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THE SECOND WAVE: IRISH REVIVAL AND MISSIONS IN THE GENERATIONS AFTER PATRICK AND PRIOR TO THE SYNOD OF WHITBY

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The fifth century in Christian history presents a juxtaposition of opposites that set the stage for the second period of rapid evangelization and expansion of the faith of Jesus Christ. The first wave began on the first Pentecost of the Christian era and extended to the end of the period of imperial persecution, around 310 A.D. The accomplishments of the church in this first 250 years of its existence are remarkable and unparalleled. The second wave of gospel progress proved to be no less remarkable in its own way.

This second wave surfaced like a Pacific earthquake with the mission of Patrick, and grew to tsunami proportions over the 200 years that followed. The period in which it began—the mid-fifth century—was witness to the growing solidification of Christian theological formulation and the administration of the Roman Catholic faith. The Council of Chalcedon, the strengthening of the papacy, and Justinian's closing of the philosophical school at Athens tightened the grip of Catholic Christianity on what remained of the Western Roman Empire. At the same time, the erosion and destruction of Roman culture and civilization in the old, established regions of Gaul, Italy, and North Africa, as well as in the frontiers of Britain, was hastened by the steady infiltration of Germanic peoples from the forests beyond the Danube. As the lights of civilization grew dim, the Roman Church hunkered down for the dark night of its

soul. Missions activity into new lands from the ecclesiastical centers of the old empire all but ceased. Church authorities began to focus more on matters of order than outreach. With Roman Catholicism resigned to the task of keeping its house in order, the next wave of revival and evangelization came not from Rome or any other of the traditional bishoprics of emerging Christendom, but from a most unlikely source.

The purpose of this essay is to provide an overview, together with something of the flavor, of the missions effort that grew out of the legacy of Patrick and continued more than two centuries before Roman Catholicism managed to tame its fervor, secure its submission, and subdue its energy for allegiance more to the Catholic faith than the King of the church.



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the more notable evangelists who followed him, we will examine the methods whereby these Irish revivalists promoted the kingdom of Christ, as well as something of the scope and content of their ministries. We will conclude by a consideration of the ecclesiastical politics that brought this period of the expansion of Christianity to a close, and ponder some lessons for those seeking revival and reformation in the churches today.

PATRICK

I take this to be the measure of my faith in the Trinity that, without regard to danger, I make known God's gift and the eternal comfort He provides: that I spread God's name everywhere dutifully and without fear, so that after my death I may leave a legacy to so many thousands of people—my brothers and sons whom I have baptized in the Lord.¹

The details of Patrick's life and ministry are sparse, but the general outline is clear. After serving as a slave in Ireland for six years, he escaped and returned home to his native Britain. He prepared for the ministry and managed to secure an appointment to go back to the Irish people. This call seems to have come strictly from the local church of Britain, without any knowledge or approval by the Roman authorities. Some time around 430 he sailed to Ireland, arriving at Tara, the Druidical Mecca, at the time of high holy days. He entered into some kind of "power confrontation" with the high priest of the Druids, in which he mightily prevailed, leading to the conversion to Christ of the entire company in attendance. His ministry was off and running.

He had a clear sense of what his mission was to be:

Because I owe a great deal to God, He gave me this great boon: that through me many heathen should be reborn in

God, and that afterwards they should be confirmed as Christians, so that everywhere clergy should be ordained for a population newly coming to the faith, a population which the Lord redeemed from the ends of the earth, just as He had promised through his prophets.²

From his center in Armagh in the northeast, Patrick spent the rest of his life, most of the rest of the fifth century, in itinerant evangelism, church planting, making disciples, and raising up leaders for the new Irish church, a church which was growing independently of Rome, with its own vision and distinctives. While a cloud of Pelagianism has always hung over the Irish—or Celtic—Christianity of this period, that seems largely to be a case either of guilt by association or of reading too much into the periodic flare-ups of this heresy among the British and Irish. Pelagius being the most outspoken British theologian of the early fifth century, it is assumed that all those in the sphere of his influence followed in his erroneous ways. While it does seem that Pelagianism affected elements of Celtic Christianity during this period, Patrick's gospel, and that of his immediate successors, appears to have been most orthodox:

Because there is no other God, nor has there been nor will there be in the future, other than God the Father, begotten without beginning, from Whom all things begin, Who governs all things, as we have been taught; and His Son Jesus Christ, Whom we testify to have been manifestly with the Father always, to have been spiritually with the Father since before the beginning of time, to have been born of the Father before the beginning in a way that cannot be described. And by Him were made all things visible and invisible. He was made man. Having vanquished death He was taken back into heaven with the Father, Who gave Him

full power to govern all things in heaven and earth and hell, so that every tongue should confess to Him that Jesus is Lord and God. We believe in Him and expect His coming in the near future as Judge of the living and the dead, Who will make return to all according to what they have done. He poured out abundantly on us the Holy Spirit, the gift and pledge of immortality, Who makes of obedient believers sons of God and co-heirs of Christ. We confess and adore Him as one God in the Trinity of the Holy Name.³

Patrick based his mission and practice exclusively on what he understood the Scriptures to teach concerning the necessity of evangelism and the promise of harvest where the Word is faithfully proclaimed. Citing Jeremiah 16:19; Acts 13:47; Luke 13:29; Mark 1:17; Jeremiah 16:16; Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; Matthew 24:14; Joel 2:28; and Hosea 1:10, he concluded,

So this is why it come (sic) about in Ireland that people who had no acquaintance with God, but who, up to now, always had cults or idols and abominations, are recently—by this dispensation—a people of the Lord and are known as children of God. Sons of the Scotti and daughters of chiefs are openly monks and virgins of Christ.⁴

And apparently they were, in large numbers. Patrick himself claims to have "baptized so many thousands of people" and to have "ordained clergy everywhere."⁵ Given subsequent events—the sudden emergence of Irish monastic houses throughout Ireland and beyond in the sixth century as sending centers for missions—we have no reason to doubt his testimony. Patrick said, "I live for my God and to teach the heathen, even if many look down on me."⁶ This was to be his legacy to the indigenous revival and missions movement that followed in the two centuries after his death.

COLUMBA

By the beginning of the sixth century monastic centers had begun to spring up all over Ireland. Based on a Benedictine model, rather than the parish model of Roman Catholicism, Irish monasteries were self-contained communities of religious and secular who sustained a happy symbiosis of life. From the monks, who lived within the walls of the monastic enclosure, the people in the outer environs learned to read, to live the Christian life, and to pursue honest labor together in community. From their neighbors outside the compound, the monks gained food and defense against the occasional raiding bands of still unconverted heathen. By the middle of the sixth century the "twelve apostles of Ireland" had been designated by Finnian of Clonard,⁷ and the work of building the church and training young men for ministry, which would soon erupt into a world missions endeavor, was well under way.

One of those young men who had been set aside for the gospel ministry from an early age by his parents, was Crimthann, a prince of the O'Donnell clan. He was entrusted to the abbot, perhaps at Clonard or Moville, where his overly zealous hunger for the Word led to his expulsion, when he attempted to make and keep for himself a copy of a gospel book, contrary to the rules of the order. His resentment at the humiliation thus suffered led him to rally his clan in open warfare against his opponents. A great battle ensued, in which the armies of Crimthann prevailed, but at great cost of life. Disciplined by the church for his role in this debacle, and thoroughly broken in shame, he submitted to voluntary exile on the island of Iona, off the northwest coast of Scotland. There he took the name Columba, which is Latin for "dove," for, his biographer and successor tells us, "often in sacred books a dove is understood to signify mystically the Holy Spirit."⁸ There had been a prophecy concerning this one, by one who had been a disciple of

Patrick himself. Maucere, a British evangelist, had said of Columba, who was yet to be born, that he would "be famous through all the provinces of the islands of the Ocean, and will brightly illumine the latest years of the earth."⁹ For thirty-four years from his exile home, Columba preached the gospel, interceded for the church, entertained visitors, and trained and sent young men in missions to Scotland and beyond. Adomnan, who strongly protests the reliability of his account and the many witnesses who support his record of the life of Columba, tells us of him:

Living as an island soldier for thirty-four years, he could not pass even the space of a single hour without applying himself to prayer, or to reading, or to writing some kind of work. Also by day and by night, without any intermission, he was so occupied with unwearying hours of fasts and vigils that the burden of each several work seemed beyond the strength of man. And with all this he was loving to everyone, his holy face ever showed gladness, and he was happy in his inmost heart with the joy of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

Adomnan calls Columba a "founder of monasteries."¹¹ This might well summarize the vast bulk of the revival and missions undertakings which developed under these Celtic saints. Apparently Columba simply repeated in Iona what he had seen in his native Ireland. A monastic head, who regarded all those in his charge as his children, began to single out one or two of his students to be sent off in mission—called "white martyrdom"—to begin a new monastery in an as yet unevangelized territory. After they had been fully instructed in the Scriptures and the disciplines of grace, and had proven their ministry skills within the monastic community, those designated for mission first went off by themselves and constructed a simple hut, or cell (reminiscent of the stone cells in which they lived in the monastery), where

they grew in their love of God and confidence in His power by observing Him in the creation around them. Excerpts from an early Celtic verse a little later than Columba's day give us the sense of how this part of the training served to further prepare these missionaries for the rigors of evangelism, church planting, and making disciples:

I have a hut in the wood, none knows of it but my Lord; an ash tree on this side, a hazel on the other, a great tree on a mound encloses it.

Two leathery door-posts for support, and a lintel of honeysuckle; around its close the wood sheds its nuts upon fat swine.

The size of my hut, small yet not small, a place of familiar paths; the she-bird in its dress of blackbird colour sings a melodious strain from its gable . . .

A clutch of eggs, honey, produce of heath-peas, God has sent it; sweet apples, red bog-berries, whortleberries . . .

A beautiful pine makes music to me, it is not hired; through Christ, I fare no worse at any time than you do.

Though you delight in your own enjoyments, greater than all wealth, for my part I am grateful for what is given me from my dear Christ.

Without an hour of quarrel, without the noise of strife which disturbs you, grateful to the Prince who gives every good to me in my hut.¹²

From this humble but sufficient dwelling, these *peregrinati pro Christo* (pilgrims for Christ) began the work of evangelizing, teaching, and serving that ultimately lead to a

new monastic settlement on the order of the Irish model. Some would come to the new church as students who were already believers, seeking further discipling and perhaps "a piece of the action" on the frontiers of the Kingdom. Most, however, came to the monastery and its environs through the faithful prayers and preaching of the itinerating monk. The early records of these evangelists show us that their witness-bearing was a combination of intercession for the sick and injured, casting out evil spirits, healing the sick and lame, giving wise counsel, living exemplary lives, fasting, helping in situations where reconciliation was needed, and preaching the gospel.¹³ A typical example of this preaching is recorded in the life of Colman. The local king, hearing of his ministry in the vicinity, commanded that Colman be brought to him "that he may preach to us, so that we may know how many among us he can convert." The account continues:

Colman was brought to them, and he preached to them. [He then sent for others to come and join him, perhaps some of his own disciples, for an extended tour of revival preaching.] And these clerks began their preaching, and they had fair Latin books with them, and they recited their reading clearly and praised the Creator fervently. And it was recreation of mind and heart to the hosts to listen to them. And those who had never thought of God before, turned their thoughts to Him now.¹⁴

From such preaching—which seems mostly to have been passionate reading of the Scriptures with intermittent praise and thanksgiving—coupled with prayer and fasting, good works, and blameless lives, new monastic centers grew up under the impetus of Columba's vision and ministry. From Iona missionaries went to Scotland, where they founded many monasteries, including the great center at

Lindisfarne off the northeast coast, from which Irish missionaries took the gospel to the Low Countries, France, Germany, and Northern Italy before the end of the seventh century. Columba's exile from his native kingdom led to the vast and rapid expansion of the heavenly realm under his teaching, vision, and example.

BRENDAN

One more example of Irish missions from the mid-sixth century will suffice to give us something of the reach and the flavor of this great revival of the Christian faith. Brendan was a novice at the great monastery in Clonfert and a contemporary of Columba. He was singled out by his abbot for a remarkable work of mission. One of the many ancient lives of him, who came to be called "The Navigator," tells us, in a passage that says much about the training, character, and orthodoxy of these missionaries:

This Brendan was the head of the belief and devotion of a great part of the world like faithful Abraham, a pre-eminently prophetic psalmist like David the son of Jesse, a distinguished sage like Solomon the son of David, a lawgiver to hundreds like Moses the son of Amram, a prolific translator like Jerome, a wondrous thinker like Augustine; a great and eminently universal student like Origen, a virgin like John, the Lord's bosom-fostering, an évangélist like Matthew, a teacher like Paul, a chief apostle, gentle and forgiving, like Peter, an eremite like John the Baptist, a commentator like Gregory of Rome, a prudent and wondrous emissary by sea and land like Noah in the ark.¹⁵

A "prudent and wondrous emissary by sea." Brendan's calling was to sail westward over the unknown ocean to preach the gospel to whatever heathen he may encounter. In a leather boat, called a coracle or *curragh*, he and twelve

disciples sailed for the Orkney Islands, Iceland, Greenland, and Nova Scotia, preaching the gospel to all who would listen and trusting the Lord for their provision and care.¹⁶ As we might imagine, such a journey was fraught with great fear. Brendan's fear and his consummate trust in God are reflected in his prayer before leaving Ireland for the terrors of the sea:

Shall I abandon, O King of Mysteries, the soft comforts of home? Shall I turn my back on my native land, and my face towards the sea?

Shall I put myself wholly at the mercy of God, without silver, without a horse, without fame and honour? Shall I throw myself wholly on the King of Kings, without sword and shield, without a bed to lie on?

Shall I say farewell to my beautiful land, placing myself under Christ's yoke? Shall I pour out my heart to him, confessing my manifold sins and begging forgiveness, tears streaming down my cheeks?

Shall I leave the prints of my knees on the sandy beach, a record of my final prayer in my native land? Shall I then suffer every kind of wound that the sea can inflict?

Shall I take my tiny coracle across the wide, sparkling ocean? O King of the Glorious Heaven, shall I go of my own choice upon the sea?

O Christ, will you help me on the wild waves?¹⁷

The success of his ministry is summarized in one of the many ancient versions of Brendan's life:

So then, after traversing sea and land, after raising dead men,

healing lepers, blind, deaf, lame, and all kinds of sick folk, after founding many cells, and monasteries, and holy churches, after appointing abbots and masters, after blessing cataracts and estuaries, after consecrating districts and tribes, after putting down crimes and sins, after great perils by sea and land, after expelling demons and vices, after pre-eminence in pilgrimage and (ascetic) devotion, after performance of mighty works and miracles too numerous to mention, St. Brendan drew near the day of his death.¹⁸

Even leaving room for hagiographic exaggeration, Brendan's achievement was memorable.

CAPITULATION

Periods of vigorous revival do not go on indefinitely. They are often cut short by one thing or another, as when the 1830's awakening in Northampton seemed abruptly to falter with the suicide of Jonathan Edwards's kinsman, or when the Second Great Awakening became gradually distracted and defused by the "new measures" of Finney and his followers. So it was with the revival that occurred under the preaching of generations of faithful Irish pastors and missionaries in the fifth through the seventh centuries. It was cut short by ecclesiastical politics and a failure of vision.

For nearly two centuries Irish missions and evangelism had gone on without Roman assistance or recognition. From the beginning, Rome was aware of the spread of the faith among the Irish, and even of some of the differences between the Irish and themselves, in particular, the manner of wearing the tonsure and the date for celebrating Easter. However, these differences were tolerated until the early seventh century.

By that time, with the extraordinary success on the European mainland of the Irish missionary, Columban—

whose church-planting took him even to the north of Italy—Rome was beginning to be aware of the need to take this movement under its wing. The revival itself, because it had completed the circle and made contact with the frontiers of the emerging Christendom, was beginning to lose its vision. Two thrusts were begun from Rome, one catechetical, and the other political. By the former, papal missionaries, such as Boniface, began going to the many Irish monasteries in Europe, instructing the people, in the name of the pope, in the distinctives of Roman religion, invoking the more ancient name and traditions of Rome, and gaining monastery after monastery. By the latter, political machinery was set in motion, culminating in the Synod of Whitby (663-64), wherein Irish Christians were compelled by King Oswy to set aside such distinctives as their manner of tonsure and date for celebrating Easter and submit to the authority of Rome. By the beginning of the eighth century the powerful impetus of Celtic missions was beginning to wane, and the Romanizing of the Irish church set in, with all its administrative control, sacramental distraction, and hierarchical stagnation. By the end of that century, the Irish revival was over.

LESSONS

Several lessons are suggested by the revival and missions fervor of these great saints. We will look briefly at two positive and two negative ones.

First, the bad news. Those who seek revival must be prepared to contend not only with the forces of wickedness in high places and the hard hearts of the lost, but with church politicians who are more interested in protecting their ecclesiastical turf than in extending that of the kingdom of God. Jonathan Edwards and the leaders of the Second Great Awakening knew such opposition, as did the leaders of the Irish revival, once they began to make contact with Rome. They who desire to see the churches

revived and reformed today would do well not to entertain any starry-eyed notions about how naturally eager the leaders of settled churches and Christian organizations will be to join in and support their labors. They must anticipate that opposition will arise, and they must prepare by God's grace to resist and overcome that opposition when it does. The failure of the generation that succeeded Columba to do precisely this hastened the end of the Irish revival.

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Second, revivals die when men begin to lose sight of God's vision and touch with His power for revival, and when they substitute for the dynamic and sacrifice of an ever-growing missions endeavor the comfortable conditions of the status quo. The sheer success of the Irish revival meant that, throughout Ireland, Scotland, and much of Europe, Irish monastic houses could be found on all the major thoroughfares of the Western world. After a while, it must have seemed as though there were no new frontiers to

conquer for Christ, or that those that still existed were simply too far away, for the numbers of missionaries sent out began to decline, and the numbers of those staying back in the monastic centers continued to rise. Cultural activities began to take precedence over missions. Apparently it was assumed that all those within the reach of existing monasteries were already Christians, so other pursuits besides evangelism began to command more attention. When Roman Catholicism came along offering merger into a long-standing tradition—albeit one that was rapidly descending into a dead orthodoxy—the prospect proved irresistible. Political opposition to revival presented itself as the next step in the revival's progress, and men who had lost their vision and spiritual energy simply caved in to the pressure. Leaders of revival today must nurture an ever-expanding vision of the growth of God's kingdom, and they must sustain the kind of true spirituality that will find them filled with God's Spirit, and not the spirit of the age.

And now the positive lessons. First, from the example of the Irish revival and missions endeavor we learn that a true and sustained revival of the faith of Jesus Christ can begin in the most unlikely of places and can grow and be sustained without the support of the "official church." No place was less likely a source for the re-evangelization of Europe than wild, backwater Ireland in the fifth century. Yet God is not constrained in His work by ideal conditions. No church today in which the gospel is faithfully preached and revival earnestly sought can be considered disqualified from serving as the flash point for the next worldwide awakening. God can begin His mighty work in even the humblest corners of His kingdom. Nor does a sustained revival depend on denominational or megachurch leadership, approval, or participation. We don't need to wait around for the "big boys" to get this going, and we don't need their approval or help once it begins. God has His

own ways when those who have a reputation that they know Him are found to be dragging their feet.

Second, and finally, true revival of religion tends to follow those who have themselves been truly revived. Patrick's love for those who kidnapped and enslaved him; Columba's repentance and shame; Brendan's incredible trust in God—these are the attributes of revived men, and these are the kinds of men who get caught up in the power of God's Spirit and who, by their example of courageous self-sacrifice and determined faith, draw others up into the divine whirlwind with them. O that God might raise up such men in our day!

We can be grateful that the period of the Irish revival is beginning to receive somewhat more attention, for, like all periods of awakening, this second wave of revival and evangelization holds out the encouragement that God might yet be pleased to revive us again.

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Notes

1. Patrick, "St. Patrick's Declaration," in Liam De Paor, *St. Patrick's World* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 98.
2. Patrick, *ibid.*, 103.
3. Patrick, *ibid.*, 96-97.
4. Patrick, *ibid.*, 104.
5. Patrick, *ibid.*, 106.

6. Patrick, "St. Patrick's Letter Against the Soldiers of Coroticus," in De Paor, 109.
7. "The Twelve Apostles of Ireland" in Charles Plummer, tr. and ed., *Lives of Irish Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922, 1997), 93.
8. Adomnan, *Life of Columba*, ed. and tr. by Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 5.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Adomnan, 7.
11. Adomnan, 3.
12. "The Hermit's Hut," in Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, tr., *A Celtic Miscellany* (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), 68-70.
13. Cf. Plummer, 4-10, 19, etc.
14. "Life of Colman Ela," in Plummer, 162.
15. "Life of Brendan," in Plummer, 44.
16. Those who doubt that such a mission might actually have been accomplished must contend with the many different versions of the story that have survived since antiquity. In 1977 Tim Severin, using a similar leather vessel, replicated Brendan's feat, showing at least the physical feasibility of the mission.
17. "Brendan's Prayer," in Robert Vande Meyer, ed., *A Celtic Fire* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 57-58.
18. "Life of Brendan," in Plummer, 91.