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The First Centuries of Christianity in Ireland

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Abstract

In the 5th century the Irish people was ready to receive the good seed of the Christian faith. Through St. Patrick, the apostle of Ireland, this seed brought hundreds and thousands of fruits, as the newly-settled insular Church was enforced by the quick Christianization of the majority of the people and by the Eastern monastic life established in these lands. For centuries, during the material and spiritual desertion of a good part of the West of Europe, Ireland remained faithful to the true God, becoming a treasure of Christian spirituality and life. It will be opened to the rediscovery of the Western peoples by the Irish left in the sixth century as pilgrims for Christ.

Keywords

Irish Church, St. Patrick, Christianization, monasteries, pilgrims.

I. Introduction

Christianity was brought to Ireland primarily by the Britons, whether traders, slaves, or missionaries. Through Briton prelates, both Christian faith and the writings of the Fathers of the Church penetrated into Ireland. But when

it came to organizing, the Irish did not take over the Roman characteristics of the British Church, but integrated the new church into their old social order. Thus, in the Irish island there were several professional guild groups, which the entrance was selective in and they included lawyers, priests (druids), poets (so-called bards), and genealogists. In this hierarchy, the place of the druids was slowly taken up by the Christian priests¹.

II. Saint Patrick - “The Apostle of Ireland”

The man who left a strong trail at the beginning of the Christianity in Ireland is St. Patrick. His impressive personality and work in the midst of the Irish nation, with fruit over the centuries to our day, make us pass over the assumptions and uncertainties of historians and those who have leaned to study the path of the Christian Church in Ireland. So first of all we will stop at the one called with love and gratitude by the Celts - “The Apostle of Ireland”.

II.1 Early life and youth

Saint Patrick was born in north-western Roman Britain, in a village called Bannavem Taburniae, around 381². He descended from a rather wealthy family, where two generations before him were servants of the Church - grandfather Potitus as a priest, and father Calpurnius as a deacon, but also a Decurion, a kind of local police officer. The family of the saint was one of the richest in the land, and carefree life made young Patrick depart from God. He will confess later:

“I did not, indeed, know the true God; and I was taken into captivity in Ireland with many thousands of people, according to our deserts, for quite drawn away from God, we did not keep his precepts, nor were we obedient to our priests who used to remind us of our salvation”³.

¹ Barbara YORKE, *The Conversion of Britain 600-800*, Pearson Education Limited, Harlow, 2006, p. 116.

² Vlad BENEĂ, *Viețile sfinților ortodocși din Apus – sfinții insulelor britanice*, Editura Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2006, p. 100.

³ *The Confession of Saint Patrick*, Book of Armagh (TCD MS 52); Cotton MS Nero E.I., 1, on the Internet <http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/p01.html>.

The way his life changed at age 16 will deeply shake his soul. The saint was taken captive during one of the Irish raids on the British coasts, so frequent in that period, brought to Ireland and sold as a slave to a pagan priest. That one sent him at the sheep flock. The Saint spent six years as a shepherd, living in the mountains, hungry and naked⁴. The years of slavery have been a true school of humility since, from an heir of a well-seen family in society, he became a shepherd of sheep, a foreigner in a foreign country and alone, with no man of the same kind with him in the neighbourhood. The life of slavery interrupted his quiet living in the parental home and the prospect of an education as a clergy son. But if he had remained at home, perhaps Patrick would not have become the most beloved saint and apostle of the Irish⁵.

The years of slavery also meant the beginning of a life entirely devoted to God. In his *Confessions*, he testifies how the miseries of slave life have increased the zeal for God and how he began to pray during the day, but especially at night, saying hundreds and thousands of prayers:

“More and more did the love of God, and my fear of him and faith increase, and my spirit was moved so that in a day [I said] from one up to a hundred prayers, and in the night a like number; besides I used to stay out in the forests and on the mountain and I would wake up before daylight to pray in the snow, in icy coldness, in rain, and I used to feel neither ill nor any slothfulness, because, as I now see, the Spirit was burning in me at that time”⁶.

Yearning for freedom, St. Patrick will flee from the yoke of slavery, retreating to Gaul. He testifies how God had steadfastly led his steps, from the first dream when he was told that deliverance from bondage is near to the wonderful way which he escaped danger and famine on the way home. For the years that followed, the saint tells us very little. We only know that he spent some time at the well-known monastery of Lerins, where St. Honoratus introduced the monastic order of the Fathers of Egypt and at the monastery of Auxerre, where St. Germain, the bishop of that city

⁴ St. PATRICK, *Confession*, 10, apud Duffy JOSEPH, *Patrick in His Own Works*, Veritas Publications, Dublin, 1975, p. 15.

⁵ E.A. THOMPSON, *Who was Saint Patrick?*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 1999, p. 15.

⁶ *The Confession of Saint Patrick*, Book of Armagh (TCD MS 52); Cotton MS Nero E.I., 1, on the Internet <http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/p01.html>.

was living, at whose feet St. Patrick strengthened, preparing for the later mission⁷. Leaving Britain since his childhood prevented some deviations from the right faith that had occurred in his native land, and which St. Patrick easily passed in the years of maturity when he returned among his own. Thus, his faith was preserved purely Orthodox⁸.

II.2 Missionary to the Irish

After a while, he returned to his relatives in Britain, but he did not even stay there, as the light could not be kept under a measuring basket. As the saint himself confesses, he had a dream: a certain Victoricius came from Ireland bringing him many letters. When he opened the first one, he saw the phrase “the voice of the Irish”, and at that moment he heard strong calls from Ireland calling him to come to them: “We beg you, holy youth, that you shall come and shall walk again among us!”⁹.

The one who would support him in this work will be St. Germain, who first ordained him a deacon, then a priest and sent him to preach to the pagan people where the saint suffered so many years.

But before he started on the no-return road of preaching the faith in Ireland, St. Patrick sold his parents’ fortune, and used this money in his mission. The departure from the parents’ home provoked opposition from both his relatives and some of the priests, but the man of God overcame all, following his purpose and calling¹⁰.

Once in Ireland, St. Patrick sowed the faith after a well-thought-out plan, starting from the high rank, the tribal leader or the idolatrous priest, and then reaching those whom they were in charge with¹¹. For a time the druids showed themselves to be the saint’s main enemies, since his work denied their position and prestige as wizards. It seems there were plenty of moments the saint was in danger, and he often escaped from it by the help

⁷ St. PATRICK, *Confession*, 10, apud Duffy JOSEPH, *Patrick in His Own Works*, p. 15.

⁸ Anthony Richard BIRLEY, *The People of Roman Britain*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980, p. 157.

⁹ St. PATRICK, *Confession*, 10, apud Duffy Joseph, *Patrick in His Own Works*, p. 15.

¹⁰ Charles THOMAS, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*, University of California Press, 1981, Los Angeles, p. 332.

¹¹ Paul E. PIERSON, *The Dynamics of Christian Mission – History through a Missiological Perspective*, William Carey International University Press, Pasadena, 2009, p. 71.

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of his leading class friends, whom he had already converted¹². His former master's attitude remained well-known, too; when he heard that Patrick returned to Ireland and prophesied the Christian religion, he set himself on fire in the locked house to prevent the "spell" of Christians¹³.

Though the saint worked countless miracles, the Irish were in fact impressed by his love and kindness. It is said that while St. Patrick preached in Ireland, no Christian was killed by the heathen. This is considered a true miracle, and the conversion of the Irish people from pagan to Christian faith is seen to be the only change in the history of Ireland that has not been washed in the blood¹⁴.

III. The early Church life in Ireland

The Scripture was of great importance in the life of missionary Patrick. He was constantly reading it, knowing many chapters by heart¹⁵. It seems that St. Patrick preached the Christian belief in the Irish language, which he had learned in the years of prison in his youth. However, the church founded by him will use Latin both at service and writing. The schools he established also used Latin as language of instruction¹⁶. This was classical Latin, different from that spoken by his parents and grandparents in the markets of Britain. But the apostle of Ireland was aware that, beyond the Latin service, people must be spoken of and their faith translated into their language. So he set up schools of theology where he sent the children of the Irish nobles, who would then consecrated priests all over the country, thus being prepared to speak to the people about the God of Christians¹⁷.

When his work was settled and expanded, his main concern was the monastic missionary centres¹⁸. These important Christian centres would give the saint a real support in his preaching and Christianization work,

¹² George Frederick MACLEAR, *A History of Christian Missions during the Middle Ages*, Macmillan and Co, Cambridge, 1863, p. 68.

¹³ C.J. GODFREY, *The Church in Anglo – Saxon England*, Cambridge University Press, 1962, Cambridge, p. 23.

¹⁴ V. BENEĂ, *Viețile sfinților ortodocși din Apus...*, p. 110.

¹⁵ P. E. PIERSON, *The Dynamics...*, p. 73.

¹⁶ Tore JANSON, *A Natural History of Latin*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, p. 93.

¹⁷ G. F. MACLEAR, *A History of Christian Missions...*, p. 70.

¹⁸ P. E. PIERSON, *The Dynamics...*, p. 72.

and later they would become real bastions around which the Irish would gather, preserving their faith and national identity.

Shortly after coming to Ireland, St. Patrick was named bishop. Historians have questioned who named him at this stage. The possible answer is that he was ordained by the Briton bishop in his native land, as it appears that at least in the middle of the 5th century Ireland was administratively dependent on the Church of Britain¹⁹. But the coming of three bishops in the following years – Auxilius, Isernius and Secundinus, to help St. Patrick in his ministry, raises other questions. Who ordained these three Celts as bishops? Some authors believe that they formed and were ordained in Auxerre, along with St. Patrick, as part of the Celtic population established in Brittany. The fact that they spoke a language similar to that of the island, which could easily be understood by the Irish, seems to have been the reason for their sending from Gaul²⁰. In turn, St. Patrick ordained bishops in every province. Thus, St. Guasach, the son of young Patrick's former master, was ordained Bishop of Granard. His sisters founded a nunnery near this town. Saint Mel, the nephew of St. Patrick, was ordained Bishop of Armagh, and another beloved disciple, St. Kieran, "the firstborn among the Irish saints", was ordained Bishop of Ossory²¹.

The settlement of the Church in Ireland during St. Patrick did not stir up the still-pagan population, as the church and the Irish tribal society overlapped, a society that would retain its characteristics unchanged for nearly a thousand years²². Due to the fact that St. Patrick ordained bishops and priests among the Irish, the people did not feel the Christian faith as something foreign, and as an element imposed by another nation, but the Church could become one of the most powerful national institutions.

Although St. Patrick did not convert the entire population, he is rightly considered to be the father and true founder of the Irish Church²³. The great number of locals who received the faith surprised even the saint. He speaks of the lads and virgins who were increasingly choosing the monastic way after they had lived in idol worship until not long ago²⁴.

¹⁹ David N. DUMVILLE, *Saint Patrick A.D. 493-1993*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 1993, p. 138.

²⁰ D. N. DUMVILLE, *Saint Patrick A.D. 493-1993*, p. 245.

²¹ V. BENEĂ, *Viețile sfinților ortodocși din Apus...*, p. 118.

²² J.B. Bury, *Life of St. Patrick and his Place in History*, Cosimo, 2008, New York, p. 67.

²³ C.J. GODFREY, *The Church in Anglo – Saxon England*, p. 25.

²⁴ Westley FOLLETT, *Celi De in Ireland – Monastic Writing and Identity in the Early Middle Ages*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2006, p. 28.

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Christianity during St. Patrick's time is a post-Roman one. The specific British and Irish faith was born from it, but having oriental monastic traits of Gaul influence²⁵. Although he is honoured by the Church of Rome as a saint and his cult spread out to the native Britain and then to the continent, his relations with the papal chair were not very strong. His writings, but also the different use of the Easter dates by the Irish churches or the haircut of the monks who will populate the holy places, attest a greater Eastern influence of the church established by the saint in Ireland²⁶.

St Patrick's mission was a complete achievement: thousands of baptized men, kings and their clans brought to the Christian faith, and a respect for the church and its values that were imposed among all those who were still pagans²⁷.

It is said that before dying he saw the future of his beloved island in a vision. Thus, he was shown a strong light that covered all of Ireland. Then over the centuries, he saw that this light slowly goes out and becomes just a faint flicker in the most hidden valleys. Seeing this, the saint began to pray with tears that God would not let his people. Then, as he prayed, he saw the light spread out again and grew stronger, and an angel came and comforted him telling him that the light of Truth would shine again in Ireland²⁸.

IV. The Irish Church after St. Patrick

After St. Patrick, St. Benignus will follow in the Episcopal seat as his disciple and also a missionary. He will multiply the number of schools and monasteries left by St. Patrick, thus continuing his work²⁹. From these seeds put in the stony land of Ireland will come the flower of Christian missions during St. Columba, St. Columban and the other Irish missionaries.

In the following centuries, Ireland has become a true shelter of Christian values and men of the Church. Geographically isolated, it sheltered thousands of refugees from various persecutions (migratory, iconoclasm,

²⁵ Charles THOMAS, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*, p. 348.

²⁶ P. E. PIERSON, *The Dynamics...*, p. 71.

²⁷ Brendan LEHANE, *The Quest of Three Abbots – The Golden Age of Celtic Christianity*, Lindisfarne Press, Hudson, 1994, p. 47.

²⁸ V. BENEĂ, *Viețile sfinților ortodocși din Apus...*, p. 118.

²⁹ G. F. MACLEAR, *A History of Christian Missions...*, p. 76.

etc.). Ireland carefully gathered all the treasures that these exiled brought from their lands, preserved them, worked them, and eventually put them to light by giving them to Europe that had forgotten them. Through its monasteries, schools and libraries, but also through its entire religious and cultural life during the 5th-7th centuries, Ireland has come to be called “the strongest civilized force of the West”³⁰. While, during this period, Europe and Britain constituted uninterrupted scenes of war, Ireland became a true “fortress of education and Christianity”³¹.

Thus, the Irishmen did not start plundering Europe as conquerors, limiting themselves to regular attacks on the west coast of Britain. The Irish did not enter the European political game, but they preserved their millenary tribal traditions, letting the West lead and survive as it pleased. But in terms of Christian and cultural values, in the Middle Ages the Celtic people from this small island put their mark in a way that Europe can be grateful for. Ireland managed to get rid of self-isolation and to enter the history of the world, shining for centuries as a glimmer and bringing a ray of light over the darkness of the West of the continent.

The gifts of Rome (be their ideas or people) shaped an old and strange culture for contemporaries, bringing powerful and special fruits. Latin was the language of the religious writings and sermons, and profane knowledge followed them, so that when the West was under the siege of the migrants, the Irish studied the cosmos and talked about the round shape of the earth³².

Ireland began to feel its presence in the world in three ways: 1) on the realm of imagination, looking beyond the great sea for lands no one had ever heard or seen; 2) in the lands of the Celtic and Briton brothers, and then 3) in Europe deserted by migrants³³. From the mysterious and almost unknown religion of the druids, the Irish easily moved to Christian baptism and changed the places of sacrifice with hundreds of monasteries. Christianity was brought to the Irish at the right time, when they were ready to receive it, and this people - who considered them to be chosen from the beginning - did not miss the chance the faith in Christ offered them³⁴. This smooth transition from one religion to another, with no sudden

³⁰ G. F. MACLEAR, *A History of Christian Missions...*, p. 2.

³¹ Leslie HARDINGE, *The Celtic Church in Britain*, TEACH Services Inc., New York, 1995, p. 4.

³² B. LEHANE, *The Quest of Three Abbots...*, p. 43.

³³ Brendan LEHANE, *Early Celtic Christianity*, Continuum, London, 2005, p. 27.

³⁴ B. LEHANE, *The Quest of Three Abbots...*, p. 42

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or violent turning like other nations, has been a great advantage. The Irish were not conquered with weapons and forced to change their mentality and culture, but conquered by the power of a prophet like St. Patrick and by the heroism of the monastic Christian life, so that metanoia came naturally, being necessary and even required by the baptized ones.

Traditionally, Ireland of these ages is linked to three names of saints: Brendan, Columba and Columban. But the dowry it gave to Europe is much richer. An author cites a wonderful painting of the saints who shone in Ireland: St. Patrick and the bishops who followed him are bright as the sun; the priests with St. Columba in the forehead shine like the moon, and the other clergy and hermits (like St. Colman and Aidan) are the stars in the sky of the Orthodox Ireland³⁵.

V. Monasticism in Ireland

Since, after Christianization, the Irish have shown themselves particularly attracted to monastic life, whether living in monasteries that have begun to spread all over the island, or as their fervent pilgrims, we will continue by presenting the beginnings of this way of Christian living in Ireland.

At the end of the fourth century the first monasteries appeared in Western Europe, more precisely in Gaul, following the Egyptian model. They were established by people like St. Ambrose, St. Martin of Tours and Blessed Jerome. The seaside of the Mediterranean - full of islands - was an attraction for those who wanted to withdraw from the world for God. One of the first monasteries built in these isolated places was Lerins, founded by St. Honoratus. All these Western fathers centred on the cenobitic life, whose beginner was St. Pachomius the Great. There were also cases of hermits, but the rule was clear: only the spiritually advanced monks were allowed to retreat to a cave or forest, away from the eyes of the laymen and their brethren³⁶. These two characteristics - the common life in the monastery and the solitude of those who were spiritually increased - will enter the 5th century in southwest Britain and southern Wales and over another century in Ireland³⁷.

³⁵ Charles KINGSLEY, *The Hermits*, Readhowyouwant, 2008, p. 213.

³⁶ John RYAN, *Origins and Ideals of Irish Monasticism*, *An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 19, no. 76 (dec., 1930), p. 640.

³⁷ C. THOMAS, *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*, p. 348.

St. John Cassian and St. Martin of Tours are the two men who marked the history of early Christianity in Gaul and from there came to influence the church. St. Patrick and his disciples established in Ireland. The first of them died in 435, after having founded a monastery in Marseilles dedicated to the Holy Martyr Victor, and after speaking to Christians about the monastic life, having as example the fathers of the Egyptian desert³⁸. The second was the founder of the Marmoutier Monastery where St. Patrick may have lived for a while. From this monastery, the monastic spirit and the refreshing of the faith will spread throughout Gaul³⁹.

The journey of the Briton monks living in Gaul in the 5th century, full of spiritual gifts and monastic experience, will be completed by their return to Britain and Wales. People like Faustus or Riocatus brought the Lerins tradition to their country, and from there they found a fruitful shelter at Llanilltud and Llancarfan, through monks like Gilda and Cadoc. The Irish Finnian of Clonard discovered them and let themselves be penetrated by the Welsh monk's spirits coming through the Briton way⁴⁰.

Some authors say the Irish monasteries shadowed the authority and the work of the bishops by holding both the Church administrative power and, above all, the spiritual authority over the inhabitants of the area. Ireland has never been part of the Roman Empire and, as such, lacking the city's structure, did not follow the model of Western monasticism. In the West, monasteries were built near towns and cities or even within them, under the watchful eye of the bishop. Having no urban life, Ireland did not develop a diocese structure⁴¹, but folded on the tribal nature of society, the monastery being the mirror image of a clan with a well-defined territory and ruled by one man⁴².

St. Patrick chose Armagh as an Episcopal centre. Through the prestige of the saint, it kept the Episcopal organization for a time, especially between 430 and 544, but later the monasteries became the true ecclesial centres in Ireland⁴³. Armagh never had the authority of the monastic settlements in Ireland. The large churches in the capital cities of the territory dominated

³⁸ Ted OLSEN, *Christianity and the Celts*, Lion Publishing, Oxford, 2003, p. 44.

³⁹ John M. RIDDLE, *A History of the Middle Ages 300-1500*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., Plymouth, 2008, p. 89.

⁴⁰ J. RYAN, *Origins and Ideals of Irish Monasticism*, p. 641.

⁴¹ C.H. LAWRENCE, *Medieval Monasticism*, Pearson, Harlow, 2001, p. 45.

⁴² B. LEHANE, *The Quest of Three Abbots...*, p. 41.

⁴³ C.J. GODFREY, *The Church in Anglo – Saxon England*, p. 25.

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by a clan had greater independence. The smaller ones, though partially subordinated, were much more numerous. Over time, they will even become the residence of a bishop. Thus it is known that in the 5th-6th centuries in Ireland there were no fewer than 350 bishops⁴⁴. Virtually every tribe had a bishop who concentrated his power and authority in the area where he lived or where there was a thriving monastic community. Given the large number of clans (a clan had no more than 12,000 members⁴⁵), it is not surprising that there were hundreds of hierarchs. Often the abbot of a monastery was the bishop of the place at the same time.

The nobles from St. Patrick's time and from the following centuries carefully endowed the monastic centres, also sending some members of their clans to serve God - for example, St. Columba was from a noble family, who was leading one of the island's tribes⁴⁶. Large monasteries such as Kildare, Clonard, or Clonmacnoise were run by noble monks and, through their economic power and their neighbourhood they became an important economic centre or even the king's residence⁴⁷.

We might also observe some particular features within the Irish monastic life that make it depart from the North African source which watered and kept it alive. First, Celtic monasticism is less patriarchal as a structure more related to nature. It urges to mysticism, poetry and dream, but also to a practical spirit⁴⁸. Then the monk's life was opened to many women who wanted to go far from this world and gave them a very important role in the Irish Church⁴⁹. Most monasteries for nuns arose from the desire of an abbot to settle his mother, sister, or other relative, in the vicinity of the monastery he was leading.

Irish monasticism was thirsty for *learning*. Holy Bible and Psalter were the main books of the Celtic monk and he read them every day. Just as in the past the memorization and recitation of the ballads was of great honour, the learning the Psalms by heart became a daily work in the

⁴⁴ C.J. GODFREY, *The Church in Anglo – Saxon England*, p. 44.

⁴⁵ Lisa M. BITEL, *Isle of the Saints. Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1993, p. 2.

⁴⁶ C.H. LAWRENCE, *Medieval Monasticism*, Pearson, Harlow, 2001, p. 46.

⁴⁷ R.F. FOSTER, *The Oxford History of Ireland*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989, p. 14.

⁴⁸ B. LEHANE, *The Quest of Three Abbots...*, p. 41.

⁴⁹ Edward C. SELLNER, *Finding the Monk Within. Great Monastic Values for Today*, Paulist Press, New Jersey, 2008, p. 146.

monastery⁵⁰. The children were learning to read using Psalter. It is possible St. John Cassian inspired them to read the holy books – as his influence on the Briton monasteries is a well-known fact. He urges the monk: “*Read the holy books with the same zeal that you read the pagan authors and your thoughts will be cleansed*”⁵¹. Returning to the role of the Holy Scriptures in the life of the Irish monk, we must note its good knowledge and emphasis on the scriptural preparation of the monks, as Saint Patrick learned from Gaul, and then instilled it in the Celtic lands⁵². Irish monks could not easily be deceived about the biblical word because they were more familiar to it than perhaps to the weekly services. The heresies that have shaken the Church over the years had lesser effect in Ireland as long as the Irish were anchored in the word of Scripture. Also, the thirst for reading and knowing, as well as the daily feeding from the Bible, made the monks sent in future missions to be able to vigorously preach the Christian religion.

In addition to reading holy books, the exegesis was highly appreciated. The Irish began to write comments and homilies to the Holy Scripture. In the following centuries the apocryphal writings were more and more sought, being in fact a replicated form of canonical biblical texts⁵³. Besides these, there existed libraries well-equipped with both Western and Eastern Fathers’ writings. The Latin and Greek cultures, including the profane one, valued much for the Irish monks⁵⁴. This is the time when the books of the Eastern Christianity still penetrated the island, and when the Greek language was still taught by those who attended the schools of the West. However, the following centuries brought a gap with the Greek culture, both profane and ecclesiastical because of the barbaric invasions in the Western Europe⁵⁵. Nevertheless, the isolation of the British islands allowed this rupture to be delayed in the Briton Church, and the springs of the great Fathers of the Church resisted in Ireland for longer. Thus, the paradox is that in a great Latin culture sea such as the Western one, there is Ireland, an island of Hellenism, both ecclesiastical and profane.

⁵⁰ B. LEHANE, *The Quest of Three Abbots ...*, p. 21

⁵¹ L. HARDINGE, *The Celtic Church in Britain*, p. 33.

⁵² J. RYAN, *Origins and Ideals of Irish Monasticism*, p. 641.

⁵³ OLIVER DAVIES, THOMAS O’LOUGHLIN, *Celtic Spirituality*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, 1999, p. XVI.

⁵⁴ JACKSON J. SPIELVOGEL, *Western Civilization – A Brief History*, Wadsworth, 2011, Boston, p. 141.

⁵⁵ CONSTANTINE C. KLIORA, *Catholics, Non-Catholics and Non-Catholic Catholics*, Xlibris, 2009, p. 155.

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Another feature of the Irish monasticism is its *apostolic-anachoretic trait*. The Celtic monk was attracted by wilderness and loneliness, but at the same time he also thought of those in the world he left. This paradox was amazingly resolved by the Irish monks, as they took the path of pilgrimage for God⁵⁶. On the one hand, they left their family, monastery and even country, the distant and foreign lands becoming their desert, and on the other through their missions, they called to Christ those who were still wandering in ignorance and paganism. The writings the Irish so much appreciated that penetrated the island were also a result of the many pilgrimages the Celts of these lands began from the sixth century. Unlike other pilgrims, for the Irish the journey primarily meant an inner journey, a repentance of the heart and an alienation from the world⁵⁷, but also a call of God to serve Him in a foreign land⁵⁸. The Celt was a great traveller. In the Irish mentality Heaven was placed somewhere on an island. And the West was for them a true land of promise and a place where no people came to their land as conquerors⁵⁹.

By doing this the Irish monks became pioneers and pilgrims of Christ throughout Europe⁶⁰. Those who started *peregrinatio* often did not return to their native country, but carried their cross of estrangement until the end of their lives. This form of asceticism was particularly suited to the Irish, who, among all the Celtic peoples, were most related to the idea of family, home, native land, and people. They considered the rupture from everything that meant country as a true bloodless martyrdom, a renunciation of everything for Christ. These pilgrimages the Irishmen began since the end of the 5th century became precursors of the great missionary trips after the year 600. It was even said that St. Patrick was the one who taught them and encouraged to live as pilgrims through the world by his own example as a clergyman detached from his native lands⁶¹. The fervour to preach the Christian faith first led them to their Celtic brothers on the great island. In the 5th and 6th centuries Wales and Cornwall received the renewed breath

⁵⁶ J. RYAN, *Origins and Ideals of Irish Monasticism*, p. 642.

⁵⁷ Peter HARBISON, *Pilgrimage in Ireland – The Monuments and the People*, Syracuse University Press, New York, 1992, p. 35.

⁵⁸ Leslie HARDINGE, *The Celtic Church in Britain*, p. 9.

⁵⁹ B. LEHANE, *The Quest of Three Abbots...*, p. 41

⁶⁰ C.J. GODFREY, *The Church in Anglo – Saxon England*, p. 45.

⁶¹ L. HARDINGE, *The Celtic Church in Britain*, p. 9.

of holy pilgrims such as St. Piran, St. Fingar, or St. Ia⁶². There is also the testimony of the trip made by the Irish monk Fursey in East Anglia. He established a monastery there and stayed for a while, until leaving for Gaul in Péronne, where he built another monastic settlement⁶³.

VI. Conclusion

From the fires of the trials experienced in the 5th and 6th centuries, the Celtic Church emerged victorious in both post-Roman Britain and in the archipelago where the Church in Ireland proved to be its strongest branch. St. Patrick himself was amazed how quickly this generation of Celts received the Christian faith. Over a century, from newly baptized, the Irish will come to give the Christian world a whole host of holy monks and missionaries.

⁶² C.J. GODFREY, *The Church in Anglo – Saxon England*, p. 43.

⁶³ David ROLLASON, *Northumbria, 500 – 1100, Creation and Destruction of a Kingdom*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 129.