

On Celtic Christianity

A wide-ranging interview with the editor of BRIGIT'S FEAST, Frank A. Mills

B.F.: I've been looking forward to this interview. First, a question I am sure a lot of readers are asking, what exactly is the Celtic Church?

Frank: The Celtic Church was that branch of Christianity that existed in the British Isles and, to some extent, on the European continent, mostly in the Rhine Valley, Brittany and Spanish Galicia. Christianity in these lands shared certain ritual practices differing from the rest of Christianity, as well as a common culture and linguistic heritage. On occasion we hear mention to the Old British Church, the Old Irish Church, the Gallic Church, or the Mozarabic Church in reference to a particular aspect of the Celtic Church. Such reference points out that although the so-called Celtic Church held certain forms in common, there were also considerable differences, and in many ways the term "Celtic Church" is a misnomer. The aforementioned "Churches" are really terms designating ritual. Rituals having much in common, and often lumped together as "Gallic," or "Celtic," however, even a cursory study shows considerable difference. The Mozarabic, for example has some Moorish elements in it, which at the very least makes it "late Celtic."

B.F.: Some would argue that we should include the Galatians of Asia Minor, the recipients of St. Paul's epistle of the same name.

Frank: I do like that notion, but it has to be admitted that such inclusion is merely speculative. What we do know about the Galatian Church comes primarily from the fourth century St. Jerome and seems far more Eastern Church than other "Celtic Churches." Whether the church at Galatia held "Celtic" forms in common with Celtic Christians elsewhere is highly debatable, but if even a little bit true, it would make the basis for an interesting rereading of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatian Church. Jerome does tell us that in his time the Celtic language was still being spoken in Galatia. Other writers of the period also comment on the "Celtic nature" of the Galatians. Of course, there are those biblical scholars who claim that Paul's epistle was not even written to the ethnic Galatians of Galatia, but to Greek, Roman and Jewish Christians who lived in eastern Galatia.

B.F.: You seem to be putting the phrase "Celtic Church" in quotes.

Frank: That's true. There's really a couple of different ways to approach the question of the existence of such a Church. Generally, when we use the phrase "Celtic Church" we are referring to a branch of Christianity that was generally independent of either the Eastern or Roman branches of Christianity. This is not to say, however, that such a Church did not share much in common with her sister Churches. Specifically, the phrase usually refers to a period of time extending from the introduction of Christianity into the British Isles to almost the end of the twelfth century. From extant records we know that the Celtic Church sent representatives to the various councils of the pre-schismatic Church. For further reading I would suggest Louis Gougaud's *Christianity in Celtic Lands* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1992). Originally published in 1932, Gougaud is a bit dated, but still a classic in its field. [Reviewed in this issue of BRIGIT'S FEAST, ed.]

B.F.: How did Christianity come to the British Isles?

Frank: Well, legend has it that Joseph of Arimathea, shortly after the Crucifixion, arrived in Glastonbury bearing with him the chalice of Jesus' Last Supper. We are all familiar with the legends that have sprung up around this idea. While most of them are rather dubious, it does point to the fact that the British Isles were on the tin trades routes. Joseph, according to tradition, was a tin trader. This being the case, it is a possibility that Christianity came first to Britain from Antioch, rather than Rome. There are those, of course, who make the argument that Christian Roman soldiers introduced Christianity into the British Isles. Whatever the truth of the matter, and there is probably some truth in both claims, much of the argument is politically motivated. And of course there are those who recreate a nostalgic church, blissfully ignoring anything negative. It seems that everyone wants to claim the Celtic Church as his or her own creation. Isn't amazing what a fad will do, considering that not all too long ago, only a few scholars cared?

I want to go back to the idea of the Galatian Church being Celtic for a moment. It can be demonstrated that Celts in Anatolia traded with the Celts in Britain long before the coming of Christianity. Could it not be possible that it was the Celtic Galatians that first brought Christianity to the land? I think that the question deserves more research, but it is intriguing.

B.F.: Are there major theological differences between the Celtic Christianity and other forms of Christianity?

Frank: We need to answer the theological cautiously. Celtic Christianity is essentially a mystical Christianity, rather than dogmatic. It is this

characteristic, which permeates the entirety of Celtic spirituality, that appeals to contemporary culture, and, I believe, is fueling our present faddish interest in things Celtic.

When we discuss Celtic Christian theology, the term “theology” takes on a different meaning from the one we usually assign to it; that of dogma. Celtic Christianity as a mystical expression has no dogmatic theology, but that is not to say that it does not have a “theology of mysticism.” Therefore, we must be careful to first define what it is that we mean; secondly, make valid comparisons based on our definition; and lastly, and perhaps most crucial, recognize that the dogma of contemporary Christianity is considerably different than the dogma of early Christianity. We must make our comparisons to theologies contemporary to the Celtic Church and not to those of the Church today, be it Roman, Eastern, or even Protestant. If we make the latter comparison, we will find many differences, some of which will become evident as we continue.

When we look at the theology of the Celtic Church and compare it to the theology of her sister Churches, we will find that Celtic Christianity few theological differences existed, and what differences did exist had more to do with differences in individual interpretation, in which one became the accepted norm, such as with controversy between the British theologian Pelagius, with his emphasis on free will, and St. Augustine of Hippo, with his emphasis on Grace. While considered a heretic in the Roman Church, Pelagius is known as St. Morgan in the Eastern Church, and his theology was never condemned as heretical by any unified Church synod. The theology of John Scotus Eriugena is another example. Although his theology is considered by some to be heretical, he shares much with the later “orthodox” St. Francis. The problem was simply that the Roman Church failed to realize the mystical nature of Celtic Christianity. Which, by the way, a failure many perpetuate today.

Apart from the “problem” with Pelagius, the real areas of difference were in polity. Unfortunately, the Roman faction at the Synod of Whitby (which officially brought to an end the Celtic Church in Britain in 664) confused differing polity with theology.

B.F.: If there were differing polities and emphasis, would not such differences imply the existence of a “Church?”

Frank: Maybe the problem is in how we define the word “Church.” More often or not, the use of the word “Church” refers to an organized body of

Christians, such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, or the Presbyterian Church. On occasion we use it the sense of a larger body of believers organized according to a particular perspective, such as the Catholic, Orthodox (or Eastern), and Protestant Churches. In this latter sense, we could conceivably group Celtic Christians together as a "Church," if we remember that they were not formally organized in such a way. In this sense, it might be more proper to say the "Irish Church," or the "British Church," as evidence seems to suggest a rudimentary form of ecclesiastical structure with these groups, even when the Irish or British monks labored away from home. Be that as it may, I find no evidence in my research to suggest that Celtic Christians, however they were organized, thought of themselves as a Church apart from other forms of Christianity.

"Church" is most properly defined as the *Body of Believers*, and the Celtic Church had a profound sense of belonging to a larger family, the family of God -- that Church above all ecclesiastical structure -- the Church Universal. The Celtic Christian was deeply concerned about finding his or her personal place in the corporate Body of Christ: not in the sense of what they may gain from it, but how they might bless the Church Universal, which for the Celtic Christian encompasses Creation herself.

Theology may indeed give rise to a system of faith, dogma, but at its very heart, theology is not a system but a way of personally understanding one's place in the Church Universal. Don't, however, confuse, "personal" with "individualistic," especially in thinking about Celtic Christianity. Celtic Christianity is at its heart, corporate. And this being the case, we need to be ever careful that we remember this when we explore Celtic Christianity either as a "Church," or her "theology of mysticism."

B.F.: What about those saints of the Celtic Church that we refer to as "bishop?" Saints such as Brigit, Kevin, and Colman? Do not bishops imply an ecclesiastical structure?

Frank: The Celtic Church was a monastic Church and it was her love for monasticism that brought about her rapid growth. As a "monastic Church," Celtic Christianity had little, or no, structure beyond her monastic foundations. What it did have was collegiate (linear) and not hierarchical, except within individual foundations. Each bishop was considered a bishop among many (including the Roman Pope), and had oversight over his own monastery and daughter monasteries and convents wherever they existed. We often think of the Celtic Bishop-Saint as being abbot of particular abbeys. However, this was not always the case. Often abbots were those nobles who

financially underwrote the foundation. A careful reading of the *Lives* of the Celtic Bishop-Saints will show that many were part of royal families. In addition, quite a few foundations solely dependent upon a noble and fully independent of any other foundation existed in the British Isles, especially Britain. In such cases, the "Bishop" was appointed by the noble, a practice not uncommon throughout the Celtic Church, or Christianity, where kings used their power to secure the advancement of favorites and the disposing of enemies.

When we use the term "monastery," we must be careful not to picture in our minds our modern conceptions of monasteries. The Celtic monastic tradition was much closer to Mediterranean villas in layout than our modern conception of monasteries. This should not surprise us as the monastic tradition arrived into Britain via the Eastern-churched John Cassian and St. Martin of Tours, who drew heavily on the monastic tradition of the Desert Fathers. Celtic monasteries often were dual, that is, co-ed; frequently inhabited by entire families. Bishops, monks, and nuns may or may not have been married. Some even had lovers. St. Brigit, it is said, took a young nun, who in time became her successor, to her bed to "warm it." One of the reasons for the reform-minded Culdee movement was the prevalence of Celtic monks to have multiple concubines.

B.F.: Where were there female bishops? Wasn't St. Brigit a bishop?

Frank: Although it has been hotly debated, I think we can make a case for at least St. Brigit. And if one female was consecrated bishop, why not others? It is a fact that in the Celtic Church, both men and women served the Eucharistic as priests.

Consecration of Celtic bishops was a sore point with the Roman Church. Roman protocol was often disregarded. Celtic Bishops appointed their own successors often without the "required three," without any consensus among other bishops, and sometimes even as a slap in the face to other Bishops. In the Roman Catholic mind this made them less than orthodox, with questionable "Apostolic succession" to boot. The Celtic Church, quite frankly, was pretty freewheeling when it came to organization. Sometimes it seems as if they made the "rules" as they went along. We tend to want to forget this as we go about "recreating" the Celtic Christianity, and much more research needs to be done in this area. Toward that end, may I suggest that Lisa M. Bitel's *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990.) [*Isle of the Saints* is reviewed in this issue of BRIGIT'S FEAST, ed.], and excellent

treatise in this regard is Allison Carroll's *The Case for 'Celtic Church': Further Considerations*, which is available online at < <http://wheel.dcn.davis.ca.us/~lacarrol/thesis.html>>.

B.F.: I want to ask you more about what you call the "mystical theology" of Celtic Christianity. Will you elaborate?

Frank: When I was in seminary I took several classes in dogmatics, which my Catholic dictionary defines as "a truth proposed by the Church for our belief as an article of divine revelation. The logic is, that if a certain dogma is a Truth revealed by God, then it must be obeyed. All too often though, "dogma" has come to mean an arbitrary doctrine imposed seemingly without reason. Further, what are the criteria to determine "revealed Truth," and who has the right to determine the criteria? This is essentially the question that precipitated the Reformation. The fact is that certain dogmas are imposed or rejected, not without reason, but according to reason that meets our own set of preconceived criteria. Our preconceived determines our dogma, and our applied theology, or ethics. It is this idea of criteria that separates Celtic Christianity. Dogma, as it has become, is about theologically defending how we choose to live as a Christian. Celtic Christians were not practitioners of a dogmatic theology. Celtic "theologians" were mystics, not proponents of dogma. Whatever criteria they followed, were personal and grew out of intimate mystical experiences with both God and Creation and was fluid and elastic. This is as true for Eriugena and St. Columba as it is for the Celtic druids. For the Celtic Saints theology was not about creating dogma, but about how God is practically experienced in every day matters.

Now, as Celtic Christians saw Christianity in corporate terms, it may appear to the outsider that Celtic Christianity had a unified theology. However, what is really being observed is how God mystically functions within the Church universal, albeit from the Celtic perspective. Ironically, what we are observing is true dogma, an article of divine revelation. It is not revealed, however, in a theological formula, but an experiential revelation. Celtic Christianity, I believe, had no desire to translate their mystical experiences into binding dogma.

B.F.: In the context of experiential revelation, can we arrive at beliefs that define Celtic Christianity?

Frank: Yes, but remember, our context is experiential, thus what we are doing is trying to shift out a set of "understanding" and beliefs that speak to the experience without our having the experience. We also need to

remember that the experiential was, and must continue to be, interpreted in the milieu of authentic Celtic culture. Therein is the rub. What is authentic Celtic culture? We need to leave that for another time, but it is safe to say, that much of what we see in today's Celtic faddism is not authentic to the Celts of the period we are examining. Lastly, we need to understand, that Celtic Christians did not see their new faith as a departure from the Old Ways, or a synergism of the Old Ways with the new, but as an authentic continuation of the Old Way reborn as Christianity. This is no different from how the first Christians viewed Christianity and Judaism.

This said; we are able to arrive at some idea concerning the "mystical theology" of Celtic Christians.

The Celts of old believed that the primordial God sang Creation into existence and that this divine melody permeates - present tense - all of Creation, continuing its song even today. This divine melody, known to the Celts as the Oran Mór, is nothing less than Wisdom, Grace and Faith: all strains of one holy melody. To the Celtic Christian, Christianity is not a theory, or a dogma, or even the foundation of an organization— *Christianity is being overwhelmed by God!* For the Celtic Christian, Christianity is hearing and knowing the divine melody. To hear and know the divine melody is to experience God. To put it in Celtic parlance, the mystical experience of God is *enChantment*, and its theology is the "*the theology of enchantment*." The emphasis is on the middle syllable *chant*. "Chant" should be capitalized, for it is the Oran Mór, the sung image of God within.

B.F.: Whoa! The Oran Mór is the "sung image of God?" I thought the image of God had to do with God breathing into us at creation. If I understand you correctly, you are saying that the same song that God created with is his image? I'm confused.

Frank: Man is the breath of God. "I was fashioned out of clay," says Job. "God's breath it was that made me, the breathing of Shaddai (the Almighty) gave me life (Job 33:4). Moving from the "first birth" to the "second birth" of Christianity, John writes, "(Jesus) breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit (Jn. 20:22).'" It is Breath, the Breath of God in Christ Christians believe, that revives the divine Image within, just as the Breath of God revived the dry bones of Ezekiel's vision (Ez. 37: 2-10).

B.F.: Can we put words to the divine Breath? Does not a song have words? In fact, we've published your version of the Oran Mór in previous issues of BRIGIT'S FEAST. How can mere words be God's image?

Frank: What we have published as the Oran Mór is not the Holy Melody. It's nothing more than a poem I wrote to express the work of the original Oran Mór.

In the sense of what we usually understand the word, "word," to mean, the Oran Mór does not have words. It is at its simplest, a sound created by the breathing out of the divine breath. This really is too simple of an answer, though.

B.F.: Why doesn't that surprise me?

Frank: In Celtic myth, sound is the primordial God's supreme gift of friendship to Creation. Sound, the ancient Celts believed, took its meaning from within its very sound – *how it was sounded* – not from whatever meaning we externally apply. Language, the ability to communicate, then, is the coming together of certain sounds with their intrinsic meaning in a divinely prescribed, or *sounded*, manner. Following this logic, we can then say that the Oran Mór does have words, in the sense that it creatively communicated to, or joined with, the primordial waters to bring about Creation. It also effectively communicates to us today, although the hearing is within. The Oran Mór is the word of God.

B.F: "Word" in what sense? Do I hear you implying that the Oran Mór is the *Logos*," the Christ?

The creative energy is not something that God created. For example, when we breathe out, we "create" the breath coming out. Yet, even here, our breath already pre-exists, co-existent, within us and intrinsically, wholly us. More than just a part of us, it is our essential self. Medicine will tell us that breath in the form of oxygen and water is who we intrinsically are. Likewise, the Divine Breath as it is breathes out becomes the Creative Breath, or creative energy. Nevertheless, the Divine Breath is co-existent with God, and fully God. The Eastern Church has a name for the uncreated, creative Divine Breath (or Energy): Grace.

If the Divine Energy, or Breath, is intrinsically God, then can we not say that the sound that the Breath makes as it is exhaled by God is *Logos*, or Christ? Is not Christ called the Divine Word? The Apostle John writes in his

gospel, a gospel most loved by Celtic Christians, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" Literally, in intent, the phrase, "(the) Word was with God," in the original Aramaic (as well as the Greek), means, "the Word was breath to breath God." If we substitute "of" for "to" we get a better sense of the meaning. What I like about this is that it equates Christ with the divine creative song! The anonymous writer of Hebrews seems to have understood this in applying the words Psalm 102: 25-27 to Christ: "*In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundation of the earth...*(Hebrews 1:10)." Moreover, the divine Word, the *Logos*, is Grace; that which the apostle Paul calls the "*gift of God.*" The Apostle John writes, *For God so loved that he gave his only begotten Son,*" whom John has already equated with the *Logos*.

B.F.: In Genesis, we read that God breathed his Image into mankind. Are you saying then, that the Image is the Oran Mór?

Frank: Yes, but we must not separate the Oran Mór from the *Logos*. We Christians often refer to St. John's gospel as the "Gospel of Love," for Celtic Christianity it was the "Gospel of Breath" — "The Gospel of the Oran Mór.

B.F.: It's hard for me to make the leap, because in my mind, Christ is Jesus.

Frank: It is a problem common to all of us. Perhaps it would be easier for us if we conceptually think instead of "Christ is Jesus," *that Jesus is the Christ*, or the Word incarnate. Jesus is the *Logos'* earthly packaging, and as such is a finite image. The *Logos* on the other hand is infinite and beyond any true comprehension. This, of course, is true also, for our Oran Mór image, although I believe it comes closer to the overall "image" of the *Logos*. The *Logos* as we have demonstrated from scriptures is the Divine Breath. For Celtic Christians the mystical name of the *Logos* is Oran Mór.

Let me quickly insert here, that undoubtedly I am putting words into the mouth of Celtic Christianity. I am not sure that Celtic Christians made this connection at least in these terms. Nevertheless, even a quick survey of the literature produced by Celtic Christianity more than hints at a realization of the truth of the idea I'm suggesting.

Celtic Christians had no problem with accepting Jesus as the Word, or the as the "visible language of the primordial God," and in equating the "visible language" and the primordial God as one and the same. In Celtic pre-Christian spiritual thought, the gods and goddesses constantly took upon

themselves the shapes of Creation and communed with the creatures of Creation. We should note here, that in Celtic myth, although there appears to be a plethora of Celtic gods, they were understood by the ancient Celts, to be essentially One with a primal tripartite nature: Father, Mother and Child. This is exactly how the Eastern Church traditionally describes the Trinity. In the Celtic scheme, each primal nature is in itself tripartite. The Mother, for example, is muse, nursemaid and wise hag.

Following the logic of "visible language," Jesus as The Logos, or Christ, is another manifestation (at least for those who accepted Christianity) of the primordial One, specifically, the primal Child-God. In Scots Gaelic, the primordial One is known as *Cruitear*, "the one who harps." The Scots Gaelic word for "harp" is *cruit*, and is derived from the root meaning "to crowd, or gather together into one." *"And God said (breathed), 'Let the water under the sky be gathered together in one place, and let dry ground appear.' And it was so. God called the dry ground, 'land,' and the gathered waters he called 'seas' (Genesis 1:9,10)."* If we remember, that according to Celtic myth not only did God give the sound, he also gave the instrument with which to play the sound, the *cruit*, or harp, then biblical references such as Revelation 15:2 take on new meaning: *"They held the harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God: The song of the Lamb."* The Lamb, here is the Logos. What was the "Song of Moses?" It's found in Exodus 15. Of importance to us is verse 2, "The Lord is my strength and *my Song*." We see the same idea repeated by the Prophet Isaiah (12:2).

I think one of the gifts of Celtic Christianity to the contemporary Church is its emphasis on mysticism; an emphasis if rightly followed will help us to rediscover the mystical nature of the Hebrew Prophets. And when we do so, we will find that they were not prophets of doom, as we are so quick to make them, but prophets - proponents, if you will - of the experiential life in God, of living in the full realization of the divine Image.

The Song *is* the Lord. Although, we have lost it, the Hebrew Fathers and prophets understood, hear, and personally "knew" the Song. It is the basis of all Judaic mystical thought. The Celts of old, pagan and Christian, stood right alongside the ancient Hebrews with their understanding of the Oran Mór being simultaneously and fully both God *and* the Breath, or *Logos*, of God. It is the Oran Mór that's breathed into us as the Image of God. *"And God said let us make man in our own image, in our likeness ... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female (Genesis 1:26,27)."* *"And the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the Living Breath, and man became a*

living being (2:7)." In us intrinsically, from our very creation, is the divine Image, the Breath of God, the Oran Mór. The Oran Mór is who we are. The Oran Mór is the Divine Energy moving through us as Grace that animates us as living beings.

B.F.: It give a whole new understanding to "For by Grace are you saved through faith, it is a gift of God (Eph 2:8)," doesn't it?

Sound, if you remember, according to Celtic myth, is the primordial God's supreme gift of friendship. Here is that gift, both Grace and Word. Did you know that the root of our English word, "faith," is Old Gaelic? The root is *fios*, meaning knowledge. The *faithi*, are literally "those who sing knowledge." The *faithi* were both the druids of the Celtic Old Way and the saints of the New Way. The *sidh* (pronounced *fiid*) is both the home of the Tautha de Danann, or the gods, and the place where Wisdom, or true knowledge, originates. *fiid* gives us the English "faith" and the Latin *fides*. Literally, then, "faith" is the "song of true knowledge." As a verb, "faith" is the act of singing the "song of true knowledge." What is the song of true knowledge? Nothing other than the Oran Mór. There is so much more that we could say about all of this, but before we move on, I do want to give the words to my rendering of the Oran Mór, which remember, as I've have cast the song is only a description of the Holy Melody's divine, creative work.

Quiet—

Eternal Quiet.

Not even the sound of the restless, stirring, dark waters could be heard.

Then, a great spiraling strain of Melody moved across the endless waters.

Subdued at first,

then quickly gathering momentum until it reached a great crescendo.

And, then, there was Life!

But the Melody did not stop.

It continued its song,

filling all of Creation with its divine harmony.

And so it continues today,

for all those who listen.

B.F.: I always am moved when I hear those words. If nothing else, they say that God is actively involved with us.

Frank: Yes, but... Celtic Christianity places an interesting caveat here. Christianity is about being friends with God. In Celtic Christianity we start out as God's friends, not estranged from God. There is no such thing as inherited, original sin in Celtic Christianity. Everything is created holy and blessed – Friends of God. The choice to remain in friendship with God is fully our own. God has provided us with every gift to make the choice easy. Nevertheless, we can, and we do, choose to negate the friendship.

B.F.: But why would we do such a thing? From what we've seen, at least according to Celtic Christianity, we're not lacking faith.

Frank: What we are lacking is not “faith” as a noun, but “faith” as a verb. I think we choose not to be God's friend, not because we lack faith, but because we are afraid of our faith and what it demands it will make of us. Friendship is a scary thing! It demands much, not because we have to, but because we want to. Faith, as a verb, will make us change our ways. It will demand that we give up our life to the creative work of the Holy Song. And quite frankly, we don't want to. I think that we've listened to the song of modern culture too long: so many materialistic things clamoring for friendship, to be loved. We can no longer hear and recognize the Oran Mór over the din. Nevertheless, the Oran Mór has not ceased her holy singing.

B.F.: What's wrong with “self?” Should we not esteem our “selves?”

Frank: The real question is where do we find our self-esteem? Does it come from the ego, or from when we paradoxically give up our self to discover the divine Image within, our True Self. It's all about which “self” is real? That which we perceive on this temporal plane, or that which we (re)discover on the spiritual plane? The real purpose of Celtic myth was not to make up stories to explain events, but to provide stories that explained how we lost our true selves and how to go about rediscovering it. The Celtic Christian pilgrimage, *peregrinatio*, was about discovering one's place of spiritual resurrection. To be resurrected, we first have to die. And once resurrected, to move on to discover a new place of resurrection by dying once again. This is Celtic Christianity's definition of conversion – experiencing the places of resurrection – and sanctification – the movement toward resurrection. Glorification is the discovery of the Last Resurrection. Each death and resurrection is to participate in Christ's death and resurrection as Friend.

B.F.: In practical terms, how do we exercise our faith? How and where do we discover our places of death and resurrection?

Frank: Celts, both of the Old Way and the Way of Christ believed, if Pelagius is any example, that to at least some extent, God leaves us up to our own devices. Why not? We have in us the divine Image, which is the Breath of God (Spirit of God), Grace and faith from our birth. If we have the Oran Mór, the Image of God, within, then we have the ability of our own will to choose, or not to choose, to be friends with God. God is not going to manipulate the scales to make friendship happen. He is not going to force us into the friendship, nor will he punish us if we are not his friends. I believe this is what Pelagius was getting at when he wrote of our own ability to find salvation in ourselves. Not that we do not need to avail ourselves of the Grace of God, but that the Grace is already present, as is faith. We might say that God doesn't save us, we save ourselves by availing the free Gift of God: Word, Grace and faith. But then again, is this not the work of Grace? Pelagius with his theology of will took nothing away from Paul. Unfortunately for Pelagius, Augustine didn't see it this way.

B.F.: What then does God expect of us?

Frank: God expects, *demand*s, nothing. God does, however, *desire* our friendship. Now, friendship has certain responsibilities. Friends will want to live in that becomes their friendship, but they are not forced to do so. However, if they don't, as we know, the friendship suffers immensely. In the Genesis creation story, we are told that we humans were created to be stewards of God's Creation. It is here, according to Celtic Christianity, that we become co-creative with God. It is as if God needs us to guarantee the holiness of his creation. If so, we have truly screwed up!

Celtic spirituality teaches that God's Image, the Oran Mór is within all Creation. If this is true, we have pillaged and raped God!

B.F.: I agree with you that we have certainly pillaged and raped creation. However, to say that in doing so "we've pillaged and raped God." Isn't that a bit strong. It seems to me to verge on pantheism?

Frank: Creation is not God, but is charged, or enfused, with God's holiness – with his Image. We have been, off and on, referring to God's Breath. There is an interesting observation made by the Psalmist that is apropos to our discussion: "By the Word of Yahweh the heavens were made, their whole array by the *breath of his mouth* (Ps. 33:6)." Here is the existential mysticism of the Desert Fathers proclaiming the God's grandeur – Image – reflected from within all of Creation. For all Celts, the creatures of Creation

are "brothers and sisters and cousins." Here is St. Francis singing, "Sister Moon ... Brother Wind ... Sister Water ... Brother Fire," in his *Canticle of Creation*. To plunder Creation is the spiritual equivalent of incest, worse yet, if Creation is charged with God, then to plunder Creation is to rape God. Certainly not a way that a true friend acts! St. Columba instructed his monks to ask permission of a tree before cutting it down, and to delay cutting it down long enough for God's Image in the tree to find another abode. While this might be a bit primitive in thought, there is nothing primitive, or unbiblical, about recognizing that God's Image is to be found in the tree.

B.F.: So then, stewardship for the Celtic Christian is being a "friend of Creation," a friendship that flows out of our friendship with God.

Frank: The ancient Celts would say that being a true friend, whether a friend of Creation, or of God, is about the giving and receiving Blessing. Or to keep it in the context of the Oran Mór, it is about singing the Holy Melody. This is true stewardship.

A wonderful thing about Celtic song is that it involves the body, the Irish jig, not withstanding.

B.F.: The lack of movement of the upper body in the Irish jig has something to do with the British not allowing the Irish to dance the jig, doesn't it?

Frank: They danced with a stiff upper body so that the British could not see them dancing through the windows. Be that as it may, Celtic song involves *doing*. The milkmaid had a song that she sang as she milked. The harvester had a song he sang as he harvested. Not merely to make the drudgery go by easier, but because the work itself was part of the song, and conversely, the song was part of the work. In the case of the milkmaid, the song was praise both to the cow and to God for providing the milk. Songs, with their accompanying work, were about give and receiving Blessing. The cow and God were giving the gift - blessing - of the milk, and the milkmaid was participating in the blessing by both receiving and dispensing the milk. Her work was a gift, both given and received. It was not primarily viewed as a means of making a living.

B.F.: I read somewhere that Celtic prayer was not only words but also doing.

Frank: A Celtic Christian said his prayers not only with words, but also with active doing. The same premise carried over into the Celtic *peregrinatio*. The pilgrimage was two-fold. The hermitage, where one mystically

experienced God, and the *tarus* in which one actively fulfilled the experience. In other words, all encounters with God demand subsequent action. Again, the idea of receiving and giving Blessing. However, I think that the emphasis on Celtic prayer being work is backwards. For the Celtic Christian prayer is a state of existence, an existence which brings about the giving and receiving of Blessing. If I am in a truly liminal friendship with my friend there is never a time I am not mystically communing with him, although I may not be always consciously aware of the communication. The Apostle Paul writes, "Pray without ceasing (I Thes. 5:17)."

B.F.: If I remember correctly, didn't BRIGIT'S FEAST once publish part of an very old Celtic poem about the giving and receiving of Blessing?

Frank: You are referring to the Gaelic *Song of the Three Cauldrons*, found in a twelfth century Irish legal code, although written much earlier. The song is actually a series of poems with sort of a catechism inserted from time to time. The latter part of the song, attributed to the druidic bard, Nede mac Adne has the Cauldron of Vocation, *Ciore Emmae*, singing what has been called the "Celtic Beatitudes." The song starts off by proclaiming- that it sings "with insights of Grace, with measures of knowledge, with streams of inspiration," and is "an estuary of wisdom, a confluence of knowledge, a stream of dignity." The song is, among other things, "where the bound are set free, (and) the nameless win fame." In the context of Ephesians 2:8, it is in the Cauldron of Vocation that Grace works salvation. [Ed. *Song of Three Cauldrons*, Imbolc, February-March, vol. 3, no. 1, 1999, pp. 5-9.]

In *The Song of the Three Cauldrons*, an integral part of the flow of the Cauldron's song is the "Celtic beatitudes:"

Gives and is replenished - Promotes and is enlarged - Nourishes and is given Life - Ennobles and is exalted - Requests and is filled with answers - Sings and is filled with Song - Preserves and is made strong - Arranges and receives arrangement - Maintains and is maintained.

These are all about giving and receiving blessing - about stewardship! Here stewardship is the *gift* that we actively give and receive.

B.F.: I noted a water motif in the Song? Is there any significance in the use of "estuary," "confluence and "stream?"

Frank: "Mór" means both "great" and "water." Oran Mór, "The Great Song," by the way, is the name of the song of blessing sang over the clan meal by

the Scottish Chieftain. It is also "the Water (Sea) Melody." The Oran Mór becomes the Oran Mór only when the divine breath becomes united with the primordial waters. In Celtic lore, the water motif always signifies divine Wisdom. The *Logos* says, "*I am the Water of Life, he who drinks of me shall never thirst again* (cp. Jn 4:14, 6:35)." The *Logos* promises the Spirit, the "*Breath of God* (Jn. 15)." We have come full circle. The Oran Mór is not only the *Logos* of God; it is the Breath of God— the Spirit of God within proclaiming holy creative Wisdom. Or, to put it in the context of *The song of the Three Cauldrons*, the Oran Mór is the Cauldron of Divine Wisdom gushing forth Blessing. We are awash in God's blessing - only, all too often we fail to "hear" the blessing.

B.F.: How sad. We're so occupied with listening to the wisdom that flows from without rather than within.

Frank: Celtic Christianity is about finding and hearing the Oran Mór in such a way that makes us realize that we are indeed, *Friends of God*. We must listen within our very essence of being, that which the ancient Celts called the *nuirt*.

B.F.: What is the *nuirt*?

Frank: The *nuirt*, although sometimes translated as "soul" is the *essential essence of our being*. It is not some thing located somewhere within, but a mystical, divine quality that according to Celtic spirituality fully permeates our total being. Another Gaelic word, *anam* is often translated "soul". A better translation would be to translate *anam* as the *mystical expression* of the *nuirt*. Celtic spirituality teaches that the *nuirt* is constantly reaching outward, seeking to find its complementary *nuirt*. When it does so, the two *nuirt's* irrevocably join to become each other's *anam-cara*, or soul-friend. St. Columba, upon losing his *anamcara*, claimed to have lost his head. The Coire Emmae (Cauldron of Vocation), incidentally, is metaphorically placed in the head.

Properly speaking, Celtic thought has no understanding of our modern conception of soul. There is no duality of Body and Soul in Celtic spirituality. For that matter, there is no understanding of the body-soul corresponding cultural idea of sacred-secular. Everything, as we have noted is holy. All mysticism, including Celtic Christian mysticism, moves beyond duality of subject and object, seeing the whole and not the parts.

B.F.: Is everything holy then in Celtic Christianity? Where does "sin" fit in?

Frank: For Celtic Christianity, "sin" is not about going against some set of rules, but is the profaning of Creation's intrinsic holiness, God's Image, or the Oran Mór. Evil does not originate with some force outside of us. "Evil" is that force we create, and give life to, in our profanation.

B.F.: Does God punish us when we profane his Image?

God does not punish, nor does he condemn us to "hell." We don't need God to do it; we are quite capable of doing it ourselves. By choosing not to live in friendship with God we choose also not to avail ourselves of God's blessings, which are only fully realized in friendship. I can enjoy another couple's friendship with one another vicariously, but I can never participate fully in it without first becoming their friend.

Jewish Talmudic literature, in one place, defines hell as being able to see the blessings of God at a distance, but not being able to participate in them. Here is the Celtic understanding of hell. Not an endlessly fiery place that God casts us in retribution, but a state where we place ourselves outside of God's intimate blessing of Friendship. We do so through the consequences of our own choice of profanity over friendship.

To bless and receive blessing is to be a friend of God. We actively seek to live in such a way toward our friend that demonstrates and becomes true friendship. It is not about living a certain way because we are afraid that our friend will renounce our friendship if we don't. In Celtic spirituality, God never renounces friendship. He does, however, give us the free choice to do so if we so choose. It is a choice that we have the potential to make eternal, not because God eternally rejects us, but because continue *ad infinitum* to refuse to live in friendship with him.

B.F.: You say that "we" can make hell eternal. Isn't this the same as saying that once we enter the after-life, hell is endless?

Frank: First of all, Celtic Christianity does not postulate hell as a place, but as a state. In fact, hell is rarely, if at all, referred to by the Celtic saints. Secondly, we have to understand the Celtic view of the after-life.

Heaven, for the Celts, is not some place exclusively out-there. It, like hell, is more of a state of being that over-laps the Present-Now. Heaven as the abode of God, the Celtic Other-World, according to Celtic spirituality is a mystical entity that fully envelops and permeates This-World. Celtic myth teaches that the original One-World of Paradise, which was both the abode of

the gods and mortals, separated into This-World and the Other-World when, as in the Irish myth (although vernacular myths vary) Boann, the wife of The Dagda ate of the Nuts of Wisdom that were reserved for The Dagda and the mystical Salmon of Dada's well, which resulted in the overflowing of the well and the separation of the One-World into two. Boann erred, but did not sin, according to Celtic thought. Her error was in seeking to claim the Dagda's wisdom as her own. Not that The Dagda jealously guarded his wisdom, but that she failed to recognize that she already had it available to her in the Salmon, which she was free to eat, and had in fact already eaten. The story is reminiscent of the Genesis tale of The Tree of Life. Subsequent Celtic myth is about the reconciliation of the two-worlds into one, the "new heaven and new earth" of the Apocalypse.

This union is brought about through the constant accessing of those mystical "thin places" that the ancient Celts believed existed between the worlds. Following this, the Celtic Christian is called to live one hundred percent in both worlds simultaneously, not one foot in one, and one foot in the other. To live in heaven in the Present-Moment is possible when we access the "thin places" through the Oran Mór: Grace and faith. To access the "thin-places" is to live in friendship with God. To choose not to live in it in the Present-Moment of friendship is to choose to live in the Present-Moment of "hell," being out of friendship with God, a lack of friendship that we can choose to make everlasting. Even though God desires our friendship, he will never force us to be his friends, not even in the after-life.

B.F.: Is this scriptural?

I think that if ask the Holy Spirit's Breath to revive us to see anew, without our dogmatic preconceived ideas of correct theology, we will see that indeed, it is very scriptural.

We need to reread Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 8:18-39 with all that we've discussed in mind. What deep meaning it gives to, *"Creation waits in eager expectation for the Sons of God to be revealed. For Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, who is subject to the same hope: that Creation herself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole of Creation has been groaning... (8:19-22)."* Paul addresses the same subject from another perspective - a very Celtic one - in II Corinthians 5: 17-19, *"Therefore if any one is in Christ (the Logos), he is a new Creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this from God who reconciled us to himself through the Logos*

(Christ) and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God is reconciling the world to himself by Logos, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation."

B.F.: I always thought that the "Under-World" of Celtic myth was hell.

Frank: The Under-World is peculiar to Irish lore; nevertheless it is not "hell." It is that place in the Irish Other-World where the nuirt goes upon death. In other words, in death we access the Other-World through the Under-World. In Irish lore it is also the abode of those with unfinished business in This-World, those needing to right a profanity. It is not Purgatory in that "souls" are being purified, or is it "hell" in that "souls" are being punished. Perhaps the best description, in this regard, is to say it is the place of choice of those who have chosen to opt out of friendship with the gods (God), or who need to complete the giving of some blessing to be at peace with the gods (God). But, even here, the gods (God) are present and joys exist. It is not a place of eternal damnation. There is some indication that Celtic Christianity, in time, came to view the Under-World as that place where the evil humans create abides, in that it takes on supernatural characteristics. This is one of those areas that need more research. Mostly, we have tended to understand the Irish Under-World in our own Christian terms, even to the point of possibly reinterpreting Celtic myth to fit our conception.

B.F.: Is heaven the Celtic *Tir Na n'Og*?

Frank: If we mean, the traditional Christian heaven that is "out there," no. *Tir Na n'Og*, "The Isle of the Blest," closely fits the *Apocalypse's* description of the "New Earth:" *"And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away ... God is with men, and he shall dwell with them and they shall be his friends (people) ... He showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the Throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, the Tree of Life bore twelve (kinds of) fruits, yielding her fruit twelve months of the year, and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations ... and they shall see his face (breath) and his Name (Word) shall be in their foreheads (Rev. 22)."* Note again, the forehead, the location of the Celtic Cauldron of Vocation.

In Celtic Christianity, the New Heaven and the New Earth exist not in some future time, but in the Present-Now. St Matthew records Jesus saying, *"the knowledge of the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven have been given to you (Matt.13:11),"* and St. Luke writes, *"Having been asked by the Pharisees*

when the Kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, 'The Kingdom of god does not come visibly, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the Kingdom of God is [present tense]within you' (Luke 17: 20-21)."

B.F.: Could you recommend a book about this?

Frank: I think Philip Sheldrake's *Living Between Worlds: place and journey in Celtic spirituality* (Boston: Cowley Publications, n.d.) is an excellent one on the Celtic idea of the place in the Present-Moment. Two excellent books on Celtic Christianity are *Celtic Christianity: a sacred tradition, a vision of hope* by Timothy Joyce (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998) and *Candle in the Darkness: Celtic Spirituality from Wales* by Patrick Thomas (Woodstock, NY: Beekman/Gomer, 1997). [*Celtic Christianity* is reviewed in this issue of BRIGIT'S FEAST. *Candle in the Darkness* was reviewed in the Imbolc 1999, vol. 3, no. 2 issue. ed.]

B.F.: What you have been saying, if I understand you correct, is that Creation, especially humankind, is created holy and blessed.

Frank: Celtic Christianity says that we are born into friendship with God. Born blessed and holy. No inherited, original sin here. And the same applies for the entirety of Creation.

B.F.: It has been claimed that the ancient Celts believed in reincarnation. Is this idea found in Celtic Christianity?

Frank: To say that the ancient Celts believed in reincarnation, I believe, is a complete misunderstanding of the data. Caesar said in his *Gallic Wars* that the Celts believed in the "transmigration of souls." Now, right up front, we have a problem if the Celts did not have the concept of a soul. There is no reincarnation in Celtic spirituality. Those who find it are exercising wistful thinking. Caesar confused the Celtic *nuirt* with his Greco-Roman understanding of the soul, as well as misunderstood the Celtic afterlife, from which it was believed that the departed one, on occasion, could return to earth in any number of guises.

What I think the ancient Celts believed, and the truth of it can be amply demonstrated through Celtic myth, is that each person is the collective Wisdom, or *nuirt's*, of all ancestors, past and future. In other words, we are the collective Image of the divine. In some ways it is what Carl Jung refers to when we speaks of humans as being the collective sub-consciousnesses of all who have gone before. Implanted in our sub-consciousness are those

archetypal symbols whereby we commune with the Transcendental Absolute. Putting it in the context of Celtic spirituality, those archetypal symbols are not symbols at all, but the collective Divine Image passed from generation to generation. Here is an interesting twist on St. Augustine's inherited sin concept. Celtic Christianity postulates an inherited holy Image with its entire intrinsic blessing.

B.F.: On the Internet there are a number of Celtic Churches that claim the original Celtic Church was Eastern Orthodox in both theology and structure. Is there any truth in this claim?

There are those who try to place Celtic Christianity in the Roman Christianity, or the Eastern Christianity camps. The Celtic Christian Church despite claims otherwise, was neither. If anything it was "Early Church," having more in common with the Christianity of the early Christians, especially in its similarity to Hebrew spirituality. The Hebrew scriptures, too, record that Creation began with the breath of God, a divine song according to the Hebrew sages.

Logos (word) and music are the crucial elements of Judaic mysticism, a mysticism perhaps best expressed in the Kabbalah. The *Enchantment* is about *logos* and music; *logos* and music that flows from a mystical well deep within each human. A well placed within at creation, a well flowing with the divine Song, the Oran Mór, the Melody of Creation. From the well a Holy Melody of Faith, Grace and Wisdom wells up.

That said, the Celtic Church was greatly influenced by the Desert Fathers, and perhaps it is justifiable to claim that Christianity came first to the British Isles not via Roman soldiers, but via the trade routes, which originated in Antioch. Thus, it would stand to reason that Eastern Church influences could be found. And this is certainly true in the monastic structure of Celtic Christianity, and in what we know about the Celtic Christian understanding of Grace and the Trinity. There are even Eastern Church influences in Celtic Rite, especially on the Continent. But to say that the Celtic Church was structurally Eastern is patently unfounded. We can speculate all we want, and read between the lines forever— we will still end up having no proof of any such structure. Conversely, there is also Roman Church influence, but was the Celtic Church Roman? No.

There is also much within the Celtic Church that is Protestant in nature, but was the Celtic church a precursor to the Reformation? Hardly.

B.F.: What about the Celtic Church revival that is occurring?

Frank: I assume that you are referring to the so-called "Celtic Churches" that we see creeping up here and there?

B.F.: Yes.

Frank: With all due respect to my brothers and sisters who are involved in the Celtic Church revival, for many it is nothing more than playing church, not much different than a Society for Anachronism reenactment. If we are to revive the Celtic Church we need to revive her spirituality in a way that is appropriate to today's milieu. We need not a revived Celtic Church in some so-called ancient Celtic tradition, but *after* the spiritual tradition of the Church.

B.F.: So, how would this take shape?

Frank: I cannot answer with an exact model, as each community needs to find a model that fits them and enables them to receive and give blessing in a way appropriate to their own community. There are, however, certain characteristics that must be present - characteristics that were present in the original Celtic Church:

- W Celtic Christianity is, as we have noted about, living as *Friends of God*. How? By being *Bearers of the Song* - singers of the Oran Mór. Celtic Christianity is not occupied with dogma, but rather with *celebrating* God and God's holy Creation:
- W Celebrating the Revealed God & the Unrevealed God, the "*I am that I am*," Moses' Unknowable Knowable. Reveling in Living that finds expression in the divine song.
- W Celebrating Creation as the "Sacrament of God's PRESENCE," for Celtic Christianity, Grace; the divine creative melody reenacted in every Eucharist, in every holy, creative experience of Life.
- W Celebrating Eucharistic community, the shared Life in Christ. The Celtic Christian community is a community bound together by the holy harmony of the Oran Mór. Celtic Christian community is about becoming one - one with another and one with God. Celtic Christian community is about the corporate, co-creative singing of the Oran Mór.

Celtic Christianity has much to offer our modern faith and culture! We must make sure that what it does have to offer does not get lost in nostalgic, romantic faddishness.

I would like to suggest an excellent book by Fr. George A. Maloney, *The Breath of the Mystic* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1974). This book by a Russian Rite Jesuit, scholar and long time professor of Oriental Christianity at Fordham University is not Celtic per se, but it addresses Christianity from much the same perspective and is well worth reading.

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