

THE SPIRITUALITY FOR MISSION OF SAINT
COLUMBA AND SAINT COLUMBAN:
INSIGHTS GAINED FOR DEVELOPING A
SPIRITUALITY FOR MISSION FOR THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY.

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ABSTRACT

In the sixth century two Irish monks, Columba and Columban, left their homeland to establish monasteries among the peoples of northern Britain and Europe. As monasteries were founded, the monks became an outstanding example of living the way of Christ by contemplation and by reaching out with pastoral care to those around them. The purpose of this thesis is to identify valuable insights from a study of Columba and Columban for developing a spirituality for mission for the twenty-first century.

After a brief examination of the history, culture and theological understanding of early Irish Christianity and monasticism, the writer discusses the motives, lifestyle, and spirituality for mission of Columba and Columban, in the light of their tradition and of contemporary events. This leads her to examine some recent developments in mission spirituality which are influencing the way the Gospel is proclaimed today, including the concept of *missio Dei*; the emphasis on following Jesus by living the Christian life as a sign of hope to others; the importance of the Holy Spirit; and non-aggressive methods of evangelisation such as inter-religious dialogue. These are all found to harmonise with and extend the spirituality for mission of Columba and Columban.

There are some insights gained from the sixth century which are yet to be fully explored in contemporary mission spirituality, including the way Columba and Columban lived in imitation of Christ; their *peregrination*; their appreciation of the importance of the Trinity for mission; their love and respect for nature; and their particular emphasis on penance as spiritual medicine. These insights, together with more recent developments, are integrated and developed for a spirituality for mission which is relevant and meaningful today, as Christians seek to keep proclaiming the Gospel in word, sacrament, witness and service.

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby certify that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution, and affirm that to the best of my knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signed:

Date:

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INTRODUCTION

There have been many “great movements of spirituality which have arisen throughout history to bring light into new or neglected areas of human life.”¹ In the sixth century two Irish monks, Columba and Columban, introduced to northern Britain and Europe a unique spirituality for mission which, I contend, contains valuable insights to bring light to those who today seek to proclaim the Gospel. The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is to identify and develop a relevant spirituality for mission for the twenty-first century, with the assistance of these insights, these gems of wisdom from the sixth century.

Many find defining “spirituality” difficult. However, I have found two definitions significant for this thesis. First, Michael Collins Reilly states that “Christian spirituality is the life style of the Christian. Its goal is holiness, union with God, and full possession by the Father, through Christ in the Spirit.”² Second, when Lawrence Nemer talks about spirituality for mission he tells his students that he is usually talking about three facets of their life: “their motivation, their style of life and their attitudes towards their task, and that each of these should be affected by the Bible, the theological understandings of their tradition and contemporary events.”³

Because the history, culture and theological understandings of the early Irish Church significantly influenced Columba and Columban, I will briefly explore early Irish Christianity before looking at the monks’ motivation, lifestyle and attitudes towards their task of mission, and how these were affected by their history, culture and theological understandings. Examining the history of sixth-century Britain and Ireland can be difficult because of what W.H. Davies calls “that excessive dosage of the drug of secondary sources supplemented by a full magnum of autosuggestion.”⁴ In addition, hagiographies are not always reliable sources. However, Adamnan’s *Life*

¹ Ray Simpson, *Celtic Spirituality: Rhythm, Roots and Relationships* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2003), 3.

² Michael Collins Reilly, *Spirituality for Mission: Historical, Theological, and Cultural Factors for a Present-Day Missionary Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 43.

³ Lawrence Nemer, “Spirituality and the Missionary Vocation,” *Missiology: An International Review* XI, no. 4 (October 1983): 421.

⁴ W.H. Davies. “The Church in Wales,” in *Christianity in Britain, 300-700*, ed. M.W. Barley and R.P.C. Hanson (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1968), 137.

of St Columba was written relatively close in time to its subject, and “has an established provenance in linguistic, literary, and historical terms.”⁵ Columban’s hagiographer, Jonas of Susa, an Italian monk who entered the monastery at Bobbio only three years after Columban’s death, wrote the *Life of Columban* between 630 and 641. Jonas obtained many of his details from eye-witness accounts and his work is “remarkably free of additions from folklore and pious adulation.”⁶ Fortunately, Columban has left us his *Rule*, together with sermons and letters, and I will examine these to comment on the lifestyle, theology and spirituality of the sixth-century monks.

I will draw on four major insights gained from this historical examination to assist me in identifying and developing a spirituality for mission for the twenty-first century, including the way Columba and Columban lived in imitation of Christ; their Trinitarian understanding of mission; their love and respect for creation; and their emphasis on penance as spiritual medicine. I will also integrate five important recent developments in mission spirituality in order to develop my conclusions further. These will include the concept of *missio Dei*; the role of the Holy Spirit; what following Jesus means for Christians; non-coercive missionary activity; and the importance of inculturation and inter-religious dialogue.

I agree with the statement that concretely “there is no such thing as a generic ‘church.’ There can only be a church of a particular locality, situation, or culture.”⁷ Therefore when I refer to the “Church,” I mean the universal Church, the body of Christ, functioning as a community in a specific location, situation or culture. My understanding of “mission” is influenced by the following definition: “Mission is an impulsion, a driving onward, a commission to love God and neighbour actively...Authentic mission is a movement from the centre to the margin.”⁸ This understanding will allow me to speak about the Church’s mission and about God’s mission without compromising the concept of *missio Dei*, where God is the source,

⁵ James Bruce, *Prophecy, Miracles, Angels, and Heavenly Light?: The Eschatology, Pneumatology, and Missiology of Adomnan’s Life of St Columba* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2004), 1.

⁶ Richard J. Woods, *The Spirituality of the Celtic Saints* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 127.

⁷ Stephen B. Bevans and Jeffrey Gros, *Evangelization and Religious Freedom: Ad Gentes, Dignitatis Humanae* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 110.

⁸ Anthony J. Gittins, *Ministry at the Margins: Strategy and Spirituality for Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), x, xii.

purpose, driving force, and impetus of mission, and the Church is sent to love God and neighbour actively, which it is called to do by the proclamation of the Gospel “in word, in sacrament, in witness, and in service.”⁹ It is not only God who moves from the centre to the margin when the Son is sent to proclaim and make the kingdom of God a reality. It is also what the Church is called to do when it follows Jesus.

Sandra M. Schneiders states that all study in the field of spirituality is historical simply because “spirituality is a lived experience in a particular time and space... [and] is influenced by what and who has preceded it.”¹⁰ Therefore, essentially, my approach will be historical. Nevertheless, because spirituality is a lived experience in a particular context, I will not be concentrating on historical “facts,” although these are important. Rather I will be looking at “the experience, reflection and articulation of the assumptions and consequences of religious faith as it is lived in a concrete situation.”¹¹ The insights gained from Columba and Columban’s spirituality for mission, together with important features from recent developments, will then be integrated to form a spirituality for mission which is relevant for Christians today as they endeavour to undertake *missio Dei*.

⁹ Richard McBrien, “Glossary,” *Catholicism*, revised and updated ed. (North Blackburn, Vic: Harper Collins, 1994), 1245.

¹⁰ Sandra M. Schneiders, “Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 21.

¹¹ Caroline Osiek, “Reflections on an American Spirituality,” *Spiritual Life* 22 (1976), 230, quoted in Jon Alexander, “What Do Recent Writers Mean by *Spirituality*?” *Spirituality Today* 32, no. 3 (September 1980): 251.

CHAPTER ONE

IRISH CHRISTIANITY IN OVERVIEW

General Background

When Saint Patrick first arrived in Ireland in the fifth century he experienced a society which had never been under Roman rule. Although Ireland was a country of Celtic culture, it was a very different Celtic culture from that of Romanized Britain and Gaul, with a sharp difference in life and behaviour. Thus, Ireland was a country of cattle and crops, of fortified wooden defences rather than towns.¹² It was an intensely stratified society made up of strong tribal family groups and peasant farmers. Each *tuath* or tribe controlled a small area of land and consisted of families of noble or royal descent who dominated the farmers through an intricate system of mutual rights and obligations. There was the assumption that compensation would be made for service, and a gift received would necessitate a return offering. However, unlike the serfs of Roman Europe, the Irish farmers were free to be slave-owners.¹³ Celtic Ireland had never been totally isolated from Roman Britain and when the Romans withdrew from Britain in the early fifth century, the Irish nobility and farmers engaged in extensive slave-trading along Britain's west coast. Indeed, Patrick was first brought to Ireland from Britain as a slave at this time.

After escaping and returning to Britain, Patrick came again to Ireland around 432CE as bishop.¹⁴ Christian communities existed in Ireland prior to this date, but evangelisation was not widespread.¹⁵ Since there is no precedent prior to the late fifth century for a pope to send a missionary bishop to pagans, we can conclude that Patrick was almost certainly sent to minister to a community of Christians in Ireland.¹⁶ However, E.A. Thompson believes that Patrick's personal aim was the conversion of the pagan Irish, not service to believers.¹⁷ Patrick certainly travelled widely in Ireland, and his *Confessions* bear witness to the fact that he did preach the

¹² R.P.C. Hanson, *The Life and Writings of the Historical Saint Patrick* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1983), 32.

¹³ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 326.

¹⁴ E.A. Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1985), 35.

¹⁵ George Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus 542?-615* (First published in Philadelphia in 1914. Facsimile reprint by J.M.F. Books, Felinfach, 1993), 7.

¹⁶ Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?*, 61.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

Gospel to the tribes.¹⁸ In a letter regarding his enemies and detractors in the British Church, Patrick completely identified with the Irish converts when he wrote:

“Perhaps they do not believe that we have received the same baptism and have the same God as Father. They think it derogatory that we are Irish.”¹⁹ As a bishop with a passion for evangelisation, Patrick was unique for his time.

Francis MacManus writes that Patrick brought about a deep change in Irish society as the people accepted his message “with astonishing single-mindedness.”²⁰ Peter Brown argues that it was the influx of slaves from Britain which brought about the conversion of Ireland. As a large group, united by their Christian faith and strengthened by the energetic ministry of Patrick, they brought with them their own British Celtic culture, and thus threatened to cause a breakdown in society. To counter this threat, the nobility made the decision to adopt Christianity, the religion of their slaves, “quickly and very much on their own terms.”²¹ Whether conversion was by evangelisation or by political expediency, by the sixth century Christianity had become the major religion in Ireland.

It is interesting to note that there were no attempts to abolish the existing political system, and the new religion was adapted, at least in its external organisation, to the ways of life of the Irish people, at times “with creative energy.”²² The sign of the cross was engraved on the ancient pillar-stones, which were left intact; special fires in midsummer were in honour of St John the Baptist rather than in honour of the sun; pagan sacred fountains were converted into Holy Wells; hermits’ huts were built under sacred oaks for the purposes of prayer and fasting; the Druids’ white garment and “ear to ear” tonsure were adapted for the Christian monk.²³ These, and many more, are early examples of utilising rather than destroying previous cultural and religious symbols, artefacts and activities which could remain meaningful without compromising the integrity of the new religion.

¹⁸ Hanson, *The Life and Writings of the Historical Saint Patrick*, 106. [Confession 37].

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70. [Letter to Coroticus].

²⁰ Francis MacManus, *Saint Columban* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962), 6.

²¹ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 326.

²² MacManus, *Saint Columban*, 7.

²³ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 14.

There is little doubt that Patrick made headway against paganism in Ireland, but it is difficult to gain a profile of the Church he was establishing. There is some evidence that following the episcopate of Patrick a number of sees were created, but attempts to establish a metropolitan hierarchy failed.²⁴ The ecclesiastical organisation on the Continent and in Britain was based on the chief cities where each had its bishop. However, the social order in Ireland made this form of organisation impossible. F.F. Bruce maintains that Patrick based his episcopal organisation on the tribal divisions, where monasteries became episcopal sees. These early monasteries consisted of villages of small cells grouped around a larger one which served as a church.²⁵ L. Hardinge agrees that ecclesiastical government in Ireland developed along tribal patterns and that, before the sixth century, monasteries in Ireland “apparently resembled Christian missionary village compounds, walled off from the hostile populace, in which a cross-section of Christian society lived.”²⁶ George Metlake also thinks that the first monasteries were in all probability mission stations.²⁷

Sources which suggest that Patrick himself established monasteries are vague. Patrick does mention that “the sons of the Irish and the daughters of subkings become monks and virgins of Christ,”²⁸ but nowhere does he write of monasteries which practised conventional renunciation or asceticism. It was only from the middle of the sixth century that the great monastic foundations arose in Ireland, with their characteristics of severity and self-sacrifice. Territorial episcopacies were gradually replaced by a monastic system where the chief figure was the abbot, not the bishop. Because it was common for the abbot of the monastery to belong to the same family as the rulers of the local tribe, the office of bishop was overshadowed by the abbot’s.²⁹ With no large urban centres, the evangelisation of Ireland went hand in hand with the spread of monasticism. The result was that a unique and extraordinary type of Christianity developed in Ireland.

²⁴ J.R. Morris, “The Literary Evidence,” in *Christianity in Britain, 300-700*, ed. M.W. Barley and R.P.C. Hanson (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1968), 69.

²⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Progress of Christianity from its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (London: Paternoster Press, 1958), 380.

²⁶ L. Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain* (London: SPCK, 1972), 156.

²⁷ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St Columbanus*, 11.

²⁸ Hanson, *The Life and Writings of the Historical Saint Patrick*, 110. [Confession 41].

²⁹ Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, 385.

Irish Monasticism

From the sixth century monasteries became the centre of Irish Christianity.³⁰ The Druids in Ireland at this time exercised no sacerdotal functions and formed no regular organisation, despite their earlier influence.³¹ They had lost their power with the rise of Christianity, but their zeal for study and their love of poetry and art were inherited by the monks, who were considered their successors. Indeed Saint Columba is known to have said, “Christ, the Son of God, is my Druid.”³² Although the monasteries reflected the tribal character of society, and in this regard were unavoidably political, they also tended to be quite pluralistic. Many admitted celibates and married lay persons, women and men, artisans and workers. Quite a few abbots were laymen, and there were a variety of rules.³³ Monasteries became the spiritual, intellectual and economic hub of clan life and the monks had close pastoral contact with the people.³⁴

Metlake maintains that the extraordinary development of Irish Monasticism was due to three factors: the zealous spirit of the early missionaries, the passionate temperament of the Irish themselves, and the social and political climate which promoted decentralization and individualism.³⁵ Brown is convinced that the true originality and creativity of Irish Christian culture meant that the early Christian texts of Saint Jerome, John Cassian and others “were read as if time and distance had collapsed...The Irish wanted to experience to the full the rigours of the Egyptian desert.”³⁶ John Ryan agrees that the spirit which animated Irish monasticism was modelled on anchorites like Saint Anthony of Egypt who withdrew from the world to pursue perfection. However, Irish monasteries were predominantly coenobitical, based on communal life.³⁷ In fact Irish monasticism combined asceticism and peaceful contemplation with a passionate interest in the spiritual wellbeing of both

³⁰ Owen Cummings, *Eucharistic Doctors: A Theological History* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 98.

³¹ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 12.

³² M. Forthomme Nicholson, “Celtic Theology: Pelagius,” in *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, ed. J.P. Mackey (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 400.

³³ Woods, *The Spirituality of the Celtic Saints*, 59.

³⁴ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 120,121.

³⁵ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 16.

³⁶ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 241.

³⁷ John Ryan, *Irish Monasticism: Origins and Early Development*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1992), 408.

one another within the community and of the world outside, so that “the very life-breath of Irish monasticism seems to be apostolic work for souls.”³⁸

Catherine Thom asks the question: what it was that made Irish monasticism so unique? She argues that the good news, preached by Jesus and spread by his followers, was far from an abstract philosophy. Rather it was a life-giving message which brought purpose and hope. It was “an acknowledgement of the all-pervading Spirit...an all-embracing love and purpose drawing and impelling the human person’s journey forward.”³⁹ Stephen Neil agrees that what made the Irish monks so great was “the development of an admirable Christian culture, and an equally admirable missionary passion.”⁴⁰ The Irish monk longed for the desert yet at the same time was fervently evangelical. Austerity, or self-imposed deprivation as a way to God, was combined with a spirit of community inherent in Irish society. Study and learning were combined with creative art, poetry, and a love of creation, along with hard manual labour. Thom points out: “While an intuitive sense of theology and asceticism is universal in religious experience, their articulation and *praxis* in Irish monasticism revealed an orthodox theology but an idiosyncratic *praxis*.”⁴¹ Irish monasticism in its theology and *praxis* was a unique example of living out the good news of Christ in a distinctly Irish way.

Concluding Comments

The early Christianity of Ireland was the source of a great movement of spirituality. It was a Christianity which was not associated with conquering armies or autocratic rulers. If some historians are correct, it began as a movement from below, from the influence of imported slaves, and was spread by the missionary endeavours of the great Saint Patrick. The general structure of tribal society and the peculiar social conditions of Ireland, where there were no large cities, encouraged the growth of a monastic system where the abbot and not the bishop ruled supreme. Monasteries became an important factor in tribal life where the sons of royalty were educated, and monks pursued learning, including the study of sacred Scripture. In these monasteries

³⁸ Ibid., 407.

³⁹ Catherine Thom, *Early Irish Monasticism: An Understanding of its Cultural Roots* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 7.

⁴⁰ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1986), 50.

⁴¹ Thom, *Early Irish Monasticism*, 176.

hard work, fasting, prayer and penance were practised with cheerful abandon by those who flocked to them. All these factors produced a Christianity which was not only contemplative in practice, but also was passionately concerned with sharing the message of Christ with others. Indeed, Irish Monasticism, with its unique type of Christian spirituality, was directly influential in the spread of Christianity into northern Britain and Europe in the sixth century, especially through the missionary efforts of Saint Columba and Saint Columban.

CHAPTER TWO

SAINT COLUMBA'S PARTICULAR CONTRIBUTION

Background

Columba (sometimes known as Colmcille) was born in 521CE, in northwest Ireland, of the royal clan of Ui Neill, descendants of the former high king of Ireland. It was customary for one or more boys of the royal families to be raised as monks, and Columba was sent to Finnian's monastery at Moville and then to Clonard in Meath. At the age of twenty-five Columba founded Durrow monastery, and many other foundations in Ireland are attributed to him.⁴² In 563 Columba left Ireland with twelve companions and sailed in a currach of wickerwork and hides to what is now north-west Scotland and settled on the island of Iona, which was in the territory of the Irish clan, the Dal Riada.

Because Dal Riada was ruled by Columba's kinsmen, he had no difficulty establishing a monastery on Iona. It was a humble monastery built of rough planks and wattles, similar to the monasteries in Ireland, consisting of church, refectory and huts for sleeping.⁴³ Adamnan (or Adomnan), the ninth abbot of Iona, in his *Life of Columba*, describes Columba as full of the prophetic spirit, working great miracles in God and surrounded by a halo of heavenly light.⁴⁴ Stories of Columba's love for people and for all creatures are to be found throughout Adamnan's *Life*. Columba did not leave a written Rule, although a simple Rule attributed to him was set down much later. References in this Rule to love of God and neighbour, and the importance of prayer, work, and study of Scripture, reflect the spirit of early Irish Monasticism.⁴⁵ Poems traditionally recognised as being by Columba demonstrate a deep love of nature and proud patriotism.⁴⁶

Motives for Mission

⁴² Woods, *The Spirituality of the Celtic Saints*, 71.

⁴³ Tomas O Fiaich, "Saint Colmcille in Ireland and Scotland," in *Irish Monks in the Golden Age*, ed. John Ryan (Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds, 1963), 21.

⁴⁴ Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson, eds. & trans., *Adomnan's Life of Columba* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1961), III.17,18; 501, 503.

⁴⁵ Medieval Sourcebook: *Rule of St Columba 6th Century*, Paul Halsall (January 1996).

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/columba-rule.html> (accessed 18 July 2011).

⁴⁶ Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, 388.

Writing in the eighth century, the Venerable Bede simply states that Columba came to Britain “to instruct the Picts.”⁴⁷ Some historians believe that Columba’s main motive for leaving Ireland was “to escape from political involvement at home.”⁴⁸ It is believed that Columba’s grievances against King Diarmaid had caused a battle that was fought in 561, where many of Columba’s kinsmen had been slain.⁴⁹ Adamnan does mention the battle, but says that Columba resolved to “seek a foreign country for the love of Christ.”⁵⁰ Traditionally, this is taken to mean “seeking the perfect contemplation of God in ascetic, ethical rigour.”⁵¹ Peter Brown agrees with this motive for leaving Ireland: “Here was the classic ‘desert’ of Egypt, the home of the great monks of old, now re-created, in a Celtic idiom, in the remoteness of an offshore island in the wild Atlantic.”⁵²

Separation from homeland to undergo pilgrimage, or *peregrination*, was a common practice of early Irish Christians. *Peregrination* did not have the same meaning as a medieval pilgrimage. Rather, the practice of *peregrination* describes “a religious, ascetically oriented journey into isolated exile.”⁵³ Adamnan portrays Columba as a pilgrim (*peregrinaturus*)⁵⁴ who sails away and lives in pilgrimage (*peregrinatem*)⁵⁵ in Britain. A journey to Pictland is said to be part of the *peregrination*.⁵⁶ A crane, which comes to Iona and is lovingly nursed back to health, is described as a foreign visitor on a pilgrimage (*perigrinari*).⁵⁷ Writing about the end of Columba’s life, Adamnan reports that Columba had spent over thirty years in pilgrimage (*peregrinationis*).⁵⁸ James Bruce believes that *peregrination* accurately describes the nature of Columba’s mission on Iona. The words “exile” or “journey” are not

⁴⁷ J. Campbell, ed., *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People and Other Selections from the Writings of the Venerable Bede* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), 5.24, 309.

⁴⁸ Eoin De Bhaldraithe, “Book Review: Early Irish Monasticism: An Understanding of its Cultural Roots, by Catherine Thom, London & New York: T & T Clark, 2006,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 73 (2008): 216. <http://itq.sagepub.com/content/73/1-2/216.citation> (accessed 27 March 2011).

⁴⁹ Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, 387.

⁵⁰ William Reeves, ed., *Life of Saint Columba, Founder of Hy (Iona): Written by Adamnan*. Facsimile reprint 1988 by Llanerch Enterprises, Dyfed and Reprinted from the *Historians of Scotland* (Edmonston and Douglas, 1874), Preface II, 35.

⁵¹ Bruce, *Prophecy, Miracles, Angels, and Heavenly Light?*, 206.

⁵² Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 328.

⁵³ T.M. Charles-Edwards, “The Social Background to Irish Peregrinatio,” *Celtica* 11 (1976): 43-59, quoted in Bruce, *Prophecy, Miracles, Angels and Heavenly Light?*, 209.

⁵⁴ Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnan’s Life of Columba*, I.7, 224.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, I.13, 234.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, II.10, 346.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, I.48, 313.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, III.22, 515.

sufficiently accurate since not only did Columba return to Ireland on a number of occasions, he was also resident on Iona for much of the time. Nevertheless, Columba made numerous journeys around Dal Riada and into Pictland, and the Iona monastic community was not a closed one. The journeys were merely part of the *peregrination*.⁵⁹

Thom believes that every Irish Christian saw pilgrimage as a form of martyrdom and that the monastery on Iona was inspired by the notion of martyrdom as the sacrifice of self in total dedication to God. This was “a foundational aspect of the Christian monastic choice, both of the hermit and the coenobite.”⁶⁰ John Ryan identifies three types of martyrdom in Irish monasticism: white martyrdom where a man leaves everything he loves for God’s sake; green martyrdom where by means of fasting and labour he frees himself from his evil desires; and the red martyrdom of death for the sake of Christ. These ideas of martyrdom were not of Irish origin. They are found in the *Life of St Anthony* by Saint Athanasius, who speaks of the great hermit as a martyr in love if not in deed.⁶¹ The Irish could also have borrowed these ideas from monasteries in Gaul which had fallen under the influence of John Cassian, a follower of Anthony and desert ascetism, with its concept of heroic obedience.⁶²

It is clear that the monastery on the lonely and isolated island of Iona was established in accordance with the principles of both white and green martyrdom. Nevertheless, by living in imitation of Christ, Columba also experienced the prompting of the Holy Spirit to bring the good news to the lost. His earliest biographers “all make it clear that personal sanctification *and* the spread of Christ’s Kingdom on earth were the motives behind his exile.”⁶³ When reading Adamnan’s *Life*, some of the most striking features of Columba’s mission are his marvellous miracles, his visions, his encounters with angels, and his prophecies. James Bruce maintains that these phenomena “most naturally cohere with the ongoing evangelistic missiological activity of the Holy Spirit, over and above that in a simply ascetic pilgrimage.”⁶⁴ It was the establishment

⁵⁹ Bruce, *Prophecy, Miracles, Angels and Heavenly Light?*, 210.

⁶⁰ Thom, *Early Irish Monasticism*, 149,168.

⁶¹ Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, 197-199.

⁶² J. Lacarriere, *Men Possessed by God: The Story of the Desert Monks of Ancient Christendom*, trans. R. Monkcam (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1964), 93.

⁶³ O Fiaich, “Saint Colmcille in Ireland and Scotland,” 20. Italics are mine.

⁶⁴ Bruce, *Prophecy, Miracles, Angels and Heavenly Light?*, 211.

of the kingdom of God through the guidance of the Holy Spirit which seemed to be Columba's ultimate motive for mission.

Methods for Mission

It is important to note that Columba was related to the Irish rulers of Dal Riada and thus was familiar with their language. He was also familiar with the Druids and their influence in society, and so was not confronted with a culture vastly different from his own. His methods for mission reflect this fact. Columba's missionary activities in Pictland meant confrontations, hostilities and opposition from the Druids and other groups, and he was well equipped to deal with these challenges. Brude, the high king of Pictland, had defeated the royal house of Dal Riada in a battle three years before Columba's arrival, and the territory of Dal Riada was forced to acknowledge the overlordship of Brude.⁶⁵ James Bruce concludes that because Columba was a wise man, he tried to settle the differences between the peoples of Dal Riada and Pictland.⁶⁶ Therefore, it was possibly in the role of statesman that Columba sought an interview with Brude.

Adamnan records that as they neared the fortress of the high king near Inverness, Columba and his companions were chanting the evening hymns. After opposition from the Druids, Columba began to sing the 44th Psalm in such a loud voice that the king and people were awestruck.⁶⁷ When Columba and his fellow travellers approached the fortress, the king haughtily refused to open his gates to them. Accordingly, Columba made the sign of the cross, knocked, and laid his hand upon the gate, which instantly flew open of its own accord, the bolts having been driven back with great force. Despite his alarm, Brude went to meet with Columba and "ever after from that day, so long as he lived, the king held this holy and reverend man in very great honour, as was due."⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, 389.

⁶⁶ Bruce, *Prophecy, Miracles, Angels, and Heavenly Light?*, 389.

⁶⁷ Medieval Sourcebook: *Adamnan: Life of Columba*. Source: *Life of Saint Columba, Founder of Hy*. Written by Adamnan, Ninth Abbot of that Monastery, ed. William Reeves (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1874), Paul Halsall (March 1998), I.29.

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/columba-e.html> (accessed 4th April 2011).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, I.36.

Some presume that King Brude was converted to Christianity, as until his death he cooperated in the work of evangelisation in the highlands and islands.⁶⁹ However, as James Bruce points out, it is surprising that Adamnan does not record Brude's actual conversion and baptism.⁷⁰ Columba was certainly engaged in a power contest with the high king, but the outcome of his methods seemed to be a peaceful resolution, rather than conversion. It was well known that to secure the conversion of a tribal king would almost certainly lead to conversion of the whole tribe. Therefore, there are some questions concerning the validity of Columba's evangelisation of the Picts because of Adamnan's failure to record the conversion of the Pictish aristocracy.⁷¹ However, this opinion does not take into account the nature of Columba's mission. His focus was to live in imitation of Christ, to follow the guidance of the Spirit, and to allow God to do the work of conversion.

Adamnan, in fact, does record conversions. Columba's Spirit-inspired journeys took him all over northern Britain. When Columba was staying on the Isle of Skye he encountered an old man, Artbranan, who responded to Columba's preaching through an interpreter. Artbranan immediately believed and was baptised.⁷² Similar stories of conversions are recorded where whole households were baptised, such as the family of Urquhart in Pictland.⁷³ In these and many other cases, Columba was inspired by the Spirit to seek out those in need, preach the good news, and baptise those who believed. It is therefore hard to assert that Columba's *peregrination* was merely the pursuit of an ascetic life at Iona, and thus it is inappropriate to question his pursuit of an evangelistic mission. Columba, in the power of the Holy Spirit, was obviously involved in evangelisation both in Dal Riada and far into Pictland. His motives and his methods of mission reflect the unique style of Irish monasticism, which was both inward and outward-looking in its spirituality.

Spirituality for Mission

After a period of fourteen hundred years it is a difficult task to understand Columba's spirituality for mission. *The Life of Saint Columba* holds clues which can be and

⁶⁹ O Fiaich, "Saint Colmcille in Ireland and Scotland," 22.

⁷⁰ Bruce, *Prophecy, Miracles, Angels and Heavenly Light?*, 206.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁷² Anderson and Anderson, *Adamnan's Life of Columba*, I.33, 275.

⁷³ Medieval Sourcebook: *Adamnan: Life of Columba*, III.15.

have been interpreted in different ways. World views have changed. For example, we may understand miracles and marvels in a different way from Adamnan and Bede. We sometimes meet someone whose face “shines” with the light of Christ, but we may not write about this in terms of a “halo of heavenly light.” And yet are we not describing the same phenomena as Adamnan? It *is* possible, then, to sift through the miracles and wondrous events and discover something of the spirituality of Columba and his mission in his words and actions.

Columba’s spirituality for mission is found in his love and concern for all creatures, and in his sense of connectedness with creation. The most heart-rending “voice” of Columba is heard just prior to his death in 597. Having announced his imminent death to his close companion, Columba was returning to the monastery and needed to rest. A white pack-horse, which was used to carry the milk-vessels from the cowshed to the monastery, came up to Columba and laid its head on the saint’s bosom, uttering plaintive cries and shedding tears, foaming and wailing. When the attendant attempted to drive away the weeping horse, Columba stopped him saying: “Let it alone, as it is so fond of me, let it pour out its bitter grief into my bosom... the Creator Himself hath evidently in some way made it known that its master is going to leave it.”⁷⁴

Another tender example of Columba’s sensitivity to God’s creatures is in the story of the weary crane which had been driven by stormy winds from Ireland to Iona. Columba instructed one of his monks to treat the bird tenderly as a guest, and to take it to a neighbouring house where he could kindly and carefully nurse and feed the bird, so that when it was refreshed and was unwilling to abide any longer with the community, it could fly back with renewed strength to Ireland. After three days “the bird then gently rose on its wings to a great height in the sight of its hospitable entertainer, and marking for a little its path through the air homewards, it directed its course across the sea to Hibernia.”⁷⁵ Columba’s understanding of the ways in which the Spirit permeates all creation, is seen in his affirmation of and his desire for transformation of all life. Although we today seem to have lost our close connection with the natural world, yet something stirs within us when we read these stories.

⁷⁴ Ibid., II.24.

⁷⁵ Ibid., I.35.

The spirituality for mission of Columba is also found in his willingness to engage in mission, despite his love of the contemplative life. Columba was well known for the affection he demonstrated towards his monks, and for the hospitality he showed to the visitors to Iona.⁷⁶ Although Iona in Columba's time was not a centre of mass pilgrimage, the community was not closed and it attracted those who wished to join the monastery and those who sought healing. Columba brought the Word to the people and remained open to being led by the Holy Spirit, sometimes into far and distant regions. Indeed it is in his sensitivity to the promptings of the Spirit that Columba's spirituality for mission is most clear. On numerous occasions he was directed to those in need of help or conversion. Adamnan's *Life of Columba* presents a humble, remarkable and influential man. We rarely if ever find Columba preaching to crowds of people and there are no mass baptisms of converts. Columba's miracles, encounters with angels, his prophecies, his heavenly light, his hospitality, and his living out an ascetic monasticism, are all part of his spirituality. In other words, he witnessed with his life and conversions followed.

Concluding Comments

We can conclude that Columba was a man of great spiritual strength whose life was a noble example to those who carried on his work. After establishing a monastery in a remote part of northern Britain, he was involved in bringing the faith of Christ to even more remote parts as the Spirit led him. It is possible that in this he did not plan to be a missionary, but simply set out on a voyage overseas to practice an extreme form of asceticism. Thompson writes of "the monstrous difficulties of interpreting works of hagiography,"⁷⁷ and Thom agrees that *Lives* of saints "cannot be judged in the same sense that purely historical texts can be judged."⁷⁸ However, Richard Woods points out that Adamnan's hagiography surpasses other early Irish works both in narrative and especially in history, "despite the inevitable admixture of saintly hyperbole."⁷⁹ James Bruce even suggests that a function of Adamnan's *Life* "was itself evangelistic in addition to recording evangelism."⁸⁰ Columba is presented as an example of the ascetic missionary described by the apostle Paul: "For those whom he foreknew he

⁷⁶ Thom, *Early Irish Monasticism*, 178.

⁷⁷ E.A. Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1984), ix.

⁷⁸ Thom, *Early Irish Monasticism*, xxviii.

⁷⁹ Woods, *The Spirituality of the Celtic Saints*, 73.

⁸⁰ Bruce, *Prophecy, Miracles, Angels and Heavenly Light?*, 234.

also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family” (Rom 8:29).

Initially, Columba’s mission was to live out the kingdom of God in ascetic practices of renunciation and humility. It was a pilgrimage involving seeking solitude and salvation in imitation of Christ. Nevertheless, in living out his service to the reign of God, Columba found himself called by the Spirit to journey far from the security of his monastery in order to witness to those who were needy and lost. What was initially an inward-looking spirituality became an outward-looking spirituality. It was a spirituality for mission which did not confront or impose, but which demonstrated a sincere dedication to God and to fellow creatures.

Columba, Irish monk, prince and statesman, familiar with Celtic culture, was well equipped to journey into northern Britain to found monasteries and to communicate with Pictish kings. Within fifty years of his death in 597, a number of monasteries had been established, built up on the traditional Irish pattern. They covered an area from Ireland to western Scotland, and to Lindisfarne in northern England. In 635 the Irish monks of Iona were instrumental in the conversion of the Saxon warlords of the Northumbrian dynasty of Bernica. This kingdom subsequently spread the influence of Irish Christianity far south into Saxon England.⁸¹

The Venerable Bede highly praised Columba and the monks of Iona for their “great continence, love of God, and regular way of life.”⁸² When Bede states that Columba converted the nation of the Picts to the faith of Christ “by his preaching and example,”⁸³ he is describing in a nutshell the spirituality of Columba’s mission in northern Britain. History tells us that in 664 at the Council of Whitby, Roman Christianity, and not Celtic or Irish Christianity, finally become the official religion of Britain.⁸⁴ However, Celtic spirituality was not entirely lost. Neill states: “The Irish enthusiasm spread to the Church in England, which for the next four centuries was...a great missionary Church.”⁸⁵ Beyond Britain, the task of bringing Irish spirituality to

⁸¹ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 328.

⁸² Campbell, *Bede: Ecclesiastical History*, III.4, 116.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, III.4, 116.

⁸⁴ Thom, *Early Irish Monasticism*, 161.

⁸⁵ Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 63.

Europe was undertaken by another sixth-century Irish monk, Saint Columban, to whom I now turn my attention.

CHAPTER THREE
SAINT COLUMBAN'S PARTICULAR CONTRIBUTION

Background

Columban (also known as Columbanus) was born in West Leinster, Ireland, around 540CE. He was well educated as a child, and as a young man he was described as handsome and attractive, which inevitably led to many struggles with temptation. Despite strong opposition from his mother, Columban followed the advice of a wise religious woman and decided to retire from the world to a monastery. His first master, Sinell the Abbot of Cluaninis, assisted Columban in the writing of a commentary on the Psalms. Cluaninis was well-known for its scholarly pursuits and there Columban would have studied rhetoric, geometry, Latin, and the Scriptures. From Cluaninis he moved to the monastery at Bangor in Down, “one of the most austere and learned of all the Irish monasteries.”⁸⁶ Under Abbot Comghall, for over twenty years he lived a rigorous monastic life of study with a harsh regime. However, it seems “the monks blessed Comghall’s rule and rejoiced in the family, the household...to which they belonged.”⁸⁷

Around 590, after repeated requests, Columban persuaded Abbot Comgall to release him for *peregrination*. Leading a party of twelve monks, Columban left Ireland and sailed across the sea to Brittany, and from there soon headed eastwards to the territory of the Franks. Here Columban found the territory severely affected by war and almost devoid of Christian morality and principles. Jonas, in his *Life of Columban*, gives a brief description of the situation on the Continent at the end of the sixth century: “At that time either because of the numerous enemies from without, or on account of the carelessness of the bishops, the Christian faith had almost departed from that country.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Woods, *The Spirituality of the Celtic Saints*, 128.

⁸⁷ MacManus, *Saint Columban*, 15.

⁸⁸ Medieval Sourcebook: *The Life of St. Columban by the Monk Jonas*. Source: *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European history*, published for the Department of History of the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1897?-1907?), Vol. II. No. 7, ed. Dana C. Munro, University of Pennsylvania, Department of History, Paul Halsall (June, 1997), I.11. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/columban.html> (accessed 12 April 2011)

Metlake questions Jonas's description of Christianity in Western Europe and asks whether his assessment was exaggerated or even just. "Had religion really decayed so sadly that hardly more than the mere profession of the faith remained?"⁸⁹ Brown considers that Columban and his Irish monks "acted as a catalyst for changes which had already been under way for a century."⁹⁰ Gaul had passed into the hands of the Franks and a close relationship had developed between the Church and the State.⁹¹ Unlike the Goths, Vandals and Lombards, who had earlier accepted the heresy of Arianism, the Franks were Catholic Christians. Thus they were not in contention with the Gallic bishops.⁹² However, the ruling family, the Merovingians, were notorious for their family feuds and treacheries, and it would seem that throughout the Frankish lands the Christian faith had grown lukewarm.

Jonas reports that when Columban arrived in the Frankish territories he was summoned to appear before the king, who begged him not to leave but to remain in Gallic territory and seek the quiet of a hermitage.⁹³ It is possible that a holy man living on the king's lands and praying for the kingdom would be viewed as of great benefit.⁹⁴ Columban chose territory in the lonely wilderness of the Vosges mountains. Here, with the singing of Psalms, they planted a cross on the site of a ruined Roman fort called Annegray, and commenced the construction of their wattle huts. A simple oratory, dedicated to Saint Martin of Tours, was built from the ruins of a temple to Diana, and the monks commenced their harsh regime of privation, prayer and hard labour.⁹⁵

Before long the monastery at Annegray was overcrowded as more and more people travelled into the wilderness to seek education for their children and comfort for their souls. It was necessary to find another site. Eight miles west were the ruins of a deserted Roman town consisting of brambles, broken building stones, toppled statues of Roman gods, and the homes of wild wolves, bears and oxen. Luxeuil proved a

⁸⁹ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 43.

⁹⁰ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 220.

⁹¹ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 48.

⁹² Kate Tristram, *Columbanus: The Earliest Voice of Christian Ireland* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2010), 43,44.

⁹³ Medieval Sourcebook: *The Life of St. Columban by the Monk Jonas*, I.12.

⁹⁴ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 40.

⁹⁵ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 64.

better site than Annegray, with good soil for their crops and mineral springs for healing purposes. Here Columban built his second monastery along with a church dedicated to Saint Peter. The monastery at Luxeuil became a popular centre of education for the Frankish nobility, as well as a haven of peace, rest and healing for the common people. Within ten years, there were more than two hundred monks living and working at Luxeuil, and it was soon overflowing. Columban was forced to establish another monastery about five miles north of Luxeuil. This became known as Fontaines, from the abundance of springs and streams in the area. Following Irish custom, Columban remained the leader of all three monasteries, living at Luxeuil and frequently visiting Annegray and Fontaines.⁹⁶

Columban remained in relative peace in the Vosges for around twenty years. Although at times he encountered opposition from the local bishops, he remained on friendly terms with the Frankish rulers, and it seems that he had no desire to extend his *peregrination*. Jonas reports: “The fame of Columban had already penetrated into all parts of Gaul and Germany, and everyone was praising the venerable man.”⁹⁷ However, this situation was to change dramatically as a result of a quarrel with the royal family. Consequently Columban was banished. His exile was greeted with grief and sorrow by all the monks, who resolved to accompany their leader. However, only Columban’s countrymen and those who had come with him from Brittany were permitted to leave.⁹⁸ At Nantes a ship bound for Ireland was found and Columban sent a poignant and affectionate letter to “his most sweet sons and dearest pupils, to his brothers in abstinence, to all his monks,”⁹⁹ longing for their advancement and recommending them, with God’s blessing, to “increase to thousands of thousands.”¹⁰⁰ Exile for Columban had become “an intolerable anguish of love.”¹⁰¹ However, according to Jonas, Columban and his monks were miraculously delivered from exile and, once free, they moved on to Neustria and from there to the court of Theudebert,

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 66, 67.

⁹⁷ Medieval Sourcebook: *The Life of St. Columban by the Monk Jonas*, I.31.

⁹⁸ Dana Carleton Munro, ed., *Life of St. Columban by the Monk Jonas* (First published in Philadelphia in 1895 as Vol. II, No. 7. Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History. Reprinted by Llanerch Publishers, Felinfach, 1993), I.36, 65.

⁹⁹ MacManus, *Saint Columban*, 134.

¹⁰⁰ Tomas O Fiaich, *Columbanus in his own words* (Dublin: Veritas, 1974), 88. [Letter to the Monks of Luxeuil 610].

¹⁰¹ MacManus, *Saint Columban*, 134.

who promised his support and a suitable place to stay and “sow the seeds of faith in the hearts of the neighbouring peoples.”¹⁰²

Seeking such a place, Columban and his monks travelled on the Rhine and its tributaries and arrived in the land of the Swabians, where he discovered the people making an offering to their god Wodan. After destroying their offering, he “reproved them in the words of the Gospel, and commanded them to cease from such offerings and go home.”¹⁰³ Despite some protest, many were converted by Columban’s preaching and were baptised. Some Christians who had taken part in the pagan offering were led by his words to again embrace the faith. Jonas describes Columban’s manner towards the lapsed Christians as “like a good shepherd.”¹⁰⁴ Moving on to Bregenz, Columban erected a monastery and commenced monastic life. This was short-lived because the country at that time fell into the hands of his royal enemies. He then made the decision to make the arduous and dangerous journey across the Alps into Italy. On arrival in Milan in 612, Columban and his monks were met with a kindly welcome and the king gave them a plot of land at Bobbio, near the Trebbia River between Milan and Genoa where, over a number of years, they repaired the half-ruined church of Saint Peter and erected an abbey.¹⁰⁵ Despite requests for Columban to return to Luxueil, he remained at Bobbio until his death in 615.

Motives for Mission

Columban’s motive for leaving Ireland was to embark on *peregrination*. His love for Ireland, though good in itself, was an attachment which he needed to renounce.¹⁰⁶ For an Irishman, self-exile in order to live as “a stranger among total strangers” meant “a total loss of social identity.”¹⁰⁷ The Irish understanding of this form of martyrdom was that exile was only beneficial if it was a deliberate choice, an act of faith upon hearing the call of God. The true servant of Christ must put on the armour of faith and, like a soldier, prepare to enter the battle by the practice of self discipline and renunciation.¹⁰⁸ MacManus calls the extreme restlessness of Columban’s

¹⁰² Munro, *Life of St. Columban by the Monk Jonas*, I.51, 86.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, I.53, 89.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, I.53, 90.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, I.54-59, 91-98.

¹⁰⁶ MacManus, *Saint Columban*, 22.

¹⁰⁷ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 247.

¹⁰⁸ Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, 197.

peregrination “divine nomadism.”¹⁰⁹ It had very little in common with evangelisation as understood today. Nevertheless it may be said that Columban definitely had a mission.

It is clear that Columban’s motive for mission at this stage was to live in exile among total strangers. Therefore, when the party landed on the shores of Brittany, they did not stay there for long. Tristram thinks that Columban did not aim to settle in Brittany, where Celtic life and culture were familiar.¹¹⁰ Instead he increased his party with a number of enthusiastic Bretons and set out for the unfamiliar Gallic territories.¹¹¹ Brown points out that for a middle-aged scholar and ascetic like Columban, exile would offer the opportunity to establish his own style of Irish monastery in the unfamiliar territory of northern Gaul.¹¹² Columban may have been expressing the characteristics of the unique features of Irish monasticism: to pursue asceticism *and* to undertake the apostolic work of evangelisation. However, I agree with Thom that Columban’s primary motive for mission upon arrival in Gaul was not to convert others, and if this occurred it was simply a result of their monastic living.¹¹³

When Columban was forced to leave Luxeuil in exile, it must have been necessary for him to re-examine his motives for mission. Returning to Ireland would have been considered shameful for one who had embarked on *peregrination*. When he found he had escaped banishment to Ireland, he set his heart once again on *peregrination* and looked for a route over the Alps to Italy.¹¹⁴ However, in Neustria, he was reminded of the great needs of the people in the Frankish territories, and so he reluctantly interrupted his journey.¹¹⁵ His concern for the people and their need for evangelisation seem to have been his primary motives for mission at this stage of his journey. However, once more, political events forced him to set out for Italy.

When Columban arrived in Milan he found that although the Arian heresy had lost ground in many parts of Europe, Lombardy had for the most part remained Arian in

¹⁰⁹ MacManus, *Saint Columban*, 224.

¹¹⁰ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 40.

¹¹¹ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 38.

¹¹² Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 247

¹¹³ Thom, *Early Irish Monasticism*, 157.

¹¹⁴ Medieval Sourcebook: *The Life of St Columban by the Monk Jonas*, I.49.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, I.51.

its beliefs. During his stay, Columban composed an excellent and learned work against the Arian heresy, “which he wanted to cut out and exterminate with the cauterizing knife of the Scriptures.”¹¹⁶ His passionate nature prompted him to write to the Pope in defence of the orthodox faith. There is no doubt that his motive was “zeal for the triumph of the truth, as he conceived it.”¹¹⁷ This motive is obvious in all of his correspondence. He believed it was his task to fearlessly defend the ideals of the Christian life. This would fit with the monks’ self-perception as “spiritual warriors, fighters against pagan beliefs, errors, heresies...”¹¹⁸ However, it is clear that in this particular case, he did not understand the whole issue. He soon longed for solitude and quiet. He chose a site for a monastery in the valley of Trebbia in Lombardy and, at the age of seventy-two, founded his monastery at Bobbio. He had reached the final stage of his *peregrination*, his final place of exile among strangers.

Methods for Mission

Jonas reports that when Columban first arrived in the Frankish territories, he went about preaching the Gospel and witnessing by his virtuous life.¹¹⁹ Notwithstanding the limitations of hagiography as a historical record, Jonas paints a vivid picture of the monks and their initial impact upon the Franks, referring to their moderation and mildness, their patience and love. About Columban, he writes: “The holy man was revered with so great gratitude that where he remained for a time in a house, all hearts were resolved to practise the faith more strictly.”¹²⁰

Despite the remoteness of his monasteries in the Vosges and the austerity of monastic life, Columban and his monks acted as a magnet, drawing many people who had heard of the remarkable lifestyle and the holy deeds of the foreigners from a land far away. This soon posed a problem for the monks, because in seeking to renounce the world, they found that the world pursued them. “In their virtue they were the world’s need, but the need of their virtue was solitude.”¹²¹ To remedy the situation, on occasion Columban would withdraw from communal life to live in isolation deep in the woods or in mountain caves. Here prayer and fasting became more intense,

¹¹⁶ Munro, *Life of St Columban by the Monk Jonas*, I.59, 98.

¹¹⁷ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 212.

¹¹⁸ MacManus, *Saint Columban*, 8.

¹¹⁹ Medieval Sourcebook: *The Life of St Columban by the Monk Jonas*, I.11.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ MacManus, *Saint Columban*, 38.

despite the physical and mental dangers. MacManus believes that these times of solitude satisfied Columban's deep intellectual, emotional and spiritual needs.¹²² However, these silent interludes were not prolonged, and Columban always returned to the communal life of prayer, penance, fasting and hard labour, no doubt refreshed and revitalised. Tristram argues that "in maintaining the tradition of the 'hermit' alongside that of the 'active' monk, Columbanus was continuing faithful to his Irishness to the end."¹²³

If we relied on Columban's Rule to discover his methods for mission, we would have a picture of a severe, unbending individual, and an extremely austere lifestyle which would have been almost impossible to live. Nevertheless, by attempting to live the Rule, the monks did indeed witness to the wider world. Consisting of two parts, the *Regula Monachorum* and the *Regula Coenobialis*, the Rule deals with the principles of monastic life, and practical details for sustaining harmony and order within the community. It is not a "monastic constitution in the strict sense of the word, but rather a treatise on the monastic life...a mirror of perfection."¹²⁴ It is predominantly about obedience and mortification of the will. Laymen wishing to join the monastery would certainly need instruction and encouragement to adjust to a life of self-renunciation and the work of prayer. For instance throughout the year, as summer turned to winter and the nights grew longer, the number of psalms chanted at the pre-dawn service grew from twenty-four to seventy-five psalms.¹²⁵ The singing of sacred music, especially the psalms, and the love of Scriptures was a tradition of the Irish Church. However, Columban reminded his monks that what was more pleasing to God than their singing was their purity of heart, and they were to watch and pray at all times without ceasing.¹²⁶

The Communal Rule is more complicated than the Monk's Rule, and is similar to a penitential with desired behaviours and penalties for failures. Many seem extremely harsh. For example, causing a noise during prayers would attract a penalty of fifty

¹²² Ibid., 39.

¹²³ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 90.

¹²⁴ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 76.

¹²⁵ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 63.

¹²⁶ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 81.

blows,¹²⁷ which were probably made with a leather strap on the hand. However, imposed silence was frequently substituted for blows.¹²⁸ MacManus points out that we must keep in mind Columban's "principle and desire of moderation."¹²⁹ The *Regula Monachorum* is so radically different from the *Regula Coenobialis* that it is hard to believe that Columban could have written both, even taking into account the two sides of Columban's character: the tender-hearted father-figure and the passionate, fearless man who demanded perfection. However, in the Rule we do see "Columban's utter contempt of all earthly things, his ardent thirst for self-renouncement, his indomitable energy..."¹³⁰ It is possible that the punishments may have been more flexible and less severe than they appear, as any of the penalties could be put aside by a senior, and it was the abbot, not the written Rule, who was the supreme authority in all Irish monasteries.¹³¹ Indeed, after Columban's death, when complaints were made against some details of the Rule, they did not include the suggestion that physically the Rule was excessively harsh.¹³²

What is clear is that the Rule does not give a complete outline of monastic life, but simply reflects Columban's particular emphases.¹³³ There was no place for mediocrity, and the reward for diligence and industry was "a daily increase in prudence and spiritual wisdom, as well as in grace and virtue."¹³⁴ It is interesting to note that although the Rule has a long chapter on mortification, there is no mention of the physical practices usually associated with asceticism. Rather "it deals exclusively with internal mortification of the will by obedience."¹³⁵ MacManus concisely sums up Columban's Rule: "This Rule...is about and for ordinary men, the old, the young, veteran monks and mere boys, who wish to be unmade in the image of fallen Adam and remade in the image of Christ."¹³⁶ As such it proved a valuable method for mission.

¹²⁷ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 65.

¹²⁸ MacManus, *Saint Columban*, 58, 60.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹³⁰ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 84, 87.

¹³¹ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 69.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹³⁴ Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, 222.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 399.

¹³⁶ MacManus, *Saint Columban*, 49.

Hospitality played an important part in the life and witness of the monastic community. Visitors were always welcome and there was a hospice where the sick and dying might find shelter and care.¹³⁷ Even when Columban withdrew from the community for periods of quiet contemplation, he would sometimes select one or more of the monks who needed spiritual direction and invite them to accompany him. A good example is the story of a brother named Autierin who requested permission to be allowed to make a pilgrimage to Ireland. Columban invited Autierin to go with him into the wilderness in order to learn the will of God. Jonas reports that they went into the forest with another youth named Somarius, who was still alive when Jonas was writing his *Vita*. Here they spent twelve days in prayer and fasting.¹³⁸ We are not told whether permission was granted to Autierin. What we do observe are the characteristics of a sensitive and wise leader. Columban knew the benefits of seeking to discern the will of God before important decisions were made.

It was in his dealings with the Gallic bishops that Columban's wisdom and sensitivity might perhaps be called into question. Historians call the affair "the Easter Controversy."¹³⁹ This seems to be the commencement of Columban's ongoing attempts to defend the truth as he saw it. When he first arrived in the Vosges he established his monasteries in much the same way as the monasteries in Ireland. As abbot, he regarded himself as exempt from episcopal jurisdiction, and because of his connections with the Burgundian court, he was initially left alone by the local bishops. Columban and his monks wore the Irish tonsure, celebrated the Irish liturgy of the Mass, and used the Irish way to calculate the date for celebrating Easter.¹⁴⁰ When Columban arrived in Europe, he would have been made aware of the contentious issue regarding the proper date for Easter. He soon decided to appeal to Pope Gregory to take his side in the dispute with the Gallic bishops.

¹³⁷ Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, 318.

¹³⁸ Medieval Sourcebook: *The Life of St Columban by the Monk Jonas*, I.18.

¹³⁹ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 127.

¹⁴⁰ In Britain and Ireland, the Celtic Church still observed the ancient Easter table of the Roman Church based on a cycle of eighty-four years. Due to isolation, they had not been aware of the revised calculations for Easter made by Rome after 455. See Medieval Sourcebook: *Constantine I: On the Keeping of Easter: Excursus on the subsequent history of the Easter question*. Source: Henry R. Percival, ed., *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, Vol. XIV of Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, 2nd series, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 54-56. Paul Halsall (January 1996). <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/const1-easter.html> (accessed 21 May 2011)

Columban wrote to the Pope and stated fervently that in his opinion the Gallic bishops were in error.¹⁴¹ Gregory's reply was delayed, and Columban continued to keep Easter as before. The bishops' reaction was to convene a synod in order for Columban to attend and explain his conduct. He sent an apology to the synod by way of a letter. Metlake describes the general tone of his letter as "not that of a suppliant for favour and indulgence, but rather of a master instructing his disciples."¹⁴² William H. Marnell agrees that it is clear that his respect for most of the Gallic bishops is minimal.¹⁴³ Columban commenced his letter with the statement: "Great harm has been done and is being done to the peace of the Church by different usages and diverse traditions."¹⁴⁴ However, he was careful to stress that "we are all fellow members of one body, whether Franks or Britons or Irish or whatever our race"¹⁴⁵ and called on all parties to rejoice in the unity of the faith. Finally he asked to be left alone "to remain in silence in these woods and to live beside the bones of our seventeen dead brethren."¹⁴⁶

Silence was the synod's reaction to his letter, and Columban was compelled to appeal once more to the Pope to approve the tradition of the Celtic Fathers. He argued that because he had not adopted any of the rules and customs of the Gauls, he should not be forced to conform to their Easter practice, but be allowed to "stay in seclusion, harming no one."¹⁴⁷ There does not seem to be any evidence of a reply, and Columban continued to observe Easter as before. While he was ready to drop his demand that the Frankish Church celebrate Easter according to Irish custom, he refused to abandon his native customs and resolutely retained his conviction that the Irish Church was right and the Roman Church was wrong in the matter of the Easter Controversy.

Metlake believes that "for the sake of peace, if for no other reason, Columban should have conformed to the liturgical uses of the land which he had chosen for his second

¹⁴¹ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 132.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁴³ William H. Marnell, *Light from the West: The Irish Mission and the Emergence of Modern Europe* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 87.

¹⁴⁴ O Fiaich, *Columbanus in his own words*, 84. [Letter to the French Bishops, 603 A.D.]

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 87. [Letter to the Newly Elected Pope 604 or 607 A.D.]

home.”¹⁴⁸ The Christian faith in Ireland had been built on an early method of inculturation. While Columban was willing to establish his monasteries on the sites of previous pagan worship, his love of Ireland was so deeply rooted that he was not willing to engage with the customs of his place of self-imposed exile, even when to do so would have surely helped his mission. MacManus believes that “it was not part of his exile’s wisdom that he should perceive how an exile, a stranger in a strange land, must come to some terms with strange customs and tongues and foreign temperament.”¹⁴⁹ Jonas is silent regarding the Easter controversy and it is interesting to speculate that perhaps the sources of his hagiography were reluctant to discuss this contentious matter.

So much passion and energy were spent by Columban in letter writing and argument. However, Columban believed he had some very good theological reasons for defending the Irish Easter calculations. Jesus had died and risen again at Passover time, but problems had arisen when the early Church celebrated Easter on a Sunday, thus detaching it from the Jewish Feast of Passover. Several formulae had been found to calculate the date of Easter, and by the sixth century the Irish Church was still using tables which had been superseded on the Continent. One of Columban’s main objections was that the new calculations meant the moon was often visible for less than half of the night at Easter and this would upset the symbolism of light over darkness, good over evil, life over death.¹⁵⁰ He protested that “Christians cannot possibly celebrate ‘a dark Easter.’”¹⁵¹ However, in this instance, his zeal for what he considered the truth caused contention, isolation, and disunity, and it was only after his death that his monasteries finally accepted the Continental dating of Easter.

Columban’s introduction of the Irish practice of penance with individual confession was undertaken in a more sensible and responsible manner. Along with his many duties as an abbot in an Irish-style monastery in Gaul, Columban found time to carry out the work of “the reformation of the morals of the people by the application of the remedy of penance.”¹⁵² The penitential system on the Continent at this time consisted

¹⁴⁸ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 131.

¹⁴⁹ MacManus, *Saint Columban*, 79.

¹⁵⁰ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 80.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁵² Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 110.

of public confession for serious sins such as murder, adultery or apostasy, and it required very severe public penance. “Penitents were publicly, conspicuously and deliberately marked off from their fellow Christians.”¹⁵³ Partaking of the Eucharist or receiving a blessing was forbidden, and “the ostracized ones cast themselves prostrate on the floor with wailing and lamentation.”¹⁵⁴ Even after reconciliation the penitent was severely disadvantaged, as penance for a specific sin was offered only once.¹⁵⁵ While so-called small sins were managed within the Christian’s prayer life, this penitential system proved to be far from satisfactory. People often postponed baptism up to the time of their death to avoid the risk of public penance. By the sixth century “some church leaders at least saw a pastoral need [for change]; but loyalty to the old system prevailed.”¹⁵⁶

The practice of penance in Ireland differed dramatically. Pre-Christian Ireland had a system of law where punishment was not the most important feature. Rather, reconciliation was effected through the payment of compensation and the restoration of honour. The Irish had maintained independence from classical Rome and its legal system. When dealing with sins, the monks followed the teachings of John Cassian in their emphasis on the role of the spiritual doctor, rather than judge.¹⁵⁷ The actual process of reconciliation was treated “with a new, liberating precision.”¹⁵⁸ Abbots encouraged monks and lay people to go to private confession frequently and to receive penance from a wise person or priest for not only serious sins but also less severe transgressions as well. This wise person was known as an *anamchara*, or soul-friend, who acted as “confessor, advisor, and mentor...an indispensable companion on the spiritual journey.”¹⁵⁹ It provided an opportunity to confide worries, doubts and temptations as well as sins, and to receive spiritual medicine and the restoration of spiritual health. “The penitent was a sick person to be helped, not a criminal to offer satisfaction.”¹⁶⁰ Sin, although serious, was manageable. From these practices the Irish *Penitentials* were formed and written down, and contained particular directions

¹⁵³ MacManus, *Saint Columban*, 71.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 71,72.

¹⁵⁵ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 51.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁵⁸ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 242.

¹⁵⁹ Woods, *The Spirituality of the Celtic Saints*, 62.

¹⁶⁰ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 53.

and penances for a variety of offences. Columban had grown up under this penitential system.

When Columban first arrived in Gaul he continued to practise the Irish way of penance. Marnell describes Annegray as a peaceful settlement where the monks “heard individual confessions, gave penances, and with the penance also consolation, encouragement, spiritual assistance, and what physical assistance was in their power.”¹⁶¹ Even a number of the Gallic bishops approached Columban to unburden their consciences. At this stage he wrote to Pope Gregory regarding the use of the Irish tradition of penance, and commenced using the penitential canons of Gildas, Finnian and the other Celtic doctors, adapting them to the special needs of the clergy and people of Gaul.¹⁶² There is no evidence that the Pope or any of the bishops objected. Unfortunately the primitive text of Columban’s *Penitential* has been lost, but several later manuscripts from Bobbio contain passages which are no doubt authentic.¹⁶³ For example, the first sentence states: “True penance consists in the avoidance of sins which one must repent of, as much as in weeping for sins committed.”¹⁶⁴

Serious sins were dealt with in a serious manner, and the moral responsibility of a monk was held to be greater than that of a layperson.¹⁶⁵ MacManus observes: “The Columbanian way is private and individual. It is punitive, but it is also medicinal, reformatory as well as reparatory.”¹⁶⁶ In practice, the penances given by Columban were accepted voluntarily and carried out devoutly.¹⁶⁷ Ray Simpson is of the opinion that Columban’s *Penitentials* were “designed to be a means to spiritual fitness” and calls them “Fitness Training Programmes.”¹⁶⁸ The practice of penance encouraged persistence in seeking God’s forgiveness and confidence that forgiveness would be granted. Brown considers that the *Penitentials* had a “missionary” quality about them as they sought to care for peoples’ souls.¹⁶⁹ Both monk and layperson benefitted from

¹⁶¹ Marnell, *Light from the West*, 82.

¹⁶² Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 116.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ MacManus, *Saint Columban*, 74.

¹⁶⁵ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 55.

¹⁶⁶ MacManus, *Saint Columban*, 74.

¹⁶⁷ Marguerite-Marie Dubois, “Saint Columbanus,” in *Irish Monks in the Golden Age*, ed. John Ryan (Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds, 1963), 51.

¹⁶⁸ Simpson, *Celtic Spirituality: Rhythm, Roots and Relationships*, 20.

¹⁶⁹ Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 246.

the healing and renewal of reconciliation. Indeed, the frequent use of private confession became the crucial way to develop spiritually.

Columban's methods for mission included not only spiritual development, but also active evangelisation. There are a number of incidents recorded by Jonas where Columban took part in itinerant preaching. While he was in exile in Besançon he heard that the prison was full of condemned men awaiting the death penalty and he hastened to see them. After hearing Columban preach the word of God, the condemned men "promised him that if they were liberated they would amend their lives and would do penance for the crimes which they had committed."¹⁷⁰

Accordingly, Columban's attendant severed their chains, and Columban washed and dried their feet and commanded the men to go to the nearby church to "do penance for the crimes they had committed and to wash away their faults by their tears."¹⁷¹

G.S.M. Walker makes the interesting observation that although this was certainly evangelisation, "the converted criminals were expected to behave, at least temporarily, like monks."¹⁷² Columban also engaged in active evangelisation in the land of the Swabians where his response to pagan practices was to instruct the people in the fundamental truths of the Christian religion and to lovingly care for those who had strayed from the way.

Columban's example to his monks was commendable. Despite his age and position "he would sally forth at the head of the monks to clear the forests, till the fields, and harvest the crops."¹⁷³ Notwithstanding the strict regime, hard labour and almost superhuman austerity, his monasteries continued to grow as many people joined and were prepared to follow the monks' example and live in imitation of Christ. Those aspiring to monastic perfection were not the only ones who were attracted to Columban's communities. They also included people seeking reconciliation and healing, peace and consolation, as well as those seeking education for their children. As a method for mission, the establishment of a monastery as a beacon of light to draw people, and as a place to worship, learn and grow, proved very fruitful.

¹⁷⁰ Medieval Sourcebook: *The Life of St Columban by the Monk Jonas*, I.34.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² G.S.M. Walker, "St Columban: Monk or Missionary?," vol. 6 of *Studies in Church History: The Mission of the Church and the Propagation of the Faith*, ed. G.J. Cuming (Cambridge: University Press, 1970), 42.

¹⁷³ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 97.

Spirituality for Mission

Nowhere is Columban's spirituality clearer than in his thirteen sermons, most probably written at Bobbio for the benefit of those in his community. Tristram points out that the Irish did not write books of spirituality. Rather Columban's sermons can be understood as his "witness to that in the Christian faith which he believed to be the most important and to which he hoped his community would be faithful."¹⁷⁴ From these sermons we see an emphasis on the mystery of God and a very practical way of living the Christian life. Rather than concentrate on doctrine, Columban often asked a question and then provided an answer which was designed to illustrate some practical truth.¹⁷⁵ For example, with regard to knowing God, he replies: "We can't grow close to God by speculation or by discussion. But he has given us another way...and that is by choosing to live as he wants us to live."¹⁷⁶

In order to seek to live the way of Christ, it was important to contemplate all they have been given in the Scriptures. However, Columban was quick to point out that it is "pointless just to read and hear about these things, we have got to live them...it is the work of a life-time, a constant striving." Indeed he calls it "a sort of warfare,"¹⁷⁷ where success comes as they fight the good fight, with God's grace to help them. Much of his preaching has the biblical theme of the choice between the way of self-indulgence which leads to death, and the way of goodness which leads to life. In his poems, his writings and his sermons, his message is clear and can be summed up as follows: "heaven...is the consequence of a choice of lifestyle, lived out with love, hope and generosity and with a clear-eyed knowledge of the alternative."¹⁷⁸

Columban reminded his monks that they were pilgrims who travel along the road but who do not settle down on the road. Rather they must fix their minds on the goal, which is eternal life.¹⁷⁹ The description of the journey of life as a roadway is one of his favourite analogies. The travelling is demanding and often arduous, and so they travel light, without unnecessary luggage, always thinking about the joyful

¹⁷⁴ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 90.

¹⁷⁵ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 101.

¹⁷⁶ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 94. [Sermon 1].

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.* [Sermon 2].

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 96. [Sermon 5].

homecoming. Like the roadway, their life is changeable and uncertain, and it is only in eternity that they shall really see and possess the truth.¹⁸⁰ Once again, for Columban, life involves choice. By taking control, and accepting the poverty of self-denial, they choose to hate, despise and reject the things which will enslave and ruin them.¹⁸¹ He specifically mentions the dangers of materialism, and advises that “however alluring, however dazzling, let us avoid the earthly goods of others, that we may not lose our own eternal good.”¹⁸² His advice is positive: “Keep the vision of the end, of the beauty and joy and peace of the Father’s presence, and travel with persistence and hope.”¹⁸³ However, the happiness at the end of the road is only for those who constantly review their lives and remain obedient to God’s will.

Interestingly, following the Irish tradition of the time, Columban makes no threats of damnation regarding the afterlife, nor does he see the main enemy in this warfare as the devil or demons. Rather the enemy is “our own weakness and stupidity.”¹⁸⁴ The striving is against “the desires and vices which draw us down to a spiritual death.”¹⁸⁵ His listeners must think of themselves as God’s soldiers who fight against “spiritual enemies” and who “do not go to sleep on the battlefield.”¹⁸⁶ It is necessary to reject the transitory things of this world and choose the way of God. He likens it to the training an apprentice undertakes in order to learn a trade or skill. Christians must expect difficulties, grief, temptation, and setbacks. However he says that “we must let all of this teach us patience.”¹⁸⁷ Columban’s advice to his listeners gives us an insight into his spirituality for mission. Despite the fact that, by way of Scriptural texts, he sets before them the vices and sins which would draw them to destruction, his main aim is to bring the listener to a hatred of sin and to self-knowledge.¹⁸⁸ Rather than concentrate on their shortcomings, his focus is on their potential for goodness. He states: “You have an eternal treasure, your self, your soul, which is worth your love.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. [Sermon 6].

¹⁸¹ Ibid. [Sermon 7].

¹⁸² O Fiaich, *Columbanus in his own words*, 102. [Sermon V].

¹⁸³ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 97. [Sermon 8].

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 91.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 95. [Sermon 3].

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 97. [Sermon 10].

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 95. [Sermon 4].

¹⁸⁸ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 103.

Love yourself rightly, love yourself enough to choose your own happiness in choosing the way of God.”¹⁸⁹

One of Columban’s letters is sometimes included with his sermons in early manuscripts. In this letter to a young monk, Columban explains that the advice he gives is “a means of acquiring perfection for those who take it to heart and put it into practice.”¹⁹⁰ Tristram calls the letter “a kind of check-list in self-examination”¹⁹¹ for someone who has already made the choice to renounce self and experience the rewards and delights of monastic life. The monk is to be a vigorous fighter against temptations from within and without, humble, cooperative and obedient, not critical of others but helpful and generous.¹⁹² Columban concludes his letter with the following advice: “Though weary, don’t give up. Weep and rejoice at the one time out of zeal and hope. Advance with determination, but always fear for the end.”¹⁹³ It is in this letter that we see clearly Columban’s role as spiritual leader and teacher.

At no time does Columban say that the physical world is itself evil, only that it is transient. This is evident especially during his times of retreat into the mountains and forests where, like many of the Irish saints, he was in touch with nature and demonstrated his affinity with nature and all living things. Gathering material for his *Vita*, Jonas learned that Columban often wandered about in the wilderness fasting and praying, and calling the wild beasts and birds.

These came immediately at his command and he stroked them with his hand. The beasts and birds joyfully played, frisking about him, just as cats frisk about their mistresses. Chamnoald said he had often seen him call the little animal, which men commonly name a *squiruis*, from the tops of a tree and take it in his hand and put it on his neck and let it go into and come out from his bosom.¹⁹⁴

Columban’s view of humankind remained positive. He was quick to point out that it is an amazing privilege for human beings to be made in God’s image. And that image is restored by leading a life of holiness.¹⁹⁵ He urged his listeners to make the choice:

¹⁸⁹ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 95. [Sermon 3].

¹⁹⁰ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 106.

¹⁹¹ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 99.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ O Fiaich, *Columbanus in his own words*, 96. [Letter to a Young Disciple, c.610].

¹⁹⁴ Medieval Sourcebook: *The Life of St Columban by the Monk Jonas*, I.30.

¹⁹⁵ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 98. [Sermon 11].

“Let us not be the painters of an image that is not His!”¹⁹⁶ However, the painting is a mutual process. As they allow Christ to “paint his image”¹⁹⁷ on them they are given his peace. He prayed for “God to kindle his light and his fire”¹⁹⁸ in their lives, so that they could “give light to others.”¹⁹⁹ He prayed that their love for God would pervade their hearts and fill all their senses.²⁰⁰ His view was that “love is not toil; on the contrary, it is sweet; it is a soothing salutary medicine for the heart.”²⁰¹ His advice was along these lines: “We are to follow Christ and imitate him. But not sadly or reluctantly! We think of the goal to which we are travelling and we wonder: could any people be happier than we are?”²⁰² Although Columban gave constructive and encouraging advice, he also pointed out that it is not wise to presume upon God’s mercy, for God is also just.²⁰³ He recommended that they keep alive the sense of being under judgement. In this way they would avoid lukewarmness and would always be aware of where life was going. They were to be thirsty and hungry for God. They were to make God’s will their will by choosing to die to their own will and giving themselves and the whole of their lives to God.

Columban’s ultimate concern was that those who came to his monasteries should strive to live in imitation of Christ. As they lived this monastic life, reports of their goodness spread, and people were attracted by their way of life. For those who came to observe monastic life “it was order, activity and reticence foreign to the mode and aim of their lives.”²⁰⁴ No doubt many visitors longed for the peace and order they observed. Others came to the monasteries for healing. One incident from Jonas will serve to demonstrate the mutual benefits which often flowed between the monks and the people. When Columban and his monks first established their monastery at Annegray they underwent a time of severe famine. One day a man appeared at their gate with horses loaded with a supply of bread and condiments. It seems he had been led “by a sudden impulse of his heart to bear aid from his own substance to those who

¹⁹⁶ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 104.

¹⁹⁷ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 98. [Sermon 11]

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 98. [Sermon 12]

¹⁹⁹ O Fiaich, *Columbanus in his own words*, 102. [Sermon XII]

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 104, 105.

²⁰² Tristram, *Columbanus*, 97. [Sermon 10]

²⁰³ *Ibid.* [Sermon 9]

²⁰⁴ MacManus, *Saint Columban*, 53.

were, for Christ's sake, suffering from so great poverty in the wilderness.”²⁰⁵ After presenting the food to Columban the man asked the holy man to pray to God on behalf of his wife, who had been gravely ill for a whole year with a fever. Calling together the monks, Columban prayed and the woman was restored to full health.²⁰⁶ Even though Jonas does not specifically mention it, one can recognise the leading of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the man who came to the monastery, as well as the Spirit's healing power.

Numerous times in Jonas's hagiography we read of all types of people, from royalty to humble peasants, who approached Columban for advice, healing and spiritual guidance. There are exceptions, such as the incident at Besançon, where Columban deliberately sought out the condemned prisoners. However, on the whole, the lost and suffering sought Columban. His spirituality for mission was to live the monastic life in imitation of Christ, and to shape souls rather than save souls. Nevertheless, by the practical living of that life in love and service, Columban became a witness and a catalyst for the salvation of many.

Concluding Comments

Columban left a far-reaching legacy after his death. Historians have recorded the names of at least sixty of his immediate disciples whose influence spread all over Europe within fifty years of Columban's death. Indeed, “Luxeuil became a nursery of saints and missionaries”²⁰⁷ and the Irish monastic influence in Brittany and France lasted for two centuries.²⁰⁸ However, the secular and monastic worlds were changing. The asceticism and self-sacrifice expected by Columban's Rule demanded heroes. It “made life in the Columbanian monasteries look more like a frontline under perpetual fire in an unceasing battle.”²⁰⁹ Columban's reluctance to engage in inculturation did not prevent change, as eventually his monasteries more and more reflected the culture and the people of Europe. The more lenient Rule of Saint Benedict gradually replaced Columban's Rule. MacManus puts it very succinctly: “The forms of the Irish and Italian minds were mingling, and Monte Cassino and Bangor were being inscribed on

²⁰⁵ Medieval Sourcebook: *The Life of St Columban by the Monk Jonas*, I.13.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Metlake, *Life and Writings of St. Columbanus*, 229.

²⁰⁸ Woods, *The Spirituality of the Celtic Saints*, 133.

²⁰⁹ MacManus, *Saint Columban*, 220.

the same spiritual map.”²¹⁰ Perhaps the most far-reaching legacy which Columban left was his introduction of the Irish practice of confession. This meant that the emphasis in Europe gradually shifted from public to private penance. MacManus states that the Irish monks’ “positive, realist and therapeutic approach to sinners and sins...was their millennial and perhaps greatest gift to Europe.”²¹¹

Marguerite-Marie Dubois argues that through Columban’s writings “we can reach into the soul of a man who was a product of his time and can discover the essential ideas which were the basis of his spirituality.”²¹² Through his writings we see a man who was impetuous, passionate, single-minded, patriotic, generous, compassionate and loyal. We see a man who loved the Scriptures and who sought to live a holy life in imitation of Christ, to the extent that he left Ireland on a *peregrination* which involved hardship, austere living, hard labour and sometimes misunderstanding. As a soldier of Christ and as abbot, Columban demanded strict obedience. However, his emphasis was on joyful obedience prompted by true humility. His positive view of humankind was demonstrated in his love and care for his monks, and in the brief glimpses we get of his public preaching.

Columban obviously felt it was his duty to uphold the ideals of the Christian life. He did not hesitate to stand up for what he considered right and took upon himself the task of reform. His theology was essentially the theology which Patrick had established in Ireland, and which had been developed far from Rome in a society vastly different from that in Europe. It was based on the principles of heroic virtue, love of nature, and the freedom to choose between good and evil. It was a theology which emphasised action rather than doctrine, a theology of the roadway. Despite his disagreements with popes and local bishops, Columban remained loyal to the papacy and deplored anything which disturbed Christian unity. And despite the severity of his Rule, his call to purity of life was based on spiritual healing and spiritual development rather than on punishment.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 219.

²¹¹ Ibid., 72.

²¹² Dubois, “Saint Columbanus,” 49.

His primary aim was to practise asceticism and live in imitation of Christ. Nevertheless, historical circumstances meant that he was also engaged in an outward-reaching mission of apostolic preaching and direct evangelisation. At times he engaged in debates with popes and kings, and yet he remained faithful to his calling to be a pilgrim for Christ. His was an inward-looking spirituality for mission which was also an outward-looking one.

CHAPTER FOUR

INSIGHTS FROM THE SIXTH CENTURY HARMONISED: THE BIG PICTURE IN MINIATURE

Theological and Cultural Factors

When it comes to forming a spirituality for mission, theological and cultural factors as well as motives and methods for mission are important. There is no doubt that the theological and cultural uniqueness of Ireland, and in particular of early Irish monasticism, played a large part in the formation of the spirituality for mission of both Columba and Columban. In comparison to those countries ruled by the Roman Empire, the rural nature of the Irish countryside, the lack of cities or towns, the strong tribal and family bonds, and the complex legal system made it a unique society in which to live. When Christianity came to Ireland, the old political system, with its stratified pyramid of peasant farmers, nobility and royalty, was not abandoned. Neither was the old religion totally overturned.

The Druids had long been forbidden to practise their religion in the Roman Empire. However, they were still very influential in Ireland because of their learning and their reputed magical powers. When Patrick arrived, he insisted the Druids give up many of their sacrificial practices, but he wisely valued their love of study, poetry and art. Significant pagan holy symbols and sites were modified and Christianised rather than destroyed, and the Irish love of and intimacy with nature was enhanced by the recognition of the immanent God of creation. Irish monasticism developed within this rich Irish culture. Monasteries reflected the familial tribal character of society and attracted a diverse cross-section of the population. These were not closed monasteries but communities that had close contact with the people. They were based on hard work, austerity, prayer and study, and especially the study of sacred Scripture.

When Columba and Columban left Ireland they took with them their love of all things Irish. For Columban, living in exile among complete strangers, this love became a consuming passion which at times clouded his judgment and threatened the stability of his mission. Columban's insistence on the Irish tonsure, the Irish calculation for Easter, and the autonomy of the Irish abbot, lead to conflict with the Gallic bishops. Notwithstanding his cultural insensitivity, Columban was willing to stand up for what

he considered the truth, and despite his love for all things Irish having the potential to create division, his letters to the papacy demonstrate a passion for unity in the Church. He introduced a unique spirituality and a distinctive world view which were attractive to those living in parts of Europe where Christianity had grown lukewarm, and his monasteries in the Vosges soon expanded as the local people joined. Nemer points out that it “is striking how quickly native names appear on the register of monks and emerge as leaders of the monastery, no matter where the Irish monks settled.”²¹³

Columba’s place of exile was vastly different from Columban’s, and, relatively speaking, Columba would not have experienced a religious culture shock. Dal Riada had been colonised and ruled by Irish settlers, and so the culture and religion Columba encountered at Iona would have been familiar. The Picts were the “complete strangers” of Columba’s exile, and it is his journeys into pagan Pictland which correspond more closely with the modern understanding of the activities of a “missionary.”

When we examine the motives for mission of Columba and Columban there is one common feature, and that is *peregrination*. Even if Columba’s exile was prompted in some part by political circumstances in Ireland, his establishment at Iona and his journeys into Pictland can be legitimately described as the pilgrimage of one seeking to live in imitation of Christ in austerity among strangers. Columba and Columban both possessed a desire to withdraw from the world, coupled with an interest in the spiritual welfare of the world. It was this which made the Irish *peregrination* so exceptional.

It is interesting to speculate whether either Columba or Columban would have thought of their *peregrination* as “mission” or “missionary activity.” Walker believes that the evidence in Columban’s writings suggests that he was “a missionary through circumstance.”²¹⁴ The Irish monks’ missionary activities were a by-product of their pilgrimage of renunciation. The ancient Irish love of roaming, sometimes called “wanderlust,”²¹⁵ became a Christian activity. Pilgrimage became associated with

²¹³ Nemer, “Spirituality and the Missionary Vocation,” 424.

²¹⁴ Walker, “St Columban: Monk or Missionary,” 39.

²¹⁵ Reilly, *Spirituality for Mission*, 61.

mission, “and both were subordinate to the spiritual perfection of the monk.”²¹⁶ However, it does seem that both Columba and Columban were inspired by the desire to live a life of renunciation *and* the desire to spread the Gospel. It is apparent that when they left Ireland and founded monasteries on distant shores, they were in fact serving the establishment of the kingdom of God in those places. And when they encountered the lost and needy they did not hesitate to witness to the good news of the kingdom of God. A modern description of a missionary perfectly describes their sixth century activities: “Ideally a missionary is someone whose personality, lifestyle and work embody God’s love for humanity and for the world.”²¹⁷

While we are left with either few or none of Columba’s writings, Columban’s Rule, sermons and letters allow us a glimpse of sixth century Irish theology and spirituality. Columban’s emphasis in his sermons is on living the Christian life, hearing and acting on the Word, fighting the good fight and striving for perfection, always being aware that there is freedom of choice between good and evil. His Rule could perhaps be called a handbook of exercises in living in imitation of Christ in community. Columban’s spirituality of the “roadway” uses an appropriate analogy to describe the journey of the pilgrim. His recommendation to paint the image of God on our own image by leading a life of holiness, demonstrates his emphasis on the need for human effort, coupled with God’s grace.

It is worthy of note that the Irish Church may have been affected by the teaching of Pelagius, who in the early fourth century had espoused perfectionist ideals. M. Forthomme Nicholson sees a comparison between much of Pelagius’ thinking and the wisdom of the Druids, who declared everything in nature to be essentially good, and who believed that humans could attain to and keep in a state of perfection by the exercise of their will.²¹⁸ Great emphasis was also laid on morality and justice. According to Pelagius, everyone was free to choose the good and therefore it was the Christian’s duty to strive toward sinlessness.²¹⁹ In his view there was no such thing as an average, mediocre Christian. Although Pelagius’s ascetic movement became a notorious heresy, words from a Pelagian tract *de Virginitate* were quoted in Gildas’ *de*

²¹⁶ Walker, “St Columban: Monk or Missionary,” 43.

²¹⁷ Sean Dwan, “What do we mean by mission?,” *The Far East* 94, no. 1 (January/February 2012): 11.

²¹⁸ Forthomme Nicholson, “Celtic Theology: Pelagius,” 401.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Excidio Britanniae over a century after they were written, which suggests that some of Pelagius's views were considered orthodox in parts of Britain.²²⁰ Forthomme Nicholson agrees that the British Church at the time of Gildas may have "long since professed these doctrines."²²¹

It is possible that Patrick took Pelagius's ideas from Britain to Ireland, where they would have resonated with the beliefs of the Druids and with the ideas of morality and justice in Irish society. Indeed, F.F. Bruce notes that extant records suggest that the views of the earliest Irish Christians were tainted with Pelagianism.²²² Woods goes so far as to state that Pelagius's doctrine seems to have been well known to Irish *peregrini* such as Columban.²²³ On investigation, Columban's writings do contain echoes of Pelagius's teaching, especially in the emphasis on striving for perfection, but Columban also points out that human goodness is ultimately accomplished through the grace of God. He writes: "It is the work of a life-time, a constant striving. Indeed it can be called a sort of warfare, and for success in this warfare, if we fight on his side his grace will be with us and help us."²²⁴ For Columban, human goodness is achieved in partnership with God. His focus is on the goodness of humanity and the belief that the physical world is not evil. It is a positive theology and a spirituality in which love is central. It emphasises God's love for people, and their love for God, for themselves and for all God's creatures, together with love of nature and natural beauty. This is the theology and spirituality of both Columba and Columban, and we see it in their spirituality for mission.

Living in Imitation of Christ

If a person's spirituality for mission can be measured by the three qualities of motivation, lifestyle and attitude, then to live in imitation of Christ would have to be considered the outstanding feature of Columba's and Columban's spirituality for mission. They heard the call of God and in a very real way understood that they were to follow Jesus in every aspect of their lives. Their sixth century *peregrination* was in a sense an application of their reflection on the incarnation. Jesus, the Word, had

²²⁰ J. Morris, "Pelagian Literature," *Journal of Theological Studies* XVI, Part I (April 1965): 34, 35.

²²¹ Forthomme Nicholson, "Celtic Theology: Pelagius," 406.

²²² Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, 371.

²²³ Woods, *The Spirituality of the Celtic Saints*, 50.

²²⁴ Tristram, *Columbanus*, 94. [Sermon 2].

become flesh and blood and had accepted the insecurity of being human. They too moved outside their comfort zone, and left the security of home and family to live in exile among strangers. Jesus on many occasions sought solitude to pray and commune with God, and presumably found it hard to balance the need to be alone with the needs of the people. Columba and Columban also withdrew from the world, only to find that the world sought them out. Jesus had loved and reached out to those on the margins. Hospitality was also part of the monks' desire to live in imitation of Christ, and this meant sharing the Gospel with others. The monasteries they founded provided a place where people could feel they belonged, and where they could gradually come to belief in Christ. Theirs was an "ongoing contagious common life."²²⁵

For Columba and Columban, prayer and study of the Scriptures were part of everyday living within the monastic community. They lived simply and were not afraid of hard labour and austerity. Sixth century Irish Christianity was based on the principles of heroic virtue where the journey of life consisted in striving for perfection, as the Christian exercised the freedom to choose between good and evil. Renunciation and self-discipline were necessary tools of warfare in the fight against laxity and mediocrity. To live such an austere life in imitation of Christ must have seemed a difficult and daunting prospect, and yet this did not seem to pose a problem for those who chose to join the monasteries. On the contrary, a community of co-pilgrims to mutually help and encourage one another along the journey of life proved to be very attractive.

The monastic life was itself a witness. Even the times of solitude in lonely places, when the monks could feel near to nature and commune with God in a very special way, would have seemed attractive to those who were burdened with the cares of the world. To live in imitation of Christ meant to practise love – love of God and love of neighbour. This love was demonstrated in hospitality, support, companionship, spiritual health and happiness, and the desire to share the Gospel with others. Simpson describes it very succinctly: "[They] attracted the people to Christ by sharing their humanity with them, transfigured by Christ. They had taken on board

²²⁵ George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 55.

Irenaeus's insight that 'the glory of God is seen through a human life fully lived.'²²⁶ Indeed, it was because they lived in imitation of Christ that their spirituality for mission was both inward-looking and outward-looking. In fact, their whole mission was based on this form of proclamation of the kingdom of God.

Active Evangelisation

Conversions are mentioned much more frequently by Adamnan than by Jonas. We do see glimpses of active evangelisation in the lives of Columba and Columban, but conversions were usually the outcome and not the motive for mission. Building up relationships seemed to be more important than aggressive evangelisation. Columba's encounter with King Brude is a good example of a non-confrontational method of preaching the Gospel. Rather than meet head-on and clash with the king and his advisers, Columba's party stayed outside the town singing psalms, albeit quite loudly in the hope of attracting attention. Brude's initial reaction was to refuse to grant Columba an audience. Columba's miraculous entry through locked gates was the cause of much alarm, but his attitude was no doubt diplomatic and sensitive, since the outcome was favourable to the spread of the Gospel.

Columban's ministry to the prisoners at Besançon is another instance where compassion and sensitivity accompanied the preaching of the good news. It is not an example of the imposition of the Christian Gospel on a captive audience. While the prisoners were certainly challenged to repent and believe, Columban's message did not bring condemnation. After he freed the prisoners he performed the Christ-like action of washing their feet, and practical instructions were given for penance. As a result they experienced genuine healing and reconciliation. The destruction of the offerings to the Teutonic gods in Swabia seemed to be more aggressive and perhaps was an example of Columban's impulsive and passionate nature. Nevertheless, it is noted that many believed his message, and Columban obviously displayed some compassion since he is described as a caring shepherd who was slow to condemn.

Trinitarian Understanding

²²⁶ Ray Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality: Historic Roots for our Future*, 2nd ed. (Suffolk: Kevin Mayhew Ltd., 2004), 218.

Irish Christianity focussed on the Trinity. For the Irish, the number three was especially symbolic, and one of their ancient Celtic gods was even believed to have three faces.²²⁷ Indeed, the doctrine of the Trinity became “the foundational paradigm”²²⁸ for Irish Christianity. The people appreciated that all three persons of the Trinity were with them in every aspect of their daily lives. A good example is the ancient traditional prayer, Saint Patrick’s Breastplate, which begins with the words “I bind unto myself the name, the strong name of the Trinity; by invocation of the same, the Three in One and One in Three.”²²⁹ This understanding of God emphasised the diversity of God’s character and actions, and yet expressed the realisation of the unity of God.

For Columba especially, the role of the Holy Spirit in mission was very important. In Adamnan’s *Vita* we almost always read that it was the Holy Spirit who guided and directed Columba to those needing his ministry of instruction, baptism, healing or guidance. Columban’s hagiographer, Jonas, does not mention the Holy Spirit in that context. It is possible that Adamnan, an Irishman, was more familiar than Jonas with Irish spirituality and its perception that the Holy Spirit permeates all things. Nevertheless, despite Jonas’s much more down-to-earth and historic *Vita*, it is possible to find hints concerning the direction of the Holy Spirit in Columban’s life. Even in Columban’s excessive passion for the truth we can detect more than a spark of the Spirit, the Spirit of truth. It is also possible that a Trinitarian understanding of God which expressed diversity within unity enabled Columban to continue to use the Irish calculation for Easter in good conscience, while at the same time professing a strong belief in the unity of the Church.

Love of Nature

As we read the lives of the Irish saints we observe a great affinity with nature and the natural world. The lack of cities in Ireland meant that most people lived in natural settings which encouraged their love of nature. The Druids’ nature mysticism had appealed to the pagan Irish. With the introduction of Christianity came the affirmation that God’s creation was declared good and precious (Gen 1:31). It was

²²⁷ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 81.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

²²⁹ Simpson, *Exploring Celtic Spirituality: Historic Roots for our Future*, 160.

also seen that Jesus taught that God cared for the sparrows, ravens, lilies, and grass of the field (Luke 12: 7, 24-28). It was easy to incorporate the love of nature into Irish Christianity. The wells, trees, and rivers were retained as holy places, where it was believed that the natural encountered the supernatural. The Celtic Cross itself features a cross intertwined by a circle representing creation, where the earth and the sun surround and encompass the cross of redemption.²³⁰ The transcendent God was also understood as the immanent God revealed in and through creation.

Columba and Columban both founded their monasteries in areas of natural beauty. They also formed relationships with the birds and animals they encountered. Indeed Columban could count squirrels, wolves and bears as his friends. Nevertheless, the Irish attitude towards nature was not sentimental. Rather they seemed to have an innate feeling of kinship with the natural world. In the story of the exhausted crane, Columba ministered to the crane as he would to any of the visitors to Iona. He was equally willing to allow the grieving pack-horse to minister to him as he approached death. This is a spirituality for mission which acknowledges interdependence and reciprocity between humans and the natural world. It is an acknowledgement of what we call today “the cosmic community,”²³¹ in which everything and everyone are viewed as interconnected.

Penance as Medicine

The distinct Irish practice of penance, where private confessors acted as counsellors or soul-friends, was innovative as well as sensitive, and Columban’s introduction of the practice to Europe has had far-reaching consequences. Robert J. Schreiter states: “Reconciliation is not about the erasure of memory; it is about its transformation... Reconciliation is not about going back. It is about addressing the past adequately so that we can go forward.”²³² In sixth-century Europe a form of penance was practised which sought not so much to transform as to punish and exclude. It is not surprising that even the bishops of Gaul travelled to Columban’s monasteries to confess their sins and receive spiritual medicine in order to be reconciled with God and go forward. The Irish practice of confession to a holy man or woman led directly to the

²³⁰ Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1993), 52.

²³¹ Jacob Kavunkal, *Anthropophany: Mission as Making a New Humanity* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), 199.

²³² Robert J. Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality & Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 18.

development around the eleventh century of the sacrament of penance as practised today, although the role of confessor was gradually taken over by priests.²³³

In the monasteries of Columba and Columban the focus was not on punishment but on spiritual health, and on a person's potential virtue rather than on their faults. Sin was considered to be extremely serious, as seen in Columban's *Penitentials*, and it is clear that he taught that we should not presume upon God's mercy. However, sin could be overcome by helping the sinner to choose the way of Christ. In fact it was the avoidance of sins and the practice of virtue which was true penance. The Irish monks' concern for the whole person – body, soul and spirit – attracted people to their monasteries. Physical needs were met where possible, and a rigorous “training programme” undertaken to help avoid lukewarmness and encourage striving for perfection, which they believed necessary to live in imitation of Christ. The confessor became a spiritual advisor and counsellor. The process of reconciliation was liberating. In Columban's writings we see clearly his wise advice and his positive approach to sinners. Indeed, the practice of penance became part of the monks' outward-looking spirituality for mission.

Concluding Comments

Despite the passage of time, there are a number of insights we can gain from the lives of Columba and Columban to help us form a spirituality for mission in the twenty-first century. When Reilly states that Columban “exemplifies the merger of the monastic and mission vocations,”²³⁴ he could also be describing Columba. Both men had a spirituality for mission which was very effective in the spread of Christianity into northern Britain and Europe, and they are fine examples of how to engage in *missio Dei*. They both combined contemplation with passion for justice, and compassion for those they met on the journey of life. Their unique theology, their zeal for living the contemplative life in imitation of Christ, their methods of evangelisation, their understanding of the Trinity, their sensitivity to the leading of the Holy Spirit to engage in mission, their love and respect for creation, and their emphasis on penance as spiritual medicine, are important aspects of missionary

²³³ Stephen B. Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 231.

²³⁴ Reilly, *Spirituality for Mission*, 63.

spirituality which are particularly relevant today. However, to integrate such insights from the sixth century with a contemporary spirituality for mission, it is necessary to first examine some recent developments which harmonize with the spirituality of Columba and Columban and which tend to enhance my overall conclusions.

CHAPTER FIVE

SOME RECENT RELEVANT DEVELOPMENTS IN MISSION SPIRITUALITY

God is Mission

Mission spirituality depends on the perception of mission itself. Columba and Columban did not think of themselves as missionaries. They simply sought to live in imitation of Christ and participate in God's mission. The concept of *missio Dei* has recognised the reality that the origin, source, and purpose of mission are God. Indeed mission belongs to God and the Church simply participates in mission.²³⁵ Moreover, Stephen Bevans is convinced that rather than imagining God as "a static kind of 'person' – sort of like us but wiser and more powerful – who is 'up there' or 'out there,'"²³⁶ the God revealed by Jesus through the power of the Spirit is best described as a verb. In other words "God is a Movement"²³⁷ constantly present and always working for the healing and wholeness of creation, inviting all creation, including human beings, "to join in the dance."²³⁸ This means that God *is* Mission, not God *has* a Mission.²³⁹

Bevans likens God to "an ever-flowing fountain of living water, poured out on earth through the Holy Spirit and actually made part of creation through the Word-become-flesh."²⁴⁰ This Word-become-flesh, Jesus, shows us what God is like. God is like Jesus. Jesus taught us about God by his healing and forgiveness, his acceptance of the marginalised, his message of joy and liberation, and his vulnerability. He showed how God was involved in caring for all creation. Jesus' message of love, freedom and inclusion ultimately brought him to the cross. However, as Bevans reminds us: "You cannot stop the Movement that is overflowing life and love."²⁴¹ Jesus' message did not cease at the cross. *Missio Dei* has continued. Jesus' followers realised that God's mission was also their mission. God's mission of love existed long before the

²³⁵ Robert J. Schreiter, "Mission for the Twenty-First Century: A Catholic Perspective," in *Mission for the 21st Century*, ed. Stephen B. Bevans and R. Schroeder (Chicago, IL: CCGM Publications, 2001), 34.

²³⁶ Stephen Bevans, "The Mission has a Church: An Invitation to the Dance," *Australian eJournal of Theology*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2009), 1, http://aejt.com.au/2009/issue_14/?article=197644 (accessed 14 October 2011).

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid., 2.

²³⁹ Ibid., 3. Italics are Bevans's.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 7.

Church, and indeed it was mission which called “the church into being to serve God’s purposes in the world.”²⁴² The missionary Church was formed with the imperative to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19). As the followers of Jesus spread into the Gentile world it gradually became clear that they themselves were to be the presence of Jesus. So Bevans makes the particularly astute statement: “The church does not have a mission, but the mission has a church.”²⁴³

Mission is at the very centre of Christian life. To simply concentrate on building up the Church is not what the kingdom of God is about. Rather it is about living good, responsible, loving and caring lives for the whole world. The kingdom of God is about “forgiving, healing, saving, reconciling, being in relation.”²⁴⁴ Every baptised person is called to be the presence of Jesus in the world, to be for others his face, eyes, ears, voice, heart, hands and feet. When we understand mission as God’s mission then “the gospel remains good news.”²⁴⁵ When we recognise that ultimately it is God’s mission rather than our mission, it alleviates any apprehension we may have concerning our role in mission. We are indeed privileged to be co-workers with God. Therefore, as Bevans wisely states: “We don’t have to burn ourselves out in ministry, we don’t have to worry about our children not belonging to the church, we don’t have to worry about the millions who will never belong to the church.”²⁴⁶

The Role of the Holy Spirit

Bevans believes that “[j]ust as God in Godself is a community of dialogue and acts for the salvation of the world in a non-coercive persuasive manner, so must those baptized into this Trinitarian community act in mission.”²⁴⁷ In God’s mission, the Father sends the Son, and the Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit. When mission is understood to be “our mission” or “the Church’s mission,” then we risk underestimating the importance of the Holy Spirit’s role. Indeed, “the end point of

²⁴² Ibid., 11.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 6.

²⁴⁵ Tiina Ahonen, *Transformation through Compassionate Mission: David J. Bosch’s Theology of Contextualization* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 2003), 223.

²⁴⁶ Bevans, “The Mission has a Church,” 13.

²⁴⁷ Bevans and Gros, *Evangelization and Religious Freedom*, 96.

evangelization is a new creation under the Spirit.”²⁴⁸ Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* states: “Evangelization will never be possible without the action of the Holy Spirit.”²⁴⁹ After the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost Jesus’ followers were sent into the world to bring the good news. Even the most advanced methods for mission could not replace the gentle action of the Spirit. Indeed, “[t]he most perfect preparation of the evangelizer has no effect without the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit the most convincing dialectic has no power over the heart of man.”²⁵⁰

Jesus experienced the Holy Spirit’s presence at his baptism (Luke 3:22), at the commencement of his ministry (Luke 4:1), and throughout his life as he went about doing good deeds and healing those who were oppressed (Acts 10:38). Soon after his resurrection, he came to his fearful disciples, breathed on them and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit. As the Father has sent me, I send you” (John 20:22). At Pentecost, Peter repeated the promise of the Spirit made in the prophecy of Joel (Joel 2:28-32) and confirmed that the gift of the Spirit was for all people (Acts 2:17). Peter and Paul experienced the presence of the Spirit (Acts 4:8; 9:17) who empowered and directed them throughout their ministry so much so that the “Acts of the Apostles” might have been titled the “Acts of the Holy Spirit.” When Christians recognise the Trinitarian dimension of mission, they begin to comprehend that the mysterious Creator of the Universe, revealed to them in Jesus Christ, is constantly in and with them through the gift of the Spirit, and consequently transforming, empowering, and guiding them to serve *missio Dei*. The Trinitarian dimension of mission also reminds them that the fundamental character of God is relational, and this in turn helps them to recognise the vital importance of relationships with others.

Following Jesus in Mission

Jacob Kavunkal states that “mission itself is the conviction that one is called by God to be sent as a witness to the Gospel,”²⁵¹ and that mission today “is following the

²⁴⁸ Anthony J. Gittins, “Mission for the Twenty-First Century in North America,” in *Mission for the 21st Century*, ed. Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder (Chicago, IL: CCGM Publications, 2001), 160.

²⁴⁹ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (*Apostolic Exhortation of his Holiness Pope Paul VI to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to all the Faithful of the Entire World*), # 75.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Kavunkal, *Anthropophany*, 219.

Lord in his mission.”²⁵² Therefore the focal point must be on Jesus’ ministry more than on doctrinal statements. Theological realities must be linked with human life and experience. Mission’s primary concern should be “a call to change one’s attitude to fellow humans in the spirit of love and service.”²⁵³ Mission is about the humanisation of all people. When Jesus called Peter, James and John from their fishing boats they immediately left everything and followed him (Matt 4:20). However, rather than stress the importance of doctrine, Jesus focussed on the importance of lifestyle. He taught that his disciples were to be the salt of the earth and a light to the world (Matt 5:13-14).

Jesus did not understand his mission as the commencement of a new religion. Rather, he introduced a new way of living. “Jesus’ mission, basically, was an upheaval of a person’s outlook towards God and fellow human beings.”²⁵⁴ By following Jesus the disciples not only heard his teachings, they also observed his lifestyle, and after Pentecost they were empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim his good news, to heal the sick, to liberate captives, to befriend outcasts, and to demonstrate by their lives what it meant to follow Jesus. They became “followers of the Way” (Acts 9:2). In other words, they attempted to live in imitation of Christ. Kavunkal reminds us that following Jesus is not the same as finding security in religious claims. Rather it is “a compelling life-style of other-centredness and love, to the extent of laying down one’s life for others.”²⁵⁵

Christians as a Sign of Hope

Even though verbal proclamation of the Gospel is only one aspect of mission, witness to the Gospel whether by words or by lifestyle needs to be made explicit. “Good news wants to spread itself, and disciples are broadcasters.”²⁵⁶ Jesus’ followers were urged to be always ready to account for the hope that was in them, with gentleness and reverence (1 Pet 3:15- 16). More importantly, they themselves were to be a sign of hope, a sign of God’s love and compassion in the world. “*Witness* is not standing on street corners or walking in silent processions...[it] is the totality of the way we

²⁵² Ibid., xiii.

²⁵³ Ibid., 229.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 16.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 237.

²⁵⁶ Gittins, “Mission for the Twenty-First Century in North America,” 157.

live.”²⁵⁷ Jesus testified to the reality of God, and of the kingdom of God, understood as God’s redemptive presence. The kingdom was enacted in his life and ministry “through symbolic acts like the table-fellowships, dealings with women, healings, forgiving, feeding, casting out demons, etc.”²⁵⁸ When Jesus taught that his disciples were the salt and the light, he meant that their presence in the world would be transforming; they would make a difference. Consequently all Christians are missionaries. The Vatican II document *Ad Gentes* states that “[t]he pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature.”²⁵⁹ Mission spirituality becomes the very centre of Christian spirituality.

Kavunkal believes that the pilgrim Church must be like a “little flock.”²⁶⁰ The Church consists of many little flocks of Christians called in specific times and places to spread the fragrance that comes from knowing Christ (2 Cor 2:14). Christian communities are called to reach out to others to establish harmony and bring God’s liberating presence. John Paul II states: “...missionary activity is a matter for all Christians, for all dioceses and parishes, Church institutions and associations.”²⁶¹ The very presence of Christian communities working in co-operation and dialogue with other communities and religions brings about a lively exchange of spiritual benefits and gifts. “The community has to become a disturbing presence from within human society through the community’s ‘good works.’”²⁶² Through baptism all Christians inherit Jesus’ prophetic spirit. Therefore they must identify themselves with Jesus in concern for those who are poor, marginalised, dehumanised, and disenfranchised. God’s mission becomes a way of life rather than an infrequent endeavour, and evangelisation becomes prophetic service to the world.²⁶³

The incarnation speaks to us of God’s liberating presence among us. Jesus’ mission was to make people “aware of God’s presence, and to make this effective in their

²⁵⁷ Antony J. Gittins, “Mission: What’s It Got To Do with Me?” *The Living Light* 34, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 12. (Italics are Gittins’s)

²⁵⁸ Kavunkal, *Anthropophany*, 11.

²⁵⁹ Vatican II, *Ad Gentes* (*Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church*), # 2.

²⁶⁰ Kavunkal, *Anthropophany*, 98.

²⁶¹ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (*Encyclical on the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate*), 1990, # 2. Italics are John Paul’s.

²⁶² Kavunkal, *Anthropophany*, 47.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 226.

lives.”²⁶⁴ It was all about caring love. Kavunkal makes the significant observation that Jesus repeatedly taught that the focus of religion is not God in fact, but neighbour.²⁶⁵ However, our neighbour is not to be the object of our evangelisation. Rather it is in loving relationships that both the Christian and the neighbour become more aware of God’s presence. Relationships are centred on the other. This means that our relationship with God and our relationship with others are intertwined and inseparable. David Bosch argues that “[s]pirituality is not contemplation over against action...not a flight from the world over against involvement in the world.”²⁶⁶ He maintains that God and our neighbour are not and never should be competitors for our love.²⁶⁷ The Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* reminds us that salvation is for all humankind and therefore the Church is intrinsically linked with humankind “by the deepest of bonds.”²⁶⁸ Christians become a sign of hope when our relationship with God flows out into relationship with others. What is most important in mission spirituality is that Christ becomes visible in our life.

Non-coercive Evangelisation

Mission spirituality today has left behind the aggressive proclamation of the Gospel which dominated the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and which preached exclusivism. The Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* states that all people share a common origin and a common goal which is God.²⁶⁹ Therefore human beings are all fellow pilgrims. In solidarity with other pilgrims, Christians become “manifestors of the God-experience in Jesus Christ.”²⁷⁰ They share their stories and allow their lives and the way they live them to be the attraction which provokes interest to hear and learn more. Indeed, the apostle Paul instructed the community at Corinth to live their lives so that their fragrance would spread into every place. The modern world is ready to listen to this style of proclamation, this way of doing mission.²⁷¹ This spirituality for mission is neither dominating nor imposing. Rather it respects the

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 149.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ David J. Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1979), 13.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 65.

²⁶⁸ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*), # 1.

²⁶⁹ Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate* (*Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religion*), #1.

²⁷⁰ Kavunkal, *Anthropophany*, 158.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

dignity of each person and is open to the other. It is a spirituality for mission which builds relationships and promotes connectedness.

Bosch points out that at the beginning of the twentieth century the terms used to describe missionaries and mission were predominantly military, for example “soldiers, forces, advance, army, crusade, marching orders, strategy, planning, and many more.”²⁷² At the end of the twentieth century some mission terminology still included references to crusade, campaign, or offensive. It is natural to want to be in control, to take charge, to plot and plan a mission strategy. Kosuke Koyama makes the interesting observation that Christians may think that “[i]f necessary, we can even walk ahead of Jesus instead of ‘follow him.’”²⁷³ There is also the temptation to see Christ at work only when there are visible signs and spectacular results, and an even greater temptation to use power to bring people to Christ. However, the Gospel ceases to be the Gospel when people are coerced or misled by aggressive evangelisation. Bosch argues: “It is possible to be unaggressive and missionary at the same time. It is indeed the only way of being truly missionary.”²⁷⁴

Mission today often domesticates the cross. People in the twenty-first century need security and they want immediate answers to everything that life can throw at them. The statement “Jesus Christ is the answer!” provokes the obvious outburst: “Yes, but what was the question?”²⁷⁵ If the Gospel is presented as a clear-cut answer to all problems, and Christians measure what they undertake in terms of numerical success or spectacular achievement, then they have failed to take into account the story of the cross. Jesus was not the triumphant Messiah the world expected, but was instead the Servant King (Matt 23:11) whose life-journey ended on a shameful cross. It is the ordinary everyday living in imitation of Christ that becomes the fragrance which permeates and speaks to others God’s Good News. Koyama believes that what is needed today is not an “answer-theology” but a “relationship-theology.”²⁷⁶ On the cross, Jesus placed his trust in the forsaking God. Like David (Ps 22) and Jeremiah (Jer 20:7-12), Jesus received no answer in the midst of his suffering and despair, and

²⁷² Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road*, 31.

²⁷³ Kosuke Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 2, quoted in Bosch, *Spirituality of the Road*, 32.

²⁷⁴ Bosch, *Spirituality of the Road*, 33.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁷⁶ Koyama, *No Handle on the Cross*, 72, quoted in Bosch, *Spirituality of the Road*, 35.

yet he retained his faith and trust in God. The call to follow Jesus means that Christians should not rely on human success, nor should they expect or offer security. Rather they too should place their trust in the seemingly forsaking God.

Anthony J. Gittins argues that rather than taking a censorious attitude and maintaining its invincibility, the Church will only convince others through “service, dedication and vulnerability.”²⁷⁷ Bosch tells the moving story of a group of Lutheran missionaries in Upper Egypt who worked faithfully for fifty-two years serving the people, despite there being only one convert from Islam in all that time. They continued their work, praising God among the people, even though the situation seemed hopeless.²⁷⁸ These missionaries had a relationship with God which allowed them to serve the people irrespective of the outcome. They themselves became part of the message they proclaimed. This illustrates the meaning of spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of God among all people. Like Jesus, Christians must be prepared to allow the fragrance to permeate irrespective of the risk of being rejected. A non-coercive spirituality for mission admits vulnerability.

Inter-Religious Dialogue and Inculturation

Gerald A. Arbuckle defines inculturation as

a dialectical interaction between Christian faith and cultures in which these cultures are challenged, affirmed, and transformed toward the reign of God, and in which the Christian faith is likewise challenged, affirmed, and enhanced by this experience.²⁷⁹

The notion that we are all co-pilgrims and that Christians are called to follow Jesus as the light and salt of the earth has led to the development of inter-faith or inter-religious dialogue as an effective method of mission, together with the emphasis on the importance of inculturation. The Gospel message is for all cultures and therefore it must transform cultures from within. It has become clear that “only from within and through culture does the Christian faith become a part of history and the creator of

²⁷⁷ Gittins, “Mission for the Twenty-First Century in North America,” 159.

²⁷⁸ Bosch, *Spirituality of the Road*, 36.

²⁷⁹ Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation & Theologians: A Postmodern Critique* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010), 152.

history.”²⁸⁰ Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* states that the kingdom of God is lived within cultures.²⁸¹ Therefore the building up of the kingdom must involve elements of human culture or cultures. Even though the Gospel and evangelisation are independent of cultures, “they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them.”²⁸² The process of inculturation is itself a form of evangelisation. However, it involves being willing to learn from other cultures with an openness that admits “an inter-connected harmony of the many.”²⁸³

As he moved around the Mediterranean region, the apostle Paul encountered other cultures and other religions, and the influence of the Gentile converts on his theology and spirituality remains significant. Bosch believes that when the Spirit sent Paul to the Gentiles, it was “not only to evangelize them; it was also to make it possible for Paul himself to see the real heart of his message.”²⁸⁴ Jesus was also challenged and amazed by the scope and extent of the Gospel. This is verified in his encounter with the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21-28) and with the Roman centurion (Matt 8:5-13). Arbuckle suggests that Jesus himself used methods of inculturation by teaching through parables, stories and social drama.²⁸⁵ The story of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42) is a good example of a social drama which demonstrates two antagonistic cultures and the methods used by Jesus to bring about their healing and reconciliation. Jesus listened to people and respected the cultural contexts in which they were living. However, as a member of a particular culture, Jesus recognised that he needed to be aware of the prejudices of his own culture and how he was affected by them. Inculturation is leaving the familiar behind and being willing to take a journey of faith, “a journey of listening and letting go (Rom 1:15-17).”²⁸⁶

It is very easy to adopt an attitude that says “we have the truth, we are right, all the rest are wrong.”²⁸⁷ When Christians encounter others they often have deep-seated feelings of superiority, so that even though they listen they remain resistant to change.

²⁸⁰ John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World)*, 1988, # 44.

²⁸¹ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, # 20.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Kavunkal, *Anthropophany*, 230.

²⁸⁴ Bosch, *Spirituality of the Road*, 60.

²⁸⁵ Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation & Theologians*, 159.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 165.

²⁸⁷ Bosch, *Spirituality of the Road*, 36.

They may be quite clear about what they have to give to people, such as salvation, faith, care, social improvement and so on, but may not be so clear about what they are prepared to receive. The result is that they “do not go on a journey of discovery to search and find together.”²⁸⁸ The principles of inter-religious dialogue require mutual dependence and reciprocity in giving. The positive values to be found in other religions have the potential to affect Christian faith and bear fruit.

There is no doubt that engaging in mission in a pluralistic world provides a great challenge. However diversity and plurality are not threats to human unity. Rather they can be seen as “the essential safeguards preventing life-affirming unity from degenerating into deadening uniformity.”²⁸⁹ The question is how to maintain the essential beliefs of the Christian faith while at the same time exhibiting genuine universality? How to maintain unity while encouraging diversity? Some argue that religious pluralism “is not only an inevitable part of human life, but a desirable reflection of the richness of God’s grace.”²⁹⁰ Schreiter asserts that the Trinitarian character of mission provides an avenue for dealing with this challenge. For Schreiter, the paradox of unity and plurality is found in the Trinity itself – one God, three Persons. He believes that when the focus is entirely on the Second Person, the Son, in the story of salvation, then the roles of the Father and the Spirit are overlooked. It is the creation of the world by God, not the incarnation, which is the beginning of the story of salvation, and the part other religions play in the order of creation must be taken into account.²⁹¹ If the Holy Spirit is understood as “the principal agent of mission”²⁹² then “a christomonistic theology of mission” is avoided and one can move “beyond monistic proposals.”²⁹³

One can argue about the theology of mission and attempt to find ways to resolve differences. However, to maintain the fragrance of a genuine mission spirituality, it is clear that, in dialogue, exclusive claims to revelation, salvation and truth must be

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 68.

²⁸⁹ Peter C. Phan, “Evangelization in a Culture of Pluralism,” *Australian EJournal of Theology*, no. 9 (March 2007): 3. http://aejt.com.au/2007/issue_9/?article=378591 (accessed 16 October 2011).

²⁹⁰ Robert A. Hunt, *The Gospel Among the Nations: A Documentary History of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 29.

²⁹¹ Schreiter, “Mission for the Twenty-First Century: A Catholic Perspective,” 36, 37.

²⁹² John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, # 30.

²⁹³ Schreiter, “Mission for the Twenty-First Century: A Catholic Perspective,” 37.

abandoned and replaced with the recognition of a common humanity which is interconnected and interdependent. While Bevans paints a picture of God as a fountain of living water, flowing out through the Holy Spirit,²⁹⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr visualises the many religious traditions as “streams cascading down a mountain through separate courses from a single font on high.”²⁹⁵ In Nasr’s vision, humanity’s religious search is “one of finding our way back upstream, each of us taking advantage of the scriptures, symbols and rites of our traditions while also appreciating the many provided by others.”²⁹⁶ Being open to the other does not exclude conviction, nor does it mean abandoning one’s own tradition. Indeed one’s own cascading stream is vitally nourishing and life-giving. Rather, openness should take the form of respectful dialogue and kind deeds performed in the spirit of love and justice, both at the level of the collective and of the individual. In this way one not only learns to live in peace and harmony with people from different religions, but also becomes willing to address those issues within one’s own religion which lead to hostility and division. Inter-religious dialogue demands a spirituality for mission which is non-aggressive, open and tolerant. However, it also demands a strong faith which draws courage from the knowledge that Christians are followers of Jesus who called them to go and bear fruit (John 15:16).

Concluding Comments

Paul, in his letter to the Thessalonians, gives us a very good description of how he, together with Silvanus and Timothy, went about their work. He writes of how they brought the message of the Gospel not only in word, but also in the Holy Spirit, with full conviction, and by the way they led their lives (1 Thess 1:5). This is a good summary, not only of the more recent developments in mission spirituality, but also of the spirituality for mission of Columba and Columban. There is a strong call to live in imitation of Christ by following his lifestyle of love and other-centredness, and in so doing becoming a sign of hope to the world. There is a call to abandon the concept of *our* mission or the *Church’s* mission, along with all aggressive evangelisation, in favour of respecting and serving the dignity of others. Christians don’t have to rely

²⁹⁴ Bevans, “The Mission has a Church,” 4.

²⁹⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), quoted in John F. Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Oxford: Westview, 2000), 187.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

on human success or have all the answers to life's questions. Rather they need to admit vulnerability, put total trust in God, and allow Christ to become visible in their lives. As salt, light, leaven, and fragrance in the world, they allow God's mission to be accomplished.

There is also the call for mission through dialogue and inculturation of the Gospel. Through inter-religious dialogue, one's kind deeds, open attitude, lifestyle, and deep and passionate faith become tools for mission. Here a relationship with God becomes of paramount importance, since it is inseparable from a relationship with others. The call to recognise that God is mission, God is a Movement, God is a verb, is innovative and of great consequence for the twenty-first century. Christians are co-workers with God rather than working for God. It is the Holy Spirit's role to dwell in them and with them, supporting, comforting, guiding, correcting and equipping them. Recognising this enables Christians to be part of the Movement, part of "that great Conga Line that has moved through the world since the beginning of time and which is also the heartbeat of God's deepest self."²⁹⁷ Columba and Columban also participated in that great dance, and it is to them that I now turn once again towards developing and integrating a spirituality for mission for today.

²⁹⁷ Bevans, "The Mission has a Church: An Invitation to the Dance," 14.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS THE INTEGRATION OF THE MISSION SPIRITUALITY OF COLUMBA AND COLUMBAN WITH CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

When examining recent developments in mission spirituality, it is easy to recognise that the Irish monks of the sixth century present to us a fine example of a “little flock,” living a lifestyle which was a sign to the world of God’s presence. They were light, salt, leaven and an evocative fragrance which were signs of hope to those around them. Columba and Columban sought to live in imitation of Christ, and as followers of Jesus they shared their lives with the people around them in selfless deeds of love through the power and guidance of the Spirit. Their methods of evangelisation were persuasive, and yet non-coercive and welcoming. Most of all, their task was not *their* mission but *God’s* mission. While they may not have engaged in what we now call “inter-religious dialogue,” their attitude towards the natural world displayed the same principles of interconnectedness and mutual enrichment. Likewise their understanding of the Trinity allowed for diversity within unity. These are all characteristics of a spirituality for mission which is relevant for today’s world.

However, developing a spirituality for mission for the twenty-first century with insights gained from the sixth century cannot be attempted with the presumption that because something worked for Columba and Columban it can definitely work in the present. Any mission spirituality must take into account its time and place in history. The twenty-first century presents numerous challenges to mission which include economic and cultural globalisation, multiculturalism, technological advances, environmental degradation, population explosion, third world poverty, HIV-AIDS, and many others. Columba and Columban also faced many challenges, and at times they too must have felt overwhelmed. Therefore, if we examine their motives, lifestyles and attitudes in the light of contemporary events and the theological understandings of their tradition, we can mine and integrate many valuable treasures. Their *peregrination*, their Trinitarian outlook, their love of creation, their sense of community, and their unique understanding of reconciliation, are contributions which have not yet been sufficiently endorsed and integrated into contemporary mission

spirituality. These offer an enriching spirituality for mission which, in summary, I will now integrate and develop.

At first glance, the motivation to undertake *peregrination*, to live in imitation of Christ in exile among complete strangers, seems an alien concept today. However, if one considers that missionary activity was part of the Irish monks' pilgrimage of renunciation, then one cannot exclude the possibility that this dimension will assist today in the formation of a spirituality for mission. *Peregrination* involved moving out of one's comfort zone, withdrawing from the world and sacrificing one's self in total dedication to God and God's people. Paradoxically, these actions were accompanied by an intense interest in the spiritual, and indeed physical, welfare of the world. Their *peregrination* also attracted the interest of the world. Their actions were based on the story of the incarnation, where the Word of God left the "comfort" of heaven and lived among strangers in order to demonstrate God's great love towards all creation.

The world of today needs people who are willing to move out of their comfort zones, and live and work among "strangers" by sharing their humanity. In doing so, they don't need to be "wanderers," or travel overseas to find strangers. For example, the strangers might be refugees, or people from other cultures or religions living in today's multicultural societies. They might be neighbours who exhibit different lifestyles, or those whom some might label "social outcasts." They are surely the people in our society who are poor, lonely or desperate. Jesus' understanding of the incarnation is clear. At the commencement of his ministry he proclaimed in the synagogue that he was the one who was sent to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, release to the captives, and freedom to the oppressed (Luke 4:16-19). A Christian spirituality for mission must involve renunciation of self, and a commitment to live in imitation of Christ. When this becomes the lifestyle and attitude for the task, then it follows that Christians will experience an intense interest in the welfare of others, and others in turn will be attracted by this lifestyle. To move out of one's comfort zone and follow Jesus means to live simply with no thought of personal gain, and to dedicate one's life wholeheartedly to God and to others. This can be a witness to a society dominated by materialism and narcissism, and to a world which is longing

for “good news.” This can be the twenty-first century *peregrination* which adds significantly to our spirituality for mission.

The strong Trinitarian understanding of God which dominated early Irish Christianity meant that Columba and Columban were acutely aware of God’s direction and guidance as they ministered to those around them. When reading Columba’s *Vita* one is struck by the way in which the natural and the supernatural are both part of the one reality. Columba’s world is inherently numinous and mystical. This does not mean that today’s spirituality for mission must be so mystical that Christians are viewed as strange and unapproachable. However, human beings today have become so rational in their thinking that many people neglect to explore the reality and presence of God in their lives and are content to lead lives of spiritual emptiness or mediocrity. Australia has been called “a very secular society,”²⁹⁸ and people are often more comfortable expressing the deep need to connect with something spiritual in a passion for sport or in a vague New Age spirituality. The Trinitarian understanding of God expresses the wonder and love of the creator Father, the humanity and compassion of the Son, and the comfort, empowerment and guidance of the Holy Spirit. If one’s spirituality for mission witnesses to all these qualities, then there will be offered to those around the possibility of a numinous world where God is experienced as a mysterious but relational reality. When God is one’s constant companion, then emptiness, laxity and mediocrity can be left behind. Indeed, to allow the Holy Spirit to guide and direct is an important way to ensure “our” mission is in fact God’s mission.

For Columba and Columban the love of creation was an important part of their overall spirituality for mission. Love of nature in today’s world can be quite inconsistent. On the one hand, people enjoy and appreciate areas of natural beauty. On the other hand, exploitation of the natural world is widespread, despite calls to care for the environment. Human beings have often misunderstood God’s command for stewardship as domination and control, and have failed to understand that every part of creation is precious and significant to God. It has even been suggested that early “Roman Christianity’s detachment from nature, in time, opened the way for Western

²⁹⁸ Australian Catholic University, “Downer calls Australia a ‘secular society,’” *Catholic News* (2 July 2004), 1. <http://cathnews.acu.edu.au/407/9.html> (accessed 30 March 2012).

humanity's domination and exploitation of nature – which Celtic Christians would have regarded as sinful.”²⁹⁹ It was easy for Columba and Columban to relate to the natural world, because they believed that the immanent God was present in and through all creation. Theirs was a spirituality for mission which did not display a superior, dominating or exploitative attitude. Columba and Columban showed respect for creation and acknowledged interdependence and mutual enrichment.

Because of environmental degradation and loss of species, people are becoming aware that they belong to a cosmic community where humans have been given the responsibility to love and care not only for each other but also for all creation, and where the survival and future of the natural world is at stake. God's mission reaches beyond humankind, and caring for creation is a missionary activity. A spirituality for mission which embraces the cosmic community will be one which moves away from anthropocentrism and acknowledges the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. In a similar way, the principles of respect, interdependence and mutual enrichment can be applied today as we reach out to those of other faiths through inter-religious dialogue. They are principles which can also be applied to the task of establishing peaceful and cooperative ecumenical relationships with Christians of other denominations and their communities.

Christian baptism compels Christians to reach out to others. The nature of baptism proclaims that they are not simply individuals but are part of a community, the community and body of Christ. The lifestyle of Columba and Columban was highly monastic, ascetic and severe, and any attempt to reproduce their kind of sixth-century Irish monastic communities today would be futile. In a letter written in 1935, Dietrich Bonhoeffer argued that a new kind of monasticism was needed to restore the Church. This new monasticism would have “only one thing in common with the old, a life lived without compromise according to the Sermon on the Mount in the following of Jesus.”³⁰⁰ One recent attempt to establish a new monastic rhythm of life in community has been the Urban Seed in the city of Melbourne, where people live

²⁹⁹ Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 87.

³⁰⁰ Mary Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968), quoted in Brent Lyons-Lee, “City Mission and the New Monasticism: The Urban Seed Story,” *Australian Journal of Mission Studies* 3, no. 1 (June 2009): 26.

together and endeavour to balance work, study and mission.³⁰¹ However, where two or three are gathered together there is always the potential to live out this new monasticism.

Each local community is needed to be the spiritual hub of worship, learning, and encouragement for its members, and to provide close pastoral contact with the people around, especially those on the margins. It is very easy for a community to become so focussed on God that the stranger is forgotten, or so focussed on the stranger that God is forgotten. While the community needs to be inward-looking in prayer, contemplation, worship, and study of the Word, it can only be fully effective in living in imitation of Christ when it is at the same time outward-looking and other-centred. Columba and Columban provide us with this vital insight. They balanced a contemplative life with a missionary vocation, and demonstrated that individual Christians, united together as a little flock, are a very effective sign of hope for the whole world. In order to live authentically in imitation of Christ, communities need to be aware of the importance of balancing an inward-looking with an outward-looking spirituality for mission.

The positive attitude of Columba and Columban towards all creation can be seen in their behaviour towards strangers. When visitors or strangers approached their monasteries they were greeted with hospitality and care, and shown great consideration. When people chose to stay and join the monasteries, they discovered God *within* community. This is a valuable insight for today. Bosch states that “our witness will be credible only if it flows from a *local, worshiping community*.”³⁰² At a local level, within each community, the principles of respect, interdependence and mutual enrichment can be applied to visitors or strangers who approach and enquire about the Christian faith. This spirituality for mission compels Christians to listen attentively and compassionately to the story of each person’s journey and respectfully allow them to journey alongside at their own pace. When each person is welcomed with love, understanding, and warm hospitality, and is free to join with the community in worship, study and prayer, they may experience a true sense of

³⁰¹ Brent Lyons-Lee, “City Mission and the New Monasticism: The Urban Seed Story,” *Australian Journal of Mission Studies* 3:1 (June 2009): 26.

³⁰² David J. Bosch, *Believing in the Future: Toward a Missiology of Western Culture* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1995), 59. Italics are Bosch’s.

belonging. The community needs to provide a safe environment in which to share stories and undergo a time of learning, challenge, growth and mutual enrichment. In this way the stranger and the community embark on a shared journey, discovering the wonders of God's love together. As Gittens reminds us, "we must carefully hand on the tradition" but at the same time we "must prepare to be evangelized by the people and converted by the Spirit."³⁰³

Columban's emphasis was on the journey of life as a roadway. The Christian way could be changeable and uncertain, and it involved choice. Sin and the transitory things of the world were to be rejected. Despite his view that sin was extremely serious, Columban retained a positive approach to sinners, and his exhortations frequently highlighted the human potential for goodness. He stressed that humans are made in God's image and, as Christ continues to paint that image on them, they also paint the image by leading a life of holiness. This is to balance the statement "by grace you have been saved" (Eph 2:5) with the wisdom which admits that "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (Jas 2:17). The monk's journey along the roadway consisted of striving for perfection, and fighting the good fight with the help of God's grace. This is a spirituality for mission which is focussed on the potential for goodness rather than focussed on sin.

The Irish practice of penance became a way of administering spiritual medicine to those who had fallen from the roadway, and of promoting spiritual growth for those who wished to go forward. For many people today, the sacrament of penance through repentance has become a thing of the past, or even irrelevant, and yet those same people long for healing and for their lives to be transformed. Reconciliation with God and with others brings liberation. If confessors adopted the role of spiritual advisors, counsellors, or "wounded healers,"³⁰⁴ where penitents were given the opportunity to confide worries, doubts and temptations as well as sins, then many more people might be encouraged to find the confidence to participate. If persistence in seeking God's forgiveness was encouraged through a sacrament of reconciliation which emphasised healing and spiritual development rather than punishment, then many might seek

³⁰³ Anthony J. Gittens, *Gifts and Strangers: Meeting the Challenge of Inculturation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 112.

³⁰⁴ Taken from the title of a book by Henri J.M. Nouwen: *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972).

“medicine” for their spiritual health on a regular basis. A spirituality for mission which emphasises the care for peoples’ souls and the value of an *anamchara*, or soul-friend, is one which is sorely needed in the twenty-first century.

To summarise, as Christians today seek to proclaim the Gospel they will find many valuable gems of wisdom from the sixth century. A spiritual *peregrination* will involve leaving one’s comfort zone behind and moving from the centre to the marginalised. Living in imitation of Christ will mean that each individual Christian can be a light and a permeating fragrance in the world, and each local, worshipping community will function as a “little flock,” which is both God-focussed and other-focussed. An awareness of the significance of the Trinity will mean that Christians can experience and share the wonder and love of the Father, the humanity and compassion of the Son, and the comfort, empowerment and guidance of the Holy Spirit. In addition, a love and respect for creation will mean that this and future generations may appreciate the Creator God and be blessed by all creation. Finally, the recognition of the potential goodness of humankind and the need for reconciliation may bring about healing, restoration and spiritual growth. In a nutshell, a spirituality for mission which utilises the many valuable insights gained from the sixth century will be one which is very meaningful and relevant to the needs of twenty-first century persons.

Columba and Columban were part of a great movement of spirituality which began in Ireland with the introduction of Christianity, and which spread into Britain and Europe in the sixth century. This movement brought much light and healing into new and neglected areas of human life, and continues to enlighten and inspire today, as Christians recognise its contribution to the task of mission. Columba and Columban, along with countless others throughout the centuries, participated in the Movement of God that has become a great Conga Line. The dance continues today as the latest generations of followers of Christ reach out with God’s accepting, forgiving, healing and empowering love to engage the hearts and hands of new and enthusiastic participants.

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