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A New Ethic of Holiness

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A New Ethic of Holiness
– *Celtic Saints and their Kinship with Animals*

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From ancient to modern times, indigenous peoples have long had a deep spiritual awareness that in this world all things are related to one another, and, especially, when it comes to humankind, that we are intrinsically linked with *Gaia*, our mother earth, and all her inhabitants – not only with those people who travel with us on our pilgrimage through time, but also with animals who often act as teachers, healers, and guides. This awareness was shared with the ancient Celts, a perspective they passed on to those early Celtic Christians who built monasteries that eventually grew into a Celtic Church much different from the one influenced by the dominant Roman culture that arose on the continent of Europe. A sense of kinship with animals, and really of all creation, became a major characteristic of that Celtic Christian spirituality which emerged in places we now identify as Ireland, Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man, Cornwall in England, Brittany in France, and Galicia in Spain.

One of the major themes that appears in the stories of the saints of the early Celtic Church is how intimate they were with animals, and how much they valued the contributions animals made to their lives. At a time when a new discipline of theology is emerging in many theology departments and academic institutions which has been identified as 'animal theology' (defined simply as a 'theology concerned with the suffering of animals'), it can be helpful, I believe, to go back to the stories of these saints which express their special affinity and respect for animals, and ask what these stories, these old tales, have to teach us today about what could be called 'a new ethic of holiness.'

STORIES OF THE CELTIC SAINTS

The flowering of Celtic monasticism which began in Ireland with 'the golden age' of the early saints who lived primarily in

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the sixth and seventh centuries was followed in the late seventh to the thirteenth centuries with the writing of their stories. Christian storytellers who first wrote them drew upon the rich oral tradition of storytelling about them which had been kept alive for centuries, preceding any writing. While these stories cannot be considered historical in the strict sense that we understand that term today, they do provide insights into the historical context of the early monastic communities of the Celtic Church as well as specific values associated with their leaders.

Storytellers primarily wrote them because they believed that the saint whose life they were describing had something important to teach people about Christian holiness, prayer, service, and union with God. Ultimately, these stories were written to inspire later generations of Christians in leading a life reflecting the values of the original founder, Jesus, who loved all of creation, and who saw God's love as inclusive of the lilies of the field, the birds of the air, and especially all those who are suffering (cf. Lk.13:34, Mtt. 6:26 ff.).

With this purpose of the storytellers in mind, it strikes the reader of them as highly significant that there are so many stories of the Celtic saints portraying them as intimates with animals and birds, and loving them as fellow-creatures. In almost every saint's Life some mention is made of them befriending or protecting animals. This was possibly due to the influence of their ancestors, the ancient Celts, who were worshippers of nature and considered certain animals, such as the wolf, boar, fox, and stag as sacred. Besides the influence of their ancestors, the love of the early Celtic Christians for animals was probably also due to their living in a rural environment filled with those wild creatures. Judging from the Brehon Laws of Ireland, we know that dogs and cats were also found in their homes and monasteries. Fines were imposed for cruelty against dogs, for example, while cats were also loved as pets, especially appreciated for hunting mice and rats, artistically portrayed in the famous Irish *Book of Kells*.

In the stories of Patrick, Brigit, and Columcille, 'the Holy Trinity of Celtic Saints,' we find numerous examples of the saints' loving treatment of animals.

St. Patrick (c. 380-461 *C. E.*) makes reference in his autobiographical work, *The Confession,* to his shepherding flocks of sheep on a mountainside during his youthful years as a slave in Ireland, and how it was there, surrounded by his woolly companions that 'more and more the love of God and fear of him grew strong within me, and as my faith grew, so the Spirit became more and more active.' The earliest Life of St. Patrick, by Muirchu, written some two hundred years later, contains stories of

how, after Patrick's escape from Ireland and then his return there as missionary, he at one point changes himself and his men into deer in order to hide from a pursuing chieftain. Another deer story tells how on the hilltop where a church still stands today, he comes upon a hind with her fawn while searching for a place to build his monastery. While Patrick's companions wanted to take hold of the fawn and kill it, the saint, Muirchu says, did not allow it: 'indeed the saint himself took the fawn, carrying it on his shoulders; and the hind followed him like a very gentle, docile ewe, till he had let the fawn go free in another wood lying to the north side of Armagh.'

St. Brigit (c.452-524) of Ireland also has stories of her great compassion for both humans and creatures, told by the storyteller Cogitosus, writing about 650 C.E. In one story she is portrayed as feeding a hungry dog to whom she gives a generous portion of pork that she was cooking for guests. Another story is of Brigit taming a wild boar who lived in the forest. Being hunted one day, it fled in terror from its natural habitat, and found refuge among a herd of Brigit's pigs. When the saint spotted the boar among her animals, rather than attacking it, she blessed it, and from then on the boar, fearless and friendly, remained with the other pigs. A story about how she, 'being moved with affection,' called to wild ducks in flight which, when they heard her, 'flew over to her … showing no fear,' summarizes how Brigit's holiness drew both people and wild animals to her, and, through her, to the God who made them all. 'From all these miracles,' Cogitosus tells us, 'we can easily conclude that all kinds of wild animals, flocks, and birds listened to her….'

St. Columcille (521-597) of Iona also has stories expressing his care for animals and birds. One of the most famous tells of his solicitude toward a tired crane which was being driven to Iona, the small island off the coast of Scotland, by fierce winds. The saint told one of his monks to prepare for its coming, to 'treat the bird tenderly,' and 'to kindly and carefully nurse it and feed it' until it was ready to fly back to Ireland from which it had originally come. Another story, less well-known, suggests that Columcille and the community he founded on Iona, was vegetarian, if not outright vegan:

> A certain brother called Molua approached the saint while he was writing, and said, 'Please bless this implement which I am holding.' Stretching out his holy hand a little, with the pen still in it, he made the sign of the cross over it without looking up from the book which he was copying. Now when Molua had gone away with the blessed implement, Columcille said, as an

afterthought, 'What was that implement which I blessed for our brother?' 'A knife,' said Diarmait, his faithful attendant, 'for slaughtering bulls and cattle.' 'I trust in my Lord,' the saint replied,' that the implement I blessed will do no harm to people or animals.' These words of Columcille came true that very hour. For the same brother went out beyond the enclosure of the monastery intending to kill a bullock. Three times he tried, pressing hard, but he could not pierce the skin. So the skilful monks melted down the iron knife and coated all the implements of the monastery with it, and after that none of these could do any harm, since the saint's blessing remained on them so strongly.

TALES OF OTHER SAINTS' COMPASSION

These are a few stories associated with the Holy Trinity of Celtic Saints, but they are only just a few. So many other saints have stories alluding to this sense of the kinship the saints felt with animals, and their compassion toward them. Maedoc of Ferns (550-632) is portrayed as a monk who has much sympathy for wild animals. The story is told of his meeting on one of his travels a mother wolf, wretched, weak, and starving, who approached him gently, as if seeking his attention. Maedoc gave her what he had. Another story tells of the saint seeing a stag being pursued by hounds while he was praying deep in the forest, and how he threw his cloak over its horns to protect it. When the hounds came running, 'they could neither see nor smell the stag, and after they had gone, it ran for safety back into the forest.'

This act of saving animals being pursued by hunting dogs is a common storyline in the Lives of the Celtic saints. Kevin of Glendalough (d. 616), besides being loved by a cow which used to lick his feet at night, and a blackbird which built a nest in his outstretched hands while he was praying, is depicted as saving the life of a wild boar which was being chased by hunters and their dogs. Petroc (d. 564) of Padstow, Cornwall, saves a fleeing stag, being hunted by the men of a rich man who is at first outraged at being denied his venison, but eventually converts to Christianity. Then there is Melangell of Wales (d. 641), who protects a wild hare, being chased by the hunting dogs of a prince. When the prince sees her compassion, he gave her the lands on which she lived as a 'perpetual sanctuary, refuge, or safe haven for the oppressed.' Rabbits then came to her, and besides offering them sanctuary, she trained young women in helping the oppressed.

Of all the saints, only Godric is portrayed as impatient with wild animals. His reason was his objection to the animals eating from his garden when the food was for the poor, he said, 'not beasts.' Even so, he was gentle as he led them away, putting up a fence to

keep them out. As the storyteller says, 'the gentleness of his heart' was not only directed 'in kindness to men, but his wise solicitude watched over the very reptiles and the creatures of the earth.' In winter,

> if he lighted on any animal helpless with misery of the cold, he would set it under his armpit or in his bosom to warm it… . And if anyone in his service had caught a bird or little beast in a snare or a trap or a noose, as soon as he found it he would snatch it from their hands and let it go free in the fields or the glades of the wood.

THEIR FELLOW-CREATURES' RECIPROCITY

While the stories reveal these acts of compassion the saints performed, one should not overlook what their fellow-creatures contributed to the lives of the saints. Ciarán of Clonmacnois (c. 516-544) had a fox who, in response to the saint's gentleness, acted as a sort of mail-carrier between him and another monk. He also had a stag that used to visit him and on whose antlers he would allow Ciarán to place his books while the saint read. A different Ciarán, Ciarán of Saighir (c. 501-530) had his monastery built with the help of a wild boar, a wolf, a badger, a fox, and a deer, all of whom stayed with him, 'tame and gentle,' obeying him, 'as if they had been his monks.' Another saint, Colman, said to be 'a great lover and keeper of evangelic poverty,' so despised possessions that he had none, the storyteller says, 'unless you could call property three small creatures:' a rooster, a mouse, and a fly. While the rooster acted as a sort of alarm clock, waking him for Lauds at dawn, the mouse, sometimes by gnawing at his clothes, sometimes by nibbling at his ear, would also get him up, not allowing him to sleep beyond the fixed hour that he desired. The service of the third creature, the fly, was scarcely less remarkable, for when the monk had time to read his holy books, the fly would trot up and down the page, guiding his reading, and if anyone called the saint or he had to go about other business, 'he would instruct the fly to sit down upon the line at which he had halted, and keep his place until he should return ….'

There are many other stories too: of the otters who warmed the feet of Cuthbert (c. 634-687) after he had spent the night in prayer, immersed in the ocean's cold waters off Lindisfarne; of the bear who helped Gall (c. 550-620) build a fire when the saint had twisted his ankle in a fall; of the white bird who guided Brendan (c. 484-577) on his voyage to the Promised Land, and the whale, Jasconius, who provided his back for Brendan's boat to rest on; of the swans who used to sing for Colman Ela (553-610) and his

monks as they worked. In effect, what all these stories reveal is that the animals often became a significant part of the saints' daily lives, and important members, 'consociates' or 'lay oblates' if you will, of the monastic community.

As we look back, then, over the stories of saints and creatures in fellowship, a pattern can be discerned: one of *reciprocity* that transcends species-differences so that all benefit in the circle of life. Kindness, compassion, loving respect on the part of the saints elicit from their creature-partners trust, caring, and love – which, in turn, increase the happiness of everyone. A story of Columban (543-615), the great Irish missionary to France, Switzerland, and Italy, tells how he would call to the creatures as he walked through the woods. 'They would come at once to his call, and he would stroke them with his hand and caress them; and the wild things and the birds would leap and frisk about him for sheer happiness, jumping up on him as puppies jump on their masters.'

THE SAINTS AS LOVERS OF ANIMALS; THEIR DIETARY CHOICES

The Lives of these Celtic saints constitute the largest body of saintly stories of any group in Christian history to have so many creature stories included in them. Aside from any mythical or magical associations with them, there seems evidence that the early and medieval Irish were truly lovers of animals, and that the saints shared this quality to the full. While Native American and Hawaiian peoples as well as certain Asian spiritual traditions have stories about animals, only the Celtic saints have so many references to them as fellow-creatures. This sense of kinship was an intrinsic aspect of Celtic Christian spirituality that affected not only those living in Celtic lands, but also influenced some of the spirituality and theology of later saints who were raised in geographical areas on the Continent ministered to by Irish missionaries, such as Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), and Joan of Arc (1412-1431).

The question can be asked, however, if this sense of kinship translated into any of the early Celtic saints' dietary choices? Judging from the saints' lives as well as certain monastic Rules, the evidence is mixed. Columcille on Iona, as related above, evidently followed a vegan diet, and expected his monks to do the same. Brendan was vegan. According to the story of his voyage in search of the Promised Land, while allowing his monastic colleagues to eat meat, he told them when they were loading the boat, to collect only plants and roots for his own use. 'For the father from the time of his ordination to the priesthood tasted nothing in which the spirit of life drew support from flesh.' David of Wales (c. 500-589), according to his *Life*, rejected wine, beer, and everything

intoxicating, 'and led a blessed life for God on bread and water only.' The daily diet of Finnian of Clonard (470-549) consisted of 'a bit of barley-bread and a drink of water,' but on holy days 'he would eat a slice of wheat bread and a piece of broiled salmon, and drink a full cup of clear mead or of ale.'

Many monks, after these early saints, seem to have followed their example. In the latter half of the eighth century, Maelruain (d.792), the founder of the Céli Dé reform movement, at his monastery of Tallaght, outside of Dublin, allowed only vegetables, a dry egg and cheese – but no meat – and no beer for most meals. At times, however, as acknowledged in his Rule, a monk could 'content himself with salmon.' In their admiration for the ascetic desert monks who had preceded them, early Celtic monks seem to have followed a highly restrictive diet. Some were vegan, while many others followed a vegetarian diet, like the Céli Dé, in which fish was allowed occasionally. Whether their vegetarian or vegan diets were at all related to a respect for and compassion toward animals is difficult to know, but surely some, like Columcille and his decision to not allow any animals to be killed or eaten on Iona, did so as the result of their compassion and sense of inter-relatedness – dimensions found in the stories of their saints.

A NEW ETHIC OF HOLINESS

Celtic storytellers, in telling these stories, sought to teach lessons, reinforce a perspective that humans and animals are all related to one another, and that we are meant to enjoy each other's company as well as alleviate each other's pain. Considering the prominence of this characteristic in their stories, it seems that, for them, one of the most significant criteria for sainthood itself was the compassionate treatment not only of human beings but of all creation, especially our fellow-creatures. Celtic storytellers are thus suggesting to their readers that to be a holy person one must have this same type of relationship and awareness.

What is it, then, that we might learn from them today in a world which is increasingly becoming, both East and West, more urbanized – and thus more removed from direct contact with nature and animals, wild or domestic?

From Patrick's protection of innocent deer when others wanted to kill them, we might challenge those who consider the hunting of ordinary as well as so-called 'trophy' animals as a 'sport,' encouraging them to find other forms of recreation that do not involve the killing of fellow-creatures. From Brigit's concern for a terror-stricken boar and a flock of wild ducks, we might consider how animals are treated today in labs and factory farms, and the extreme cruelty and often prolonged suffering and terror they

endure. From Columcille's decision that 'the implement I bless will do no harm,' we might work toward ending the slaughter of animals for food simply because we like the taste of meat. Maedoc's sympathy for a starving wolf might make us more attentive to our treatment of wolves today, often resulting in attempts at their annihilation. Kevin's patient caring for a blackbird's nest and Melangell's for rabbits may induce us to start shelters ourselves or support them for birds and animals of all kinds. Even Godric has something to teach us about the treatment of those who are perceived as invaders to our gardens, inviting us to, yes, perhaps set up fences, but still to treat animals 'kindly' – not destroying them for their simple desire to share our wealth.

Above all, what the stories show is how much our fellow-creatures can contribute to our own lives without having to give up theirs, so that we can all experience, like Columban, the shared joy of partnership. In response to this renewed awareness of our kinship with them, we too might reorient our lives, as many of the Celtic monks did, by choosing different approaches to our consumption of food, asking whether it is necessary for us to choose a vegetarian, if not a vegan diet.

All of this presupposes *a newer ethic of holiness* than that which has often been taught – and which increasing numbers of people, young and old, are rejecting, especially if raised in the Christian tradition. Instead of hearing that holiness is all about sexual continence and only a specific sexual orientation, the stories of the saints might remind us of the importance of developing an ethic of caring for creation in all its wondrous diversity. Instead of preaching or being lectured at on the importance of rules and respect for the hierarchy or elders, the example of the saints might rather teach the need for engaging in ministries of service and servant leadership.

Instead of concentrating one's attention on the wealthy and the privileged, the saints' lives might affirm the importance of attending to the poor, the neglected, the marginalized, and all those who suffer, human and otherwise. In the development of a new ethic of holiness, these stories of the Celtic saints might encourage us to pursue a genuine spirituality of reverence for all forms of life, and, if we are Christian, to see in the faces of suffering animals the face of the Crucified.

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The 'regulation' of abominations. The 'regulation' of abominations is a modern governmental exercise that never succeeds. If we are willing to pollute the air – to harm the elegant creature known as the atmosphere – by that token we are willing to harm all creatures that breathe, ourselves and our children among them. There is no begging off or 'trading off.' You cannot affirm the power plant and condemn the smokestack, or affirm the smoke and condemn the cough. That is not to suggest that we can live harmlessly, or strictly at our own expense; we depend upon other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skilfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.

– Wendell Berry, 'The Gift of Good Land', *A New Creation,* ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Crossroad) p.327.