

Daily Meditation 3-17-25

St. Patrick's Day 2025: Gifts From the Celtic Tradition

Good morning. Happy St Patrick's Day.

In my essay today, I reflect on St. Patrick, and offer one of his poems within the context, the larger context, of his Celtic tradition. And I end the essay talking about how thoroughly the great mystics of the West, Hildegard of Bingen to Francis to Aquinas and Mechtild and Eckhart and Julian and so forth, how much they relate to this Celtic tradition. because the Celts settled on the Rhineland, and they were so influential in the thought of all these mystics, these creation-centered mystics.

And the first mystic I mentioned is, of course, Hildegard of Bingen, who was raised in a Celtic monastery on the Rhineland. And I want to begin with a few of her poems, because we heard from St Patrick. And I think you will feel, you will feel in these poems, the marriage of Nature and Grace, that was rendered dualistic by the Fall-Redemption traditions, Augustinian tradition. But in the Celtic tradition, there's this wonderful marriage and recognition of the sacredness of nature. Here's Hildegard of Bingen:

There is no Creation that does not have a radiance, be it greenness or seed, blossom or beauty. It could not be Creation without it. If God had not power to thus empower the light, to thus enlighten, where then would all Creation be? It is easier to gaze into the Sun than into the face of the mystery of God. Such is this beauty and its radiance. God says, I am the supreme fire: not deadly, but rather in kindling every spark of life. I, the fiery light from Divine Wisdom, I ignite the beauty of the plains. I sparkle the waters, I burn in the Sun and the Moon and the Stars. With wisdom. I order all rightly. Above all, I determine Truth.

I think you can feel in these poems the same spirit in St. Patrick's poem that I share in the essay: that it is the spirit of the presence of Divine throughout Nature. And this is an awareness, microcosm and macrocosm, that Spirituality begins with a Cosmos, with Creation. Check out Genesis 1, which begins the Bible. And does not begin with the human. This is a big mistake that has been made, that in the dualism, for too many centuries of late. This is why we have an ecological crisis today. In this poem,

I am the one whose praise echoes on high. I adorn all the earth. I am the breeze that nurtures all things green. I encourage blossoms to flourish with ripening fruits. I am led by the Spirit to feed the purest streams. I am the rain coming from the dew, that causes

the grasses to laugh. Laugh, for the joy of life. I call forth tears, the aroma of holy work. I am the yearning of good.

So this is a great “I am” poem by Hildegard. And the Celtic tradition has many “I am” poems. And of course, in the gospels, especially John’s gospel, there were “I am” sayings of Christ. Most of them, scholars tell us, did not come from Jesus’ mouth, but obviously came from the gospel writers, many of whom interviewed those who knew Jesus.

Now what I want to do, is share a few thoughts more from this fine book by John Philip Newell, *A Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul on the Celtic Tradition*. He points out that, in the Celtic tradition, there was a 500-year resistance to the decree, the council meeting in Whitby, which was an effort to bring the Roman, the Imperial church, if you will, to oversee more closely the Celtic Church, which was not nearly as structurally organized or hierarchical as the Roman version of the church. And each monastery which was the basis of the Celtic Christianity, had a lot of autonomy, and so it was a much more horizontal than vertical organization.

And one of the main disputes at the time, was around the issue of Easter, and the dating of Easter. In the Celtic tradition, Easter had been celebrated on the night of the first Full Moon after the Spring Equinox, and they felt this was appropriate, because the resurrection of Christ occurred then, at that time. So they were dating at Easter in tune with Nature’s work of Spring

Thus, Easter's relationship to the Moon's light and to the natural cycle of the seasons. This was being promoted. But the Roman dating of Easter was the Sunday following the first Full Moon after the Spring Equinox. So there is this clash between the two versions of Christianity, and Rome wanted to get it all settled and clear.

But what I find fascinating is that the fight, and it was a fight, the liturgical fight over the season was a scientific one, in many ways, a Cosmic fight. It was about, well, when do our souls most associate with the Stars and the Equinox and the passing of the planets and all this? So there was all this hullabaloo over cosmology. And of course, today, we have a new cosmology, and yet it barely penetrates many religious ideas, because we don’t associate religion with Cosmos anymore. We associate it with structures, and going to church.

But previous generations, certainly the Celtic mind, tell there was a big deal about how does the human soul most connect to the Liturgy of the Universe? The Liturgy of the Universe. So there was this council in 664, in Whitby, and there the decisions were made.

But the Celtic Church was very slow, let's say, in agreeing to this. There was a 500-year period of resistance to those decrees. That's a long time!

And Philip Newell also talks about the Celtic Cross that I'm sure you're all familiar with. He says, *The stone crosses reflect the Celtic practice of worship outside, in the great cathedral for Earth, Sky, and Sea. And again, it's a connecting Grace and Nature, Spirit and Matter, Heaven and Earth. The symbol of Christ is there in the cross form, but so too is a symbol of the Cosmos. There's always a Sun image, a circle image. The Celtic art speaks of Christ as the Cosmos coming forth from the same point of origin. That's the Christ mystery.*

So they put into stone, over 1000 years ago, or 1500 years ago, the Cosmic Christ, you see. It's a celebration of the Cosmic Christ. So all this is a recognition in the Celtic mindset, that the Christ event is integrated into the Cosmic event, into Nature.

And of course, now we have evolutionary understandings of the Cosmos, and we have dates, 13.8 billion years, and a real, more profound sense of history. But again, the Celtic mind was like Hildegard's mind: First and foremost, a celebration. Religion as a celebration, the connection between the human and the rest of Creation. And this is the real meaning of Incarnation, about divinity taking flesh among us, in history, and in the universe itself. Great joining.

Thank you. We'll see you next week, and Happy St Patrick's Day.