰ Adomnán tells us that Columba left Ireland for Scotland ‘wishing to be a pilgrim for Christ’ and Gall travelled to Europe to engage in ‘*peregrinatio* for the love of God.’¹⁹¹ The longing for solitude as a part of the ascetic life, common as it was to all followers of the monastic way, was inherent in the very nature and character of the Celtic *peregrini*.¹⁹²

The Celtic monks, and more rarely nuns, freely wandered—inspired by the voice of God to travel over earth and sea, pursuing new knowledge, new love of spiritual things, ever seeking their ‘ideal place of resurrection.’¹⁹³ According to Brendan Lehane, an old Irish legend had it that each person was spiritually tied to three lumps of earth—‘the three sods of fate’—firstly, the place where they were born—secondly, their place of death—and thirdly, their place of burial—the burial site becoming their ‘place of resurrection.’¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁷ Adomnán, *Life of St Columba*, Book 2, Chapter 42, see Maire & Liam De Paor, *Early Christian Ireland: Ancient Peoples and Places*, ed. Glyn Daniel (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958), 52 quoting from, William Reeves, and J. T. Fowler (Edits.), *Adamnani Vita S. Columbae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), reissued by Blackwells in 2010 <https://blackwells.co.uk/bookshop/product/Adamnani-Vita-S-Columbaedomnan-1894-by-William-Reeves-Joseph-Thomas-Fowler-editor/9781160941945>, accessed online December 15, 2022, and see, Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 4.

¹⁸⁸ Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 5.

¹⁸⁹ O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 80.

¹⁹⁰ Jonas, *Life of St Columban*, 19, and; O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 82.

¹⁹¹ Walahfrid Strabo's *Life of Gall*, see Joynt, *The Life of St Gall*, 64-65, and; Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality*, 43, also; Anderson, *Adomnan's Life of Columba*, 186.

¹⁹² Duckett, *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages*, 23.

¹⁹³ Duckett, *The Wandering Saints of the Early Middle Ages*, 24-25.

¹⁹⁴ Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 111.

Evangelism was one of the ultimate reasons the *peregrini* wandered, but perhaps not the initial one. The travelling monks focussed on founding new monastic communities, from which to evangelise.¹⁹⁵ Columbanus, on reaching Gaul, founded a monastery at Luxeuil in order ‘to preach to the peoples of the surrounding districts.’¹⁹⁶ No sooner had Columba reached Iona than he began ‘to preach the word of God to the men of Alba and to the Britons and Saxons.’¹⁹⁷ To his Celtic kin Adomnán, Columba was ‘wishing to be an exile for Christ,’ but to the Anglo-Saxon monk Bede, he came ‘to Britain to preach the word of God to the kingdoms of the northern Picts.’¹⁹⁸

Celtic Peregrini – Columba, Columbanus & Aidan

There were ‘hundreds’ of *peregrini* during the height of the Irish missionary activity between the sixth and ninth centuries—some known to history but many lost¹⁹⁹—*peregrinatio* produced a ‘scattering of hundreds of pilgrim-missionaries into distant lands.’²⁰⁰ In this dissertation I have chosen just three Celtic *peregrini* to illustrate some of the key characteristics and circumstances surrounding their vocation.

¹⁹⁵ Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*, 12.

¹⁹⁶ Jonas, *Life of St Columban*, Chapter 51, 86, and; Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 6, also; Ryan, *Irish Monasticism: Origins and Early Development*, 263.

¹⁹⁷ The *Old Irish Life of Columba, Betha Coluim Chille in Stokes, "Bertha Choluim Chille: On the Life of Saint Columba," 117*
<https://archive.org/details/threemiddleirish00unknuoft/page/116/mode/2up>, accessed online December 14, 2022, see Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 5-6.

¹⁹⁸ Bede, *EH III.4*, in McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 114, and; Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*, 12.

¹⁹⁹ Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 6.

²⁰⁰ Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain*, 9.

Columba

The Celtic *peregrinatio* movement was traditionally started by Columba in 563, although his reasons and motives for leaving Ireland were complex. Columba, or Colum Cille, was an aristocrat of the Northern Uí Néill clan,²⁰¹ he was a great-grandson of the High King of Ireland—King Niall of the Nine Hostages²⁰²—his mother was also the daughter of a king—he was in the line of succession to the Irish throne.²⁰³ As was typical for the male offspring of royalty in his time, the young boy Columba was sent to the priest Cruithnechán to begin his education, which continued later under Gemmán in Leinster.²⁰⁴ He attended the monastery of Finnian of Clonard, the best Irish ‘university’ of his day, learning Latin and the Scriptures. He also studied with Finnian of Moville,²⁰⁵ who himself was a former student at Whithorn under Ninian.²⁰⁶ Although the facts and dates are not clear, Columba left Ireland as a *peregrinus* in around 563, two years after the Battle of Cúl Drebene—the culmination of a long and bloody struggle between the two most powerful dynasties of Ireland, the Northern and Southern Uí Néill.²⁰⁷ According to legend, the fighting was triggered by two incidents—in the first, Columba was caught borrowing and copying a valuable manuscript—Jerome’s translation of the

²⁰¹ See the poem *Amra Choluimb Chille*, in Clancy, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery*. Reference 105 and Interpretation 122, and Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 146.

²⁰² James, *An Age of Saints: Its Relevance for us Today*, 64.

²⁰³ Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 112.

²⁰⁴ Adomnán’s *Life of St Columba*, in Sharpe, *Life of St Columba: by Adomnan of Iona*. Introduction, 10-11 and *Book III.2*, 206-207.

²⁰⁵ Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 113-14.

²⁰⁶ St Ninian’s monastery in Galloway, Scotland, was called Candida Casa and Whithorn—a large white stone structure unusual for its time, see James, *An Age of Saints: Its Relevance for us Today*, 64.

²⁰⁷ Clarkson, *Columba: Pilgrim, Priest & Patron Saint*, 35.

Vulgate²⁰⁸—a rare book which had been brought from Rome by Finnian of Moville.²⁰⁹ Confronted by Finnian, Columba refused to give up the precious copy that he had made. Because of Columba’s royal pedigree, the dispute was escalated to the High King Diarmait mac Cerbaill—but he sided with Finnian—saying that: ‘to every cow belongs her calf, and to every book belongs its copy’²¹⁰—Columba’s copy had to be returned to Finnian.²¹¹ In the second incident, a young prince who had accidentally killed a son of Diarmait’s in a game of hurley, fled to the sanctuary of Columba. Contrary to all precedent, and in violation of the Celtic sacred right of sanctuary, Diarmait in a hot rage, charged in and killed the offending young prince.²¹² In the retaliatory Battle of Cúl Drebene that Columba instigated, some three thousand²¹³ warriors were slain.²¹⁴ In the ensuing politically biased Synod of Tailtiu, perhaps representing the last stand of Tara paganism against the incoming tide of Christianity,²¹⁵ Columba was excommunicated and banished from Ireland.²¹⁶ As a consequence, the forty-two year old Columba left Ireland, eventually

²⁰⁸ The Vulgate translation of the Bible was commissioned by Pope Damasus in 382, Jerome initially translated only the four Gospels, but eventually he completed the whole Bible into Latin—an early copy of which Finnian had obtained in Rome and brought to Ireland, see, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vulgate>, accessed online December 10, 2022.

²⁰⁹ Duckett, *The Gateway to the Middle Ages: Monasticism*, 80-81.

²¹⁰ *Annals of the Four Masters*, in “Foras Feasa ar Éirinn”, in Michael O’Clery, *The Annals of Ireland, Tr. From the Original Irish of the Four Masters*, by O. Connellan (USA: Franklin Classics Trade Press, 2018), also; Liam De Paor, *St Patrick’s World: Christian Culture of Ireland’s Apostolic Age* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1993), 133.

²¹¹ The *Cathach of St Columba* (RIA MS 12R33) still survives containing the Vulgate Psalms XXX to CV and written between 560 & 630—this has been portrayed as the first known reinforcement of copyright—although without the wholesale copying of numerous manuscripts in the Celtic scriptoria, very few ancient text would have survived to this day, accessed online November 19, 2022, <https://historycollection.com/copyright-dispute-dark-ages-ended-costing-3000-lives/>, and also, Lacey, *Colum Cille and the Columban Tradition*, 18-19.

²¹² Lacey, *Colum Cille and the Columban Tradition*, 19.

²¹³ A large uncountable number - Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 117.

²¹⁴ See Alfred P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men: Scotland AD 80-1000* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), Chapter 3, and; Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages*, 146.

²¹⁵ Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 118.

²¹⁶ Clarkson, *Columba: Pilgrim, Priest & Patron Saint*, 37-39.

establishing a monastery on Iona, which by then was ruled by his Dál Raita cousin, Conall mac Comgall.²¹⁷ Contrary to the ideal of the *peregrini*, Columba's exit from Ireland was probably not voluntary—he left following defeat at the Battle of Cúl Drebene.²¹⁸ He also settled in a part of Scotland where he remained connected to his kin—Dál Raita in western Scotland was under the control of his tribal group. As a man of high standing, banished for his role in the battle, Columba likely left for Iona more as an ambassador than a true *peregrinus*.²¹⁹

Columbanus

The second example of an Irish *peregrinus*, and more aligned with the *peregrinatio* tradition, was perhaps the greatest of them all, Columbanus. Columbanus was likely from 'prosperous farmer' stock, and being non-royalty, grew up in a Christian home with his father and mother.²²⁰ He was a handsome lad—and according to his biographer Jonas, his 'noble manliness...aroused against him the lust of lascivious maidens.'²²¹ In his wrestling with his religious calling, he sought out and consulted a holy anchoress who famously responded:

For fifteen years I have been homeless in the place of my pilgrimage and never by the aid of Christ have I looked back. Yes, and if my weak sex had not prevented me, I would have gone on truer [*peregrinatio*] across the sea. And you, alive with the fore of youth, you will stay here at home in your native land with weaklings and women? Remember Eve and Delilah and Bathsheba and the tempters of Solomon! Go forth, young man, go forth, and avoid the road to ruin and to Hell!²²²

²¹⁷ Clarkson, *Columba: Pilgrim, Priest & Patron Saint*, 48.

²¹⁸ See Ludwig Bieler, *Ireland: Harbinger of the Middle Ages* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 65.

²¹⁹ Clarkson, *Columba: Pilgrim, Priest & Patron Saint*, 48.

²²⁰ Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 19-21.

²²¹ *Life of St Columbanus*, 7; in Jonas, *Life of St Columban*, 12, and; O-Fiaich, *Columbanus: In His Own Words*, 18.

²²² Eve and the 'Fall of Man,' in **Genesis 3:1-20** & **2 Corinthians 11:3**, Delilah and the downfall of Samson, in **Judges 16:1-22**, David commits adultery with Bathsheba, in **2 Samuel 11:1-27**, King

Away, O youth! Away! Flee from corruption into which, as you know, many have fallen. Forsake the path which leads to the gates of hell.²²³

As the tale goes, Columbanus immediately ran home ‘with eyes ever to the front,’ collected his essential belongings, and stepping over his distraught mother who lay prostrate across the threshold to bar his way, headed north as a ‘*peregrinationis locus*’ to be educated,²²⁴ ‘wisely leaving the fair maids of Leinster safely behind him.’²²⁵ He initially sojourned with Abbot Sinell of Cleensh, a monk ‘famous for his holiness and for his learning in sacred things.’²²⁶ After some years, he moved on to Bangor in Armagh under the well-known Abbot Comgall, where he learned monastic discipline, and was taught Latin and Greek—becoming well versed in the Psalms and Scriptures.²²⁷ Comgall, who was a pupil and friend of Columba of Iona was extremely strict and renowned for his austerity.²²⁸ Much to Comgall’s surprise and anguish, Columbanus his best student and likely chosen successor, unexpectedly requested permission to follow the calling of *peregrinatio*.²²⁹ Finally, permission reluctantly bestowed, Columbanus left Bangor aged thirty²³⁰—setting off for Europe with twelve companions.²³¹ As a true *peregrinus*, he left homeland and kin not knowing where his travels would lead him—finally accepting an

Solomon’s wives and concubines cause him to turn from the Lord, in **1 Kings 11:1-13**, and Duckett, *The Gateway to the Middle Ages: Monasticism*, 91.

²²³ Jonas, *Life of St Columban*, Chapter 8, 14.

²²⁴ Jonas, *Life of St Columban*, 14-16.

²²⁵ Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 148 paraphrased from, Jonas, *Life of St Columban*, 14-15.

²²⁶ O-Fiaich, *Columbanus: In His Own Words*, 18. and; Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 7.

²²⁷ Duckett, *The Gateway to the Middle Ages: Monasticism*, 91; Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 149, and; Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 17.

²²⁸ Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 31.

²²⁹ Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 39.

²³⁰ Jonas, *Life of St Columban*, 19.

²³¹ James, *An Age of Saints: Its Relevance for us Today*, 90.

invitation from Merovingian King Gunthram²³² to build a monastery in the solitudes of the densely-forested Vosges Mountains.²³³ Thus the triple monastic community of Luxeuil, Annegray and Fountains was established from the ruins of a Roman spa built around thermal springs.²³⁴ Nicknamed 'Bangor-on-the-Breuchin' because of its similar austerity, the Luxeuil monastic complex became 'the most brilliant centre of learning and virtue in the Middle Ages'—famed for its 'scholarship, strictness, and solidarity with the poor.'²³⁵ Late-on in his life, having lost royal support for the Luxeuil foundations—at seventy—Columbanus undertook a third *peregrinatio* journey moving on into northern Italy, establishing his final monastery at Bobbio on the site of a ruined basilica dedicated to St Peter—a fertile place in the foothills of the Apennines, between two rivers.²³⁶ Columbanus was more of a true *peregrinus*, leaving home three times for the unknown—leaving kith and kin. He was particularly austere, perhaps in reaction to the temptations of his youth. Like the majority of the *peregrini* he was a well-educated and mature monk when he commenced his trans-European adventures.

Aidan

The third example of a *peregrinus*, Aidan undertook a *peregrinatio* journey from Iona at the request of the Northumbrian King Oswald; Oswald and Aidan had most likely grown up together on Iona.²³⁷ Following his conquest of the Kingdom of

²³² Jonas, *Life of St Columban*, 22, corrected in; O-Fiaich, *Columbanus: In His Own Words*, 27.

²³³ Jonas, *Life of St Columban*, 23, and; Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 155-56.

²³⁴ Jonas, *Life of St Columban*, 23, and; O-Fiaich, *Columbanus: In His Own Words*, 29-30.

²³⁵ Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 7.

²³⁶ Jonas, *Life of St Columban*, 99, and; Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 88.

²³⁷ See Bradley, *Columba: Politician, Penitent, and Pilgrim*, 122.

Northumbria, King Oswald wanted to establish Christianity in his united lands of Deira and Bernica.²³⁸ After an unsuccessful attempt by his fellow monk Cormán,²³⁹ Aidan undertook his *peregrinatio* journey under obedience, building a monastery on the small island of Lindisfarne, off the Northumberland coast—an island where, ‘the tide ebbs and flows, [the island cut-off and] surrounded twice daily by the waves of the sea.’²⁴⁰ The Venerable Bede, described Aidan as ‘a man of outstanding gentleness, devotion, and moderation, who had a zeal for God...’²⁴¹—a man who loved peace, lacked avarice and had deep concern for the poor.²⁴² Aidan was a wandering missionary Bishop—*episcopus vagans*—both the Abbot of Lindisfarne and, according to the Roman in Bede, an ecclesiastical Bishop.²⁴³ He used to travel everywhere, in town and country—not on horseback like the Roman Bishops and aristocracy—but on foot so that ‘whenever he saw people, whether rich or poor, he might at once approach them’ to encourage them in the faith.²⁴⁴ All who accompanied him, whether tonsured or laymen, had to engage in some

²³⁸ Bede, *EH III.5* in, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 116-18, and; Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 93.

²³⁹ Bishop Cormán was initially chosen to go to Northumberland at Oswald's request—probably because he knew the language of the Angles—but he found them ‘intractable, obstinate, and uncivilised. Aidan was then chosen for his humility, made a Bishop and sent. See, Bede, *EH III.5*, in McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 117-18.

²⁴⁰ Bede, *EH III.3* in, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 113.

²⁴¹ Bede, *EH III.3* in, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 113.

²⁴² Bede, *EH III.5* in, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 117, and; Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 94.

²⁴³ Bede, *EH III.3* in, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 113, and; Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 95.

²⁴⁴ Bede, *EH III.5* in, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 116-17.

form of study... 'reading the Scriptures or learning the Psalms' a daily task they always undertook.²⁴⁵ Aidan was an example of a humble monk who was also well educated and mature when he left Iona. He would frequently retreat to the Farne Islands—close to Lindisfarne—to contemplate and pray.²⁴⁶ He persuaded Hilda, King Edwin's great niece and the sister-in-law of King Ethelhere of the East Angles, to stay in England and set-up and lead the famous Abbey at Whitby.²⁴⁷ The Lindisfarne monastery was effectively a 'daughter-house' of Columba and Iona.²⁴⁸

The End of the Celtic Peregrini

The Impact of the Vikings

The activities of the *peregrini* were disturbed by the onset of the Viking raids towards the end of the eighth century.²⁴⁹ Many of the more remote monastic communities, like Lindisfarne and Iona, were raided and destroyed—often several times—leaving the monks dead or fleeing for their lives²⁵⁰—for some monks, the Viking aggression was welcomed as an opportunity to attain Red Martyrdom.²⁵¹ Although the Viking devastation in Ireland and Britain undoubtedly increased the number of monks travelling to continental Europe²⁵²—either as true *peregrini* or as scholars seeking their fortunes in the Carolingian world—the exodus to the

²⁴⁵ Bede, *EH III.5* in, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 117.

²⁴⁶ Bede, *EH III.16* in, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 135.

²⁴⁷ Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 151.

²⁴⁸ Clarkson, *Columba: Pilgrim, Priest & Patron Saint*, 187.

²⁴⁹ Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," 146-51.

²⁵⁰ For a summary of the Viking raids see, Daibhi O Croinin, *Early Medieval Ireland: 400-1200*, ed. Steven G. Ellis, Longman History of Ireland, (London: Longman, 1995), Chapter 9 - 233-71, and; Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*, 86.

²⁵¹ Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," 147.

²⁵² D. D. C. Pochin Mould, *Ireland of the Saints* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1953), 101.

continent perturbed the leaders of the Church in Ireland, who sought to restrain it.²⁵³ For example, Maelruian of Tallaght, the leader of the reform movement *Céli Dé*—most likely concerned about the retaining of Irish talent—discouraged *peregrinatio* overseas and tried to keep such movement within the limits of Ireland; even pilgrimage to Rome was discouraged.²⁵⁴

Peregrini and Diocesan Ecclesiastical Structures

The other development which finally put an end to the Irish *peregrini* was the increasing presence of the established diocesan church. The two styles were at first sight very different—the Roman diocesan cleric responsible for his see or parish, preaching, baptising and administering pastoral care—in contrast to the wandering Celtic *peregrini* who roamed across diocesan boundaries seeking places of solitude and establishing monastic sites. However, the roles became blurred—sometimes uncomfortably so—as the *peregrini* also evangelised, preached, and baptised.²⁵⁵ In Gaul, Columbanus clashed early with the Romano-Gallic diocesan Bishops—many of whom were elite aristocrats from distinguished families of ‘senatorial rank’—the European Bishops took offense to the influx of the Irish ‘barbarians’ with their unique tonsures and different way of calculating the date of Easter.²⁵⁶ Columbanus’s objections triggered a stream of measures—papal letters, synodal decrees, royal capitularies—aimed at curtailing and controlling the activities of the

²⁵³ Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," 147.

²⁵⁴ See E. J. Gwynn, "An Irish Penitential," *Eriu* 7 (1914): 121-95, and; Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," 147.

²⁵⁵ Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 30.

²⁵⁶ Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 72-74.

Irish *peregrini*.²⁵⁷ By the time Bede wrote his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in 731, the tide of Anglo-Saxon and continental opinion—which had once been in favour of the *peregrini*—had already turned.²⁵⁸ In the later Carolingian era, insults were frequently heaped upon Irish scholars, for their ‘verbose deceptions,’ and ‘syllogisms of deceit,’ their argumentativeness.²⁵⁹ Wandering religious, whether Irish or any other, became an anomaly in the reformed diocesan system which Boniface envisaged—the wind veered more and more away from the Irish wanderers.²⁶⁰ During the early ninth century, Irishmen continued to pour into Gaul, largely to escape the Vikings, but they were no longer free to wander. They were forced either to return home, or settle under patronage in a fixed residence or a designated Irish hospice.²⁶¹ Individuals had to accept the authority and pastoral responsibility of the diocesan Bishops, or leave. By the mid-ninth century in Europe, the traditional ideal of Irish *peregrinatio* could no longer be accommodated in the climate of Benedictine stability.²⁶²

What was the Spirituality of the Celtic *Peregrini*?

Central to Celtic spirituality was the discipline of *peregrinatio*—the outward expression of a journey that involved inner change towards deeper faith and greater holiness—a journey towards God.²⁶³ As Columbanus puts it in his *Eighth Homily*,

²⁵⁷ Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*, 69.

²⁵⁸ Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," 145.

²⁵⁹ Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," 144.

²⁶⁰ Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," 145.

²⁶¹ Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," 146.

²⁶² Hughes, "The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage," 145-46.

²⁶³ Shanks, *Iona - God's Energy: The Spirituality and Vision of the Iona Community*, 12-13.

Then, lest we be concerned with human things, let us concern ourselves with things divine, and as pilgrims ever sigh for and desire our homeland; for the end of the road is ever the object of hopes and desires, and thus since we are travellers and pilgrims in the world, let us ever ponder on the end of the road, that is of our life, for the end of our roaming is our home...let us not love the roadway rather than the homeland lest we lose our eternal home; for we have such a home that we ought to love it. Therefore, let this principle abide with us, that on the road we live as travellers, as pilgrims, as guests of the world, entangled in no lusts, longing with no earthly desires, but let us fill our minds with heavenly and spiritual impressions, singing with grace and power. When shall I come and appear before the face of my God.²⁶⁴

No doubt this journey began in the Celtic monastic settings in which they grew up and gained their learning but it continued throughout their lives, with many of their core spiritual principles tested and refined in their later wanderings. It is these spiritual principles that are the main topic of this dissertation—and which have been at least partially absorbed into the New Monastic expressions of today.

Red, White & Blue/Green Martyrdom

With the roots of Celtic spirituality in the Early Church and the Desert tradition, martyrdom was a central concept for the Celtic *peregrini*, particularly in the Irish Church, and considered ‘the summit of the spiritual life.’²⁶⁵ The anonymous seventh century *Old Irish Cambrai Homily*, defined three kinds of martyrdom,

Now there are three kinds of martyrdom which are accounted as a cross to man, to wit, white martyrdom, green (some call this blue) martyrdom and red martyrdom—White Martyrdom consists of man’s abandoning everything he loves for God’s sake, though he suffer fasting and labour thereat. Green/Blue Martyrdom consists of this, that by means of fasting

²⁶⁴ The *Sermons of Columbanus*, Sermon 8, in, Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera*, Sermons 60-120, see; Seward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ’s Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality*, 43-44.

²⁶⁵ O’Connell, *Thomas Merton: Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, 1, 8.

and labour he frees himself from his evil desires; or suffers toil in penance and repentance—Red Martyrdom consists in the endurance of a cross or death for Christ’s sake, as happened to the Apostles in the persecution of the wicked and in teaching the law of God.²⁶⁶

The Early Church was seeded on Red Martyrdom—men and women who died for their Christian faith, usually at the hand of the Romans.²⁶⁷ But as time moved on and the Roman Empire itself accepted Christianity, the opportunity for Red Martyrdom diminished. For the Irish, never themselves overrun by the Roman legions and therefore less likely to have suffered Red Martyrdom. They felt the need to promote martyrs of their own, and thus they developed the concept of White and Green/Blue Martyrdom.²⁶⁸ White Martyrdom entailed the separation from everything they held dear for the sake of God, through the daily practice of the ascetic life.²⁶⁹ It represented the ‘perfect pilgrimage,’ the monk leaving ‘his fatherland in body and soul to voyage abroad as a *peregrinus*.’²⁷⁰

A mind prepared for Red Martyrdom.
A mind fortified and steadfast for White Martyrdom.
Forgiveness from the heart for everyone.
Constant prayers for those who trouble you.
Fervour in singing.
Three labours in the day – prayers, work, and reading.²⁷¹

²⁶⁶ *Cambrai Homily*, Whitley Stokes, and John Strachan (Edits.), *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus: A Collection of Old-Irish Glosses Scholia Prose and Verse*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 246-47 also quoted in Ryan, *Irish Monasticism: Origins and Early Development*, 197-98.

²⁶⁷ For a useful summary of martyrdom in the Early Church see the introduction in, Bryan M. Litfin, *Early Christian Martyr Stories: An Evangelical Introduction with New Translations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014), 1-17.

²⁶⁸ Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 11.

²⁶⁹ *Life of St Antony* by St Athanasius, 46 & 47: in Meyer, *St Athanasius: The Life of Saint Antony*, 59-60, see; Clare Stancliffe, "Red, White and Blue Martyrdom," in *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamond McKitterick and David Dumville, (Edits.) (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 30, and; Ryan, *Irish Monasticism: Origins and Early Development*, 198.

²⁷⁰ Stancliffe, "Red, White and Blue Martyrdom," 38.

²⁷¹ *Rule of Columba* – in Arthur W. Haddan, and William Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1873), available online at <https://books.google.je/books?id=6m4mAQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.ht

With White Martyrdom involving the renunciation of home and the world for Christ's sake, Green/Blue Martyrdom entailed fasting and labour—suffering penance and repentance through separation from inner desires.²⁷² Ascetic practice was essential to both White and Green/Blue Martyrdom,²⁷³ but in the former as a voluntary undertaking, and in the latter as an act of penance under a Penitential sentence.²⁷⁴ To the Irish, the ascetic life was a form of martyrdom, 'one way in which a [person] can be set on the road to heaven.'²⁷⁵ The Celts adopted the teaching of Athanasius in his *Doctrina ad Monachos*,

The [Red] Martyrs were often consummated in a battle that lasted only for a moment, but the monastic institute [the monk or nun] obtains a martyrdom [White and Green/Blue] by means of a daily struggle. We are continuing the struggle until the last breath.²⁷⁶

The Columbanus *familia* regarded both White and Green/Blue Martyrdom as the first elements of the path to perfection.²⁷⁷ Thus, exiled from hearth and kin, in ascetic penitence and faith, the Irish *peregrini* abandoned themselves to God:

We went on our pilgrimage
At the blast of the whistling wind
To obtain forgiveness of our sins
There is the cause of asking.²⁷⁸

[tps://books.google.ie/books?id=6m4mQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.ie/books?id=6m4mQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false), accessed November 11, 2022, and Ray Simpson, *Celtic Daily Light: A Spiritual Journey Through the Year* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), June 16.

²⁷² Stancliffe, "Red, White and Blue Martyrdom," 38-39.

²⁷³ Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 8-9.

²⁷⁴ Stancliffe, "Red, White and Blue Martyrdom," 45. following the interpretation of the *Cambrai Homily* argued by Gougaud, see, Louis Gougaud, "Les conceptions du martyre chez les Irlandais," *Revue Benedictine* 24 (1907): 360-73.

²⁷⁵ Stancliffe, "Red, White and Blue Martyrdom," 45.

²⁷⁶ E. E. Malone, "The Monk and the Martyr," *Studia Anselmiana* xxxviii (1956): 201. (Greek text: Migne P. G. xxviii, col. 1424). Quoted in Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 93-94.

²⁷⁷ Quinn, "Rude and Religious Irish: The Cult of Wandering Saints in the Middle Ages," 8.

²⁷⁸ From *The Voyage of Ui Chorra*: quoted in Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*, 65 and; Peter Harbison, *Pilgrimage in Ireland: The Monuments and the People* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1991), 39.

Asceticism – Fasting, Vigils & Self-Denial

Thus, the Celtic monks believed that it was daily asceticism that helped them achieve martyrdom for their Lord. In an understanding that is strongly counter-cultural today, the Celtic monk and *peregrinus* saw the body as the vehicle by which each individual attained glory through life-transforming ascetic practice.²⁷⁹

Following the tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, it was their belief that ascetic practice enabled them to sever earthly attachments and ‘to light the divine fire in ourselves with tears and efforts.’²⁸⁰ Under the *Rule of Columba*,

The extent of your prayer should be until tears come.
The measure of your work should be to labour until tears of exhaustion come.
The limit of your labour, or of your genuflections,
in the event that tears do not come, should be perspiration.²⁸¹

Especially amongst the Irish, the degree of austere ascetic discipline and self-mortification was often severe. Adomnán’s comment about Columba, may include a degree of hagiography, but is typical, ‘he was ceaselessly occupied with the untiring labours of fasts and vigils, day and night, any of which works would seem to be humanly impossible.’²⁸² Ascetic prayer for the Celtic Saints was something to be approached and engaged with the body as much as with the mind.

The raising of the hands in cross-vigil, that is the word of the hands, and the word of the eyes, moreover, it is the raisings of them up to God, and the word of the knees and of the legs is the sending of them in prostration,

²⁷⁹ Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 58.

²⁸⁰ *Amma Syncletica 1*; in Benedicta Ward, (Trans.), *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, vol. 59, Cistercian Study Series, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 230-31, and; Gregory Meyers, *Listen to the Desert: Secrets of Spiritual Maturity from the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Tunbridge Wells, UK: Burns & Oates, 1997), 35.

²⁸¹ *The Rule of St Columba*, in, Haddan, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, 119-21, translated in; Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 52.

²⁸² *Life of St Columba* by Adomnán: Second Preface in Sharpe, *Life of St Columba: by Adomnan of Iona*, 106.

and the word of the body moreover, is when it is extended to God in prostration and cross-vigil.²⁸³

Standing, kneeling or lying prostrate on the ground, they were encouraged to perform cross-vigils, holding their arms outstretched for long periods. The Celtic monks were renowned for their strict observance, being woken three times during the night for vigils—whereas their European Benedictine counterparts, under the *Rule of St Benedict*, enjoyed ‘eight hours of uninterrupted sleep.’²⁸⁴ To quell the resurgence of licentious thoughts, the Celtic monks often stood for long periods in freezing water. Bede described Cuthbert as standing all night immersed up to his neck in the frigid North Sea—below the errant double monastery at Coldingham,

[Cuthbert] came and stayed a few days [at Coldingham], showing them the way of righteousness in deed as well as word. He was in the habit of rising at the dead of night, while everyone else was sleeping, to go out and pray, returning just in time for morning prayers. One night one of the monks watched him creep out, then followed him stealthily, to see where he was going and what he was about. Down he went towards the beach beneath the monastery and out into the sea until he was up to his arms and neck in deep water. The splash of the waves accompanied his vigil throughout the dark hours of the night.²⁸⁵

Asceticism, in the form of voluntary poverty, denying pleasures and creature-comforts, helped the Celtic monks to overcome their passions—it was the passions that drew them away from God.²⁸⁶ Asceticism assisted them to strive towards that

²⁸³ In a poem—a gloss on Psalm 133, the body showing the word—in a ninth-century collection in the Ambrosian Library in Milan, quoted in, Diarmuid O’Laoghaire, “The Celtic Monk at Prayer,” *Monastic Studies* 14 (1983): 130, also see; De Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer: The Recovery of the Religious Imagination*, 131.

²⁸⁴ Ryan, *Irish Monasticism: Origins and Early Development*, 411.

²⁸⁵ Celtic and Anglo-Saxon double monasteries had both male and female houses—a practice first initiated in the Eastern Desert under Pachomius. The double monasteries did not always remain chaste. See Bede’s *Life of Cuthbert*, Chapter 10: in Webb, *The Age of Bede: Bede: Life of Cuthbert: Eddius Stephanus: Life of Wilfrid: Bede: Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow: The Anonymous History of Abbot Ceolfrith: with The Voyage of St Brendan*, 57-58.

²⁸⁶ A concept was first introduced by Evagrius the Hermit and re-interpreted by his student John Cassian, see Tilby, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Their Origin in the Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius the Hermit*, especially 53-55.

inner state of humility, stillness, and purity of heart which was their object—‘carry out...fasts, vigils, the solitary life and meditation on the Scriptures—for the sake of the principal goal, which was purity of heart and love.’²⁸⁷

Aidan taught the clergy many lessons about the conduct of their lives but above all he left them a most salutary example of abstinence and self-control...he neither sought after nor cared for worldly possessions but he rejoiced to handing-over at once, to any poor [person] he met, the gifts which he had received from kings or rich men of the world. He used to travel everywhere, in town and country, not on horseback but on foot...in order that, as he walked along, whenever he saw people whether rich or poor, he might at once approach them and, if they were unbelievers, invite them to accept the mystery of the faith...²⁸⁸

In denying themselves food and in being physically hungry—the monks increased their spiritual hunger. In refusing drink and in becoming physically thirsty—they were reminded of their need for increased spiritual thirst. Thus, in diminishing the body and its needs, they attempted to live more spiritual lives.²⁸⁹

Penance & the Penitentials

Although not often mentioned by modern Celtic Christian writers, a key part of the spirituality of the Celtic *peregrini* was focussed around penance and the ‘Penitentials.’²⁹⁰ The central concept was, that for a particular offence, with the assigned penance completed, the sin was forgiven. The Penitential system, first developed in Wales and then expanded into Ireland, resulted in the compilation of a series of Penitential journals—the first full Penitential dating back to the late sixth

²⁸⁷ John Cassian, *Conferences*, I.iv; in Cassian, *Conferences*, 41-42.

²⁸⁸ Bede, *EH III.5* in, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 116-17.

²⁸⁹ Simpson, *High Street Monasteries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*, 67.

²⁹⁰ O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings*, 49.

century—the *Penitential of Finnian*—probably written at Finnian’s monastery at Clonard.²⁹¹ The need for a system of confession and penance arose from a misunderstanding of Biblical teaching—the grace of God was not considered sufficient—a form of penance was required. In the Western Church of the time, it was generally agreed that an individual’s past sins were forgiven and removed by the Sacrament of Baptism—marking ‘the coming of a new creation.’²⁹² But what happened to sins committed post-baptism? Could these sins also be forgiven? Although at this time minor post-baptism sins were understood to be cleansed through the ‘usual prayer life of the Christian,’ the more serious crimes of murder and adultery, could only be atoned through a complex process of public confession—in effect a public humiliation and shaming—and ongoing penance.²⁹³ The system became unworkable, some individuals preferred to delay baptism until their death-beds in order to die in a reconciled state.²⁹⁴ With the influence of John Cassian’s writings,²⁹⁵ the problem became more acute, in his *Confessions*, Cassian underlined the blocking effect of unforgiven sin in pursuit of the monk’s objective of a perfect life.²⁹⁶ Ironically, it was a better understanding of Cassian’s teaching in the same book, that provided the work-around, it was realised that Cassian viewed sin more as a curable sickness rather than an issue of judgement and

²⁹¹ The full text is included in, Ludwig Bieler, (Edit.), *The Irish Penitentials*, 367 vols., vol. V, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniani*, (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1963), 74-95.

²⁹² Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 50-51.

²⁹³ Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 50-51.

²⁹⁴ Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 51.

²⁹⁵ John Cassian’s books were well loved, as quoted in the *Amra Choluimb Chille*, Stanza V, in Clancy, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery*, 107-09.

²⁹⁶ Cassian *Conferences* XIX, 14 & 15 (Conference of Abbot John) <https://www.abrahamicstudyhall.org/2019/09/20/cassians-spiritual-conferences-learning-from-the-experience-of-our-ancestors>, accessed November 5, 2022, and in, O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings*, 53.

punishment²⁹⁷—'Christ moved from the place of judge to that of physician.'²⁹⁸ The concept being that diseases can be cured by medicines, and therefore sins could also be atoned for by an act of penance. Cassian suggested that each sin was offset by its opposite; the principle of 'contraries are healed by contraries.'²⁹⁹ For example, excess food and strong [alcoholic] drink required a penance of rationed bread and water.³⁰⁰ According to the *Penitential of Columbanus*,

Diversity of offenses causes diversity of penances. For doctors of the body also compound their medicines in diverse kinds; thus, they heal wounds in one manner, sicknesses in another, boils in another...So also should spiritual doctors treat with diverse kinds of cure the wounds of souls, their sicknesses, [offenses], pains, ailments, and infirmities. But since this gift belongs to few, namely to know to a nicety all these things, to treat them, to restore what is weak to a complete state of health, let us set out even a few prescriptions according to the traditions of our elders [principally John Cassian], and according to our own partial understanding, for we prophesy in part and we know in part.³⁰¹

The idea of forgiveness via penance rapidly gained acceptance in Ireland, as the concept was compatible with Irish law—each crime could be settled with a fine—'the payment of an honour price by the guilty party.'³⁰² The system quickly

²⁹⁷ Cassian *Conferences* XX, 8 (Conference of Abbot Pinufius)

<https://www.abrahamicstudyhall.org/2019/09/20/cassians-spiritual-conferences-learning-from-the-experience-of-our-ancestors>, accessed November 5, 2022, and John T. McNeill, "Medicine for Sin as Prescribed in the Penitentials," *Church History* 1, 1, no. March (1932): 17-18.

²⁹⁸ O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 104-05, and; Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 53.

²⁹⁹ Cassian *Conferences* XIX, 14 & 15 (Conference of Abbot John)

<https://www.abrahamicstudyhall.org/2019/09/20/cassians-spiritual-conferences-learning-from-the-experience-of-our-ancestors>, accessed November 5, 2022, and McNeill, "Medicine for Sin as Prescribed in the Penitentials," 17.

³⁰⁰ The *Penitential of Columbanus*, B.22, accessed online on December 15, 2022, at <http://kingscollege.net/gbrodie/Outline%20Part%20III%20C%203%20c.html>, also see Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 53-55.

³⁰¹ The *Penitential of Columbanus*, B 1-2, accessed online on December 15, 2022, at <http://kingscollege.net/gbrodie/Outline%20Part%20III%20C%203%20c.html>.

³⁰² For an introduction to Irish Law of the seventh and eighth centuries, see Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, ed. Fergus Kelly, Early Irish Law Series, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), and; O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings*, 55-56.

expanded beyond serious offences to include all sins—for each specific sin a ‘penitential remedy’ was offered, usually consisting of ‘a remedy from the medicine chest of **Matthew 6:2-17**’—a fixed quantity of prayer, fasting or almsgiving.³⁰³ The Penitential system became structured around the eight principal vices as defined by Cassian in his *Conferences*.³⁰⁴ In practice, sins, doubts, worries and temptations were confessed in private, and each misdemeanour allocated an appropriate penance.³⁰⁵ Eventually a long list of sins was matched with the appropriate penances—but the system became extremely rigorous and complex, in line with the Irish monastic emphasis on asceticism.³⁰⁶ Each Celtic monastic *familia* developed their own specific penances for the same misdemeanour.³⁰⁷ Some minor penances involved singing psalms and sacred songs, others frequent genuflections, or blows from a rod or lash.³⁰⁸ Other penances included a night immersed in water, lying on nettles, or a night spent in an open tomb with a dead body. For a layman accused of theft, from the *Penitential of Columbanus*,

If any layman has committed theft, that is, has stolen an ox or a horse or a sheep or any beast of his neighbours, if he has done it once or twice, let him first restore to his neighbour the loss which he has caused, and let him do penance for three forty-day periods on bread and water...³⁰⁹

³⁰³ O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings*, 53, and; O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 106.

³⁰⁴ O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 108-10, and Cassian *Conferences* – Conference XX, <https://www.abrahamicstudyhall.org/2019/09/20/cassians-spiritual-conferences-learning-from-the-experience-of-our-ancestors>, accessed November 5, 2022.

³⁰⁵ Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 53.

³⁰⁶ For a discussion on the various penances related to the seven deadly sins—from *The Penitentials of Vinniani, Finnian, Cummean and Columbanus* see, Hugh Connolly, *The Irish Penitentials: And their Significance for the Sacrament of Penance Today* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), also; Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 147.

³⁰⁷ See Thomas P. Oakley, "The Origins of Irish Penitential Discipline," *The Catholic Historical Review* 19, 3, no. October (1933): 320-32, and; O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 160-61.

³⁰⁸ Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain*, 145.

³⁰⁹ The *Penitential of Columbanus*, B.19, accessed online on December 15, 2022, at <http://kingscollege.net/gbrodie/Outline%20Part%20III%20C%203%20c.html>.

From the *Penitential of Finnian*, Columba's mentor, for a clergy who commits murder,

If any cleric commits murder and kills his neighbour and he is dead, he must become an exile for ten years and do penance seven years in another region. He shall do penance for three years of this time on an allowance of bread and water, and he shall fast three forty-day periods on an allowance of bread and water and for four years abstain from wine and meats; and having thus completed the ten years, if he has done well and is approved by testimonial of the abbot or priest to whom he was committed, he shall be received into his own country and make satisfaction to the friends of him whom he slew, and he shall render to his father or mother, if they are still in the flesh, compensation for the filial piety and obedience.³¹⁰

For the most serious of crimes, banishment was imposed—Columba's excommunication at the Synod of Tailtiu is likely an example of such banishment—Columba being sanctioned for the death of three thousand at the Battle of Cúl Drebene.³¹¹

Living on the Fringe – Between Worlds

The Celts have been referred to as 'Europe's Aborigines,'³¹² their roots traceable back to Bronze and Iron Age Europe, and their geographical spread as far as Spain to Turkey.³¹³ Yet the aggressive Roman cohorts pushed the Celts back to

³¹⁰ From *The Penitential of Finnian* accessed online, December 14, 2022, https://medievalbruno.weebly.com/uploads/2/7/5/2/2752477/the_penitential_of_finnian.pdf, and see, John T. McNeill, "The Celtic Penitentials," *Revue Celtique* XXXIX (1922): 266, and; Bieler, *Ireland: Harbinger of the Middle Ages*, and; Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 108.

³¹¹ Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain*, 146; Clarkson, *Columba: Pilgrim, Priest & Patron Saint*, 37, and; John T. McNeill, *The Celtic Penitentials and their Influence on Continental Christianity: A Dissertation*, Classical Reprint Series, (Paris: Forgotten Books (2012), 1923), 130-34.

³¹² Timothy J. Joyce, *Celtic Christianity: A Sacred Tradition, a Vision of Hope* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 1.

³¹³ Peter Berresford-Ellis, *The Celtic Empire: The First Millennium of Celtic History c.1000 BC-51 AD* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1990), 9.

the fringes of the known world: to Ireland, Scotland, Manx³¹⁴ and Wales³¹⁵—areas isolated by land but linked by sea.³¹⁶ When monasticism took hold in Ireland and Scotland, the Celtic Christians saw themselves as a remote people, ‘living on the edge,’ and ‘perched on an island in the ocean’—Adomnán described Columba on Iona as, ‘...on this tiny island out at the extremity of the Ocean near Britain.’³¹⁷ Although the Roman and Celtic Churches were both fully part of Christ through baptism—both orthodox³¹⁸—the Celtic Christians were regarded as outsiders; they lived on the cultural fringe, very few of them had ever seen a city, let alone a metropolis like Rome.³¹⁹

For several hundred years the Celtic Church had developed in almost complete isolation from the main church in Rome.³²⁰ Yet its remoteness was not just geographic, it was also spiritual—the Celtic Church evolved spiritually ‘under the shadow of eternity.’³²¹ Contrary to the Roman Church, the Celts embraced the monastic principles of the Eastern tradition³²² and were more focussed on purity of heart, simplicity of life, openness and availability to God. According to Bede, Bishop Aidan was ‘a man of outstanding gentleness, devotion, and moderation, who had a zeal for God...’³²³ In line with its rural setting, the Celtic Church developed as a less

³¹⁴ The Isle of Man

³¹⁵ Rees, *Celtic Saints Passionate Wanderers*, 9.

³¹⁶ James, *An Age of Saints: Its Relevance for us Today*, 6-7.

³¹⁷ Adomnán’s *Life of Columba Book III.23*, Sharpe, *Life of St Columba: by Adomnan of Iona*, 233, quoted in; O’Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 49-50.

³¹⁸ Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, 64-65.

³¹⁹ O’Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 62.

³²⁰ See Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 201.

³²¹ O’Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 60.

³²² The Celtic Christians adopted the monastic principles of the East, today more aligned with the modern Orthodox tradition, see, John Chryssavgis, *Light Through Darkness: The Orthodox Tradition*, ed. Philip Sheldrake, Traditions of Christian Spirituality, (London: Dalton, Longman & Todd, 2004).

³²³ Bede, *EH III.5* in, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede’s Letter to Egbert*, 116-18.

structured, less hierarchical, and more diverse phenomenon. This led to notable differences in liturgical practice, worship styles, dress and appearance, as well as the well-known discrepancy over the calculation of the date of Easter.³²⁴ It was the Synod of Whitby in 664, that history has portrayed as the moment when the regional and isolated Celtic Church began its journey back towards uniformity—moulded and battered, sometimes belligerently—back into alignment with Rome and more synchronous observances.³²⁵

Sacramental Universe – the Omnipresence of God

An important part of the spirituality of the Celtic *peregrini* was their understanding of a sacramental universe.³²⁶ Following St Paul in the book of **Romans**, the Celtic *peregrini* believed that God reveals himself through His creation.³²⁷ For Columbanus in his first sermon: ‘Understand the creation, if you wish to know the Creator; if you will not know the former either, be silent concerning the Creator, but believe in the Creator.’³²⁸ Each flower and each creature were for the Celts ‘the music of many tiny whispering instruments woven

³²⁴ Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 200-03, for more on the calculation of the date of Easter see; Benedicta Ward, *High King of Heaven: Aspects of Early English Spirituality* (London: Mowbray, 1999), 16-20, and from the astronomer Bede, in Bede *EH*, III.25; McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 152-59, and also; Faith Wallis, (Trans.), *Bede, the Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999).

³²⁵ See John L. Meissner, *The Celtic Church in England: After the Synod of Whitby* (London: Martin Hopkinson Ltd., 1929).

³²⁶ O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 150-52, largely from the original source, *Liber de ordine creaturarum*, see; Marina Smyth, "The Seventh-Century Hiberno-Latin Treatise *Liber de ordine creaturarum*. A Translation," *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 21 (2011): 137-222.

³²⁷ ‘For since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that [humans] are without excuse,’ see **Romans 1:20**.

³²⁸ Columbanus Sermons, *Sermon 1.5*, in O'Hara, *Saint Columbanus: Selected Writings*, 61, for the full original text, see; Walker, *Sancti Columbanus Opera*.

into the harmony of a divine orchestra,' each element with its part to play, all treasured and all valued.³²⁹ For God 'has sweetly and powerfully disposed all things, ordering them from one end of the universe to the other.'³³⁰ From

Columba's poem the *Altus Prosator*,

The High Creator, the Unbegotten Ancient of Days,
was without origin of beginning, limitless.
He is and He will be for endless ages of ages,
with whom is the only-begotten Christ, and the Holy Spirit,
co-eternal in the everlasting glory of divinity.
We do not confess three gods, but say one God,
saving our faith in three most glorious Persons.

By the divine powers of the great God is hung
the globe of the earth, and the circle of the great deep placed about it,
held up by the strong hand of Almighty God,
with columns like bars supporting it,
promontories and rocks as their solid foundations,
fixed firm, as if on certain immovable bases.

Paradise was planted from the beginning by the Lord,
as we read in the most noble opening of Genesis,
from whose fountain-spring four rivers flow,
in whose flowery midst is also the Tree of Life
whose leaves, bearing healing for the nations, do not fall;
whose delights are indescribable and abundant.³³¹

Not only did the Celts see God omnipotent in the universe, but they viewed creation as a shadow of what is to come—as a sacrament pointing to the ultimate glory of heaven.³³² This emphasis on creation as sacramental, although largely lost

³²⁹ O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 152-53.

³³⁰ **Wisdom 8:1**, as translated in O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 37.

³³¹ Three verses from Columba's poem the *Altus Prosator*, translated in Clancy, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery*, 45-53.

³³² Sacrament defined as, 'a mechanism of imparting divine grace,' see O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 46-47.

to our contemporary thinking, was a strong theme in early Medieval times, and well-supported by Scripture.³³³

The Author of life is the fountain of life, the Creator of light, the fountain of glory. Therefore, spurning the things that are seen, journeying through the world, let us seek the fountain of glory, the fountain of life, the fountain of living water, in the upper regions of the heavens, like rational and most wise fishes, that there we may drink the living water which springs up to eternal life.³³⁴

Perceiving creation in this way, led to the Celtic Christian belief that the presence of God is intimately infused throughout the world. In Celtic lands ‘God was known for His presence rather than His inference.’³³⁵ In the words of John Macquarrie, ‘The Celt was very much a God-intoxicated [person], whose life was embraced on all sides by the divine Being.’³³⁶

The path I walk, Christ walks it. May the land in which I am be without sorrow.
May the Trinity protect me wherever I stay, Father, Son and Holy Spirit...
May every path before me be smooth, man, woman and child welcome me.
A truly good journey! Well does the fair Lord show us a course, a path.³³⁷

For the mid-ninth century Irish philosopher John Scotus Eriugena: ‘Creation was not an accident to the Creator. He was always inseparable from it, even if He rises above it in His perpetuity, even if He precedes it in eternity, and even if His being is

³³³ **Colossians 2:17**, just as God’s law ‘is only a shadow of good things that are coming,’ **Hebrews 10:1**, see, O’Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 46.

³³⁴ Columbanus’s Sermons, *Sermon Thirteen*, translated in, Oliver Davies, and Fiona Bowie, *Celtic Christian Spirituality: An Anthology of Medieval and Modern Sources* (London: SPCK, 1995), 76.

³³⁵ John Baillie, *The Sense of the Presence of God: Gifford Lectures 1961-62* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 137, and; John Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality*, Second ed. (London: SCM Press, 1992), 157.

³³⁶ Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality*, 155-56.

³³⁷ A poem attributed to Columba—sixth to eighth century Old Irish, in Davies, *Celtic Christian Spirituality: An Anthology of Medieval and Modern Sources*, 38, and; Lesley Whiteside, *In Search of Columba* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1997), 84.

its source.³³⁸ 'The nearness, the ubiquitous presence of the spiritual in all things and at all times—though needing its special times and places too...is indeed a powerful, permanent, and characteristic Celtic conviction.'³³⁹ This understanding of God in the universe is similar to the modern concept of panentheism, 'God containing the cosmos,' 'God penetrating the cosmos,'—He is the 'ground of the cosmos.'³⁴⁰ This nearness, which we in our ever industrialised and materialistic world need to recapture, is well articulated in Celtic poetry, for example in Columba's poem the *Adiutor Laborantium*,

O helper of workers, ruler of all the good,
 guard on the ramparts and defender of the faithful,
 who lift up the lowly and crush the proud,
 ruler of the faithful, enemy of the impenitent,
 judge of all judges, who punish those who err,
 pure life of the living, light and Father of lights
 shining with great light, denying to none of the hopeful
 your strength and help, I beg that me, a little man
 trembling and most wretched, rowing through the infinite storm of this
 age,
 Christ may draw after Him to the lofty most beautiful haven of life
 ...an unending holy hymn forever.
 From the envy of enemies you lead me into the joy of paradise
 Through you, Christ Jesus, who live and reign...³⁴¹

From a liturgical prayer written by Irish bishop Tírechán in the *Book of Armagh*,

c670—a prayer similar to the *Lorica of St Patrick*,

God is above the heavens;
 and He is in the heavens;

³³⁸ John Scotus Erigena—a *peregrinationis locus*—from Books 4&5, *The Division of Nature*: quoted in John J. O'Meara, *Eriugena*, vol. XVII, *Irish Life and Culture*, (Cork: Mercer Press, 1969), 57, full translation; I. P. Sheldon-Williams, and John J. O'Meara (Trans.), *Johnannes Scoti Erigena: Periphyseon - The Division of Nature* (1987).

³³⁹ James P. Mackey, *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1995), 11.

³⁴⁰ Michael W. Brierley, "The Potential of Panentheism for Dialogue between Science and Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, ed. Philip D. Clayton, and Zachary R. Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 636-37.

³⁴¹ *Adiutor Laborantium*, a poem attributed to Columba—some attribute it to Adomnán, see Markus, 2010—Footnote 380—which reads like a litany, translated in Clancy, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery*, 72-73.

and He is beneath the heavens...
He inspires all things,
He gives life to all things,
He stands above all things,
and He stands beneath all things.³⁴²

Their belief of the ubiquitous presence of God in the cosmos, led the Celtic *peregrini* to constant praise and thanksgiving, alongside the whole of creation.³⁴³ In essence, the Celtic *peregrini* practiced first and foremost a ministry of presence—evangelism through presence rather than proselytizing.³⁴⁴ This in turn inspired creativity and pattern—the intricate intertwining of spirals and knotwork of the illustrated manuscripts³⁴⁵—portraying monastic shape, rhythm and balance.³⁴⁶ Creativity was celebrated as a God-given gift and included intricate metal work and precious stone inlay, as well as the carving of the high crosses between the ninth and eleventh centuries.³⁴⁷

The Celtic *peregrini's* awareness of the presence of God led to 'a sense of wonder and awe at the divine residing in everything.'³⁴⁸ They were a rural people and a rural church—holding a profound love and respect for the natural world around them. Following their pagan ancestors they believed in the supernatural—

³⁴² Tírechán, *Collectanea: The Patrician Documents in the Book of Armagh*, ed. L. Bieler (Dublin, 1979), Section 26, 122-67.

³⁴³ Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 104.

³⁴⁴ Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 90.

³⁴⁵ For example see, Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba*.

³⁴⁶ Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 66.

³⁴⁷ See, Romilly J. Allen, "The High Crosses of Ireland," in *Early Christian Symbolism in Great Britain and Ireland* (Burnham-on-Sea, Somerset: Llanerch Publishers, 1992), 132.

³⁴⁸ Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 30.

God in ancient trees, sacred groves, on mountaintops and in holy wells.³⁴⁹ God was the ‘Lord of the Elements.’³⁵⁰ The ancient ‘place-lore’ of their ancestors manifested itself in the extensive tapestry of local Celtic Saints,³⁵¹ and their recognition of ‘thin places’ where the ‘membrane between the material and the spiritual world is more permeable’—and heaven and earth meet.³⁵² To the Celt, the natural world was a ‘doorway to heaven’³⁵³—a window to the divine.

Power & Protection

To the Celtic *peregrini*, God’s omnipresence always brought both power and protection in their highly fragile and turbulent environment.³⁵⁴ They believed that a powerful force encircled their lives, as evidenced by the numerous miracle stories based on the strong reality of the presence of God active in His world.³⁵⁵ They exercised the pre-Christian encompassing prayer—the *caim* prayer—drawing a

³⁴⁹ Margaret Silf, *Sacred Spaces: Stations on a Celtic Way* (Oxford: Lion Hudson plc., 2001), 9, and ; Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 30.

³⁵⁰ The Saints and faithful undertook ‘perfect pilgrimage’ or *peregrinatio* for the ‘Lord of the Elements,’ see the *Life of Colomb Cille*, Line 733 and page 170 in Stokes, *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore*. Accessed online on December 15, 2022, at https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=sBgMAAAIAAJ&pg=PA168&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false, and see Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 31.

³⁵¹ Davies, *Celtic Spirituality*, 13.

³⁵² Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*, 7. The sense of God’s immanence in His creation was so strong in Celtic spirituality, see Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality*, 156. God’s presence was felt in the daily activities of kindling the fire, going to work, milking the cow. Seeing God in the everyday chores and activities of life was very much the theme of the more modern prayers and poems of the Western Isles and Highlands collected by Alexander Carmichael in the early 1900s, see Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1992), and; Alistair Maclean, *Hebridean Altars: The Spirit of an Island Race* (London: Hodder & Stroughton, 1937).

³⁵³ See, Lisa Bitel, *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland* (New York: Ithaca, 1990), 39-56, and; Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*, 7.

³⁵⁴ O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings*, 34.

³⁵⁵ Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 75 as an example of these miraculous stories see Adomnán’s *Life of Columba*, particularly Book II in, Sharpe, *Life of St Columba: by Adomnan of Iona*, 154-204.

circle of protection—a boundary protecting themselves and their loved ones.³⁵⁶

The Celts also used the *Lorica* prayers—the ‘armour’ or ‘breast-plate’ prayers—derived from St Paul’s teachings in **Ephesians**³⁵⁷—for example, the seventh century St Fursey *Lorica*,³⁵⁸ still popular in Ireland today—steeped in the Holy Spirit they went forward in faith,

The arms of God be around my shoulders,
the touch of the Holy Spirit upon my head,
the sign of the cross upon my forehead,
the sound of the Holy Spirit in my ears,
the fragrance of the Holy Spirit in my nostrils,
the vision of heaven’s company in my eyes,
the conversation of heaven’s company on my lips,
the work of God’s church in my hands,
the service of God and the neighbour in my feet,
a home for God in my heart,
and to God, the father of all, my entire being.
Amen.³⁵⁹

Prayer & The Psalms

As with all monastic traditions, prayer was the lifeblood of the *peregrini*. The Celtic Saints followed as closely as possible the Biblical directive of ‘praying continually.’³⁶⁰ According to Adomnán, Columba ‘could not spend even a single

³⁵⁶ The *Caim* prayer—meaning ‘circle’ or ‘turn’—is an ancient Gaelic, likely pre-Christian, prayer of enclosure and protection—perhaps suggesting the comfort of the womb? St Ninian provides one good example—with prayer, he drew a boundary circle of protection around a herd of cattle, see, Aelred’s *Life of Ninian*, Chapter 8, in, John MacQueen, *St Nynia* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2005), 114, and; MacDonald, *Life of St Ninian: by Aelred, Abbot of Rievaulx*, 43-45, see also; De Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer: The Recovery of the Religious Imagination*, 133, and; Sellner, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*, 227.

³⁵⁷ **Ephesians 6:14-16.**

³⁵⁸ The *Lorica* tradition—prayers recited for protection – *lorica* is Latin for ‘body armour’: see Joseph A. Jungmann, *Christian Prayer through the Centuries*, ed. Christopher Irvine, trans. John Coyne, Third ed., Alcuin Club Collections, (London: SPCK, 2007), 38.

³⁵⁹ *Lorica* of St Fursey (c587-649) – seventh century – original manuscript in the British Library: BL 30512 folio.35v. in, John J. O Riordain, *The Music of What Happens: Celtic Spirituality - A View from the Inside* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1996), 46-47.

³⁶⁰ **1 Thessalonians 5:17.**

hour without attending to prayer, or reading or writing.³⁶¹ *The Rule of Columbanus* saw the monks praying corporately up to eight times a day—five services in the daytime—following the now Benedictine format: at dawn with *matins* (or *prime*), with *terce* at three hours after sunrise, *sext* at midday, *nonas* in mid-afternoon and *vespers* in the evening.³⁶² Following Cassian, the three services in the middle of the day were kept short³⁶³—only three psalms sung at each—to maximise the time for manual work in the fields.³⁶⁴ During the night hours there were three gatherings with twelve psalms in each. Stricter than Cassian, Columbanus insisted on at least twenty-four psalms pre-dawn in summer and thirty-six in winter months.³⁶⁵ Central to prayer was the Psalter—frequent repetition of the psalms was core to the spiritual life of the *peregrini*.³⁶⁶ Bede praised Aidan’s habits,

Aidan’s life was in great contrast to our modern slothfulness; all who accompanied him, whether tonsured or laymen, had to engage in some form of study, that is to say, to occupy themselves either in reading the Scriptures or learning the Psalms.³⁶⁷

³⁶¹ Second Preface of the *Life of St Columba*, by Adomnán, see Sharpe, *Life of St Columba: by Adomnan of Iona*, 106, and; Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 43.

³⁶² *The Rule of Columbanus*, Section VII Divine Office, in, Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera*, and see; Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 44.

³⁶³ John Cassian’s teaching on the ‘Divine Office and how to Sing the Psalms’ is taken from *The Institutes*, Book III, see, Bertram, *John Cassian: The Monastic Institutes: On the Training of a Monk and The Eight Deadly Sins*, 29-39.

³⁶⁴ Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 62.

³⁶⁵ *Columbanus Hibernus*. Walker, G. S. M., (ed). “*Monk’s Rules*”, *Columbanus’ Sermons* <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/L201053/index.html>, accessed November 5, 2022, and, Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland*, 63.

³⁶⁶ The Celts took their lead on singing the Psalms from the Desert Fathers and Mothers, as prescribed by Cassian, specifically Books II & III of *The Institutes*, see, Bertram, *John Cassian: The Monastic Institutes: On the Training of a Monk and The Eight Deadly Sins*, 15-39, and see; Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 45.

³⁶⁷ Bede, *EH III.5* in, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede’s Letter to Egbert*, 117.

Coming from an oral tradition, the Celtic Saints learnt and recited the Psalms by heart, even to the extent of losing precious tablets and their contents, 'the travelling priest was so absorbed in reciting the Psalms on his journey, as many monastic rules of life advocated, that he took a tumble into the bog and lost his precious tablets.'³⁶⁸

All alone in my little cell, without the company of a single person;
precious has been the pilgrimage before going to meet death.
A hidden secluded hut, for the forgiveness of my sins: an
upright, untroubled conscience towards holy heaven.
Treading the paths of the Gospel; singing Psalms at every Hour;
an end to talking and long stories; constant bending of knees.
May my Creator visit me, my Lord, my King;
may my spirit seek Him in the everlasting kingdom in which He is.³⁶⁹

Patience & Perseverance

The linked virtues of patience and perseverance were also spiritual qualities of the Celtic *peregrini*—patience in waiting on God, and perseverance to 'finish the race.'³⁷⁰ The *Rule of Comgall* emphasised patience, '...that in every desire which thou desirest thou shouldst exercise patience.'³⁷¹ In common with other Celtic Christians, Pelagius recognised the divine infinite patience of God—'God does not remit the penalty for sin but only delays its punishment, nor does he free the

³⁶⁸ Michelle P. Brown, *The World of the Luttrell Psalter*, London, (British Library, 2006), 114, and; Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 47.

³⁶⁹ 'All alone in my little cell', an *Old Irish Poem*—eighth or ninth century, in Davies, *Celtic Christian Spirituality: An Anthology of Medieval and Modern Sources*, 34-35.

³⁷⁰ **2 Timothy 4:7.**

³⁷¹ Comgall was Columbanus's superior at Bangor in Ireland, see, *Rule of Comgall V 12*, in, J. Strachan, "An Old-Irish Metrical Rule," *Eriu*, no. 1/2 (1904/5): 196 and; Catherine Thom, *Early Irish Monasticism: An Understanding of its Cultural Roots* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 98.

persistent sinner from death, but waits patiently...³⁷² Those who were patient and persistent standing and waiting outside St David's monastery in Wales,

Whoever desired this saintly way of life and sought to enter the company of the brethren had first to remain for ten days outside the doors of the monastery, as if rejected and reduced to silence by words of abuse. If he exercised patience and stood there until the tenth day, he was first admitted and put to serve under the elder who had charge of the gate. When he had laboured there for a good while, and resistance in his soul had been broken down, he was finally judged to be ready to enter the company of the brethren.³⁷³

Similarly, Aidan and his brethren in the preparation for a ministry on Lindisfarne, spent forty days in prayer and fasting, patiently reorganising their priorities to focus on God, despite the rapid approach of winter.³⁷⁴

Poetry & Paganism

Many consider Celtic Christianity 'a faith conceived and expressed as much through the imagination as the intellect, in images rather than in concepts.'³⁷⁵ To the Celts, story, symbol, and verse were used rather than intellectual proposition, argument, concept and debate.³⁷⁶ This largely stems from the oral tradition of the Celts who put great emphasis on poetry and rhythmic rhyme.³⁷⁷ In Ireland the *filid*, or bards, formed an ancient tradition beholden to the High King to preserve the oral

³⁷² For Pelagius's *Liber de Vita Christiana (Christianorium)*: PL. 40,1031-46; 50,383-402; *Clavis Patrum Latinorum* 730, and in, Bryn R. Rees, *Pelagius: Life and Letters* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1998), 108.

³⁷³ From the *Life of St David* by Rhigyfarch, recorded in, Davies, *Celtic Spirituality*, 200.

³⁷⁴ David Adam, *Flame in My Heart: St Aidan for Today* (London: Triangle SPCK, 1997), 51-52 - Adam makes an inference here, suggesting that Aidan set the example for Cedd—who is recorded in Bede's *EH III.23* of spending the whole of Lent, 40 days, in prayer before building the new monastery at Lastingham, see, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 147-49.

³⁷⁵ Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 48.

³⁷⁶ Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 49-50.

³⁷⁷ Davies, *Celtic Spirituality*, 40.

lineage, folklore and historical legend of the community,³⁷⁸—'the *ollam* or highest grade of Irish poet enjoyed a status in law equal to that of a bishop or a petty king.'³⁷⁹ The ancient *filid* tradition was so important to Columba—himself considered a poet³⁸⁰—that he attended the Convention of Druim Ceat in Ireland in 575,³⁸¹ to successfully defend the power and social status of the bards against his kin, the High King of the Northern Uí Néill Áedán mac Gabráin.³⁸²

In many aspects of Celtic Christianity there was a clear continuity with ancient Celtic paganism. In some instances, leading Celtic Saints took over the functions and even the names of older pagan deities.³⁸³ The widespread cult of St Brigid (452-524) is the prime example—her life was interwoven with pagan myth and Irish folklore.³⁸⁴ She resided in Kildare, a place long associated with druidesses who were especially known for being goddesses of fire and the hearth.³⁸⁵ Kildare became a popular pilgrimage destination in the Middle Ages, many seeking the healing powers and spiritual direction of Brigit.³⁸⁶ A perpetual fire of welcome and

³⁷⁸ Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 48.

³⁷⁹ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, 49, and in; Davies, *Celtic Spirituality*, 40.

³⁸⁰ Poems considered to come from Columba's hand include, *Altus Prosator*—original translation in, J. H. and R. Atkinson Bernard, (Edits.), *The Irish Liber Hymnorum*, 2 vols. (Henry Bradshaw Society, 1898), and *Adiutor Laborantium* in, Gilbert Markus, "'Adiutor Laborantium' - a poem by Adomnan?," in *Adomnan of Iona: Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker*, ed. Rodney Aist, Thomas Clancy, Thomas O'Loughlin and Jonathan Wooding (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010).

³⁸¹ *Annals of Ulster 575*, see, Clarkson, *Columba: Pilgrim, Priest & Patron Saint*, 57.

³⁸² A brief reference to the meeting at Druim Ceat is made by Adomnán in the *Life of Columba* in Book I.49 and in Note 204, see, Sharpe, *Life of St Columba: by Adomnan of Iona*, 151 and 312-14, see; Bradley, *Columba: Politician, Penitent, and Pilgrim*, 104-05, and; Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 131. In Ireland, God was seen as the High King—a king who was always moving amongst His people, see Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality*, 157.

³⁸³ See Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology* (London: Hamlyn, 1970), 35, and; Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality*, 156.

³⁸⁴ For the c650 Cogitosus's *Life of St Brigit the Virgin* see, Davies, *Celtic Spirituality*, 122-39 and for *The Irish Life of Brigit* see, Davies, *Celtic Spirituality*, 140-54, and; M. A. O'Brien, "The Old Irish Life of St Brigit," *Irish Historical Studies* 1, 2 (1938): 121-34, and; Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality*, 156.

³⁸⁵ Edward C. Sellner, *Finding the Monk Within: Great Monastic Values for Today* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Hidden Spring, 2008), 153.

³⁸⁶ Green, *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*, 198-202.

hospitality was kept alight—leading poet Padraic Colum to describe Brigid as ‘she who had the flaming heart’³⁸⁷—‘Brigit, woman ever excellent, golden, radiant flame, leading us to the eternal kingdom, the brilliant, dazzling sun.’³⁸⁸

Prophecy & Advocacy

The *Lives* of the Celtic Saints put a firm emphasis on prophecy—Columba’s biographer Adomnán placing prophecy ahead of miracles and manifestations.³⁸⁹ Many of the prophetic stories may display hagiography, as Columba was documented as predicting the outcome of battles, impending death, weather patterns and natural disasters—even as far away as Italy.³⁹⁰ Adomnán records some fifty prophecies of Columba, stating that these were ‘only a few out of many.’³⁹¹ Yet one form of prophesy emerged that was akin to the Old Testament prophets—that of speaking ‘truth to power.’³⁹² The importance of advocacy saw the protection of the bards at Druim Ceat, Columba negotiating with his kin the High King of Tara³⁹³—this episode emphasises the important princely role that Columba assumed because of his heritage—mutual benefit arising out of co-operation between Church and dynasty.³⁹⁴ Perhaps the best example of Celtic

³⁸⁷ A quote from Irish poet Padraic Colum (1881-1972) see, Sellner, *Finding the Monk Within: Great Monastic Values for Today*, 151.

³⁸⁸ *Ultán’s Hymn to Brigit* in, Davies, *Celtic Spirituality*, 121.

³⁸⁹ Adomnán orders his divisions in the *Vita Columba*, Book I—Prophecies, Book II—Miracles, and Book III—Visions of Angels see, Sharpe, *Life of St Columba: by Adomnan of Iona*.

³⁹⁰ *Life of Columba* by Adomnán, in Sharpe, *Life of St Columba: by Adomnan of Iona*, see; Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 109.

³⁹¹ In *Vita Columba*, by Adomnán, Sharpe, *Life of St Columba: by Adomnan of Iona*, see; Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 110.

³⁹² Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 112.

³⁹³ In the Preface of the *Amra Coluim Chille*—in effect Columba’s eulogy, see Clarkson, *Columba: Pilgrim, Priest & Patron Saint*, 57.

³⁹⁴ Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba*, 28, and; Bradley, *Columba: Politician, Penitent, and Pilgrim*, 41.

advocacy was the role of Adomnán at the Synod of Birr in central Ireland in 697, where in what became known as the *Law of the Innocence* or *Lex Innocentium*, Adomnán persuaded some fifty Irish kings and his relative the High King, to pass a law protecting women, children and non-combatants in battle—what has been described as the earliest form of the ‘Geneva Convention.’³⁹⁵ On at least two other occasions, Adomnán negotiated the release of hostages of war, mainly from the Northumbrian King Aldfrith with whom he had a connection.³⁹⁶ Aidan also had a strong influence on King Oswald of Northumbria, often acting as his councillor and mentor.³⁹⁷

Pastoral Care & Peace-Making

In witnessing to the Lord in their actions and availability, and not just in their preaching and proselytizing, the Celtic *peregrini* primarily practiced a ministry of presence.³⁹⁸ They imitated Christ in the hospitality offered in their monasteries and on the road, they listened and patiently healed broken souls—exercising the skills of reconciliation, discernment, counselling, Soul Friendship and spiritual accompaniment.³⁹⁹ They travelled alongside sufferers whom they comforted—they

³⁹⁵ The *Lex Innocentium* or *Cáin Adomáin* (the Law of Adomnán) was written by Adomnán Abbot of Iona with the most comprehensive account given in, M. Ni Dhonnchadha, "The Guarantor List of Cáin Adomnáin, 697," *Peritia* 1 (1982): 178-215, and see, Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 123-24, and; O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings*, 70-71.

³⁹⁶ What we know of these hostage releases is built up from several sources, see O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings*, 71-74.

³⁹⁷ See Bede, *EH III.5* in, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 116-18 and, Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 112-13.

³⁹⁸ Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 119.

³⁹⁹ Bede, *EH III.5* in, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 117, and; Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 120-21.

acted as agents of peace in their dangerous and turbulent world—their monasteries were places of sanctuary.⁴⁰⁰

Which Aspects of the Spirituality of the Celtic *Peregrini* are of Value Today?

Having assessed the spirituality of the Celtic *peregrini*, our attention now turns to which attributes of their spirituality could be applicable today in modern expressions of Christian practice. The Celtic *peregrini* were to some extent a product of their age, and therefore not all of their spiritual practices are applicable in today's world. In particular, our modern culture largely rejects the emphasis on martyrdom and the extreme asceticism of the Celtic monks. Although there are still a number of martyrs today, the concept of martyrdom and asceticism does not dominate our modern spirituality as it did the Celts. In contrast, for the modern monk or nun, the body is generally viewed as the temple of the Holy Spirit, rather than an object on which to inflict suffering as a route to salvation. Today, food and exercise—in moderation—are seen as important elements to keep the body fit and healthy.⁴⁰¹ With the body neither idolised nor demonised, the modern monastic recognises that some degree of abstinence is essential to control the ego and to subdue the passions,⁴⁰²—the emphases of Evagrius and Cassian are left behind.⁴⁰³

⁴⁰⁰ Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 123.

⁴⁰¹ Simpson, *High Street Monastries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*, 67.

⁴⁰² Simpson, *High Street Monastries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*, 67.

⁴⁰³ John E. Bamberger, (Trans.), *Evagrius Pontus: The Praktikos & Chapters On Prayer*, ed. Basil M. Pennington, vol. 4, Cistercian Studies Series, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1972), 16 and see Tilby for a summary of the history of sin; Tilby, *The Seven Deadly Sins: Their Origin in the Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius the Hermit*, 9-34, and Bertram, *John Cassian: The Monastic Institutes: On the Training of a Monk and The Eight Deadly Sins*.

Likewise, rather than penance and Penitentials, for the modern monastic, St Paul's teachings on the grace of God is sufficient for the forgiveness of sins.⁴⁰⁴ Yet the Celtic innovation of private confession in front of a priest [or Soul Friend]—to which later was added the act of absolution—was a practice that has been adopted by the Western Church and is used routinely today, particularly in the Catholic Church.⁴⁰⁵ This workable form of confession and absolution after baptism has been acclaimed by some, 'as one of the greatest contributions of the Celtic Church to Western Christianity.'⁴⁰⁶

Common Monastic Spiritual Practices

However, there are aspects of the spirituality for the Celts that are considered beneficial for modern Christians and monastics. These fall into two broad groups, practices held in common with other monastic movements, and spiritual attributes which are more distinctively Celtic.

Frameworks – Daily Rhythms of Prayer and Bible Reading

To constantly remind monks and nuns of their heavenly orientation and of the ways of God, maintaining a daily **framework**⁴⁰⁷ of regular prayer and Scriptural reading—particularly *lectio divina*—is vitally important.⁴⁰⁸ A life of simplicity and

⁴⁰⁴ **Ephesians 2:8-9.**

⁴⁰⁵ O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 111.

⁴⁰⁶ O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edge: The Celtic Tradition*, 111-13.

⁴⁰⁷ Key words from each of the spiritual attributes of the Celts have been bolded to assist in identification and recognition in this text.

⁴⁰⁸ Stokes, "Bertha Choluim Chille: On the Life of Saint Columba," 123, see <https://archive.org/details/threemiddleirish00unknuoft/page/n9/mode/2up>, accessed on December 5, 2022.

self-control,⁴⁰⁹ with balance and rhythm of both life and worship, are central—'leaving room for both awe and intimacy, silence and celebration, relevance and transcendence, order and spontaneity.'⁴¹⁰ Mirroring the Desert tradition before them, the majority of monastics, including the Celts, used Psalmody as the bedrock of their daily devotion.⁴¹¹ In many monasteries, worship and prayer were, and still are, balanced with the discipline of hard manual work and study.⁴¹² In addition, alongside formal times of daily worship, the Celtic *peregrini* learnt the Psalms and Gospels by heart,⁴¹³ with constant recital of the 'three fifties'⁴¹⁴ as they journeyed—in their persistent endeavour to 'pray without ceasing.'⁴¹⁵ Before the printing press, the Celts developed *scriptoria*⁴¹⁶ and became particularly well-known for their learning of languages, literature and Biblical exposition.⁴¹⁷

Scaffolding – Shared Values, Vows and Rules of Life

The Celtic *peregrini* were bound by shared values, life-long vows and *Rules of Life*—important **scaffolding** of monastic cohesion and unity.⁴¹⁸ In a similar format

⁴⁰⁹ Bede, *EH III.5*, described Aidan as teaching simplicity of life and 'abstinence and self-control.' See, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 116-18.

⁴¹⁰ Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church*, 152.

⁴¹¹ Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church*, 138.

⁴¹² *Rule of Columba* – in Haddan, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, 11.i: 119-21, and; Simpson, *Celtic Daily Light: A Spiritual Journey Through the Year*, June 16.

⁴¹³ Aidan's followers 'occupied themselves either with reading the Scriptures or learning the Psalms,' in Bede, *EH III.5* in, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 117.

⁴¹⁴ The Psalms—three fifties adding to a hundred and fifty Psalms in total. See Stokes, "Bertha Cholui Chille: On the Life of Saint Columba," 123, and; Bradley, *Columba: Politician, Penitent, and Pilgrim*, 74.

⁴¹⁵ **1 Thessalonians 5:17**, see Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church*, 16.

⁴¹⁶ For the copying of manuscripts.

⁴¹⁷ Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 165 and 87-88; Jonas, *Life of St Columban*, 22.

⁴¹⁸ Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church*, 54.

to modern monastics, for the first ten to twenty years of their lives, they lived in static cenobitic settings, in obedience to a balanced rhythm of sustainable prayer, observing their *Rule* and obeying their abbot. But later, following their call to *peregrinatio*, they ventured forth into the unknown, seeking to maintain this same rhythm and scaffolding of vow and *Rule*, as they sought to walk more deeply with God—being drawn continually back to their inner place of prayer and sanctuary.⁴¹⁹

Spiritual Attributes of the Celtic Peregrini

Risky Living – ‘Peregrinatio’

To a degree, all monks and nuns follow a call to **risky living**—to follow Christ into the unknown—spiritually, and perhaps geographically—all are called to separate themselves from the world in order to follow the spiritual path, often leaving the familiar and comfortable behind. Yet in dramatic fashion, the Celtic *peregrini* followed God’s call by pushing off in their coracles into the unknown—seeking their ‘places of resurrection.’⁴²⁰ They undertook total abandonment of kith and kin with no intention of returning—both the physical and the spiritual journeys entailed full commitment.

Sacramental Universe & the Presence of God

For the Celtic *peregrini* there was an intense sense of God’s omnipresence. According to Arthur Allchin, the Celts believed, ‘The world is the place of God’s

⁴¹⁹ Simpson, *High Street Monastries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*, 37.

⁴²⁰ Simpson, *High Street Monastries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*, 57.

presence...without Him there is no world.⁴²¹ The Celtic *peregrini* saw God as incarnate in the world—God present amongst them—God sustaining and caring for His creation.⁴²² They felt the tangible **presence of God** in nature and in their neighbour, as well as God’s power and protection in the world.

Although modern monastics are also aware of the presence of God in the world, the main difference was the intensity of belief shown by the Celtic *peregrini*. Perhaps in recapturing some of this intensity today, a renewed sense of the presence of God will bring increased accountability towards our neighbour and a greater sense of ownership of our planet. As a rural people, the Celts certainly had a special affinity for nature, yet a number of modern authors have romanticised the Celtic view of the sacramental universe,⁴²³ and portrayed the Celts as ultra ‘eco-friendly.’⁴²⁴

Seasonal Formation and Ebb & Flow

Following the regular fluctuation between seasons, and the ebb and flow of the tides,⁴²⁵ the Celts believed in the importance of balanced rhythms between prayer and action, receiving and giving, being and doing—or as Columba taught, the link of ‘sacrament with service, altar with hearth, and worship with work.’⁴²⁶ The

⁴²¹ A. M. Allchin, *God's Presence makes the World: The Celtic Vision Through the Centuries in Wales* (London: Dalton, Longman & Todd, 1997), 11.

⁴²² Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 91-94.

⁴²³ See Gilbert Markus, "The End of Celtic Christianity," *Epworth Review* 24, 3, no. July (1997): 45-55.

⁴²⁴ Ray Simpson, *Celtic Christianity and Climate Crisis: Twelve Keys for the Future of the Church* (Durham: Sacristy Press, 2020), 5; Ian Bradley, *God is Green: Christianity and the Environment* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2020), and; Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (London: Dalton, Longman & Todd, 1993).

⁴²⁵ Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, 83-86.

⁴²⁶ *Life of Columba* by Adomnán, in Sharpe, *Life of St Columba: by Adomnan of Iona*, and; Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, 82.

Celtic Saints undertook **spiritual formation** in their monastic origins before setting out on their journeys.⁴²⁷ Following the lead of Jesus,⁴²⁸ they also retreated regularly during their ministry—a rhythm of **ebb and flow**, often for extended periods—to find a quiet place to pray—Columbanus to a secluded cave in the dense forest,⁴²⁹ or Aidan to the remote Farne Islands⁴³⁰—to be alone with God, ‘before launching back to preach, or to organise.’⁴³¹ Times for solitude and silence were regular parts of the *peregrini’s* spiritual diet—first breathing in God’s Spirit of power through prayer and contemplation—before breathing out God’s life and love in evangelism, hospitality and service.⁴³²

Boundaries – ‘Vallum’

Celtic monasteries were surrounded by a ditch or ‘*vallum*’⁴³³—designed practically, to keep wild animals out and domestic animals in—but spiritually, to delineate the **spiritual boundaries** of a sacred space. The Columban tradition saw the *vallum* as enclosing ‘places of spiritual experience—glimpses of paradise on earth’⁴³⁴—where the values of the Kingdom of God were daily reinforced—places of sanctuary for those fleeing from violence and aggression—places of earthly

⁴²⁷ Columbanus, like Jesus, started his ministry at around the age of 30, see, Jonas, *Life of St Columban*, 19 and Columba when he was 42, see, Hale, *The Magnificent Gael: St Columba*, 177.

⁴²⁸ For example: **Mark 1:12-13 & Mark 6:46**.

⁴²⁹ Jonas I.16; in Jonas, *Life of St Columban*, 30, and in; Katherine Lack, *The Eagle and the Dove: The Spirituality of Celtic Saint Columbanus* (London: Triangle SPCK, 2000), 64-67.

⁴³⁰ Bede, *EH III.16* in, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 135.

⁴³¹ Freeman, *Punk Monk: New Monasticism and the Ancient Art of Breathing*, 98.

⁴³² Freeman, *Punk Monk: New Monasticism and the Ancient Art of Breathing*, 98.

⁴³³ Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages*, 177.

⁴³⁴ For the significance of the monastic enclosure, see the *Community Rule* of Columbanus in Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera*, 144-49, and; Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*, 39.

community but with ‘radically other-worldly values.’⁴³⁵ As Philip Sheldrake put it, the *vallum* surrounded the Celtic monastery where, ‘the privileges of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, received from God but lost in the Fall, were reclaimed.’⁴³⁶

How has the Spirituality of the Celtic *Peregrini* impacted

Contemporary Christian Spirituality?

Having assessed the spirituality of the Celtic monks and *peregrini*, I now turn to examine modern expressions of New Monasticism, and to what extent they have adopted the Celtic spiritual milieu. In this section, selected New Monastic movements will be critically evaluated, against the demonstrated Celtic spiritual attributes. Ray Simpson defined five modern waves of new monastic innovation and experiment.⁴³⁷ An initial wave in the 1930s and 1940s following the horror of the World Wars, including the *Iona Community*, the *Taizé Community*,⁴³⁸ as well as *Focolare* in Italy, and *Madonna House* in Canada.⁴³⁹ A second wave, in response to ‘the moral permissiveness and material prosperity’ of the swinging 1960s and 1970s, leading to the formation of *Chemin Neuf* and the *Community of the Beatitudes* in France, amongst others.⁴⁴⁰ The third wave in the 1990s saw the founding of Ray Simpson’s own institution, the *Community of Aidan and Hilda*, as well as the *Northumbria Community*⁴⁴¹—and the fourth wave, predominately in the

⁴³⁵ Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church*, 18-19.

⁴³⁶ Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*, 39.

⁴³⁷ Simpson, *High Street Monastries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*.

⁴³⁸ Although Simpson has included the Taizé movement as a New Monastic phenomenon, the *Taizé Community* would likely disagree, arguing that they are more akin to a new expression, but within a traditional, enclosed monastic setting.

⁴³⁹ Simpson, *High Street Monastries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*, 13-18.

⁴⁴⁰ Simpson, *High Street Monastries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*, 22-24.

⁴⁴¹ Simpson, *High Street Monastries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*, 25-30.

USA, produced the *Simple Way Community* and the *Catholic Worker*.⁴⁴² The fifth wave of new monastic experiment began in the early 2000s, initiated by the *24-7 Prayer* movement, which morphed into the *Boiler Rooms* and the subsequent revival of the *Order of the Mustard Seed*.⁴⁴³

Three of the northern European examples of these fresh monastic expressions are chosen for closer examination, given that they are the most likely to include the Celtic spirituality of the *peregrini*—namely, the *Iona Community*, the *Community of Aidan and Hilda*, and the *Northumbria Community*. Regarding the more recent *24-7 Prayer*, *Boiler Room* and the *Order of the Mustard Seed* movement, although claiming to be ‘inspired by the ancient Celtic Christian communities that combined prayer and mission’ and in ‘looking to the Celtic Saints for ideas and a framework for doing mission and ministry in our time,’⁴⁴⁴ and although the movement is based on some monastic principles, it is not overtly Celtic. The movement does embrace a framework of daily prayer and Scriptural reading, they have developed their own scaffolding of shared values and vows, and they are committed to the ebb and flow of ministry—times of prayer interspersed with the upward and outward practices of creativity, hospitality, learning, mission and justice.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴² Simpson, *High Street Monastries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*, 31-35.

⁴⁴³ Simpson, *High Street Monastries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*, 36-39.

⁴⁴⁴ Freeman, *Punk Monk: New Monasticism and the Ancient Art of Breathing*, 16-18, see also; Pete Greig, and Dave Roberts, *Red Moon Rising: Rediscovering the Power of Prayer - The Story of 24-7 Prayer*, Third ed. (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2015); Pete Greig, *The Vision and the Vow: Rediscovering Life and Grace* (Eastbourne, East Sussex: Relevant Books: Survivor, 2004), and; Phil Anderson, *The Lord of the Ring: A Journey in Search of Count Zinzendorf* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Muddy Pearl, 2020).

⁴⁴⁵ Freeman, *Punk Monk: New Monasticism and the Ancient Art of Breathing*, 16.

Iona Community

The small rocky island of Iona in the Scottish Hebrides—described by George MacLeod as a ‘thin place’—is the spiritual home of the *Iona Community*.⁴⁴⁶ As we have already seen, the first Christian community was formed on the island by Irish *peregrinus* Columba in 563, and the island has been a spiritual magnet ever since.⁴⁴⁷ Yet according to Norman Shanks, the *Iona Community* was not explicitly initiated to reflect ‘the patterns and priorities of the Celtic Church.’⁴⁴⁸ The Iona Cathedral Trust—set-up by George Campbell the Eighth Duke of Argyll in 1899—had a choice to make in 1935. Against a fully-funded offer to restore the Iona Abbey ruins and establish a Celtic College, from a group of Highland emigrants of the American Iona Society—the Trust chose the unfunded, local option proposed by Glasgow Church of Scotland Presbyterian Minister Dr George MacLeod.⁴⁴⁹ MacLeod’s vision was to restore the Abbey ruins as ‘a retreat centre for worship, meditation, study, and instruction,’ by conducting a social experiment of combining equal numbers of unemployed working-class tradesmen, with young middle-class Church of Scotland ministers and ordinands.⁴⁵⁰ MacLeod’s proposal won the day because of his distinguished Scottish military and aristocratic lineage, and because the experiment was essentially a repeat of what MacLeod had already achieved a few years earlier in a similar social endeavour at Fingletton Mill, near Glasgow—again firmly under

⁴⁴⁶ Ferguson, *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Story of the Iona Community*, 15, for the full narrative of the origin of the Iona Community see; Ronald Ferguson, *George MacLeod: Founder of the Iona Community* (London: Collins, 1990).

⁴⁴⁷ Rosalind K. Marshall, *Columba's Iona: A New History* (Dingwall, Scotland: Sandstone Press, 2014), 27, and following Columba’s prophecy, ‘In Iona of my heart, Iona of my love. Instead of monk’s voices shall be lowing of cattle, but ‘ere the world come to an end, Iona shall be as it was,’ in Ferguson, *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Story of the Iona Community*, 99.

⁴⁴⁸ Shanks, *Iona - God's Energy: The Spirituality and Vision of the Iona Community*, 150.

⁴⁴⁹ Marshall, *Columba's Iona: A New History*, 137-43.

⁴⁵⁰ Marshall, *Columba's Iona: A New History*, 142.

the auspices of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland.⁴⁵¹ Thus the *Iona Community*, founded by MacLeod, commenced rebuilding activities in 1938 and largely completed the Abbey restoration by 1967.⁴⁵² MacLeod—an ex-World War I war-hero turned pacifist—ran an autocratic, quasi-military all male group on Iona, but had remarkable success in returning more experienced and empathetic Church of Scotland ministers to rejuvenate the slums of Glasgow and the Church in Scotland more broadly. With the Abbey restored and his elevation to the peerage in 1967, the Very Revd Lord MacLeod of Fuinary, stepped down from his leadership role of the *Iona Community*.⁴⁵³ Some saw MacLeod as a latter-day reincarnation of Columba—both aristocratic individuals with connections to royalty, with commanding charisma and hugely autocratic—both personalities combining stubborn pride with deep humility and an almost childlike simplicity and enthusiasm—both hugely successful in their undertakings.⁴⁵⁴ Unlike the Celtic *peregrinus* in Columba, MacLeod’s motives were almost entirely aimed at social justice and the advancement of the Church of Scotland.⁴⁵⁵ Some critics, perhaps rather unfairly, referred to MacLeod’s achievement as ‘I own a community,’ instead of as founder of the ‘*Iona Community*.’⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵¹ Ferguson, *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Story of the Iona Community*, 50-52.

⁴⁵² Shanks, *Iona - God's Energy: The Spirituality and Vision of the Iona Community*, 44, for personal reflections on the early years of the Iona Community see; Ralph T. Morton, *The Iona Community: Personal Impressions of the Early Years* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrews Press, 1977), and; Anne Muir, *Outside the Safe Place: An Oral History of the Early Years of the Iona Community* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2011).

⁴⁵³ Ferguson, *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Story of the Iona Community*, 100.

⁴⁵⁴ Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church*, 45-46.

⁴⁵⁵ Shanks, *Iona - God's Energy: The Spirituality and Vision of the Iona Community*, Chapter 10, 154-77.

⁴⁵⁶ Ferguson, *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Story of the Iona Community*, 63.

Under the new leadership of Ian Reid, the *Community* rapidly became ecumenical and more diverse—both core values reflected in the *Iona Community* of today⁴⁵⁷—the first female *Community* member, Dr Nancy Brash was accepted in 1969, and the first Roman Catholic in 1976.⁴⁵⁸ With the *Community's* main centre in Glasgow and a further youth camp at Camas on the Isle of Mull—the key spiritual focus remains Iona Abbey, with a small transient core of devotees—occasionally including an *Iona Community* member—committing to a true Celtic-style rhythm of daily Scriptural reading and prayer.⁴⁵⁹ As the *Community* expanded and the majority of adherents dispersed, the need for statements of common values and shared beliefs became acute.⁴⁶⁰ Rather than follow the format of their Celtic forebears, a new five-principle *Community Rule of Life* was developed. To the vows of a regular practice of devotion and meetings were added accountability for time and money—and later—social and political advocacy, environmental justice and peace.⁴⁶¹

The *Community's* focus on the incarnation and the presence of God in the world is captured in George MacLeod's view of the birth of Jesus Christ as 'an inherent explosion [of God] into matter, setting up a chain reaction of igniting love.'⁴⁶² The importance of the incarnation to the *Community* is reflected in the dramatic statue positioned at the centre of the Iona Abbey cloister—the '*Descent of*

⁴⁵⁷ Marshall, *Columba's Iona: A New History*, 162.

⁴⁵⁸ Ferguson, *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Story of the Iona Community*, 112.

⁴⁵⁹ Shanks, *Iona - God's Energy: The Spirituality and Vision of the Iona Community*, 66-70.

⁴⁶⁰ Kathy Galloway, *Living by the Rule: The Rule of the Iona Community* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2010), 19-20.

⁴⁶¹ Galloway, *Living by the Rule: The Rule of the Iona Community*, 18-19, and; Marshall, *Columba's Iona: A New History*, 162-63.

⁴⁶² Shanks, *Iona - God's Energy: The Spirituality and Vision of the Iona Community*, 3.

the Spirit' by Jacob Lipchitz—compatible with Celtic belief—Christ born with energy and mystery.⁴⁶³

Rather than embodying Celtic Christianity, the present day *Iona Community*, with its distinctly inclusive and liberal theology,⁴⁶⁴ is regarded more as a social justice movement—in keeping with its mantra: 'spirituality is where prayer and politics meet.'⁴⁶⁵ The typical *Iona Community* member has a strong sense of advocacy and justice—with 'a placard in every corner' in readiness to join demonstrations for world peace, social justice for the poor, and to demand action on Climate Change.⁴⁶⁶ On the island of Iona today, the spiritual offering of the *Iona Community* is just one form alongside others—the others including retreats specifically focussed on Celtic spirituality led by Celtic evangelists such as Ian Bradley,⁴⁶⁷ and Philip Newell,⁴⁶⁸ boarding at local hotels, not the Abbey—as well as more humanistic gatherings focussed on well-being and spiritual variants, not necessarily recognised as Christian.⁴⁶⁹

According to Shanks, the *Iona Community* today demonstrates only a limited number of the spiritual characteristics of the Celtic *peregrini* including pilgrimage

⁴⁶³ 'The dove descending, large-eyed, all-seeing, the figure of the Virgin in the centre, within the heart-shaped canopy, womb-like and representing humanity, open, receptive, but blind, the lamb below—also blind—the three supportive angelic figures, unseeing too, all combine to create an unfathomable dynamic of energy and mystery,' see Shanks, *Iona - God's Energy: The Spirituality and Vision of the Iona Community*, 2.

⁴⁶⁴ Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church*, 51.

⁴⁶⁵ Shanks, *Iona - God's Energy: The Spirituality and Vision of the Iona Community*, 154, and; Ferguson, *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Story of the Iona Community*, 183.

⁴⁶⁶ Shanks, *Iona - God's Energy: The Spirituality and Vision of the Iona Community*, 156.

⁴⁶⁷ Bradley, *Following the Celtic Way: A New Assessment of Celtic Christianity*, 12.

⁴⁶⁸ Iona Pilgrimages run by former Warden of Iona Abbey (1988-1992) John Philip Newell out of the St Columba Hotel on Iona, see <https://www.earthandsoul.org/iona-pilgrimage>, accessed November 7, 2022.

⁴⁶⁹ For example: see, Culture Honey Pilgrimages – Iona, <https://www.culturehoney.com/product/celtic-way-pilgrimages-iona-scotland-april-28th-may-2-2023>, and Waymakers – Iona Pilgrimage, <https://www.waymarkers.net/iona-pilgrimage>, accessed November 7, 2022.

[*peregrinatio*] as a lifelong journey of adventure and discovery in God—**risky living**—the incarnation and recognition of the presence of God all around us and in the everyday—the **presence of God**—and God in the creative imagination in poetry, hymn and worship.⁴⁷⁰ There is some adherence to a daily **framework** of prayer and Scriptural reading on Iona, but less so at the *Community's* headquarters in Glasgow. Their **scaffolding** of shared values and vows are not based on their Celtic forebears, with vows restricted to an annual commitment. There is no emphasis on life-long learning or **spiritual formation**—although in the early days many of their members were trained clerics—but there is some adherence to **ebb and flow**, with their worship-style strong Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Given the liberal and all-inclusive stance of the Community, **spiritual boundaries** have largely been left to each individual's concern.

The Community of Aidan and Hilda

The *Community of Aidan and Hilda* is charismatic, with an emphasis on spirituality and mission—focussing on how the characteristically Celtic themes of monastic discipline and Soul Friendship can be applied to enrich the life and mission of the contemporary Church.⁴⁷¹ The focus is ecumenical, and like the Celtic *peregrini*, they espouse to a regular rhythm of prayer and study—a simple lifestyle—concern about creation, care, mission and justice—and are seeking 'to

⁴⁷⁰ Shanks, *Iona - God's Energy: The Spirituality and Vision of the Iona Community*, 151, for a personal spiritual reflection on Iona see; Fiona Macleod, *Iona* (Edinburgh: Floris Classics, 1982).

⁴⁷¹ Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church*, 51-52, for more detail on the Community of Aidan and Hilda search the writings of Founder Ray Simpson, especially; Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, and; Ray Simpson, *A Pilgrim Way: New Celtic Monasticism for Everyday People* (Stowmarket, Suffolk: Kevin Mayhew, 2005).

weave together the separate strands of Christianity to bring healing to fragmented people, communities and lands.⁴⁷² The *Community* seeks to ‘research the first Celtic mission,’ combining the depth of the ancient monastic traditions of the Desert Fathers and Mothers and the Celts, with today’s culture,⁴⁷³—restoring the memory and experience of this past, with a view to resourcing its members and churches with new ‘Celtic’ worship materials, and to conducting study programmes and retreats.⁴⁷⁴ The aim of their worship is ‘to bridge the gap between formal church liturgies and creationist practices inspired by nature...to rediscover our Christian roots’ in a worship style that reflects the ‘rhythm of creation’ and the ‘flow of human life.’⁴⁷⁵ From its launch by Ray Simpson and Michael Mitten in 1994, a small *Community* group has followed a regular rhythm of morning and evening prayer at the ‘Open Gate’ retreat centre on Lindisfarne.⁴⁷⁶ The *Community’s Rule*—the ‘*Way of Life*’—contains ‘Three Life-giving Principles’ and ‘Ten Elements of the Way’—the *Waymarks*—all broadly compatible with the spiritual principles of the Celtic *peregrini*.⁴⁷⁷ The ten ‘*Waymarks*’ are based on the broad monastic principles of: poverty, chastity and obedience—they add lifelong learning, particularly focussed on the Celtic traditions—following a spiritual journey with a Soul Friend—a rhythm of prayer, work and rest—spiritual protection—

⁴⁷² Simpson, *High Street Monastries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*, 25.

⁴⁷³ For the *Community of Aidan and Hilda* see, Simpson, *High Street Monastries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*, 25, and for the Northumbria Community see Miller, Trevor; <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/articles/celtic-spirituality-a-beginners-guide/>, accessed November 7, 2022.

⁴⁷⁴ Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, 30.

⁴⁷⁵ Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, 33.

⁴⁷⁶ Ray Simpson, *New Celtic Monasticism for everyday people* (Stowmarket, Suffolk: Kevin Mayhew, 2014), 45-48.

⁴⁷⁷ Simpson, *New Celtic Monasticism for everyday people*, 19-27. Ray Simpson has produced a daily prayer guide incorporating the Waymarks, see; Ray Simpson, *Waymarks for the Journey: Daily Prayer to Change our World* (Stowmarket, Suffolk: Kevin Mayhew, 2009).

simplicity of lifestyle—creation care—healing ministry—openness to God’s spirit—unity and community—and mission.⁴⁷⁸ The importance of a Soul Friend to the *Community* has a strong Biblical endorsement,⁴⁷⁹ was inherited from the Desert tradition,⁴⁸⁰ is a prominent Celtic theme,⁴⁸¹ and is one of the most popular practices in the current revival of enthusiasm for Celtic Christianity.⁴⁸²

Matched against the described spiritual attributes of the Celtic *peregrini*, the *Community* has a limited adherence to a **framework** of daily prayer and Biblical reading at its retreat centre on Lindisfarne. In the dispersed *Community*, this rhythm is largely left to the individual’s discretion—although extensive liturgical literature has been provided. The **scaffolding** of the *Waymarks* and shared values is more aligned with the Celtic *peregrini*, but the vows are annually renewed. There is limited exposure to **risky living**, restricted to the inner spiritual journey. A strong sense of the **presence of God** is evidenced by an active care for others and of all creation. There is no formal requirement for extended periods of **spiritual formation** although life-long learning is encouraged, as is the **ebb and flow** of prayer and action. Some care is taken to develop **spiritual boundaries**, but again these are largely for personal consideration.

⁴⁷⁸ Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church*, 51.

⁴⁷⁹ From the Apocrypha: **Ecclesiasticus 6:14-16**.

⁴⁸⁰ Stelios Ramfos, *Like a Pelican in the Wilderness: Reflections on the Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000), 215-17.

⁴⁸¹ A Celtic example of a ‘Soul Friendship’ is that between Aidan and Hilda—Aidan persuading Hilda to stay in England and take-up a leadership role as a woman: ‘Bishop Aidan...visited her frequently, instructed her assiduously, and loved her heartily...’: in, Bede, *EH IV.23*, McClure, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People: The Greater Chronicle: Bede's Letter to Egbert*, 211. Columba unburdened his conscience for his role in the Battle of Cúl Drebene to his Soul Friend St Laisren, in: *Vita Sancti Lasriani*, XXXi in Charles Plummer, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ii 139, see: Duke, *The Columban Church*, 130.

⁴⁸² Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic Models for Today's Church*, 108-10. The role of Soul Friendship in the Celtic tradition are further elaborated in; Ray Simpson, *Soul Friendship: Celtic Insights into Spiritual Mentoring* (London: Hodder & Stroughton, 1999), and; Edward C. Sellner, *The Celtic Soul Friend: A Trusted Guide for Today* (Notre Dame, Illinois: Ave Maria Press, 2002).

The Northumbria Community

The *Northumbria Community's* spirituality is predominantly contemplative, focussing on the inner life, but also listening for God's call to action, and is therefore the closest modern expression of authentic Celtic Christianity. The *Community* does not call itself 'Celtic'—mainly because, in their view, the word 'Celtic' has become 'so misunderstood, misrepresented and misused by popularism'—as Trevor Miller, a leader of the *Northumbria Community* put it—it is not a 'trendy fad,' nor signs-up to the 'Disneyland Celtic spirituality' that 'romanticises the Saints with ridiculous nostalgia.'⁴⁸³ Following the Celtic *peregrini* as they wandered and wondered for the love of Christ, the *Community* originated with a call to 'risky living'⁴⁸⁴—a commitment to 'be willing to walk in the paradox of life's uncertainties,' not knowing where this journey may lead.⁴⁸⁵ The specific call was to live three questions: 'How then shall we live?,'⁴⁸⁶ 'Who is it that we seek?,'⁴⁸⁷ and 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?'⁴⁸⁸ Praying through these three questions led to the development of the *Northumbria Community's Rule of Life*, focussing on *Availability* and *Vulnerability*—providing 'an external spiritual scaffolding for an interior journey, both as "sign posts" and as

⁴⁸³ Miller, Trevor; <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/articles/celtic-spirituality-a-beginners-guide/> - 20220907, accessed November 30, 2022.

⁴⁸⁴ Northumbria Community, *A Way of Living: Introducing the Rule of the Northumbria Community*, ed. Trevor Miller, *How then shall we live?*, (Northumberland: Northumbria Community, 2004), 15.

⁴⁸⁵ <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/articles/celtic-spirituality-a-beginners-guide/> - 20220907, accessed October 30, 2022—as the title of this web-blog suggests, it is a good introduction to the Northumbria Community and their spirituality.

⁴⁸⁶ **Ezekiel 33:10.**

⁴⁸⁷ **John 18:7.**

⁴⁸⁸ **Psalm 137:4**; see Northumbria Community, *The Heretical Imperative*, ed. Trevor Miller, *How then shall we live?*, (Northumberland: Northumbria Community, 2003), 3-4, and <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/articles/celtic-spirituality-a-beginners-guide/> - 20220907, accessed October 30, 2022.

“banister railings,” both marker and guideline on our way to God.’⁴⁸⁹ The *Rule* emphasises being *Available* to God, to each other and to mission—whilst remaining *Vulnerable* to being taught, accountable, to asking the hard questions, making relationships the priority, and living in ‘a church without walls.’⁴⁹⁰ The concepts of availability—being available to follow God’s call, and vulnerability—to risky exposure—were very much components of the Celtic *peregrini*’s call in their search for God. Following the natural rhythm of the ebb and flood tides on the island of Lindisfarne, the *Community* are happy both ‘when the tide is in and when the tide is out’⁴⁹¹—either ‘at home in the cell’ on the inner journey of seeking God in the heart—or ‘abroad in the coracle’ in their availability to others by serving God in the world.⁴⁹² The *Community* is best known for its prayer book—*Celtic Daily Prayer*—now a double tome of daily devotion and worship liturgy, based on the Celtic tradition.⁴⁹³

The *Northumbria Community* conforms more closely to the elaborated spiritual attributes of the Celtic *peregrini*. The daily **framework** and rhythm of prayer and Scriptural reading is followed by the mother-house in Northumberland, at the dispersed daughter-houses of the *Community*, and also encouraged by adopting *Celtic Daily Prayer*. In wrestling with some of life’s key questions, the

⁴⁸⁹ Northumbria Community, *A Way of Living: Introducing the Rule of the Northumbria Community*, 6-7.

⁴⁹⁰ George Lings, *Northumbria Community: Matching Monastery and Mission*, vol. 29, Encounters on the Edge Series, (Sheffield: Church Army, 2006), 21.

⁴⁹¹ <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/articles/celtic-spirituality-a-beginners-guide/> - 20220907, accessed October 30, 2022.

⁴⁹² Simpson, *High Street Monastries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*, 27.

⁴⁹³ *Celtic Daily Prayer* first published in 1994, edited in 2000, Northumbria Community, *Celtic Daily Prayer* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), and with a major revision and addition of a second volume in 2015, Northumbria Community, *Celtic Daily Prayer: Book One - the Journey Begins*, vol. 1 (London: WilliamCollins Books, 2015), and; Northumbria Community, *Celtic Daily Prayer: Book Two - Further up and Farther in*, vol. 2 (London: WilliamCollins Books, 2015).

scaffolding of the *Community Rule* of Vulnerability and Availability is well aligned with the spirituality of the Celtic *peregrini*. The focus on contemplative prayer leads naturally to a greater awareness of the **presence of God**. Although there is no specific requirement for **seasonal spiritual formation**, there is an emphasis on continual learning, as well as a good awareness of the need for **ebb and flow**, linked to the tides of Lindisfarne. There is a greater appreciation of the need for spiritual **boundaries**, allowing space for contemplation and silent prayer.

CONCLUSION

The enormous challenge for the dispersed expressions of the modern New Monastics is how to maintain and enhance spiritual discipline amongst the many distractions in today's world. Over history, most forms of monasticism have evolved from solitary eremitic and semi-eremitic forms towards communities of enclosed cenobitic monks and nuns, for good reason. If the new dispersed monastic experiments are to become sustainable, they would do well to embrace not only the more usual monastic practices, but also adopt some of the distinctive spiritual tools of the Celtic *peregrini*.

Set against the defined spiritual attributes of the Celtic *peregrini*, the three most 'Celtic-like' movements—*Iona Community*, *Community of Aidan and Hilda* and *Northumbria Community*—show variable take-up. All three have minimised the focus on martyrdom, asceticism and penance—the more 'dated' aspects of Celtic spirituality. To some degree all have developed **frameworks** of daily prayer and Scriptural reading, but usually only observed by a small number located at the mother-houses of the communities—the majority of the dispersed members are

left to their own devices. Having said this, all communities have developed extensive 'Celtic' worship and liturgical materials to encourage daily adherence. The Psalms are used, but there is not the intense focus on the Psalmody of the Celts. Worship patterns vary, although none of these three movements aspires to replace traditional denominational devotion.

Although the **scaffolding** of vows and *Rules of Life* are still believed important today, for the dispersed New Monastic expressions the trend is towards loosening these formalities—with less demanding *Rules* and a drift away from life-long commitments, towards annually reassurances. This relaxation of stricture is controversial, believed beneficial by some, to give individuals enough space to breathe—to allow greater creativity—and perhaps surprisingly—more room for God.⁴⁹⁴

The **risky living** of the *peregrini* is largely restricted to the inner spiritual journey, but the concept of Availability and Vulnerability in the *Northumbria Community* implies a readiness to spring forth into travel and action to follow God's call. Each movement embraces a special sense of the **presence of God**, sustaining and caring for His creation.

The **seasonal formation** of regular, extended periods of learning and spiritual formation are not always present, but there is an awareness of the need for continual learning and openness to God's call. There is some adherence to the need for **ebb and flow** in quietness and activity, but this seems often to be overcome by busy schedules. The tendency in New Monasticism is to minimise

⁴⁹⁴ See Simpson 2009 for the arguments backing this relaxation: Simpson, *High Street Monastries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*, 60.

boundaries and to avoid divisions becoming ‘a play-thing of colliding egos’⁴⁹⁵—yet maintaining spiritual discipline in a world without firm boundaries, is a major challenge.

Although the practices of the Celtic *peregrini* were to some degree counter-cultural, some aspects of their spirituality are very applicable for today—seeking separation in saying no to the distractions of the world—deliberately setting aside time for silence and solitude—drawing circles, separating out, with the *Caim* prayer⁴⁹⁶—as well as consciously creating scaffolding and frameworks to protect their spiritual boundaries.

⁴⁹⁵ Simpson, *High Street Monastries: Fresh Expressions of Committed Christianity*, 66.

⁴⁹⁶ As St Ninian did around the herd of cattle—to keep the thieves out and the cattle protected within, see, MacDonald, *Life of St Ninian: by Aelred, Abbot of Rievaulx*, 43-45, and; MacQueen, *St Nynia*, 114.

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