

Celtic crossovers: May the Lent of the Irish be with you

By **Joyce Rupp**



Joyce Rupp suggests seven ways to let Celtic spirituality be your guide this Lent.

I shy away from many popular spiritual movements, which seem to come and go like feathers in the breeze. But Celtic spirituality is not one of these. Celtic spirituality is solid and deeply rooted in a spiritual heritage. I have been deeply drawn to Celtic spirituality with its creation-centered orientation. It has been a "coming home" for me because I have always felt a strong bond with creation.

From the time I was a small child on an Iowa farm, I have often felt God's nearness when I have been with the created world. I thought of this as I stood on a snowy Kansas hillside on New Year's Eve. I was on a silent retreat, heading back to my room for the night. I paused to look at the dark, cloudy sky, and there I saw a single star shining brilliantly through a small opening. Immediately I sensed a truth awaiting me in the night sky. I stood for many chilly minutes in sacred communion, gazing at that radiant star until I saw it as all the "strong stars" of comfort that I'd been given in the previous year of darkness when grief had consumed my spirit. I finally walked on, assured that God would guide and guard me well as I walked into the future.

The sacredness of all of life is one of the most basic tenets of Celtic spirituality, and it is this aspect that most speaks to my relationship with God, although there are other Celtic dimensions that also enrich and enhance my spiritual journey.

As we move through Lent, I suggest that Celtic spirituality can be a superb catalyst for renewing and strengthening our relationship with God. As we explore our inner terrain during these six weeks of re-turning ourselves back to the Holy One, we can use these Celtic aspects as stepping stones for our spiritual growth.

The presence of God in the ordinary

Every aspect of Celtic life was approached as an opportunity for union with the divine. The Celts believed that God permeated every part of their life, and they sensed this presence everywhere. Their faith assured them that God was lovingly concerned about each of their daily moments, no matter how ordinary or mundane. There is evidence of this especially in the *Carmina Gadelica*, a marvelous resource of prayers and blessings that Alexander Carmichael collected in the 19th century during his 60 years of travel among Celtic people in the western Scottish islands.

These prayers are filled with the Celts' ordinary moments. They sang and prayed while they were working at outdoor tasks such as fishing, herding sheep, and milking cows or indoors with the household duties of kindling the hearth, weaving cloth, cooking, and cleaning. From rising to sleeping, from birth to death, they embraced God in their lives.

We can do the same. The setting for our prayer is different from that of the Celts, but, like them, we are immersed in ordinary events and God is still in our midst. Our Celtic praying today can be about such things as sitting at computers, traveling on expressways, going to the supermarket, watching football games, or caring for children.

I recently suggested to a young father that he bless his three small children each day. He looked surprised and said, "Can I do that? I thought only priests could bless. How would I do it?" I described how the Celts easily extended blessings and assured him that each of us can and ought to also entrust our loved ones to God each day. I explained that all his blessing needed was the loving touch of his hand on his children and a brief "May God and the angels guide, guard, and protect you this day (or this night)."

Lenten practice: Choose one thing that you do everyday such as brushing your teeth, getting dressed, turning on your computer, eating, rising from bed in the morning, or going to sleep in the evening. As you do this action, pause to remember that God is with you. Do this every day for the entire six weeks. Or choose to bless your children each morning and evening.

Discover the goodness of creation

The Celts were deeply wedded to nature. It was through creation that divinity was most manifest for them. They experienced a oneness with God in hills, stones, springs of water, caves, and many other parts of creation. In a manner reminiscent of the Hebrew psalms, cosmic elements such as the stars, sun, and moon are threaded through Celtic prayers of petition, praise, and blessing. They call out to the "son of the dawn, son of the clouds"; they behold the "lightener of the stars" and celebrate "thou bright white moon of the seasons."

Many of us today live within the walls of home, work, and recreation, rarely venturing far into the world of creation unless it is a special outing to the beach, park, or a sporting event. Even those who work outdoors or spend time there recreationally often fail to give attention to the sacredness of the created world. Yet creation offers a wonderful opportunity to enter into oneness with the Creator. All it takes is a deliberate turning of the heart and a desire to be present to the wonders inherent in nature.

Lenten practice: Make a deliberate effort to listen to the created world each day. Pause to look at a plant or gaze at the moon. Pay attention to the falling snow or the first new buds on

a branch. Notice the clouds or the shape of a flower. Listen to the sea or the sound of the wind. Receive the deeper messages hidden in these gifts of creation.

Celtic Tie cross

Esther deWaal emphasizes that we cannot just look at the creation-centered aspect of Celtic Christianity. We also have to include the cross because it was so central to their lives. It is not surprising that the cross held great significance because these people lived in times of struggle, in a climate that was often harsh and dark. Suffering was never far from their doorstep. It was the cross of Christ that gave them courage to endure their trials and difficulties.

I remember the day I stopped at an ancient cemetery in Ireland to view the old stone high crosses with their full circles. I looked with awe at these memoirs of history as I saw how each cross told a story of a certain aspect of creation and redemption, or the life of a saint, through interlacing designs and drawings carved on the stones.

I thought of these high crosses recently as I spoke with a newly widowed 85-year old man. I had called to see how he was coping with his grief. After he expressed his loneliness and sadness, he told me numerous details of how he'd first met his wife, proposed to her, and about their ups and downs as they lived together through the years. As he spoke, I pictured his life with its many descriptions of joy and sorrow as etchings on one of the Celtic high crosses.

Lenten practice: Each of us has our own high cross. During Lent take time to draw a high cross. Place the story of your life, with its joys and sorrows, on the cross. Do this through words or by drawing symbols. Hold this cross in your hands as you behold your life. Unite with the life of Jesus as you do so. If you prefer not to draw or write, simply hold a crucifix in your hands and reflect on your life's story as you unite with Jesus.

A love of learning and wisdom

Non-cloistered monasticism flourished during the Celtic Christian era and influenced the common folk, especially with its regular schedule of chanted prayer and its love of learning. This attentiveness to learning was first fostered by the wise druids in pre-Christian times. Celtic monasteries were intent on furthering knowledge. The monks took study and deeper ways of knowing very seriously. Surprisingly, this learning and wisdom developed even amid the Dark Ages.

Continual study and learning is vital to spiritual growth. I often wonder how it is that I take the time to feed my body every day but pay so little attention to nourishing my inner being with good theology and spirituality when I am struggling with deadlines and difficult schedules. How easy it is to starve the spirit when life gets hectic and full.

The Celts' love of learning calls me back to my own need for this as a source of growing wiser and deeper.

Lenten practice: Ask yourself how you are growing and stretching mentally in your relationship with God and others. Do you have a commitment to ongoing learning? Are you

growing wiser spiritually? Read a good spiritual book or participate in a parish adult-formation program.

Silence and solitude

The Celts valued silence and solitude in their simple, ascetic rural lifestyle. Sometimes individuals chose to live in very remote areas where they could experience a deep and strong bond with the ruggedness of land and sea. It was here that they most knew the mystery of creation and the Creator.

Silence and solitude clear out the complex cobwebs of our daily rushing and provide a space in which to renew the purpose of our relationships and our work. It is hard to find silence and solitude where most of us live now. These valuable requirements of spiritual growth are not easily available to us. However, we can find reflective spaces if we are intent on doing so by turning off the car radio, watching less television, or turning inward when we are engaged in activity that allows for inner quiet such as spending time in the garden, working on the car, commuting on the train or bus, or going for a walk or other forms of exercise. While we do these things we can intentionally turn toward the divine presence within us and around us.

Lenten practice: Choose a time once a day where you can have a time for stillness and quiet listening.

The lorica, or breastplate prayer

Some time ago I was accompanying a woman in spiritual direction who was experiencing severe anxiety attacks. She had a professional position that required her to speak in front of large groups and would often be overwhelmed with fear and worry. I suggested she use a Celtic prayer called the lorica, or breastplate prayer, used for protection from danger and harm.

The loricas were invocations on behalf of self or others in which one was "clothed" or shielded with the power of God and the saints. The Celts knew the need for protection because of the danger of natural elements as well as their spiritual concerns regarding temptation and evil.

Another Celtic prayer of safeguarding was that of the cairn. In this prayer the Trinity, Mary, or other saints would be called on for protection as the right hand was stretched out and the forefinger extended while pivoting around sunwise, thus totally encompassing or enclosing oneself in a safe circle while calling on God for protection.

Lenten practice: Compose your own lorica or pray a Celtic one such as: "God before me, God behind me, God above me, God below me, God beside me, God always in my heart."

The otherworld

The Celts valued the realm of the otherworld and believed it to be their true home. It was considered to be the greatest source of their wisdom and the place where great deeds were done. They experienced their lives enfolded in mystery and moved easily between their internal and external worlds. It was a wonderful sphere, unbounded by time and space, where all was possible.

In Celtic myths and legends many "wonder voyages" over the western sea took them to the otherworld. Boats, bridges, mists, birds, darkness, and special sites such as circular mounds of earth were common sources of entry and travel to this realm of mystery. These sources were often referred to as the "thin places."

The deep connection and easy accessibility to this hidden realm greatly influenced the faith of Celtic Christians. This is most evident in their invocations to the saints and angels who were approached as accessible and present guardians, ready to guide and to give assistance.

Lenten practice: Choose a saint whose virtues you admire; pray to this saint during Lent and try to develop his or her key virtues in your life.

Other Celtic spirituality characteristics

There are many other characteristics of Celtic spirituality that could enrich your Lenten experience this year, such as:

A devotion to the Trinity (Lenten practice: Be more aware of the indwelling Presence when making the sign of the cross); spiritual friendship (talk with a spiritual guide or trusted friend or restore a broken relationship with a soul friend); hospitality, a spirit of joy, and a deep sense of community (visit the lonely, welcome the unwanted); adventure and exploration of new frontiers (become more aware of the people of your world, especially those who need systems changed in order to provide for their physical and social needs).

As you pray with a Celtic spirit this Lent, choose one or more of the above as your spiritual practice. As with every Lent, you'll need to decide which suggestions are most pertinent for you. May you discover the power for spiritual growth in the gift of Celtic spirituality this Lent.

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