



COLUMBA

HIS LITURGICAL APPROACH

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While most interest in this 1400th anniversary year of his death inevitably focuses on Columba's spirituality and approach to mission, are there also things that we can learn today from his liturgical approach and the style of worship practised by the monks of Iona ? At the risk of gross oversimplification, and of sounding very sermonic, I propose answering this question by identifying a trio of themes all of which conveniently begin with the letter "p". I employ this device partly because the number three was so important to the Celts, whose pre-Christian religion centred around triads of deities and whose Christianity found one of its most characteristic expression in a particular devotion to the doctrine of the Trinity. One of the distinctive



characteristics of the Columban Church was, I believe, a devotional base built on *prayer*, *psalms* and *poetry*.

Prayer, undertaken both individually and corporately, was at the heart of the spiritual life of the Columban Church. The monks spent long periods praying alone in their cells, often standing with their arms outstretched and raised in what was known as the Cross Vigil. Several times during the day and night the ringing of a bell summoned them to church to recite the Divine Office. There seem to have been five canonical hours during the day - **prime**, **terce**, **sext**, **nones** and **vespers** - while the night office was apparently divided into three separate services, *Ad initium noctis* (at nightfall), *Ad medium noctis* (at midnight) and *Ad matutinam* (very early in the morning towards daybreak). Mass was celebrated on Sundays and feastdays at **sext**, the midday service.

We know relatively little about the forms of service used in the Columban Church. The main weekly celebration of the Eucharist on Iona seems to have taken place in church with all the monks present but lay members, catechumens, penitents and others outside. The Gospel was read outside the church and then the monks processed in with the presiding priest. Other services may well have taken place out of doors at the foot of the high standing crosses. There are references to services being sung. Adomnan mentions



a book of weekly hymns which had either been copied out or written by Columba himself. It may well have resembled the *Bangor Antiphonary* which dates from the late seventh century and provides hymns for the Mass and other services. Unfortunately there are no surviving liturgies from Iona. The earliest *extant* Irish and Scottish liturgies, the *Stowe Missal* and the *Book of Deer*, both of which probably date from the early ninth century, broadly follow the Roman rite but also show traces of Gallican, Mozarabic (Spanish) and Eastern Mediterranean influence.

If it is impossible to reconstruct the eucharistic liturgy used on Iona during and after Columba's time, we are on much surer ground when it comes to the daily services held at the canonical hours. The Divine Office consisted primarily of the recitation of psalms. It is not quite clear how long it took the monks to get through all 150 psalms though there is evidence that in Irish monasteries generally more psalms were chanted at each service, and particularly during night vigils, than in either Continental European or Eastern monasteries. Columba's followers and successors seem to have shared his own special attachment to this part of the Scriptures. Chanted, recited, copied, studied, and prayed, the psalms were central to the spiritual and devotional life of the Columban Church.



The psalms may well also have been a major influence on the third strand which I have identified in the devotional life of the Columban Church - its poetic quality. What I have in mind here is the tendency, shared by many other Celtic Christian communities, to pray in poems rather than in prose and to express faith in images rather than concepts. It is not surprising that those so steeped in the vivid imagery of the psalms should be inclined to express their faith in this way and also to give more prominence in worship to the physical elements and to raw human emotions like anger and despair than other Christian traditions which have put more premium on reasonable moderation and carefully measured prose.

Other factors also contributed to this characteristic of the early British and Irish church. Pre-Christian Celtic society accorded a high role to poets. In Ireland especially the *filid*, or bards, were a much venerated and respected group who were seen as guardians of the great oral tradition of folklore and heroic legend which sustained the community and provided its roots. Often attached to royal households, the *filid* effectively constituted a distinct order living off public subsidy. The coming of Christianity did not overthrow this reverence for poets and poetry although it brought about an important change in replacing an oral with a written culture. The monks who toiled away in the monastic *scriptoria* did not simply copy psalters and Gospel books.



They also wrote down, for the first time, poems and legends about heroes and battles from the pre-Christian past which had previously been passed down by word of mouth. Zeal for native language and literature was one of the characteristics which John Ryan noted as distinguishing Irish from Continental monasticism. It betokened a broad and inclusive approach which wished to affirm traditional poems and songs and integrate them in the new literary based Christian culture.

There is a very interesting story which shows Columba defending poets at the convention of Druim Ceat in 575. Apparently some of those present sought to banish their bards because of

*“ the multitude and the sharpness of their tongues
and their complaining and for their evil words.
Moreover they had made satires against Aed,
King of Ireland”*

Columba strongly opposed this proposal and argued instead that the order of *filid* should be reorganised and their number and privileges curtailed, a solution which seems to have been accepted. This portrayal of the Saint as a friend of the creative arts seems to square with what we know of the activities undertaken by the monks on Iona which appear to have included manuscript illumination, metalwork, leatherwork and jewellery making. Columba and his successors clearly valued creative imagination and



felt that the arts stood not at the margins of the church but rather at its very centre.

Behind this encouragement of artists and poets lay a belief that story, symbol and metaphor were at least as important in putting across the mysteries of the Christian faith as argument, concept and debate. The Columban Church did not produce any great practitioners or texts in the disciplines of philosophical or systematic theology. This is not to say that it was uninterested in the big questions with which they deal. Its theology, however, was rooted in its liturgy and devotional life and expressed in hymns of praise like *Altus Prosator* rather than being confined to the schoolroom or the study and formulated in academic treatises. The Columban Church, indeed, exemplified the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi* - it was a worshipping community which believed that God was to be found through prayer and contemplation rather than a debating society which sought to find proofs and arguments for His existence through disputation.

Ian Bradley is the author of **Columba - Pilgrim and Penitent** which is published by Wild Goose Publications at £6.99

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