



Celebration of Creation

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THE CELEBRATION OF CREATION

[The following is from a talk given by the author at a forum on Celtic Christian Ecology & Holiness. It is therefore, presented from the Christian perspective, but what is said regarding Celtic spirituality, ecology and holiness needs to be heard and applied by all of us, professing Christian or not.]

*"Our God is the God of Heaven and Earth, of sea and river, of sun and moon and stars, of the lofty mountain and the lowly valley."*¹

These words of St. Patrick are the essence of Celtic spirituality. A spirituality in which ecology is intrinsically linked with human living and divine blessing. A green spirituality that teaches us that if we are to be fully human -- to fully experience what it means to be created in the image of God -- we must realize and glory in our spiritual connection with all of God's creation. The epic poem of early Christian Ireland, *Saltair na Rann* ("Psalter of the Verses") opens with the majestic psalm of creation where we see God as the Sovereign of creation; the master-craftsman actively and personally functioning in creation as its maker. "Understand, if you want to know the Creator, the created," we are told by St. Columbanus. Nature is to be celebrated as a teacher, given to humankind by God to show forth the holy immanent nature of the numinous.

Celtic spirituality is incarnational. John Scotus Eriugena (810-877), the greatest thinker that the Celtic Church produced, gives to us in his *De Naturae Divisione*, a green theology that emphasizes the immanence of God in nature. Eriugena writes that God is in all things and is the true essence of all things. This, to use Eriugena's favorite word, is *theophany* -- God with us -- not pantheism. Creation, according to Eriugena, echoing earlier Celtic Christians, is not external to God; for with God, the very act of creation makes God *immanently present* in the creation. We might say that in creating, God *ensouls* his immanent presence in his creation.² As confusing as this may be for modern man to grasp, Celtic spirituality never makes the created thing into the Creator. Creation never becomes God. What such theology does mean, however, is that In Celtic Christian spirituality, there is no difference between the natural and spiritual, or as we put it today, between the secular and the sacred. In truth, it would be more proper to say that Celtic spirituality neither secular or sacred exist. All that really exist is holiness with its inherent blessing: Therefore, *all that exist is holy and blessed*. Creation and the divine are intrinsically interwoven in holiness and blessing like a Celtic knot. Life in

its totality is nothing less than a spiritual experience, a sacrament -- the ever-present immanence of the Creator-God. A spirituality that intertwines holiness and blessing, the Creator and the created, can be nothing less than dynamic, connected with the totality of creation, and thoroughly infused with divine power. It is because of this interconnectedness that the Celts ever-sought to live in a relationship of harmony -- of reconciliation -- with the universe. The early Celtic Christians understood that this world, and the things of this world, were created by God with a divine pattern. In this pattern, all of creation had their place, and needed to function in that place to remain in harmony. Our place, according to Celtic spirituality, is that of the Genesis mandate: *To manage as stewards -- care-givers -- the creation in which God has lovingly placed us.*

This understanding of creation and humankind's place in it permeates all of Celtic spirituality; intrinsically melding life and spirituality. Life, for the ancient Celt, was lived according the rhythm of nature. Each day, with its changing rhythm, moved them throughout the year; with its cycles of birth and death and its gradual change of the seasons. Each day's rhythm brought them into the constant awareness of the presence of the numinous. Each day's rhythm reminded that they could -- indeed, had too! -- trust in their gods to protect them from whatever evils lurked nearby. In a life that God and creation are intertwined, in a life that is constantly aware of and dependent upon God, it is only natural that prayer and life, too, become intertwined. Prayer, writes Ester de Waal, for the Celtic "was not a formal exercise; it was a state of mind."³ It was as much doing as saying. Prayers flowed out of the rhythms of nature and work. Prayers which draw us back to that which we in our modern rush have all but forgotten: the symbiotic connection between the re-occurring rhythms of work, religion and nature. The ancient Celtic knew that to keep pace with these rhythms, yes, even to celebrate them, kept them in harmony -- spiritually, physically and mentally -- with their self and creation.

St. Patrick tells us in his *Confessions* (as much a hymn of praise as a confession), that his own personal credo came out of his wrestling with the elements as he met God in prayer. Tradition tells of the pagan daughters of High King of Loaghaire asking St. Patrick: "Who is God? Of whom is God? Where is his dwelling?" The dialogue which followed, became the basis of St. Patrick's credo; celebrating both the Creator and his creation. Certainly a creed much different that the Nicene and other Western creeds:

*Our God, God of all men,
God of heaven and earth, seas and rivers,
God of sun and moon, of all the stars,*

*God of high mountain and lowly valleys,
God over heaven, and in heaven, and under heaven.
He has a dwelling in heaven and earth and sea
And in all things that are in them.*

*He inspires all things, he quickens all things.
He is over all things, he supports all things.*

*He makes the light of the sun too shine,
He surrounds the moon and the stars,
He has made wells in the arid earth,
Placed dry islands in the sea.
He has a Son co-eternal with himself..
And the Holy Spirit breathes in them;
Not separate are the Father and the Son and the Holy
Spirit...⁴*

In his creed, St. Patrick, sounding like King David, celebrates God's handiwork with imagery that speaks not only to the souls his pagan hearers, but to our souls as well. Creation, St. Patrick tells us, is good and to be loved. The earth, and all that is in it, is holy. It is created by God and reflects nothing less than his holy image. It is in this created world, according to St. Patrick, that the divine and the natural come together in mutual blessing.

*Great is the virtue that is in the plants of the ground and
in the fruits of the sea,
were we but to hold them in esteem and turn them to
good use.
O King, great indeed!
The Being of life never set a thing in the creation of the
universe,
but He set some good with it
He never did;
O King, many a good is in the soil of the earth
and in the depth of the sea did we know how to make
use of them.⁵*

Creation, according to this poem from the Outer Hebrides, is a gift, shared with humankind. But that is not all of it: According to the poet, we too, are the gift. We were not created, according to Celtic spirituality, and *then* given the gift of life. It is our very creation that is the gift. Moreover, in our creation, we are shared with the whole of creation, as is creation with us, as a gift. *The Four Ancient Books of Wales* (14th c. Welsh) contain a poem that, while addressing the Creator, presents nature as the "mystical cousin" of humankind. In this poem the four traditional elements of nature, e.g., air, fire, water and earth, are combined to re-create these elements into three elements of perception. Air and water are combined to become the felt

mist. Fire and air become the warm south wind. Air, water, fire and earth all combine to become the fragrant fragile flower. This is Celtic theophany at its best: To fully appreciate our divine image we must, according to the poet, allow ourselves to both fully *perceive* the divinely appointed inter-connection of nature and to fully *experience* through the divine gift of perception, the fullness of God's creation. Creation, perceived and experienced, in the view of Celtic spirituality, is surely cause for celebration. For the Celtic peoples their well-being, healing and spiritual blessing were intrinsically connected with how they perceived and experienced God's creation. If wise care was given to creation, much good could be gained; however, the exploitation of creation would cause creation herself to withdraw her bounty. This was the way the Creator had patterned it as he created.

The basic question of Celtic mythology is "Why do we suffer?" Quite simply, we suffer because the wholeness of Creation has been shattered, leaving us fragmented. Suffering is the pain Creation experiences while in search of its wholeness. In primordial Celtic mythology, it was the numinous Oran Mór, the Great Melody, that sung a holy whole creation into existence. And in the vernacular of Celtic mythology we are informed that this holy whole world, the Original Paradise, has been shattered and divided into This-World and the Other-World⁶, and the separated worlds suffer from the strain of the fragmentation. In Celtic spirituality the numinous is actively at work making This-World and the Other-World into an integrated whole, and we, as divinely-created creatures, are to be involved with the Divine as co-creators. God's creative work is bringing about a world restored to its original purpose: A world that is not only integrated and whole, but a world that also integrates and heals. Although not the world of much of modern Christian tradition, it is the world of the Celtic Church and of St. Paul, who writes that creation now waits with groanings and travails, its re-creation (Romans 8: 20 - 22). St. John in his Apocalypse writes of a new heaven and a new earth with its healing river and its Tree of Life (21:1 - 22:5). This is re-created Paradise.

Celtic spirituality understands that a world made whole, even potentially, is a world where the divides and barriers cease to exist; both within this world, and between this world and the divine. This is a world reconciled, not only potentially, but in a real sense, in the present moment. This concept of a reconciled world was lived out by the Celts, every day: They communed with nature and the creatures of nature, and conversed with angels and saints long dead. The twelfth century Welsh poet Gwenallt writes:

*There is no barrier between two worlds in the Church,
The Church militant on earth*

*Is one with Christ triumphant in heaven,
And the saints are in this Church which is two in one.
They come to worship with us, our small congregation,
The saints of our oldest ancestors...*

Gwenalt goes on to tell of St. Dewi (David), who...

*Put the holy vessels on the kitchen table
With bread from the pantry and wine from the cellar,
And
He stood behind the table like a tramp
So as not to hide from us the winder of the sacrifice.
And after Communion we had a talk round the fire
And he spoke to us of God's natural order.⁷*

Today we live in a world that is exploited and polluted, and anything but reconciled. A world that has lost its vision for the holiness of creation and with it has lost its commitment to the dignity of human life. Nature, and life itself, has become a commodity to be exploited and bargained with. We live in a world that has lost its sense of well being, lost its connectedness to the Creator. Perhaps, the English theologian, H. J. Massingham, is right when he speculates that if the Celtic Church had survived, "it is possible that the fissure between Christianity and nature, widening through the centuries, would not have cracked the unity of western man's attitude toward the universe."⁸

It has been said that we have lost our sense of connectedness because we live in the age of individualism. An age when every man exists solely for himself, and all things — all creation — exist solely to gratify the self. This is not Celtic spirituality. For the Celt, all of creation was held in trust, by the whole, for the good of the whole. The Celt knew the need to be an integral part of the whole -- to be in harmonious reconciliation with the whole -- in order to be whole themselves. All, even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, were part of a common creation. What the ancient Celtic knew, and we are just re-discovering for ourselves, is that when we learn to be reconciled with creation, we are able to be reconciled with our self. And paradoxically, the more we are reconciled with our self, the better able we are to be reconciled to all else, and above all, our Creator.

Reconciliation of creation, for Celtic spirituality, is the "at-one-ment" when all of creation becomes wholly united within itself and with the Other-World, and thus, with the numinous. For the Celtic Church this is through Christ. For the Celtic Christian, Christ, the Word, was identical to that divine Breath of the Oran Mór which moved over the Waters, and together created. St. John, who deeply influenced Celtic Christian spirituality, with his understanding of the numinous

Word, put it clearly when he tells us that the Word which made Creation, became flesh to save Creation. In Creation, God is revealed as a Friend who lovingly cares for all of his creation. Creation is a sacrament, and as a sacrament, the created universe is a visible sign of the caring love of God. It is only nature, then, as a unknown ninth century Welsh poet writes,

*He who made the wonder of the world
Will save us,
Has saved us!*

It had to be. A loving Creator could do nothing else.

In Celtic spirituality, God is not alone in reconciling re-creation. John Scotus Eriugena reminds us, that for the Christian, not only did the Word become flesh, but that the Word is also within each of the Created. Humankind's role as a gift to creation, is that we are co-creators with the Creator. As co-creators with God, reconciliation of all creation, not just humankind, becomes our task. St. Paul writes, "... and (God) gave us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18b)." We become involved as co-creators when we become *care-givers* to God's creation. It is our co-creativity with God that we celebrate in the mystery of the Eucharist. Here is the blood and body of Christ. Here is "at-one-ment". Here is nothing more than common bread and common wine. It is here in the mystery of the Eucharist that nature loses its finiteness. In the Eucharist, as Ester de Waal writes, for the Celtic Christian, the "whole universe became one whole, in which past and present, heaven and earth, are embraced" in entirety.⁹ Each becoming mutually and timelessly embraced in the other, and the whole in God. The mystery of the Eucharist, in Celtic spirituality makes it impossible to live with one foot in heaven and one foot on earth. Celtic spirituality demands that we live with both feet in heaven, and simultaneously, live with both feet on earth. This is the paradox of Celtic Christianity, but is not this also the paradox of Christianity itself? St. Paul writes that we are ambassadors of the Kingdom of Heaven in a foreign land. Yet, while St. Paul, not wrongly, saw this foreign land as the abode of evil; the Celtic spirituality, not wrongly either, sees it in the view of how God created it, good, as well as in the potential goodness, yet to come. That to which the Eucharist in its mystery celebrates:

*The reredos
Was not a decorative work of art
Full of Church symbols,
But clear glass
With the danger
Of drawing our attention*

Away from the things that are proper to the communion table.

*For in the transparency
The green blueness of the earth
Was branching in the sight of the morning,
The flowing of the river was a blossoming,
The sky was a joyous flight. And the sunlight
Enflamed the clouds.*

*And I noticed
The priest's eyes
As if he were unknowingly
Putting his hands
On these gifts,
As if these gifts of nature
Were
The bread and the wine¹⁰.*

¹ Patrick, trans. Harney, Martin, *The Confession of St. Patrick*, (Boston: St. Paul, 1972).

² This idea, while alien to the Western Church, is embedded in the theology of the Eastern Church through Gregory of Nyssa and Basil the Great.

³ de Waal, Ester, *Every Earthly Blessing*, (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1991). p. 21.

⁴ Patrick, trans. Harney, Martin, *The Confession of St. Patrick*, (Boston: St. Paul, 1972).

⁵ *Carmina Gadelica*, IV

⁶ See Mills, F., "And There Was A Song...", BRIGIT'S FEAST, Imbolc, 1998, Vol. 2, No. 2, p.4.

⁷ Gwenaelt, *Eples*, (Gomer Press, 1951.)

⁸ Massingham, H. J. *The Tree of Life*, (London: Chapman & Hall, 1943.)

⁹ de Waal, Ester, *Every Earthly Blessing*, (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1991). p. 131

¹⁰ Bowen, Euros, Trans. Rev. James Coutts, *Detholion Yr Academi Cymraeg*, 1984: quoted by De Waal, op cited p. 130.