Celtic Christian Spirituality

Celtic Christian Spirituality

Essential writings –
with Introduction and commentary

Mary C. Earle

Foreword by Philip Newell

SPCK

First published in Great Britain in 2012 with permission from
SkyLight Paths Publishing

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
36 Causton Street
London SW1P 4ST
www.spckpublishing.co.uk

Original edition published by SkyLight Paths Publishing,
Woodstock, Vermont 05091, USA. www.skylightpaths.com

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–281–06707–7
eBook ISBN 978–0–281–06708–4

First printed in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press
Subsequently digitally printed in Great Britain

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

For my teachers, especially Dr. V. Nelle Bellamy (1922–2009)
and the Rev. Dr. William B. Green (1927–2011)

Contents

Foreword

A *foreword* is a word before other words. It is a word that prepares the way. If I were to offer one word to prepare the way for the many beautiful words of Mary Earle's *Celtic Christian Spirituality*, it would be "grace-filled." Her words bring to life the essential wisdom of these Celtic texts. Or perhaps the word should be "illuminating," for she throws light on forgotten truths. Or yet again maybe the word should be "heartfelt," for she speaks from her heart as well as from the fine clarity of her mind. So you see, I need to say more than one thing about Mary Earle's offering, for she has brought many gifts to this collection.

First, she keeps reminding us of the essential oneness of life. In the Celtic Christian world, heaven and earth are not divided. Spirit and matter are woven together inseparably. The life of one species and the life of another are never torn apart. The well-being of humanity is viewed in relationship to the well-being of the rest of earth's species. And the health of the individual is not severed from the health of the community. The one and the many belong together. The microcosm and the macrocosm are one. Time and eternity are wedded. Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, says that the devil is a dualist. The devil is forever trying to rip apart what God has joined together. Mary Earle's selections and commentary are an antidote to the dualisms that are dangerously dividing us. She keeps pointing to Celtic Christianity's gift for today, its vision of interbeing.

Second, she does not forget the brokenness of life, the wounds that are deep in the human soul, and the agonies of earth's body and species. To speak of humanity as made in the image of God, and to include texts that point to creation as theophany, is not to slip into naive romanticism.

Anyone who knows Mary Earle's journey knows that the deepest pains of life's struggle and sorrow are not foreign to her. She brings to this work the integrity of holding together a vision of life's sacredness with a full consciousness of life's woundedness. The fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich sees in one of her dreamlike awarenesses of Jesus that he is very handsome because in his countenance there is both joy and sorrow. It is this combination that Mary Earle beautifully brings to her writing.

And third, she never strays far from practice—the practice of prayer, the practice of soul-friending, the practice of pilgrimage, the practice of social justice. Transformation will happen in our lives and world only through practice and practice and practice. This is an essential feature of Celtic Christianity, as it is of any great spiritual tradition. Mary Earle knows this and keeps drawing our attention to the priority of embodied practice. Yes, we must remember the essential oneness and sacredness of everything that has being. Yes, we must look at brokenness straight in the face in our lives and the world. But, if we are to be part of change and healing, we must also find practices that strengthen the deepest yearnings of our being for wholeness. The twelfth-century teacher Hildegard of Bingen speaks of the kiss of choice. Practice is about choosing to be strong for the way of love. Mary Earle casts fresh light on a tradition that is brimful with practice. Her offering is grace-filled, illuminating, heartfelt. It is a blessing.

John Philip Newell

Acknowledgments

Over the years, I have benefited from the teaching and counsel of a variety of scholars who study these texts. I am especially grateful for the kind support of Saunders and Cynthia Davies, John Philip Newell, the late John O'Donohue, Patrick Thomas, Esther de Waal, and the late A. M. Allchin. They have been friends along the way, and have encouraged my own study and prayer. I am grateful to Sister Cintra Pemberton of the Order of Saint Helena of the Episcopal Church for my time with her on pilgrimage to Ireland and Wales.

My editors, Nancy Fitzgerald, Emily Wichland, and Lauren Hill, have answered countless questions and been patient and clear in their responses.

As ever, I am grateful to Doug, my husband, who served as first reader and steady encourager.

Lastly, I give thanks for all my students over the years. Their questions and conversation have enriched my life, focused my study, deepened my prayer, widened my learning. To each of you, thanks. For each of you, thanks.

Introduction

Some twenty-five years ago, when I was finishing up my seminary training and wondering what had happened to my prayer life, one of my mentors, Dr. V. Nelle Bellamy, returned from a trip to England with a gift book for me. Titled *Celtic Prayers* and embellished with illustrations inspired by *The Book of Kells*, an illuminated book of gospels, this little text opened a door for me. While reading that book, and praying those prayers, I went through a spiritual portal into a way of prayer, a way of seeing, a way of practicing the Christian faith. As I voiced the prayers in that volume, prayers from the Hebrides written down in the late nineteenth century, I found that something within me awakened, stirred, began to grow stronger. The aridity that too much speculative theology and doctrinal wrangling had created within me began to dissipate. A sense of faith, living and true, strong and robust, playful and forthright, came through those prayers. I had begun to explore the expression of Christian life and faith found in the Celtic cultures.

Two years later, on the occasion of my ordination to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church, Dr. Bellamy gave me another small book. This one was an anthology of prayers from the lands we know as "Celtic"—Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Brittany, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, and Galicia in Spain. *Threshold of Light*, edited by A. M. Allchin and Esther de Waal, offered a thirty-day rota of prayer for the morning and the evening.[1] The first year of my priestly life, I prayed those prayers daily. They are intrinsically woven into my life as wife, mother, priest, writer, spiritual director, teacher, and retreat leader. Lines from those prayers find their way into conversation, reflection, e-mails, sermons, and journals. They were the first threads of a larger fabric woven within me by reading and studying

the expressions of Christian life and faith found in these lands. These threads are also woven through the gospels and the life of the early Christian church. In this introduction, I invite you to begin reflecting on these themes and the ways in which they enrich the Christian way.

My hope is that you will discover a spiritual path that intentionally encourages attention and care for all of creation. In our present ecological dilemmas, so fraught with anxiety and fear, the Celtic way of seeing God's presence in and through all matter changes our perspective. We are invited to let go of anxiety and to embrace wonder. We find ourselves challenged to handle the creation with a growing awareness of its Source. We discover that no people, no nation, no religion has the final say on distribution of resources and goods, for an infinitely gracious God desires that we emulate God's own generosity. We remember that personal practice and public policy are connected. We seek ways to honor and to respect the sacred Presence that dwells within all matter and in whom we all live. The links between contemplative prayer and compassionate action become clearer. Our minds and our hearts begin to work together for the good of all bodies, whether they be the bodies of humans, creatures, or the Earth itself.

In short, this is a tradition that recalls the radical nature of the message of Jesus. Learning to love God, our neighbor, and ourselves is a life-long journey in which our awareness of the ways in which we are knit together calls the status quo into question. Whether through the lyrical poetry of Wales, the songs of the Hebridean people of Scotland, or Irish devotional poetry, this tradition wakes us up from our complacency, stirs our creativity, and calls us to steadfast practices of faith, hope, and love.

In this volume, I offer you many of the primary texts that have shaped my own life and prayer. They are also the texts that my students have found the most stirring and the most challenging over the twenty-plus years that I've taught this material. In other words, these are texts that have met these criteria: 1) The texts illustrate some aspect of the

Celtic Christian tradition; 2) The texts provoke reflection and prayer; and 3) The texts lead to deepening desire for personal and communal transformation.

Sources and Their Context

In some ways the word "Celtic" is misleading. It leads us to assume that the traditions found in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Brittany, the Isle of Man, and Galicia are uniform. In fact, each country does have its own emphasis. The word "Celtic" is a linguistic term; it signals languages in a particular grouping. For our purposes, "Celtic" signifies both the areas where Celtic languages were and are spoken and the culturally formed spiritualities, historical and contemporary, that are linked to those languages. It is derived from the Greek word *keltoi*, which was used to name the peoples who lived on the fringes of Europe in ancient times.

In the texts that follow, there are selections from Wales, Ireland, and Scotland. Each of these traditions has its own distinct characteristics. Wales, for instance, had a flourishing of court poets and bards in the Middle Ages. Kings and queens sought talented bards who composed beautiful songs of praise, both for the royalty and for God. Some say that in the Welsh tradition it is impossible to pray without also speaking poetry. To this day, the tradition of poetry is alive and flourishing in Wales. Poets such as Ruth Bidgood, Saunders Lewis, R. S. Thomas, Euros Bowen, Waldo Williams, and Bobi Jones demonstrate the vitality and insight of the Celtic Christian spiritual tradition in contemporary contexts. From Ireland we receive prayers and poems marked by lyric qualities, both in the texts from the monastic and hermitic traditions and in the texts from oral tradition. From the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, a robust oral tradition has gifted us with songs and prayers that reflect an intimate awareness of God's presence in every moment and in every aspect of life. This lively Scottish tradition continues in the present day through the liturgies, hymns and prayers published by the Iona Community, a contemporary community of men and women who live a rule of life on the Hebridean island of Iona.

Saint Patrick of Ireland

I have included excerpts from the writings of Saint Patrick, from whom we have received two works, his *Confession* and his *Letter to Coroticus.* Patrick lived in the fifth century and was probably born on the west coast of Britain (though some now say that possibly he was born in Brittany). As a teenager, he was kidnapped by Irish slavers. From a Christian family, Patrick tells us that in the isolation of his time tending the sheep, exposed to the elements and under scrutiny by his master, he prayed with the aid of the Holy Spirit. After receiving a dream in which he was told to seek a ship that would take him to freedom, he set forth, walking all the way to the east coast of Ireland. A ship was in the harbor, and he was allowed to board. His life as a slave was over, but he never forgot being held against his will and living without the freedom he had taken for granted. As a result, his mature theology denounces any attempt to own or destroy another human being. Saint Patrick's voice sounds rather like a liberation theologian's. He is confident that the work of God within us and within society is exemplified by increasing freedom to choose to honor the dignity of every human being. Given his history, Patrick knew in his body and soul the denigration of slavery. His voice is one of the strongest we know in this regard from this early period of church history.

Pelagius

The selections from the writings of Pelagius, who probably came from what is now Wales, were penned in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. For most of Christian history, Pelagius has been regarded as a heretic, because we know of him primarily through the writings of Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE). As Christian theologians asked the question, Why did God become human in Jesus? a variety of responses were offered. One answer maintained that humans had become so permanently and absolutely marred by "original sin" that we no longer bore the image and likeness of God. We humans were incapable of acting justly because our sin had eradicated the image of God within us. The argument

follows that God became human in Jesus to offer atonement for sin on the cross. Augustine's writings clearly expressed despair in the human condition and articulated what became the doctrine of original sin. The corruption of original sin is, according to Augustine, passed from mother to child in the womb. (It is worth remembering that Augustine was writing as the Roman Empire experienced successive invasions from the north of Europe. He witnessed the conquering of an empire that had been the agent of cohesion in the ancient world. In some ways it is not surprising that his own views of humanity are so acutely despairing of the possibility of God-given goodness within the human community.)

Pelagius and his followers, on the other hand, clearly believed that God became human in Jesus to show us what being truly human would look like *and* to declare that the image of God could never be completely eradicated, because God is the one who fashions humanity in God's image. According to Pelagius, we cannot undo that essential dimension of human identity; the image of God within us is indestructible. We are creatures, and we cannot utterly destroy God's essential goodness in bringing forth life and sustaining that life. God continues to make humanity in God's image and likeness. God's grace and mercy are offered at every moment to aid us in growing more capable of reflecting the gracious life of the God who breathes us into being.

This ongoing disagreement over God's purpose in becoming human in Jesus is found throughout church history. It reflects the different ways of regarding God, human life, free will, salvation, and sin. One way in which the argument between Pelagius and Augustine was focused was in the polemic regarding baptism. Augustine maintained that a baby who died without benefit of baptism would not enter heaven. Pelagius adamantly refuted that premise, stating that a baby bears the image of God, and would of course be welcomed by God in eternity.

Upon visiting Rome, and discovering a church that was far too opulent for his ascetical spirit, Pelagius continued to insist on the radical nature of Jesus' life and ministry. Care for the poor; right distribution of wealth;

attention to the sick, the hungry, and those in prison; and kindness to the marginalized were the core of his vision and ministry. In some ways, Pelagius sounds like the prophet Amos of the Hebrew Scriptures. His writing no doubt made others uncomfortable. And his message troubled the ecclesial waters in Rome.

Pelagius was excommunicated and exiled by Pope Zosimus in 418. For centuries, he was known as a heretic. Only when his writings were translated into English, and when scholars began to read what he had actually written, were we able to hear his ongoing proclamation. Pelagius understands that the whole creation is in and of God, and that God infinitely transcends that creation. Because all matter has a divine origin, we have a sacred duty to care for the earth and for one another, and to share equitably the gifts we have been given.

As a native Celt, Pelagius lived in a culture in which women had the right to own property, divorce, study Latin and Greek (which generally was not the case in Europe), and become lawyers and physicians. He taught women with the expectation that they would become equal partners in the spreading of the gospel. Some of the selections of his writings in this volume come from his *Letters.* In those letters, we discover Pelagius's ability to articulate a scandalously vibrant sense of the Incarnation—scandalous because of the profound sense that matter and spirit are inherently compatible, and vibrant in the implications of that for Christian life and practice. It is even more scandalous because he teaches Demetrias, a young woman seeking spiritual counsel, and others this gospel of Jesus that offers full participation and inclusion to women!

John Scotus Eriugena

A ninth-century Irish teacher, Eriugena offers us theology that is both deeply influenced by the early theologians of the Christian east and true to his Irish roots. He spent time in the court of Charles the Bald, who ruled much of what is now France and also became the Holy Roman Emperor. Significantly, Eriugena translated the works of both Dionysius the Are-

opagite (late fifth to early sixth century)[2] and Maximus the Confessor (seventh century)[3] from Greek into Latin. The writings of these two theologians from the Christian east are mystical theologies. In different ways, each of them explores the mystery of the Incarnation.

Dionysius explicated the process of *theosis*: being made in the image and likeness of God, and by our own God-given capacity and the generous, ineffable working of God's grace, humans are transformed steadily into the likeness of God. Dionysius likens this to the process that a sculptor uses—that which is extraneous, which obscures or clutters the essential image hidden in marble, is slowly chipped away by the sculptor. In time, the true image that has been hidden from view is revealed. Something analogous transpires through theosis. We humans participate in the divine energies (not the essence of God, which is beyond our capacity to know or encounter). As we are bathed in the light of these divine energies (like sunlight is to the sun) we are transformed, body, mind, and spirit. (The Christian East has maintained that humanity may participate in the energies, or divine Light, emanating from the infinite God. We cannot, however, ever know God in God's self, for we are finite.) We become the person God intends us to become, humbly assenting to the workings of the Holy Spirit's transforming love within us. This is a deepening journey both into the life of God as Trinity and into the singular personhood that God creates for each of us. Even more astounding, our growth in the likeness of God is a process of divinization. We become Godlike, and our bodies, minds, and spirits are changed by the profound and inexhaustible workings of grace. We become radiant, shining with the glory that is God's own Light.

Maximus the Confessor observed that humans are both "microcosm and mediator." We stand between the worlds of heaven and earth, and yet the two are conjoined within us. Each of us is a little *kosmos*—a little universe in which God dwells. Because of our distinctively human place in the vast design of creation, we have a God-given vocation as mediators. We praise and adore God, and lead the whole earth in singing "Glory to you, God on high." In Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we intercede

Anyone who knows Mary Earle's journey knows that the deepest pains of life's struggle and sorrow are not foreign to her. She brings to this work the integrity of holding together a vision of life's sacredness with a full consciousness of life's woundedness. The fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich sees in one of her dreamlike awarenesses of Jesus that he is very handsome because in his countenance there is both joy and sorrow. It is this combination that Mary Earle beautifully brings to her writing.

And third, she never strays far from practice—the practice of prayer, the practice of soul-friending, the practice of pilgrimage, the practice of social justice. Transformation will happen in our lives and world only through practice and practice and practice. This is an essential feature of Celtic Christianity, as it is of any great spiritual tradition. Mary Earle knows this and keeps drawing our attention to the priority of embodied practice. Yes, we must remember the essential oneness and sacredness of everything that has being. Yes, we must look at brokenness straight in the face in our lives and the world. But, if we are to be part of change and healing, we must also find practices that strengthen the deepest yearnings of our being for wholeness. The twelfth-century teacher Hildegard of Bingen speaks of the kiss of choice. Practice is about choosing to be strong for the way of love. Mary Earle casts fresh light on a tradition that is brimful with practice. Her offering is grace-filled, illuminating, heartfelt. It is a blessing.

John Philip Newell