

EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN NORTHERN BRITAIN

Fr B Barlow

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The old British Church: In the years 43-85, the Romans conquered Great Britain. It was called *Provincia Britannica* (Ireland and Scotland were not conquered by the Romans and evidently did not belong to the British province). Christian missionaries, as they always did, followed the Roman Legions, attached themselves to the merchant's caravans and laid the foundation of churches in certain localities. Having come from Gaul they were not received with enthusiasm. Nevertheless, Christian settlements were organised from the beginning of the fourth century. The monastic system was introduced to Britain by Hermanus of Auxerre and Lupus of Troyes. It was Germanus who ordained Iltut, known as "*the grand master of the Britons on account of his knowledge both of profane and Christian literature*"¹. It was Iltut's disciples who founded the monastery on Caldy Island (South Wales).

These early British Christian communities were hardly affected by the Arian controversy which affected the early Greek and Latin Church, but later on they were contaminated by Pelagianism, which was started by a Briton.

¹ J. Decarreaux, *Les moines et la civilisation en Occident*, Paris, 1962, p. 167

When the Roman armies pulled out of the province of Britannia in the year 407, the country became a battlefield for the Picts and the pagan Scots. The Picts were the inhabitants of Scotland (Caledonia) and the Scots were the inhabitants of Ireland (Hibernia). The Picts ravished the areas which had been vacated by the Romans. The Britons, who had been Christianised before the end of the second century, called the German tribes to their aid, namely the Angles, Saxons and Jutes. These allies soon conquered the enemy and, as a result, paganism once again spread. The Anglo-Saxons settled in Britain and founded small kingdoms there. The Britons strongly rebelled against them, but they were subdued and driven back to Wales, Cornwall, and even to Amorica in Brittany.

In Scotland, the Roman Church still exercised some influence through missionaries like St Ninian (c.360-c.432). The earliest account of him is in St. Bede's history of England²: *"For the southern Picts, who had their homes among these mountains, had long before, as is reported, forsaken the error of idolatry and embraced the true faith by the preaching of Bishop Ninian, a most reverend and holy man of the British nation, who had been regularly instructed at Rome in the faith and mysteries of the truth; whose Episcopal see, named after St. martin the bishop, and famous for a church dedicated to him (wherein Ninian himself and many other saints rest in the body), is now in possession of the English nation. The place belongs to the province of*

² Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica gentes Anglorum*, III, 4).

Bernicians and is commonly called the White House [Candida Casa], because he there built a church of stone, which was not usual amongst the Britons."

Ninian, hence, was evidently a Briton who had been educated in Rome and consecrated a bishop by Pope Siricius; he had preached to the Picts in the south of Scotland towards the end of the 4th century and founded a monastery there.

The quotation from Bede is virtually all we know with certainty about Ninian and his life and work. A later life of Ninian, written in the twelfth century by St Aelred, professes to give a detailed account founded on Bede and also on a certain "*liber de vita et miraculis eius*", but much of it is clearly legend. He states, however, that while engaged in building his church at Candida Casa, Ninian heard of the death of St Martin and decided to dedicate the building to him. Now St Martin died about 397, so that the mission of Ninian to the southern Picts must have begun towards the end of the fourth century.

What is certain is what he left behind as a legacy. Ninian founded a monastery at Whithorn, in southern Galloway, which became famous as a school of monasticism within a century of his death. His work among the southern Picts, however, seems to have had but a short-lived success. St Patrick, in his epistle to Coroticus, terms the Picts "apostates", and references to Ninian's converts having abandoned Christianity are found in Sts. Columba and Kentigern. We do know that Palladius, a deacon in the Church of Rome,

was sent in 431 by Pope Celestine I as the first bishop "ad Scottos in Christum credentes"

After the withdrawal of the Roman legions in 407, the British Church did indeed live on, but the contact with western Christianity was strongly interrupted and eventually was lost completely. By being cut off from the continental church, the Christian life nevertheless went on its own way. The jurisdictional primacy of the papacy was practically powerless, and metropolitan system was non-existent, and British Christianity evolved itself into a typical Episcopal Church.

The Formation of the Irish-Scottish Church:

This Church was principally the foundation of St Patrick, a British Christian who was kidnapped by pirates and taken as a slave to Ireland. During this time he experienced a conversion (Confessio, 16). After six years of slavery he returned to his parents who wanted him to stay at home, but Patrick had heard the "voice of Ireland" (Confession, 23). To prepare himself for his mission he went to Gaul for an education. At Auxerre, where he remained for several years, he was probably one of the students of the famous bishop, Germain of Auxerre. As a result of his stay in Gaul, Patrick received what seems to have been a modest formation in culture but an important and influential contact with the monastic life. It seems that Patrick was more inclined to action than to study. Despite opposition from his superiors who considered his education inadequate, Patrick was named as Palladius's

successor. He was consecrated bishop at Auxerre and returned to Ireland c.431.

There is much legend about St Patrick, and written documents such as the *Confessio* and *Epistola* are thought by scholars to be heavily intermixed with oriental legends from Persia. In particular there are parts of the *Confessio* (e.g. 1, 19, 20 & 23) which seem to draw heavily on the Acts of Archelaus (a Greek document of Hegemonius from about 350) and the Narrations of Nil (another 5th century Greek work). It seems probable that the author of the *Confessio* composed his work with the aid of these two authors. However it is generally admitted that the *Confessio* is a spiritual document written by St Patrick towards the end of his life and that it contains several autobiographical facts. Nevertheless we can say that Patrick brought to Ireland the culture and monastic practices of Gaul.

Patrick preached especially in the northern and western sections of Ireland. At first his collaborators were from Gaul, Britain and sometimes Italy. Later he recruited his clergy from Ireland itself. In adapting the organisation of the Roman Church to the conditions of Ireland, where there were no cities, he seems to have made the *tuatha* (states) his dioceses; the Episcopal sees, called *civitates*, were probably organised on a quasi-monastic pattern. Being himself a lover of monasticism, he transmitted this love to the Irish. He tried to convert the kings and the clan leaders. He had the protection of Loegaire, the most important king, which gave him the freedom to move with ease

throughout the country. The metropolitan See was founded at Armagh in the year 444 according to a doubtful tradition of the 7th century. This same tradition records the death of St Patrick on March 17, 461.

Patrick adapted the ecclesiastical organisation of the Roman Church to the rural conditions of Ireland. Hence, in Ireland, as in Egypt previously, there were many hermitages and monasteries for monks and religious women, which sometimes boasted several thousand members.

Patrick's task was by no means easy. He met with strong opposition from the Druids and, it would seem, also of the older generation among the ruling classes. Even among his fellow Christians in Ireland as well as in Britain and on the Continent, he had severe critics. In his native Britain feeling against him was particularly strong; it flared up violently when, at some unknown date, he demanded the excommunication of the Welsh prince Coroticus, who during a reprisal against the Irish had massacred or captured a number of Patrick's neophytes.³ In reaction to this opposition, Patrick wrote his Confessions and his Letter to Coroticus.

The cult of St Patrick spread quickly after his death. In France the cult took root in towns such as Rouen and Lérins, and became especially strong in the middle ages. Modern times have seen it spread with immigration to America and Australia.

³ L.Bieler, The Works of St Patrick, p.7

The Irish Church had little contact with Rome after the departure of the Roman legions and the invasion of the Angles, Jutes and Saxons, but missionary monks moved into the vacuum created by the withdrawal of the Roman Legions from Britain. However, one cannot say that the Irish Church became "Rome-free". The Irish, who had not experienced any schisms or heresies, wanted only to conserve integrally the revealed deposit of faith they had inherited from the apostles. In a letter to Pope Boniface IV (608-615), St Columba indicates the strong union between the Celtic Church and the Roman See: "*We Irish have never included either heretics, Jews, or schismatics....ever since Christ, the supreme Lord of chariots came to us, borne by the sea gales on the backs of dolphins, Rome became to us noble and famous above all others*". Although he gave this support, it did not stop him reminding the pope of the compromising attitude which Vigil, one of his predecessors, had shown towards doctrine: "*Watch, I beg thee, Pope, watch. I repeat, watch, for Vigil did not keep his vigil too well. If you are held in high honour through the honour of your See, you would beware of losing such honour by any lapse whatever. Your power will last as long as your discernment. For the heavenly porter is he who opens the gates to the worthy and closes them to the unworthy*".⁴

The spread of Irish Monasticism:

⁴ J Décarreaux, Les moines et la civilisations en Occident, p.192

One of the great proponents of the spread of Celtic monasticism was St. Columba of Iona (Columcilla) + 597. Columba was born of a noble Irish family. As a priest and monk, after founding several monasteries in his own country (Derry, Durrow, Kells), he decided to be a "pilgrim for Christ". He settled on the island of Iona with several companions c.563. And from Iona, Christianity spread to the Picts of Scotland and the Angles of Northumbria. King Oswald of Northumbria, while exiled in Scotland, had been converted to Christianity, and he invited the monks of Iona to come and establish a monastery in his kingdom. The monks of Iona chose the island of Lindesfarne (Holy Island) because twice a day it was cut off from the mainland by the tide. That gave the island some solitude, but it was nevertheless close to the royal castle at Bamburgh. The first monks to go to Lindisfarne did not remain long as they thought the language and mission too difficult, and it was only with the arrival of St Aiden that the mission at Lindisfarne became firmly established.

Another Irish monk who greatly influenced the growth of the church was St Columbanus. He and some companions went to Gaul in 590/591. In Bourgogne he founded three monasteries, one of which was Luxeuil where he resided as abbot. He had a quarrel with the Frankish bishops over the date of Easter, and was eventually chased out of Bourgogne following a conflict with the king. He then preached to the Alamans on Lake Zurich and Lake Constance. He eventually crossed the Alps and founded another monastery at Bobbio where he died in 615. The very severe rule of life followed by St

Columbanus had a great reputation in the Frankish kingdoms and upper Italy. However, beginning in the 7th century, it began to lose ground to the Rule of St Benedict, which was less strict and more adaptable.

The Influence of Lindisfarne (Holy Island)

The history of the monastery of Lindisfarne begins with St Aidan's arrival from Iona in 635 when it became a missionary centre and Episcopal see, and a large number of churches were founded by its efforts from Edinburgh to the Humber and beyond (e.g. Melrose, Jarrow, Durham). Among those educated in the monastery were St Chad, St Egbert, St Oswey, and St Wilfred. In the latter part of the 7th century the Scottish-Irish monks withdrew to Iona as they disliked the Roman discipline agreed upon by the Synod of Whitby (664). St Cuthbert's association with Lindisfarne added to its celebrity. In 793 and again in 875 the monastery and the church were pillaged by the Danes and the monks fled. Eardulf (+900), the last of the 16 bishops, fixed his see in 875 at Chester-le-street, but it was transferred to Durham in 995. From 1082 to the Dissolution of the monasteries during the Reformation, there was continuous monastic life on the Island.

The beautiful illustrated Book of Gospels known as the Lindisfarne Gospels, and which is now in the British Library, was written by Bishop Eadfrid c. 700 "*in honour of St Cuthbert*". Its uncial script of an Irish style

doubtless indicates the persisting influence of the Irish period of the monastery. An interlinear translation into Anglo-Saxon was added c.950 by a priest, Aldred.

The Anglo-Saxon Church:

As I mentioned earlier, British Christianity, which had flourished under the Roman Empire, collapsed almost totally under the pressure of the raids of the Picts and the Scots. The last Breton Christians withdrew into Wales and the mountains of the west before the invasions of the Jutes, Angels and Saxons.

Christianised England found itself divided between two different Christian traditions, that of the Irish and that of Rome. The Celtic Church, very traditional, was strongly attached to its own customs (e.g. the date of Easter, tonsure, manner of conferring Baptism and Confirmation). The Anglo-Saxon Church, very Roman, did not like these particularities and was more sensitive to the universality of the Church (tendency to uniformity). Thus a tension existed between the local and the universal Church.

The unity of the Church is not the same as uniformity with the Roman Church. St Augustine's problem was that, if the faith is one, why were the customs of the churches so different, as in the celebration of Mass in the Roman Church and the churches of Gaul? St Gregory, the Pope who sent Augustine to England, had a much clearer idea. He replied that: "*You know*

the customs of the Roman Church in which you have been brought up. But I believe that if you find, whether in the Roman Church, or in that of the Gauls, or in another, something which is more agreeable to God, you should carefully attempt to incorporate it in the new church of the Angles: for we should not love things because of their locality, but rather the locale because of the things found in it" (Histoire universelle de l'Eglise catholique, t. ix)

The Synod of Whitby (664)

Attempts by St Augustine at reconciliation between the Churches were unsuccessful. The site of the Abbey of Whitby, a renowned centre of learning under St Hilda, was chosen as the place for the meeting of the two Churches to decide on important differences. Among the principal participants at the conference were King Oswy who followed the Celtic tradition and his son Alfrid who championed the Roman one. Abbot Colman of Lindisfarne argued for the Celtic tradition, while defending the Roman tradition was the Abbot of Ripon, St Wilfred. Interestingly enough, Wilfred himself had once been a monk at Lindisfarne.

The account of the proceedings was recorded by St Bede. Colman, as the first speaker, in order to support the usage of the Celtic Church, invoked a tradition that according to him went back to the apostle St John, and which the great abbots carefully preserved, especially St Columba of Iona. Wilfred countered him with the Roman usages which, he said, were introduced by Sts Peter and Paul, and were practiced in the Church universal with the exception, he added, "*of a hidden corner at the end of an island*". He rejected

the authority of St Columba, on which Colman based his argument. *"And granting that your Columba was a saint and powerful miracle-worker Can he be preferred to the holy prince of apostles, to whom the Lord said: 'You are Peter and upon this Rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven'".*

The controversy was settled by King Oswy

"Wilfred having given the discourse, the king says: 'Isn't it true, Colman, that the Lord spoke thus to Peter?'

Colman replies: that's right, King.

King: Can you show that Colman received a similar power?

Colman: No.

King: Do you who are gathered here agree that it was given principally to Peter and that it was to him that the Lord gave the keys of the kingdom of Heaven?

All: Yes, we agree.

Then the King concludes: And for myself, I tell you that I do not want to go against this heavenly porter, but that I hope to obey him with all my power, out of fear that, when I come to see the gates of heaven I will not find anyone to open them for me, if the one who holds the keys is against me"

(Bede, Hist. Gentis Anglorum, III, 25)

It should be noted that St. Wilfred's argumentation is not very solid, but in the end it falls to the decision of the King. King Oswy's decision had great

consequences for the history of the Church. "*Whitby sounded the funeral knell of Celtism as a whole. There were still one or two centres of resistance, but this was chiefly a point of honour. Iona, the citadel of the old tradition, surrendered in 716, and the Welsh did likewise in the middle of the eighth century. Thus ended a quarrel which from our point of view was puerile, but significant and important in its own place and time and, had it lasted, in its consequences. It is all the same remarkable that in spite of everything it neither harmed the doctrine nor even set back the missionary work to any marked extent, so firm was the faith of those old Christian communities. Neither were the Roman customs imposed on all the monasteries. In most cases there was a traditional compromise between the Rule of St Columba and the Rule of St Benedict*" (J. Decarreaux, *les Moines et la civilisation en Occident*)

Important elements of Celtic Monasticism:

Monasticism in Ireland experienced an extraordinary development: In Ireland, as in the deserts of Egypt previously, there were many hermitages, and monasteries for monks and religious women, which sometimes boasted several thousand members.

The structure of Irish monasticism did not consist in following written Rules – which would supposedly serve as a uniting force among the members of the community – but rather it consisted in a series of personal encounters between the abbot and the monks. The word "Rule" meant only the ascetic

instruction of a saint, taught orally or by means of examples, or also the non-codified traditional observances of a monastery (Les chrétientés celtiques).

This monastic structure, based on the establishment of personal encounters, appears to be similar in structure to the relationship in political life of the relationship of the king to his subjects. It also incorporated certain institutions which had inspired St Patrick and his disciples and which were actually those used by the monks in the East, following the example of St Anthony.

The Irish Church and Rome:

To note some customs peculiar to the Irish:

1) Easter: The date on which Easter was celebrated was a cause of conflict. There were in the Church at that time three different computations regarding this: one in Rome; another in Gaul; and another in Ireland and Britain. When one of these computations was generally accepted in a region, then the differences with Rome might be regrettable but would not cause practical difficulties. But when two different computations competed in the same regions, then many complications ensued.

At that period the whole liturgical calendar was based on the date of Easter, and hence the moveable feasts were tied to the Easter date. Consequently it was not only Easter Day which would be celebrated at different times, but also The Ascension, Whitsuntide, and also the period of Lent.

The problem was basically a result of history and chronology. The Celtic tradition continued to follow those practices of the Roman Church which had been established at the time of St Patrick. These had been preserved by St Columba and his successors at Iona and other Celtic monasteries. Shortly before Augustine travelled to England, the Roman Church had decreed changes which Augustine had implemented in his mission.

This difference in practice caused not only difficulties in Britain, but also in parts of Gaul. At Luxeuil, the monastery founded by St Columban in Gaul, together with its own foundations and missions, the Irish computation was in competition with the Gaulish one. It even happened that, although Christians always tried very hard to avoid it doing so, that the Irish Easter coincided with the Jewish Passover, which resulted in general indignation. Columban, convinced that his own computation was the better one (although in fact it was the least exact), wrote to two different Popes complaining that neither Rome nor Gaul had aligned themselves alongside Ireland, as Ireland, naturally, could never be in the wrong.

2) Private and repeatable sacramental penance: Whereas in the early centuries of the Church the sacrament of penance was generally regarded as a one-off event, usually reserved to the death-bed of a person, the sacrament of penance developed in Ireland as a repeatable sacrament which could be received many times (this practice was condemned in Spain by the great Council of Toledo in 587, where it was described as scandalous). In the

monasteries of Ireland, however, the confession of faults, frequent and even daily, was part of the regular schedule of ascetical exercises. It was not only like the chapter of faults and the "opening of conscience" to a superior which the monks still practice today, but rather it had an association with the sacrament of penance itself: this was now and soon became general as the monks began to use it when the laity came to the abbot or to one of the priests and asked how they could expiate for their sins.

3) Penitential Books: The penitential books which were first used in the Irish, Scottish and English monasteries, list with juridical precision the penance which must be exacted for sins, taking into account the seriousness of the fault, the status of the penitent (monks and clerics were more severely dealt with than a simple layman), and the degree of wilful consent. There was also a curious system of compensation which allowed for the substitution of a lengthy penance by one shorter and more severe.

4) Spirituality: Celtic monasticism produced a great number of saints in the 5th and 6th centuries. Partly to do with the Celtic temperament which easily went to extremes, the spirituality was distinguished by an ardour not too common in the ascetic life, in the pursuit of mortification. Despite the difference in climate and milieu, there were the same charismatic atmosphere, the same accomplishments, the same excesses, which were found among the Fathers of the Desert in Egypt and the Orient. Poverty, austerity in dwelling, restrictions on the amount of food and of sleep, all these

were the normal routine. They renounced any relaxation at the baths, and even held cleanliness in disfavour. Instead they often immersed themselves in an icy pond for long periods. They practiced diverse mortifications pushed to the extreme of holding nature in contempt, isolation, silence, rigorous obedience to the master of the abbot. These were common in all monasteries. All these practices define an atmosphere a little strained, as the summit of asceticism was often considered as the equivalent to martyrdom. Added to this was a certain unruly tendency to the fantastic and the out-of-ordinary which is so typical of the Celtic character.

5) Voluntary exile: (*Peregrinatio propter Deum*) In the beginning of the missionary endeavour by the Irish Church we find the ascetical practice of voluntary exile, *peregrinatio propter Deum*. Irish monasticism was never too concerned about making a monk remain in one place, as had been St Benedict. There was a natural tendency in the Irish monk for adventure, for solitude, and they went searching overseas for what they could no longer find in the crowded monasteries. Shortly afterwards this self-imposed exile took on a mystical meaning in the Celtic religious mentality. The comparison with Abraham who had also left his land and family became common themes in all biographies until the 12th century. This missionary expansion contributed greatly to the expansion of Irish ideas on the spiritual life, extending its influence to Great Britain, Gaul, Germany and even to northern Italy.

6) Monastic culture: It is not known how classical culture was introduced into Ireland. Some suppositions are that Irish scholars studied in Gaul; another is that some Gauls had come to Ireland; another possibility is that some Britons came from England and had an influence on the Irish civilization. There is no doubt, however, that the monastic studies included the study of letters, grammar, rhetoric and Latin. Pagan culture was also available for study, including the fables of antiquity. One author notes that *"since they never had to struggle against the dangers of Greco-Roman paganism, they were able to use the pagan authors with less reticence than the monks on the continent"* (P.Riche, *Education et culture dans L'Occident barbare*). The Irish monks began to decorate their manuscripts combining their own decorative motifs to those which they had indirectly received from the Orient.

And so we see that the early English Church found itself caught between two different traditions, that of Rome and that of Ireland.

The Celtic Church was very traditional, and was strongly attached to its own customs (e.g. date of Easter, tonsure, manner of conferring baptism and confirmation). The Anglo-Saxon Church, very Roman, did not like these particularities and was more sensitive to the universality of the Church (strong tendency to uniformity). The remarkable thing was that this situation which could have caused a serious split in the Church in Britain was solved in so peaceable a fashion.

I note that today there is a strong trend for Irish or Celtic spirituality, and the fashion for all things Celtic. Whilst it is commendable to re-trace the rich veins of Celtic poetry and story, I note that there is a reluctance to enter into the arena of Celtic penitential practices. Celtic spiritual practice is not some gentle new-age hobby, but a serious fusion of poetry and penance.