

# *Patmos Companions~ the Celtic Order of St Columba*



*A brief history of the Celtic  
experience of spirituality and faith  
and some frequently asked questions...*

# features of celtic spirituality:

St. John's Cross,  
Iona



- Love of nature and a passion for the wild and elemental as a reminder of God's gift.
- Love and respect for art and poetry.
- Love and respect for the great stories and higher learning.
- Sense of God and the saints as a continuing, personal, helpful presence.
- Theologically orthodox, yet with heavy emphasis on the Trinity, and a love and respect for Mary as first among the disciples, the Incarnation of Christ, and liturgy.
- Thin boundaries between the sacred and the secular.
- Unique structure: there were originally no towns, just nomadic settlements, hence the community was more monastic rather than diocesan, resulting in quite independent rules and liturgies.
- Ireland was very isolated; it was hard to impose outside central Roman authority.
- Influenced much by middle-eastern and Coptic monasticism.
- Monasteries were often huge theocratic villages often associated with a clan with the same kinship ties, along with slaves, freemen, celibate monks, married clergy, professed lay people, men and women living side by side.
- While some monasteries were in isolated places, many more were at the crossroads of provincial territories.
- Women had more equal footing in ancient Irish law, thus had more equal say in church governance.
- Developed the idea of having a "soul friend" (*anamchara*) to help in spiritual direction.
- Oral word-based culture; most of the people were illiterate but had great memorization skills. They loved to hear great stories.
- A sense of closeness and immanence between the natural and supernatural.
- A mandate for hospitality.
- Emphasis on family and kinship ties.

## A BRIEF EARLY HISTORY...

Before His Ascension, Jesus commanded His disciples to go to every nation and to preach the good news to all people (Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:15). The disciples scattered and took the news of Jesus' death and resurrection throughout the Roman Empire. Eusebius (Bishop of Alexandria, noted historian and theologian who wrote the first comprehensive history of the early church and was present at Council of Nicaea) says the apostles travelled to all points of the compass spreading the Good News. Within a short time churches were established in North Africa, Asia Minor and the European continent as reported in Acts. Historians and the Early Christian Fathers tell us that the faith was brought to the Britannic Isles too by Joseph of Arimathea.



Joseph of Arimathea was a tin merchant and we're told in Matt 27:57 that he was wealthy and in John 19:38 a secret follower of Jesus. The Talmud tells us he was Mary's father's youngest brother or Mary's uncle. Even though Joseph of Arimathea had attempted to keep his love for Jesus a secret, he boldly went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus to be placed in his trust. Joseph's actions provoked both the Roman and Jewish elders and he eventually did spend time in prison for his support of Jesus. Malmsbury writes that after he left prison and still fearing persecution he joined a team of missionaries led by the apostle Philip who set out toward Gaul where they landed near present day Marseilles, a Phoenician trading post. One night while Joseph lay asleep in his hut, he was wakened by radiant light. Joseph was told he

should depart immediately the next day for Britain and bring the Good News to King Arvirgus, whom Joseph knew from his previous tin trading trips. With the eleven associates he sailed along the north shore of Cornwall and Devon and landed on the Somerset coast. At Glastonbury Joseph established the first missionary base in the British Isles.

Malmsbury writes: *"In those days Avalon was called the Island of Apples, and also known to the people of the land as Ynis-witren, the Isle of Glassy Waters. He said it was Christmas Eve that Joseph and his companions reached the Isle of Avalon. With them they carried the Holy Grail hidden beneath its cloth of snow-white samite. Heavily they toiled up the steep ascent of the hill called Weary-All. And when they reached the top Joseph thrust his thorn-staff into the ground"*.

Joseph met with the pagan king and in time the king became a very fervent Christian. Years later his family would play a prominent role in bringing Christianity to Rome.

That Joseph of Arimathea was the first to preach the Gospel in Britain is also confirmed by many other writers. St. Gregory of Tours in his *History of the Franks*, and Haleca, Archbishop of Saragossa in his *Fragments*. The famous Vatican Librarian, Cardinal Baronius, discovered an ancient MS in the Vatican library telling of Joseph of Arimathea and the mission trip to Marseilles in 36 CE the Vatican recently released the contents of this document to the public to counter Dan Brown's allegations that Mary Magdalene bore Christ's child. This document lists all members of that mission trip, of which Mary was a member along with Lazarus and nine others.

Sir Henry Spelman wrote of Joseph's mission as did Publius Discipulus who wrote: *"The church of Avalon in Britain had no other hands than those of the disciples of the Lord themselves built"*.

Theodore Martin (Lovar), in CE 1517 states; *"It is not too much to say that the site of St. Mary's church in the abbey grounds at Glastonbury is the site of the first known above-ground church in the world"*.

Archbishop Ussher writes: *"The British National Church was founded CE 36, 160 years before heathen Rome confessed Christianity"*. Cressy, the Benedictine Monk and historian, tells us that St Joseph of Arimathea died at Glastonbury on July 27th, CE. 82, and on his tombstone was written, in Latin, *"After I had buried the Christ, I came to*

*the Isles of the West; I taught; I entered into my rest."*

After Joseph of Arimathea, the next well known missionary to Britain was Simon Zelotes, one of the twelve apostles. Dorotheus, Bishop of Tyre (CE. 303) informs us that Simon Zelotes preached Christ all along the North Coast of Africa and then crossed to Britain. (*Synopsis de Apostol 9, Simon Zelotes*) Next came Aristobulus. The historian Alford (*Regia Fides, Vol 1, p.&3*) states, "*It is perfectly certain that before St. Paul had come to Rome, Aristobulus was absent in Britain*".

Haleca, Bishop of Augusta also informs us as follows: "*The memory of many martyrs is celebrated by the Britons, especially that of St. Aristobulus, one of the seventy disciples*". "*Aristobulus, Cyndav and his son, Mawan, men of Israel, came from Rome with Bran the Blessed to teach the faith of Christ to the race of the Cymry. (Iola MSS.) Again, Dorotheus of the fourth century says, „Aristobulus, who is mentioned by the Apostle in his epistle to the Romans, Romans 16:10 was made Bishop in Britain”.*"

So it is from the earliest of days that we hold fast to our ancient faith in an ever changing world...

### **Q. Are we a church?**

**A.** In a simple answer...NO... and nor do we want to be called a church in the way that our contemporary society has understood and experienced 'church.'

Perhaps to help enable some clarity here and as we uphold the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are the inspired word of God and the living word of God. Our teachings are orthodox, which simply means the correct worship or correct thinking, in that it neither adds nor subtracts from the faith given by Jesus of Nazareth. With this in mind, An Explanation of the Greek word *ecclesia* translated *church* in the New Testament may help understand our response to this question.

Today the word 'church' has a wide variety of meanings from referring to a building to performing a religion service. Although we need to understand the modern use of the word it is of little significance in understanding the

use of the word in the New Testament. It is essential that we understand its original meaning as it was used in New Testament times. In order to establish a New Testament church we must first know what the word “church” means in Scripture.

In our English Bible the Greek word, “ecclesia” is translated in most places “church.” The word “ecclesia” is found in one hundred and fifteen places in the New Testament. It is translated in English one hundred and thirteen times “church” and the remaining times it is translated “assembly.” In classical Greek the word “ecclesia” meant “an assembly of citizens summoned by the crier, the legislative assembly.” The word as used in the New Testament is taken from the root of this word, which simply means to “call out.” In New Testament times the word was exclusively used to represent a group of people assembled together for a particular cause or purpose. It was never used exclusively to refer to a religious meeting or group.

An examination of the Greek word “ecclesia” reveals that the word is properly translated into English as the “assembly” or “congregation.” It is used to refer to a group of persons that are organized together for a common purpose and who meet together.

Based on the above, another way of defining the word “church” in today’s world could be “The Called Out Ones.”

### **The Apostles Creed**

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy Catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. AMEN.

### **Q. What makes the Celtic expression of spirituality different from the mainstream church denominations?**

**A.** A number of things. Because we come from the Johannine Branch of Christianity, as opposed to the Pauline Branch that

Rome and the Protestant Churches came from, we have kept the traditions of the early Christian communities including some Jewish practices. This distinct lineage has also kept us from absorbing too much of other cultural practices and overlay like the Pauline churches have.

Celtic Spirituality is an expression of the early faith that was given by example and message to the Twelve by Jesus of Nazareth. The early Celtic Assembly was flourishing in the Celtic lands by the second century and a part of the larger western Orthodox Church. The Celtic assembly is a part of the ancient heritage and rich tradition of the early Christian (Catholic) church. The Celtic Assembly has existed in one form or another from within a decade of Christ's death and resurrection, it existed up until the



reformation, at which point it retreated into small Highland communities, until the 1800's when it was driven underground. We are now seeing a renewed interest in Celtic Christianity.

Ordained servants do not take salaries, nor have they ever been permitted to. Jesus sent the Seventy out in Luke 9 and told them to take no bag or bread or money with them script as they would be provided for. In

Matthew 10:8 when He sent the apostles out He told them *"you have received without paying, therefore give without payment"*.

Money and the quest for power and control have been the single most corrupting influences in the mainstream churches. Ordained servants serve because they are in service to the Lord and so we would ask why we should be paid for serving God. The apostles

weren't paid, so why should we? In essence they are all volunteers.

We are not a denomination, we are not a religion, but an assembly of faith, the same faith that was delivered to the Celtic peoples by the Apostles. We do not sit in pews behind four walls, but rather go out among the hurting and needy in the communities where we live to minister to their needs and carry to them Christ's message of love, healing and liberation.

**Q. Do you believe like the rest of the church?**

**A.** We are essentially an early 'anglican/catholic' expression of the faith. We uphold the Seven Sacraments and the Apostle's and Nicene Creeds, but our services range from traditional Eucharist settings to contemporary worship services. We are essentially "catholic" in the truest sense and meaning of the word. We are "universal".

**Q. Why Do You Call Yourself a Celtic "Faith" and Not The Apostolic Celtic Church? Are You Not a Church?**

**A.** As said earlier, the short answer is because we are not a church in the traditional sense. Churches today revolve around a structure with walls to say who is in and who is out and a hierarchal form of government. That form was given to Christianity by the Roman Emperor Constantine who founded what came to be the Roman Catholic Church in 326 CE and gave it the organizational structure of the Roman government at that time. Churches that came off this tree, such as the Anglicans and Protestants, carried with them the Roman concept of church, i.e., four walls, operating within an organized hierarchal power structure.

To repeat what we have said earlier, the first time the word church was used in the Christian Scriptures was in the 16th Chapter of Matthew and the Greek word used there, *ecclesia*, means a gathering. It does not refer to a structure with four walls. The "church" the apostles established was more like a church

without walls, which is what we are today. It is because we are an assembly without walls that many writers and historians concluded the Celtic Assembly simply went away. But nothing could be further from the truth. We are a *faith* that continues the traditions and teachings of the apostles and the early Christian “assembly”, a faith which is built upon the four pillars of Christ's teachings of love, forgiveness, humility and mercy.

### **Q. What does *Catholic* mean?**

#### **What's the difference between Celtic and Roman Catholic?**

**A.** The word *Catholic* comes from Greek, and means universal, whole, and complete. In the beginning of Christianity, for the first 1400 years or so, all the Church was called catholic. It meant that the Church preached the entire teaching of Christ to all people all over the world for all time. The heretics, on the other hand, usually eliminated certain beliefs they could not agree with, or only appealed to the intellectual or down-trodden, or had impossibly high moral standards for membership so nobody qualified. *Catholic* is, therefore, the name given to the original geographical divisions of the Church, before the Protestant Reformation. In the east, the Catholic Churches are generally called Orthodox. If you like, the Celtic assembly is that part of the original ‘catholic’ assemblies founded among the Celts. E.g. The Roman Catholic Church is the same, founded among the Roman (Italian) people and the territories they controlled in the Empire. As the Roman Empire conquered other nations, so too did the Roman religion become the religion of State in those countries often in conflict with the small village based, less hierarchical local expression of Christianity.

### **Q. Isn't Celtic a New Age spirituality?**

**A.** Not at all. Most spiritualities that describe themselves as New Age involve a kind of syncretism, taking elements from a number of religious sources. The Celtic Christians were exclusive in their loyalty to Jesus Christ. Saints like Patrick, Samson, Columbanus

and Brendan put their lives at risk by denying the local deities and proclaiming Jesus as their Lord.

### Q. What Is Celtic Spirituality?

A. Celtic Spirituality is marked by the belief that in the deepest part of us can be found the image of God, who created us and



breathed life into us. Celtic Christians refuse to define themselves by the ugliness of their failings, but choose rather to define themselves by the beauty of their origins. We believe that deeper than any wrong in us is the light of God, the light that no darkness has ever been able to overcome. We believe Jesus of Nazareth was raised up among us to in the world to liberate us and to

make our light shine bright again, not to condemn us. Celtic Spirituality is something that can't be learned, it must be lived. It is lived through constant communication with God during each day.

### Q. What are the Celtic assemblies views on the Virgin Mary?



A. In paragraph 149 of the Roman Catholic Catechism it says, *"The Church venerates in Mary the purest realization of faith."* We hold that Jesus of Nazareth is THE fullest realization and window in the heart of the faith. That is why we have no "altar" to Mary. The only altar in our church is the Lord's Table and it is dedicated to Jesus the Christ.

Neither do we teach the "Immaculate Conception", the belief that Mary was born without sin. Although we do hold to the birth story of Jesus as told in the Gospels, there is nothing in scripture which supports that Mary too was born without sin. What we are told in the scriptures is that Mary was a

woman of faith whom God chose for an extraordinary purpose and she listened to and was committed to the desire that God had for her life...

We also do not teach that Mary was a “perpetual virgin” as do the Romans. It is clear that the Scripture speaks of Jesus’ brothers and sisters, (Luke 8:19, Matt. 13:35, Mark 6:1).

Jesus identifies with us fully because He lived a fully human life in a family of brothers and sisters, with parents who had a fully human marriage.

### ***Q. Are Celtic priests and bishops allowed to marry?***

**A.** We do not require priests or bishops to be celibate as the Roman Catholic Church does. *There is no prohibition of marriage in the scriptures.* We know for certain that Peter was married (Matt. 8:14), that Paul, though unmarried, taught all should be free to marry or remain single as the Lord led them (1 Cor. 7:28, 1 Tim. 4:1-5), and that the requirements of a bishop in the early church was that he was to have only one wife (1 Tim. 3:2). This is another man-made “invention” of the Roman Church.

### ***Q. What is the Celtic view of the Eucharist?***

Our view of the Eucharist comes from Christ’s words in John 6:56 where He said “*Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him*”. It is clear from scripture that whenever two or three are present Christ will be among us. And in the Eucharist we are told in John 6 that Christ will be in us and us in Him. When we eat the bread and drink the wine we are reminded of the living offering of the Lord whereby we are given the full embrace to the restoring and healing power of our God. We believe our Eucharist is not a meaningless exercise or some symbolic act that we do. When we come to the table we are reminded that we are liberated by our confession and through shared forgiveness we have been restored and refreshed into the heart of God.



Therefore we would say that the Eucharist is a means by which we are brought into the presence of God and into communion with one another but that it remains a mystery that we cannot fully understand. St. Paul reminds us of

the communion we enjoy in the Eucharist in 2 Cor 10:16 when he writes, *“the cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?”*

### **Q. What is Celtic view of the role of women in the assembly?**

**A.** The Celtic Assembly completely accepts the ordaining of female candidates. It was never influenced by Roman social codes that considered women to be property and drew upon the fact that there were many female followers of Jesus; that women served in the role of priests in administering the first house assemblies and that the New Testament mentions a female deacon, Phoebe. Paul’s letters address many of these women leaders. The Celtic assembly was the first to have female saints in Ita, who served at Killeedy and Brigid who was ordained as a bishop in the Irish Church

### **Q. Do you believe infants need to be baptized in order to wash off inherited sin?**

**A.** No. The Celtic assembly has always held that the path of Baptism was a path for adults. This was the normal and accepted way. There is not a single instance in the scriptures of infant baptism. In Acts 2:38 we see Peter calling on the masses to *“repent and be baptized”*. The apostles understood one had to repent first in order to be baptized. Obviously, an infant lacks the understanding to be able to “repent.” The Early Christians refused to baptize infants and many early Church Fathers like Tertullian openly criticized this notion as pagan, simply as there was not a need to wash away a supposed inherited stain of sin.

However, the baptism of infants has been permitted as being the “abnormal” path under pinned at a later “adult” moment, to which Confirmation has often been used as a ritual means of celebrating. For us, based on the fact the Celtic Faith has always rejected the idea that one has to be baptized to “wash off” sin that was genetically inherited. This was a pagan practice brought into the church by a heretical group known as the Manicheans who mixed pagan sacrificial rites with Christianity. Augustine of Hippo, who was associated with the Manicheans, brought the practice of infant baptism into the church in the 5th century.



We hold not to a doctrine of *original sin* but to a belief that from the moment of our conception we have been *originally graced* by our God with the gift of life.

Baptism is important for Christians because Christ told us to be

baptized and felt it was important enough to ask to be baptized Himself. Through baptism we are welcomed into the family of God as St. Paul writes in 1 Cor 12:13, *“For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the one Spirit to drink”*. This concept is reinforced again in Galatians 3:26-28 *“You are all sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”*.

However, we are desperately conscious that after many centuries of baptising infants ‘to wash away original sin,’ there is a need in our community to honour, albeit from a stance of grace rather than sin, any request to baptise a child. If such a request is

made, while sharing our understanding, we will not say NO!

### ***Q. Is the Monastery a place for children?***

In a simple answer – no. The monastic sense of spirituality presumes and is built on the foundation of the life-experience as adults. Moreover, the early monastics did not involve themselves in any form of indoctrination of children in the ways of a particular 'religion'. We respect the first teachers of children in the ways of the world including spirituality are their parents. The home – the primary cell - is the focus of spirituality and its expression. The ancient adage that 'faith is more caught than taught' is so very apt.

Moreover children need to freedom to explore their own life journey and to ultimately decide for themselves what path they may choose to embrace in their adult years. For us, the home and the safety and sacredness of the home are paramount.

Can we support parents in their journey as spiritual soul friends to their children? Yes - but only in as much as pointing them to certain resources and practices which may help them. Ultimately, any decision pertaining to the spiritual growth of a any child is the sole right and privilege of that child's parents and guardians.

### ***Q. What is the ecclesiastical structure of the Celtic Assembly?***

**A.** The Celtic assembly was monastic or community-based in structure and non-hierarchical. Preferring instead to form associations/companions between the different communities. In conference, no Abbot or Bishop was 'more equal' than another. This followed more closely the earlier form of Christianity.

### ***Q. What are your views on confession of sin?***

**A.** All people sin. Sin – "falling short of the mark"- separates us from God and one another but is an inherent part of a human

nature which has yet to fully align itself with the heart of God. As sinners we recognize the need for repentance and reordering of our lives; but also trust in the infinite love and forgiveness of our Lord. Reconciliation is the great Sacrament by which those who have wandered on paths which lead astray are reunited and reconciled to the Lord and His People. Confession of sin has always been a public matter and a part of the liturgy in the Celtic Faith. (Jesus said confess your sins one to another). The Roman practice of private confession only is pagan in origin and derived from the Rite of Osiris, which had been brought into Rome by soldiers returning from Egypt. Our community of faith follows the practice of the early church with public confession of sins through the liturgy as the normal, but, make space for a soul-friend conversation about where God is at work in our individual lives, of which confession may be a part.

### **Q. Does Celtic Spirituality accept Roman doctrines like Purgatory?**

**A.** No we do not as that doctrine is not scriptural. The Roman church defines Purgatory, as an intermediate state of purification between earth and heaven that is a pure fictional creation but has no scriptural basis. It was a concept added by Rome in the 13th century. The scriptures clearly say there is only one way to heaven, and that is through Jesus Christ, who died for our sins (See John 14:6). The Scriptures also clearly say that *“It is given to all men to die once. Then comes judgment.”* (Heb. 9:27) In support of Purgatory the Romans refer to the thief on the cross. But Jesus’ response to him was, *“Today you will be with me in paradise.”* (Luke 23:43) Jesus does not say to him, *“After you spend some time in purgatory paying for your sins, and if someone in the church will say enough prayers to get you through, maybe then I’ll see you.”*

The ministry of our Companions is to the living, not the dead with the urgency that sharing the Gospel is born of the knowledge that

after our loved ones die there is no more opportunity to minister to them.

### **Q. How do we view other Christian Churches?**

#### **A. We welcome all who come to us in the Name of the Lord.**

We believe that all communities of faith honour and worship the one God. We extend to them the warmest of bonds of Love and Fellowship. They are our brothers and sisters in our common God. (cf. Mark 9:40) Each Celtic assembly is independent and autocephalous; neither Roman Catholic nor Protestant, but simply Celtic Christians trying to live a simple and faith-filled life in the world, being no better than anyone else in community. We are self-governing and ultimately and ONLY accountable to God. We welcome to the Lord's Table all baptized Christians who approach it reverently, regardless of their current ecclesiastical affiliation. Divorce and remarriage are not impediments to the reception of the Holy Eucharist (see Matthew 10:8).

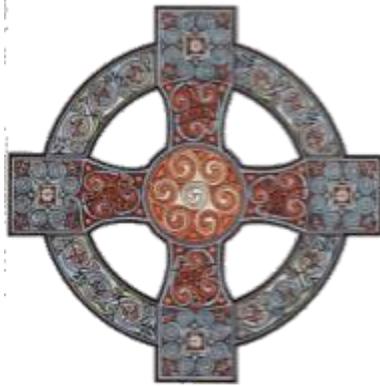
### **Q. Are Your Worship Services Liturgical and if so why?**

**A.** Yes ...and it is because the early church was liturgical. The Apostles and the first Christians were Jews who and accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah who fulfilled all the prophecies, and the worship that they practiced was liturgical because Jewish worship was liturgical. In the Christian Scriptures we're told that the early Christians continued their Jewish worship practices. They would worship in synagogues on Saturday and then gather to break bread together on Sunday (Acts 20:7 "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread"). Luke 4:16-20 records that Jesus read in the synagogue and the scriptures mention Peter worshipping there.

Luke records in Acts 13:2 that the calling of Paul and Barnabas was the work of the Holy Spirit, and that it took place during the "liturgy". The text reads, "*as they were 'worshipping'* " but the

Greek word used here actually says 'liturgising' (*leitourgounton*) before the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul to the work to which I have called them'. There are recorded forms of liturgy from the first century. The Didache between 60 and 70 CE records an early liturgy used for the Eucharist as does the Apostolic Constitutions written in the first century and there are references by Clement in 90 CE (1 Clement, Cpt 40 and 41) for liturgical prayers used in the Eucharist. And there are early written descriptions of liturgical worship. Justin Martyr describes a liturgical service in great detail around 125 CE in the First Apology. Pliny the Younger in a letter to Trajan, a Roman Emperor, also describes the early Christians worshipping liturgically (Trajan Letters, 111 CE).

When you worship liturgically you are worshipping and praising God in unison with one voice. The Scriptures say God likes organized worship (In 1 Cor 14:40 St. Paul is giving instructions on worship to the young church in Corinth and says "*But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way*").



The Celtic Cross, or wheel cross, is one of the most widely recognized patterns of this Christian symbol. It comes to us through at least three different paths, or interpretations of its development. First, the circle with rays coming out from the centre through its sides, top and bottom, had been a widespread symbol for the sun. In the Celtic world, this sun symbol had often been represented as an actual wheel with numerous spokes, deriving from the old belief that the sun was drawn by a chariot with wheels. This interpretation is adaptable to Christianity on the basis that Christ is the Light of the world. Moreover, with its longer bottom line, the Celtic cross is reminiscent of the Star of Bethlehem, with the light directing us to the birth of the Saviour.

**X** The second path is more traditionally Christian and can be traced in the development of the cross itself on monuments in Britain and elsewhere. One of the earliest Christian symbols (even before the cross) was the Chi-Rho -- a combination of the first two Greek letters in the name Christos, resembling a P over an X and often placed within

a circle or wreath. Gradually, the X was turned to become a crossed vertical and horizontal line, with the vertical line merging with the vertical line of the P. The loop of the P eventually disappeared, leaving us with the simple cross within a circle. By extending the lines outside the circle, we have the traditional Celtic cross.

In a more basically Celtic tradition, however, the cross is indeed a "wheel cross." The wheel was a symbol of the Indo-European peoples who had come into the West with the domesticated horse and the chariot. So the wheel in its simplest symbolic representation of a circle (the rim) with internal vertical and horizontal lines (the spokes) came to be associated with the Europeans and especially with the Celtic peoples. The Christian cross then is a traditional wheel symbol with the arms extended to form the cross of Christ superimposed upon the circular wheel. This interpretation is highly symbolic of Christ's Lordship over the Celtic people, but it also represents a combination of Christianity with traditional Celtic spirituality.

One thing that the interpretation of the Celtic cross as a wheel cross does give us that is most characteristic of the Celtic way is the idea of connectedness. As the Celtic knots that often adorn it show a connectedness through the single unbroken thread, the wheel cross provides us with another unbroken symbol in a circle -- often used as a symbol itself for the unity of the people of God -- connected and embraced by the arms of the cross.