



# THE CELTIC LITURGY



It would seem that there has never been a Celtic liturgy in the ordinary sense of the word. The Celtic tribes were great travellers and ardent lovers of the liturgy: indefatigable in collecting every book on the subject, copying, retouching and sometimes adding a formula here and a rite there.

It is only in the domain of private prayer, outside the scope of the official liturgy, that Celtic originality appears. Here Celtic piety has a free hand, with interminable litanies, *loricae* or "shields" for protection against the evil one, *apologiae* or confessions of sin, and invocations to national saints.

However, the liturgy of the Celtic Church certainly differed from that of Rome. It is probable also that considerable diversity existed between the Celtic Churches themselves, with no attempt at a uniform liturgy. As well as possible variances in the Mass and the tonsure, a statement of *Gildas* says that certain lessons, differing from those of any known rite, were recited at Ordinations; and he makes a possible allusion to the anointing of the hands at Ordination. Finally, and perhaps most famously, the Celtic Church championed for many years the different calculation of the date of Easter. The Gallican rite was undoubtedly the nucleus of the early Celtic liturgy.

The success of the Saxons in effecting a settlement in south-east Britain and their ultimate conquest of well-nigh the whole country interposed a heathen barrier between the British Churches and those of the nearest part of the Continent. There was indeed communication continuing at the western end of the English Channel both from Wales, through Cornwall to Brittany, and from southern Ireland to the coasts of Brittany and northern Spain. St Patrick expressed the wish that he could leave the great work he was doing in Ireland and go and visit his brethren in Gaul and meet the saints of that country face to face, but there is no evidence that he found time to do so. Relations between British and Continental Christianity became casual and un-authoritative. The Celtic Churches could no longer keep abreast with any changes which the Gauls might think fit to make in their liturgy. Thus, for example, St Augustine found the Britons still following rules for the computation of Easter which had been abandoned in Gaul about the time of the conquest of Kent.

As a result, Celtic Christianity ceased to share in the general movements of the Western Church, and yet it was a church so full of vigour that in the hundred and fifty years between the first settlement of the English in Britain and the coming of St Augustine, we find that the Welsh tribes had cast off all traces of heathenism, and, in common with the more civilised Britons, had become well organised Christian communities: in Wales, it was the age of Gildas and David.

There are no historical documents extant respecting the character of the Scottish liturgy, but its existence is proved by, the solitary fragment of the Book of Deer, the many allusions in the works of Adomnàn, and by the action of Queen Margaret in the 11th century in suppressing its last vestiges. The Aberdeen Breviary says that St Serf lived *sub forma et ritu primitivae ecclesiae*, and when Palladius arrived in Alba he is said to have found individuals, *habentes fidei doctores et sacramentorum ministros presbiteros et monachos, primitivae ecclesiae solum modo sequentes ritum et consuetudinem*. A certain amount of doubt surrounds the visit of Palladius to Alba, but documents such as the Aberdeen Breviary, even where they are historically valueless, often preserve authentic allusions or indications of otherwise unknown or forgotten circumstances.

It was not until the time of St Margaret (ob. 1093), wife of King Malcolm III, that Celtic practices came to be finally suppressed, although the process was far from immediate in its effect. The reforms included the abolition of the following "abuses":

1. the beginning of Lent on the Monday after the first Sunday, instead of on Ash Wednesday.
2. failure to receive the Eucharist on Easter Day.
3. working on the Lord's Day.
4. strange customs in the Mass.
5. the use of the transverse tonsure.

Of course, the Celtic Rite continued to be used by some outposts of the Culdees for over a hundred years more until such time as their communities faded into history. It is worth noting here that there was no iconoclastic reformation here. The true Celtic spirit of tolerance allowed the Culdees and their followers to be allowed to continue with their ancient customs until they died out "by natural causes". Would that the so-called patriots of the later Reformation had had similarly Christian hearts and a less obvious and blatant greed for land.



## VESTMENTS.

It is known that the chasuble was in use in Alba and two priests are depicted in such dress in the [Book of Deer](#), a Gospel-book of the 10th century. A curious little 9th century Irish treatise on the vestments of the Mass gives eight liturgical colours for the chasuble: gold (yellow), blue, white, green, brown, red, black and purple. Adamnàn tells of the monks of Hy wearing white garments on festivals.

The ordinary outer dress of a British priest seems to have been a long hair cloak, known as a *caracalla*. Crowns are said to have been worn by Celtic bishops. There is a representation of a bishop with a crown on a sculptured bas-relief in a ruined chapel in the valley of Glendalough, Co. Wicklow. Of course, in these times, bishops had no diocesan or territorial boundaries. They were wanderers, *episcopi vagantes*, who had no fixed see and apparently exercised their ministry wherever

they might happen to be needed. When they lived within communities, they were subject to the authority of the *ab* of the community.

The pastoral staff or *cambutta* was in shape like a primitive walking-stick, which, when damaged or worn, was sometimes covered with silver or gold. The more modern form of pastoral staff appeared in the 9th or 10th century. The manufacture of staffs was a regular monastic industry in Ireland. There are ancient prophecies regarding the *Bachall Isa* of St Patrick but the earliest mention of the staff (*cambutta*) was probably to that of St Columban, which, after his death, was sent to the monastery of St Gall.

The comb of St Kentigern, which was preserved as a relic in Glasgow was probably for liturgical use, as was also that of St Cuthbert, which was buried with him and was extracted from his grave when it was opened in 1827.

The Celtic Bishops wore crowns instead of mitres and the use of such crowns, in modified forms, continued in Anglo-Saxon times until the tenth century, when representations of the mitre, properly so called, begin to be found. These mitres originally resembled a flat cap and did not assume the present cloven shape till after the Conquest.



### LIGHTS.

A reference to lights, *lucernae ministerium*, is found in the life of St Comgall, abbot of Bangor in Ulster (ob. c.601), where we read of the monk Lugidius, who fell asleep as he was holding a light by the side of his abbot during the Paschal vigil, letting the candle fall into the consecrated Easter water.



### CHURCH ORNAMENTS.

It is possible that incense was used in the Celtic Church, although there is no reference to it in any of the surviving liturgical books.

The *flabellum* or liturgical fan seems to have been employed at Mass. It is found in an Irish gloss of the Soliloquies of Angus (9th century), as well as in designs in the [Book of Kells](#) (8th century), in which angels holding *flabella* are depicted.

The paten was known as the *discus*, *patena* or *patinus*: that chalice as *calix Domini*, *vas laguncula*, *'coilech* or *'cailech*. The sacred vessels in ancient times

were probably made of glass but at a little later period we find bronze chalices in Irish monasteries on the Continent. The two-handled chalice of Ardagh may be possibly of the 8th century.

Bells have been found in most of the districts known to have been visited by Celtic saints and many are still in existence, some at their original locii, e.g. at the church of Inch near Aviemore on Speyside. It would seem to have been customary for a bishop to receive a staff and a bell at his consecration. The Book of Armagh refers to bells as *clocos*, and Adamnàn, in his "Life of St Columba", writes of *clocca*.

It would seem to have been the custom among the Celtic clergy to carry a copy of the Gospels in a leather bag, *tiag lebair*, slung round the neck or from the shoulders.

One immediately has the image of an early Celtic saint complete with *taig lebair*, *bachall* and bell trudging through the wilds of Pictish Alba with no other armour or protection.

The most treasured books were kept in rectangular ornamented caskets, called *cumdachs*, and those in which were preserved the Gospel-book of St Molaise (100125), Missal of Stowe (1023-52 in its oldest parts), Psalter (*cathach*) of St Columba (1084) and the [the Book of Deer](#) (1150) may still be seen today.

It was customary for Celtic monks, when working in the fields or going on a voyage, to carry the Blessed Sacrament with them, either in small receptacles (*chrismals*), worn bandolier-fashion, or in a little bag (*perula*), hung round the neck under the clothes. The carrying of the Eucharist was believed to ensure safety in battle and to serve as a talisman against the attacks of brigands.



## HOLY COMMUNION.

Circular azyme bread, stamped with a cross, was in use in Ireland in the 7th century, as may be seen in the design at the foot of the monogram in the Book of Kells, and it would seem reasonable to suspect that the same was the custom in Alba. Holy Communion was normally given under both kinds although sometimes 'novices' were not permitted to receive the chalice. In certain situations, it is known that the punishment for certain offences was exclusion from the kiss of peace and Holy Communion. The Eucharist was administered to children after Baptism, and a formula of Communion and several thanksgiving prayers are found in the Stowe Missal. The sick and dying received the reserved Sacrament by intinction, and formulas are given in sources such as Stowe and Deer.

At Iona in the time of St Columba, Mass was said on Sundays and feast days, but by the 7th century we hear of priests celebrating twice on the same day. In general, it would seem that Celtic priests were unaccustomed to daily Mass as a norm. The

actual form of the Mass is, as was said earlier, as varied as there are various sources. It would seem that its form was determined by the missal being used. Although there are similarities amongst these sources there are also wide variations. However, the custom was that mass was always said at an early, generally at a very early, hour of the day often at daybreak itself.

We can infer from various sources that communion was had in both kinds - bread and wine. Indeed, in the rule of St Columbanus a special penalty is assigned to any who injure the chalice with their teeth. Women did receive communion but were to wear a dark veil over their heads.

It is sometimes commented that there are so few relics of communion chalices from early Celtic times. However, in the earliest of times they were usually made of glass and we can therefore imagine that they will simply not have survived the passage of time. Bronze chalices were used at a little later period, in the continental monasteries.



## CONFESSION.

There is plentiful evidence of the practice of confession in the Celtic Church, but there is no trace of its connection with or of its use as a preparation for the celebration of the Eucharist. The ordinary Irish title for a confessor was *anmcara* or "soul friend", and every person seems to have attached some priest to himself in that capacity. Three points are worthy of note regarding the practice of Confession:

1. It was made publicly rather than in private.
2. It was optional rather than compulsory.
3. It was not the custom to pronounce absolution until after the penance assigned had been fulfilled.



