What Are Celtic Saints?

By Renatus Derbidge (Excerpt from Spiritual Stone Bothering, Sacred Isles Press, 2025)

Introduction

When people today speak of "Celtic saints", they usually mean figures from Ireland, Scotland and the surrounding regions of the British Isles who lived between the 5th and 8th centuries. Many of them were monks and nuns, hermits and wanderers, advisors and healers – people whom their contemporaries experienced as holy.

"Celtic Christianity" does not mean a different religion, but a distinct form of early Christianity in north-western Europe: close to nature, rooted in community and less rigidly hierarchical than the Roman church. A key feature was *peregrinatio* – voluntarily leaving one's homeland for Christ's sake – and a monastic life that wove together ascetic practice, education, social care and the shaping of the cultural landscape.

In what follows, some core features of this Christianity are sketched and illustrated through three example figures – Columba, Brigit and Columbanus. The background to this is a search for identity: a new look at some of the origins of Europe.

The saints of the Celtic church are countless. Besides the still well-known names – such as Brigit (c. 451–525; Kildare, Ireland), Brendan (c. 484–577; west of Ireland; sea-voyage tradition), Columba (521–597; Iona, Hebrides), Kevin (c. 498–618; Glendalough, Ireland), Gall (c. 550–646; Lake Constance–St Gallen), Aidan (c. 590–651; Lindisfarne/Northumbria), Cuthbert (c. 634–687; Lindisfarne & Farne Islands) or Kilian (c. 640–689; Würzburg, a Frankish/Irish missionary) – there are countless others who were only venerated locally. Their memory survives in church and place names, or in legends and hagiographies of other saints in which they are mentioned.

Unlike in the Roman church, they were rarely canonised or beatified by a pope. Rather, the people around them experienced them as holy. Role models were women and men who healed, worked miracles, built chapels, founded monasteries or served as abbots – and above all those who "went on *peregrinatio*".

Tradition speaks of three kinds of martyrdom:

- Red martyrdom – death through violence in the course of mission (extremely rare in the Celtic world, and where it is reported, it needs critical examination);
- Green martyrdom – withdrawal into the "desert": into islands, caves, hermitages;

- White martyrdom – *peregrinatio*: voluntarily leaving homeland and family in imitation of Christ. This white martyrdom was considered the highest sacrifice.

Unlike the Roman mission practice, which not rarely involved pressure and violence (Boniface and the felling of the Donar oak have become a symbol of this), the Celtic Christians missionised in a spirit of invitation. They acted as wise counsellors, judges and healers; they preached without expectation or pressure; they baptised when people asked for it out of their own free conviction.

We do not know how many Celtic saints there were. Nor can we easily count how many Irish and Scottish monks and nuns travelled eastwards from Iona and Ireland into central Europe – it must have been thousands. They are regarded as co-founders of Europe after the collapse of the Roman Empire, before the Roman Catholic Church was firmly established north of the Alps and before the great princely dynasties (Merovingians, Carolingians) took on the role of state-builders.

In the 7th century alone there were over a hundred monasteries in Ireland, often with hundreds of novices and brothers (and in some places also sisters). Many children of the nobility from all over Europe received their education there. Quite a few "Celtic" saints on the Continent were therefore descendants of Frankish nobles who had lived in monasteries since childhood – and in this great stream founded chapels, daughter monasteries and mission centres.

Examples include Eustasius (c. 560–629; Luxeuil – working as far as Bavaria), a pupil of Columbanus (540–615; Luxeuil & Bobbio), who later became abbot; or Odilia (660–720; Odilienberg in Alsace), educated in an Irish-Scottish convent and later abbess and hospital founder on the Odilienberg, working in an Irish-Scottish spirit. Even Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179; Disibodenberg/Bingen on the Rhine), who grew up in the monastery of Disibodenberg, which was strongly shaped by the Irish-Scottish heritage, stands in the afterglow of this impulse.

John Duns Scotus (1265–1308; his educational roots include the Hebrides/North Uist; later teaching in Paris and Cologne) points to the wide network of the Irish-Scottish world: the West trained people; they then worked throughout Europe. In Duns Scotus we can also read off the transformation of the Celtic church into the 13th century: from the generation after Columba onwards, conflicts with Rome arose; at the Synod of Whitby (664) – symbolically for the first time on a large scale – the Roman Catholic way of thinking collided with the Irish-Scottish one, and the secular rulers sided with Rome. By the time of Scotus, little of the original impulse remained except a particular colouring in scholarship.

Yet something of the original Celtic tone has survived to this day – for example in the Hebrides, in Wales (veneration of holy wells) and in Ireland (the weaving of Brigid's crosses on 1 February, Imbolc). These traditions live on and continue to be cultivated.

Columba

In the figure of Colmcille/Columba we can study how the Celtic passes over into the Christian. Columcille came from the highly respected Cenél Conaill, related to the Northern Uí Néill, descendants of the legendary high king Niall Noígíallach ("Niall of the Nine Hostages"). Many early kings and Celtic saints are traced back to this leading family; the high kings can be imagined as priest-kings. With Niall's conversion to Christianity and the separation of secular and spiritual leadership (the line of kings and the line of druids), spiritual authority shifted towards monks and, in later perception, saints.

From childhood Columba was prepared for a priestly path. His uncle Cruithnechán baptised him and took him in as a foster-son. Columba was educated in several monasteries, among others by Finnian of Movilla († c. 579; Movilla, Ireland), who in turn is said to have learned from Ninian (late 4th/early 5th century; Whithorn, Galloway). In Columba's time druidic and Christian traditions still interpenetrated; one could speak of a "druid-monk".

Adomnán (624–704; Iona) portrays mostly miracles in his *Vita Columbae*: advising kings, influencing the outcome of battles, healings, acts of banishing, prophecies, judgments. Columba was politically active, highly respected by the people and by the highest rulers, and he upheld a democratic understanding of decision-making: long debates with all those affected, whose outcome was then borne by everyone – a legacy of druidic culture. He was a poet, hymn writer, singer, man of prayer and master of ceremonies.

Despite this closeness to the pre-Christian world, the "druid-monks" created a distinctly Christian form of life. Monastery foundations became the most important spaces of transformation. Blood bonds turned into freely chosen brotherhoods (in some places including women). What had been lived outwardly in Celtic culture as an intimate fellow-feeling with nature became inwardly soul-searching and disciplined inner work.

The abbot was a "chosen father" who earned his authority by his way of leading and who could also be deposed. Strict rules – such as the Columban rules (insofar as they had not yet been reshaped along Benedictine lines) – were understood as a voluntary corset that helped to transform the wild into the cultivated, the raw into the refined.

The loving veneration that the brothers had for Columba springs from deep feeling, not just political calculation. In each miracle something of the essential shines through – the

impression of extraordinary spiritual power and transformative force. Rudolf Steiner describes such saints as "clothed with the etheric body of Christ" – a pictorial way of saying that their morality and healing power were experienced as a radiating presence.

It is told of Columba that after guilt in a serious conflict (he had contributed to provoking a war) he left Ireland to lead a monastic life dedicated to Christ on Iona. His contemporaries experienced this as a transformation from Celt to Christian – a birth into holiness.

Brigit

We can also clearly see in Brigit of Kildare the transition from pre-Christian to Christian. In her, three figures overlap and form a kind of metamorphosis sequence at the same place, with similar attributes:

1. the pre-Celtic goddess Brighid,
2. the Celtic/druidic keeper of the flame in the oak grove of Kildare, and
3. the Celtic-Christian abbess of a women's – and soon also men's – monastery.

For centuries the same motif seems to have continued here in different forms – sometimes fused, in the sources not always easy to distinguish, and yet recognisable as a thread through time. Precisely in this we can see how non-violent and almost seamless this transformation was in Ireland: from the mythic into the historical realm, still alive today in processions, in the weaving of Brigid's crosses at Imbolc, and in pilgrimages to holy wells. In Scotland – especially on the Hebrides – she lives on as Saint Bride, even though this has been partly covered over in some places.

Also striking is the status of women: in the Celtic world women could take on comparable responsibilities to men, and the proportion of female saints is unusually high.

Columbanus and the *Peregrinatio*

Columbanus embodies *peregrinatio* – the radical setting-out into the unknown – like hardly anyone else. Many wandering monks give no external reason for their journey; it seems to have been an inner necessity. Columbanus, for a long time a monk in Bangor (Northern Ireland), did not leave the monastery until 585, at a mature age, with twelve companions.

Everywhere he went he was received with hospitality. He first sought contact with secular rulers and was given sites for monasteries. His houses quickly grew into cultural centres; the nobility entrusted him with the education of their children – even when the parents were still

heathen. Columbanus took clear positions and thus got into political conflicts. At times he was driven to return to Ireland, then moved on again.

He alternated between outwardly active work and inner retreat (in caves, hermitages). He lived with Gall, had encounters with animals, worked miracles, remained incorruptible and deeply marked by homesickness – a life that united ideal and practical action in a convincing way.

If we imagine a map of early medieval Europe in front of us, we can see something like this: from the Atlantic fringes – Ireland, western Scotland, the Hebrides, western England and Wales – small boats put out to sea, often with groups of twelve. These Irish-Scottish wanderers spread out over the continent like the branching arms of a river delta:

- to the south via Brittany and Frankish territories into Burgundy/Luxeuil, further via Helvetia to Lake Constance and through Alpine passes to Italy and Bobbio;
- to the east along the Rhine, Main and Danube, following trade routes and river valleys, in our imagination far into the plains – as far as Kiev;
- to the north-east along the North Sea via the Netherlands (Holland) and Friesland, through Bremen to Jutland/Denmark and on to Scandinavia – here Willehad (c. 745–789; Friesland & Bremen) and Ansgar (801–865; Bremen & Scandinavia) stand as examples of figures in whom the insular (Irish-Scottish/Anglo-Saxon) heritage worked deeply on within Roman structures;
- to the north to Orkney, the Faroes and Iceland;
- and to the west the Brendan tradition carries the idea of a voyage all the way to North America.

Later Viking expeditions – often imagined today as purely bloody – brought, alongside destruction, exchange: trade, captives and people who went along voluntarily. In this way Celtic monks, relics and books reached Scandinavia and Iceland and continued to work there in a healing way. Icelandic tradition speaks of *papar*: place names such as Papey remember Irish hermits who probably lived and worked there before the "official" Christianisation around 999/1000, which came via Denmark and Norway and was integrated into the Roman Catholic order.

This whole stream has its source in the idea of *peregrinatio* – white martyrdom – in the inner urge to leave one's beloved homeland and carry inner light into the "dark forests" of Europe. Often this combined with green martyrdom: outwardly hidden activity from hermitages, caves and retreats close to nature. From there the saints seemed to work "magically", because people were drawn to their quiet, different mood and recognised them as teachers and role models.

The "Irish church" of this early period was not a centrally organised structure, but a network of free initiatives. Abbeys formed something like the cells of a possible structure, but each monastery and each abbot remained largely autonomous. When individual wandering monks later appear as "bishops", it is often unclear whether this refers to actual ordinations at the time or to later labels.

From the 8th century onwards, Irish-Scottish and Roman lines increasingly overlapped. It is important to look closely: in some figures the Irish-Scottish heritage continued to work powerfully, while others – such as Boniface – acted mainly in the sense of creating structures, imposing order and integrating existing communities into the Roman system.

With the monastic impulse probably came a gardening impulse as well: the central European cultural landscape – villages, gardens, meadows, fields, woodlands – can be read as part of the Irish-Scottish inheritance. For centuries this worked in a harmonising way on people. Even though the Irish-Scottish stream was rapidly romanised, its influence should not be underestimated: Columban rules lived on in Benedictine ones; people were, as it were, re-tuned; the experience and shaping of cultural landscape formed souls.

Rudolf Steiner describes the mission of these western saints in Europe as a pacifying of wild souls. A glimpse into Steiner's stage art shows this atmosphere exemplarily in the second mystery drama *The Trial of the Soul*: in one scene a messenger of Christ from Hibernia approaches a people who still revere Balder; "magically", the people feel drawn to him – a non-violent, non-hierarchical encounter that touches inwardly.

A Comparison

1) Structure and authority

- Celtic:
  A decentralised network of autonomous monasteries; leadership through elected abbots; strong initiative of individual *peregrini* and strong personal charisms.
- Roman Catholic:
  A strictly ordered hierarchy (Pope → bishops → clergy) with territorial dioceses; obedience to the official order.

2) Mission style and practice

- Celtic:
  Invitational and exemplary; preaching from one's own experience, in the local language; "green/white martyrdom" (peregrinatio, hermit life) rather than pressure.

- Roman Catholic:
  More norm-setting and unifying; mission often linked with political and social order; clear expectation that people will be integrated into church structures.

3) Liturgy, rule and doctrine

- Celtic:
  Variety of local rites (for example different baptism practices); rules understood as a voluntary "corset"; teaching grounded in lived experience.
- Roman Catholic:
  Dogmas and rites are defined centrally; uniform norms (as in decisions like Whitby) guarantee liturgical and doctrinal unity.

4) Spirituality and relationship to nature

- Celtic:
  Strong closeness to nature; harmony between inner and outer; saints as peaceful shapers of cultural landscape.
- Roman Catholic:
  Greater emphasis on sacramental and institutional mediation; relationship to nature is less constitutive for the form of devotion.

In the early Middle Ages – that short, poorly documented period often treated as marginal in academic history – we can see a formative phase of European spiritual life. In it lives what Rudolf Steiner later calls "esoteric Christianity": an inner experience of the divine – in us, between us and around us – as a presence in all creation. The rich co-experience of nature, the life in the elements, becomes soul-fullness and inner formative power.

Later this stream was increasingly overlaid by the Roman Catholic system and fitted into its order and structure. This integration was in many ways fruitful, but a tension remained: on the one hand the free, experience-based Christianity of Celtic colouring; on the other the Roman system, which can – in Steiner's sense – be understood as a metamorphosis of older cultural forms reaching back to the Egyptian cultural epoch.

The decisive point is not to see this merely historically or as moving patterns on an "inner map", but as a foundation for European development: a source that still concerns us. Signs of this appear whenever this heritage presses back into consciousness – for example in recent years in anniversary celebrations such as "1300 years of Reichenau Island". Even if individual presentations may seem thin: the symptom is telling. Something wants to be remembered again – the sense that inner experience and the shaping of the world can permeate one another; that spirituality is not escape, but a transformative force that can form culture, landscape and community peacefully from within.

Final Thought – Connection to the Present

In times of crisis it can be healing to look back to our origins. On closer inspection, crises almost always have to do with a search for identity: those who know themselves, who have found inner form and stance, are relatively crisis-resistant. Those who lose their identity become weathercocks in the wind – susceptible to temptations, dead ends and the noise of the outer world.

If we look back at the collapse of the Roman Empire and the birth of a new Europe, we see a key moment that is often overlooked: a good hundred years before Boniface and the Roman-Catholic mission, hundreds of inspired people migrated from the West into central Europe. They brought with them a peaceful, nature-loving Christian impulse that calmed the soul inwardly and shaped nature outwardly without violence.

Large parts of early medieval education grew out of this impulse. The few Roman-Catholic bishops were tied to the cities, yet over ninety percent of the population lived in the countryside – untouched by urban Christianity. The Irish-Scottish messengers of faith worked there through their presence and example. They accepted what was local, learned the dialects and ways of thinking – it is told of Gall, for instance, how quickly he learned the local languages and could preach in people's own speech.

Their manner was far removed from the use of power or system-pressure. It was directed towards the individual, towards inner conviction and deeper understanding – and it allowed processes to take their time. There was no coercion.

Thus what lived in people's souls – among Germanic peoples, for example – could live on and be transformed instead of being fought, as happened more often later. These layers of being still work on in us today, both individually and culturally.

In this we can see a signature: the individual path through sensitive perception and the bringing into harmony of outer and inner experience. Everything that operates primarily with mass, polarisation, party formation, majority and group logic is foreign to the Irish-Scottish spirit. At the same time, the Irish-Scottish saints were very different from one another – a diversity that drove Boniface to despair, for example because the baptism ritual was not performed in exactly the same way everywhere.

This individuality produced many unusual forms, but one thing remained decisive: only what had been experienced personally was preached. That is precisely why it was so accessible and convincing; it was not about applying dogmas, but about bearing witness to a reality that had been lived.

Where such inner peace is found, a human being becomes resilient and can act peacefully. That is the lesson that can support us today: this peace must come from within; it can be won through individualising our experiences. The split between what we say and what we actually carry from lived experience must heal.

Then we free ourselves from the noise of opinions, from parroting and thoughtless repetition; we speak from something deeper. And then outer violence has little power over us: we become less vulnerable to temptations and wrong turns, and the turmoil of the outer world is experienced differently – because it has become quiet inside.