By Phillip Campbell

Between the fifth and eighth centuries, Ireland was home to one of the most vibrant strains of Christian monasticism. The contributions of the Irish monks to the development of Christianity in the West are well known; their beautiful illuminations, their heroic missionary endeavors, and their diligent labor copying the literature of antiquity are universally acclaimed. Less understood is what kind of monastic regimen these holy folk of Éire actually lived under. Early Irish monasticism existed entirely prior to and outside of the Benedictine tradition, and thus was unlike monastic life anywhere else in the West. What kind of life did these monks live? What sorts of monastic disciplines did they embrace? How did their communities function?

As there was no uniform rule of life among the early monastic foundations, the subject is easiest to approach by a series of case studies of the most influential monastics, from which we may deduce some commonalities. We shall therefore examine the monastic disciplines of Sts. Enda, Columba, Finnian, Columbanus, and Maelurain.

St. Enda's Monastic Community

One of the first Irish monastic settlements about which we know anything with detail is St. Enda's monastic community on the Aran Islands, three rocky islands guarding the mouth of Galway Bay on Ireland's west coast. St. Enda (450-530) was the son of King Conall Derg of Airgíalla who rejected worldly power and embraced religious life under the influence of his sister, St. Fanchea. Around 480, St. Enda founded a monastery called Killeany on the largest island, Inishmore. Before long a community of brothers joined him, eager to put themselves under St. Enda's discipline. Life on Inishmore was harsh, as the island is little more than moss-covered rock. In order to survive, Enda's community had to make their own soil by mixing seaweed and sand, use it to fill cracks in the rock, and protect it with walls so it would not wash or blow away. They lived off oats and barley from their meager gardens, as well as fish caught from the sea and roots scavenged from amongst the rocks.

St. Enda wrote no rule, but there was a basic division of life on Inishmore. Enda divided the day into periods for prayer, labor, and study. The monks lived in separate cells (some still exist today, little stone huts scarcely large enough to stand up in) and ate in silence in a common refectory. As if life on Inishmore was not already hard enough, St. Enda forbade the use of any tools, insisting that the monks perform all labor by hand. They were also forbidden the comfort of fire on the island, no matter how inclement the weather became — although the lack of trees on the island probably ruled out fires anyway. They wove their own clothes from the wool of the little herds they pastured on the island's hardy grasses and slept on the bare ground.

Despite the hardship, the Aran Isles became home to a thriving community of monks. Eleven monasteries dotted Inishmore, all daughter houses of Abbot Enda's first establishment. The ancient writers say there were as many as five thousand monks swarming about Aran in its heyday; this may be an exaggeration, as it is hard to see how these islands could have supported so many, but there were certainly a multitude. Many future saints learned monastic life under the tutelage of Enda upon Inishmore's barren tableland.

St. Finnian of Clonard

One of St. Enda's disciples was St. Finnian of Clonard (470-549). Born a pagan of Ulster, he was converted by St. Abbán, an early Irish hermit. After his conversion, St. Finnian spent some time on Inishmore with St. Enda before leaving Ireland to study in the monasteries of Gaul and Wales. Upon his return to Ireland, Finnian found his reputation had preceded him — he was met at the shore by Muiredach, King of Leinster, who carried St. Finnian on his back across three fields from the harbor as a sign of deference. This King Muiredach offered Finnian the choice of any land he wished upon which to build his church. Finnian chose a field of apple trees beside the Esker Riada, one of the five ancient roads that crossed Ireland. This would become Clonard, one of the most important ecclesiastical sites in early Christian Ireland.

Like St. Enda's Aran, Clonard grew into a thriving monastic city. The Irish annals tell us that thousands of monks came to Clonard to learn at the feet of St. Finnian. And like his mentor Enda, Finnian practiced extreme austerities. He fasted till he was skin and bones and wore an iron girdle for penance. He was austere, but also compassionate. Finnian was more than an abbot; he was a teacher and father figure to those who entrusted their formation to him. That thousands of monks voluntarily placed themselves under the harsh regimen of life at Clonard speaks volumes about the love these men bore for their spiritual father.

St. Finnian, too, thought it best to lay down some general guidelines for his community. He is best remembered for his penitential, a book of penances to be given to penitents by their confessors. St. Finnian believed clerics should be given harsher penances than lay people; for example, a lay person who wounded another was given a penance of forty days fasting, but a priest who did the same was required to fast on bread and water for a year, during which time he was suspended from priestly ministry. Distributing specified penances for specific sins was a unique characteristic of St. Finnian's discipline.

St. Finnian also encouraged frequent confession, even of sinful thoughts, which was uncommon at the time. While it had always been acknowledged that thoughts could be sinful, it was not common to bring them to sacramental confession. St. Finnian, however, encouraged his monks to confess these matters, and to do so frequently. St. Finnian's

penitential book and his practice of private penances assigned for specific sins would spread.

Some of the most significant names in Irish Christianity studied under St. Finnian at Clonard. St. Finnian's disciples would fan out across Christendom, founding monasteries and bringing souls into the Church. The conversion of Ireland would not have unfolded as it did without the work of St. Finnian. The spiritual fruits of Finnian's life are truly astonishing to contemplate.

St. Columba's Rule of Life

The most notable monk who spent time under St. Finnian of Clonard was St. Columba (521-597), a native of Derry in the north who was affiliated with the powerful Uí Neill clan.

St. Columba is most known for founding the abbey of Iona in the Scottish Hebrides, from which Irish monks would commence the evangelization of Scotland. A rule attributed to St. Columba has come down from the sixth century, revealing the difficulty of life at Iona. Like the discipline of Enda, St. Columba's rule tells us that his monks divided their time between prayer, work, and study — but not collectively. They lived in community but had their own separate cells and maintained their own schedule. For example, Columba's rule does not tell the monks when they should go to sleep at night; instead, it tells them not to go to sleep until they are overcome with fatigue and need to sleep. The rule directs them to pray — standing up — for the living and the dead, and to take no food until compelled by pangs of hunger. On Sundays and holy days, the monks were to seek out an older monk who was well versed in the Scriptures and listen to him speak of the things of God.

St. Columba placed extra emphasis on manuscript copying in his abbey. Columba himself was a skilled copyist who was said to have written three hundred copies of the Psalter in his own hand. One of these Psalters still exists today; it is called the *Cathach* ("Battler") because it used to be carried into battle as a sacred relic by the medieval Clan Ó Domhnaill of Ulster. Columba made sure his monks were well-trained in the art of manuscript illumination. Out of Iona would one day come one of the most beautiful of all illuminated manuscripts — the collection of the Gospels known as the *Book of Kells*.

Not to be confused with St. Columba is St. Columbanus (540-615), an Irish missionary monk notable for his establishments in France and Italy. St. Columbanus's monasteries grew so quickly that the saint decided he needed to write a rule for his monks to follow. The *Rule of St. Columbanus* was the first known Irish rule to be written down. Like the *Rule of St. Benedict*, Columbanus's rule contains directions for how to pray the Divine Office and what Psalms to say on which days. Columbanus's rule was challenging and strict — as many as 36 psalms would be prayed in a single sitting, and physical punishment was prescribed for violations (a monk caught hiding any private property was subject to a hundred lashes; even hastily calling something "mine" merited six lashes). Yet, despite his harshness, Columbanus understood the weakness of human nature. He wrote a great deal of flexibility into his rule to account for human frailty.

The Culdees

By the mid-eighth century, Irish monasticism found itself in need of reform due to a certain laxity that had crept into the monasteries from excessive lay involvement in monastic life, similar to the problems seen elsewhere in Europe. This gave rise to a new movement called the *celi De*, the "servants of God" — although they are better known by their Anglicized name, the Culdees.

The Culdees were not an order, but a reform movement within Irish monasticism. Sometimes the Culdees existed alongside other monks in traditional monasteries; sometimes they established monasteries of their own to practice their own brand of monasticism unhindered. They were ascetics who looked back to the example of Ireland's early saints as an antidote to the laxity and worldliness of the monasteries. The Culdee movement was spontaneous, popping up in different monasteries led by monks devoted to restoring the rigor of Ireland's early monastic founders.

The movement was given form by one of its early leaders, St. Maelruain (d. 792). Maelruain was the Abbot of Tallaght in Leinster, near present-day Dublin. Maelruain composed a rule for the Culdees around 780 called the *Rule of Tallaght*. Written in verse, the *Rule of Tallaght* regulated every aspect of human activity — eating, sleeping, labor, prayer, and even a man's thoughts were governed by the exacting rule. The spirituality centered on the constant repetition of the Psalms. Whereas the more moderate Rule of St. Benedict took a monk through the 150 Psalms in a week, Maelruain's rule mandated the 150 Psalms be prayed every single day. Prayer was often performed in a cross-vigil (standing upright with arms extended like a cross), with occasional genuflections. Everything superfluous was excised from the monastic routine; Maelruain's rule commanded monks, "Do not eat till thou be hungry; do not sleep till thou be ready for it; speak to none till there be cause."

Despite this strictness, St. Maelruain was also a realist who understood the weakness of human nature. His rule allowed room for individual moderation. Maelruain turned away candidates from Tallaght whom he considered too strict in their observance; for example, an individual who fasted too much would be too weak for hard work.

The Culdees were active throughout the Irish church — they became priests and bishops; they trained as illuminators and worked in scriptoria across Ireland; they influenced Irish art and wrote some of Ireland's loveliest nature poetry. They helped reinvigorate the Irish church in the troubled years of the eighth and ninth centuries.

The Culdees renewed the Church, but since they were nothing but a loose association of monasteries, they lacked the organization to renew themselves. The strictness or laxity of a monastery depended entirely upon the whims of the abbot. A pious abbot could maintain a remarkable degree of piety; an unsympathetic successor could undo his work overnight, letting the monastery sink back into laxity. The Culdees viewed themselves as restorers of ancient Irish monasticism, but they could not know that they would be its last gasp, as the Continental disciplines of the Benedictine heritage would increasingly displace the Gaelic disciplines from the 10th century onward.

A "Desert in the Ocean"

What can we say in general about Irish monasticism based on these case studies?

In general, Irish monastic life was characterized by its harshness and discipline. Penance was harsh, with common disciplines being sleeping on stone, performing genuflections — sometimes hundreds at a time — and standing cruciform for extended periods. St. Kevin of Glendalough famously stood at cross-vigil so long that a bird made a nest in his palm. The severity of this life was only compounded by the harsh conditions the great monastics often chose for their monasteries — inhospitable places like Inishmore where life could only be maintained with great difficulty. The Irish ideal was what St. Adomnan of Iona called a "desert in the ocean" — a physically inaccessible location, preferably in the sea, where the necessities of life were barely available.

Despite its harshness, Irish monasticism was not regimented. The rules of the Irish monasteries were more open, allowing the monks greater discretion in how they spent their time. The monks ate, slept, and prayed as they wished. Nor was there anything like the Benedictine concept of stability; an Irish monk remained at a monastery only so long as he found it helpful, after which he wandered off to find a new monastic patron, much like the wandering Gaelic bards of old. Monasteries themselves exercised greater independence, under neither the jurisdiction of bishops nor of any centralized order.

What liturgy did the Irish monks celebrate? As St. Patrick founded the Church in Ireland, and as Patrick was trained in Gaul under St. Germanus, the Irish liturgy was a variant of the old Gallic liturgies once practiced in Roman Gaul. These liturgies had died out in Gaul by the sixth century, surviving only in Ireland. The specific of these liturgies is preserved in little texts known as "pocket-books." These contained the texts for the Mass and sacraments, including chants, collects, and readings, usually in both Latin and Irish. Pocket-books were easy to carry, meant for missionaries and traveling priests. Several pocket-books survive, including the *Book of Dimma*, the *Book of Mulling*, and the *Stowe Missal*.

Pre-Benedictine Irish monasticism was a unique moment in the history of Christian asceticism. Though their once-teeming monastic islands are now uninhabited and their dry-built stone huts are long abandoned, the spiritual legacy they enkindled continues to inspire Catholics the world over.

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