

The Community of Aidan and Hilda
Edited by David Cole



Celtic Prayer

Caught Up in Love

Wisdom for living
from a modern Celtic community

Celtic Prayer



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(Brother Cassian)



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Introduction

David Cole (Brother Cassian)

It has been an immense privilege to be the editor of this book, to have the chance to read the richness of the following pages before anyone else. There is a vast and wonderful array awaiting you. With 20 chapters written by 30 different authors, some of whom are seasoned writers, other for whom this is the first time their words have been in print, you are in for a treat!

Our communication with heaven and the Divine is of vital importance to our faith. As Christians, we can go directly and boldly to the ‘throne of grace’ (Hebrews 4:16), that is, God’s throne, without having to go through the complex steps the Hebrew people had to go through before Christ came.

However, this communication, or ‘prayer’ as we usually call it, can quite often end up as us simply listing things out to God. Occasionally we might remember, or put time out, to listen to God, but more often than not our communication is more one way. For the Celtic Christians prayer was so much more than this.

In the book of Ephesians, the apostle Paul says to pray with ‘all kinds of prayers’ (Ephesians 6:18, NIV), so we know that there are different types of prayer, not just shopping lists directed at God. In many churches, there is a dedicated time during services for **intercession** prayers, that is, praying for others, but again this can often simply be ‘Lord, we pray for so and so’ or ‘Lord, we pray for those in this or that situation’. There is **supplication**, that is, asking God for things; there is **praise** and **thanksgiving**, that is, telling God what you think of him

and saying thank you for things; and there is **confession**, where we tell God everything we have done wrong and say sorry. These are some different types of prayer. But can you see how easy it is to simply make your entire prayer life one big list?

How often have you thought to yourself, 'I will pray for so and so today during the day because they really need it,' and then found yourself at the end of the day thinking, 'Oh no! I didn't pray for them'?

One of the wonderful things about walking the path of Celtic Christianity is that it can transform your prayer life into something not only wonderful, but constant and powerful. 'Constant?' I hear you say. 'You mean "praying without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17)? Surely that's impossible, just a turn of phrase Paul used as a metaphor!' Well, that all depends on how you understand prayer. For the Celtic Christians, and for many afterwards, this was not impossible but an everyday reality.

In the 17th century, a monk known as Brother Lawrence became famous for teaching the practice of the presence of God, or living in a continual awareness of the Divine presence in and around you and interwoven in everything you do. This, in essence, is what Celtic Christianity regards as prayer – a continual awareness of the Divine presence in and around you and interwoven into everything you do.

In the book *The Path of Celtic Prayer*, Calvin Miller states:

The key is to see prayer as something we *are* instead of something we *do*... The life of pilgrimage isn't merely punctuated with prayer, the pilgrimage *is* the prayer... The peregrini... never really 'arrived' so they never stopped praying... The fullest definition of long, wandering prayer is journeying in the presence of the triune God.¹

Prayer is simply living in the awareness of God with you, like an ever-present companion on a journey. We may not always be speaking to

our companion as we walk, but we are aware of their presence, and in our stillness and togetherness there is always space for our companion to speak to us.

We also see in the history of Celtic Christianity powerful prayers that did such things as driving back fire (Aidan and the gates of Bamburgh); making water spring from the ground (Cuthbert on Inner Farne); or causing marauders to collapse as they entered a protective circle (Ninian and his Caim prayer around cattle). Prayer was deeply believed to be harnessing the power of God through mortals.

One style of prayer which seems to be having a resurgence within the modern church is contemplative prayer. The practice of contemplation and meditation within the Christian faith goes right from Jesus through to the modern day.² There have always been those drawn to quiet stillness in faith. Through the ages, they have been called by different names – mystics, hermits, solitaries, contemplatives – but they all have one thing in common: the desire to be set apart for a time from the activity of the world to be still with God, to dwell within the Divine presence, to become drenched with it. Thomas Merton, a 20th-century contemplative, said, ‘The contemplative’s life is a prolonged immersion in the rivers of tranquillity which flow from God, out into the whole universe, and draw all things back to God.’³ But we don’t have to be called to do this for the whole of our lives. In fact, most of us won’t be called to do this: most of us will be called to live in the world and engage with some kind of work and employment; many of us will be called to have families; and many of us will be called to other things as well. But within all of this, we need to ensure that we follow the example of those who saw the benefit in contemplation, just as Jesus did, and engage in it. The Celtic saints were just such a people.

In the middle of the first millennium, life was busy and challenging in the British Isles and Ireland. War was always at your doorstep, as an invading kingdom from across the borders might decide they liked your land. They were days of hard agricultural labour, when crops had to be sown, grown and harvested at the right times, when cattle

and sheep and other livestock needed to be cared for; they were days when life could easily be taken over by work and leave you no time for anything else. Even for the Celtic saints, there were busy days, travelling from place to place, planting churches, advising kings, freeing slaves, working in the monastery, being self-sufficient, teaching people to read and write, creating illuminated books. Life was busy. And yet, many of them, if not all if they followed the rule of life, made time to be still and engage in contemplative spirituality.

Columba of Iona was a great example of prayer. Not only did he pray with connection to creation, as the prayer attributed to him – ‘delightful it is to sit upon a rock in the bosom of the isle’ – shows, but he was also known to spend long hours shut away in a hut in prayer and communing with angels. On a particular occasion, ‘from [the] house, rays of light of immeasurable brightness could be seen flooding out by night through the chinks of the doors and through the key holes.’⁴ Columba is said to have had to wear a veil over his face when he stepped out, as the glory of God was so brilliantly shining from his face that it was too much for other mortals to bear, just like when Moses descended the mountain of God (Exodus 34:29–35). And often other saints witnessed a shining light either over Columba or around him where the Divine presence was tangible.

Other Celtic saints too were dedicated to prayer. Cuthbert of Lindisfarne is said to have spent long hours of the night standing chest deep in the North Sea with his arms raised; and Kevin of Glendalough (‘glen-da-lockh’) is said to have once been so long in a prayer vigil with his arms stretched out, cross-like, that a blackbird began to build a nest in the palm of his hand. When Kevin realised this, he stayed with his hand out, supporting it with a wall, until the eggs of the blackbird hatched! Do you think that unbelievable? Look up Sadhu Amar Bharati – one day in 1973, in an extreme act of religious devotion, Sadhu Amar Bharati raised his hand in the air to honour the Hindu deity Shiva (or to promote world peace, depending on the story). He claims his hand has been in this raised position ever since, and it would certainly appear as if he’s telling the truth, by the look of it. This

has become a symbol for Shiva worshipers around India. Suddenly, one season of fledging a blackbird seems quite short!

Prayer was a part of everyday life for the Celts. In the collection of Celtic prayers known as the *Carmina Gadelica*,⁵ we find prayers not only about protection and thanksgiving but also about making a fire in the morning and putting it out at night; about shearing the sheep and milking the cattle; about working the land and the loom. Although the prayers of the *Carmina Gadelica* are modern in comparison to historic Celtic Christianity, we know that in their style and expression, they do reflect the ancient heritage of prayer. Prayer, for the Celts, was not something separate from their everyday life, something they left for 'prayer times' or simply presenting God with a list, or even times of contemplation. Prayer was a part of their everyday lives, as common and intrinsically linked as breathing the air.

In Hebrew and Greek, the languages of the Bible, the words 'air', 'breath' and 'spirit' are interchangeable. In fact, the root of the English word 'spirit' can be traced back to the Latin *spirari*, which is also the root word for 'respiratory', in other words, our breath. Prayer, then, is for the spirit what air is to our body. As much as we live in the continual presence of air and it flows in and out of us constantly, we live in the continual presence of the Divine, which flows in and out of us. This is the Celtic understanding of prayer.

We can also see in the beautifully illuminated scriptures of the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic nations that creativity was part of their meditative and prayerful practice. Art and creativity were seen as being as important as the other verbal, cognitive-based forms of prayer and just as able to be used as prayerful expressions to the Divine.

One final form of prayer which the Celtic saints understood and taught was prayer in and through the natural world, the discovery and engagement with the Divine in creation.

All of the above, and so much more, are beautifully woven into the pages of the book which you hold in your hand. The inspiration of the ancient Celtic Christian tradition expressed in a modern appropriation is lived out today by thousands of people around the world. The writers you will discover in the following pages are all members of the Community of Aidan and Hilda, a globally dispersed Celtic-inspired New Monastic community founded in the mid-1990s. The vowed members of this order follow a monastic Rule, or Way of Life, which includes not only committing to a daily rhythm of prayer, but also to an understanding that prayer is so much more than simply the words one uses during the times we intentionally direct our speech towards God.

Lots of these writers have also authored numerous other books, many of them on Celtic Christianity and/or prayer. I would encourage you to look up the works of Simon Reed, Ray Simpson, Michael Mitton, Russ Parker, Kenneth MacIntosh, Dorothy Neilson, Stella Durand and Ash Barker, as well as myself.

The purpose of this book is to be a resource to you and your church or group for teachings about prayer from a Celtic perspective, as well as a resource for Celtic-style prayers and practices which you can just pick up and use. You will find deep spiritual truths woven beautifully with usable prayers, like a piece of Celtic knotwork flowing around the page of an illuminated scripture.

Prayer is more than the words you say. Prayer is what you create; what you feel; who you are; and what you do. Celtic Christian spirituality is about embodying the Divine in every aspect of your life, and prayer is a significant part of that, so our hope is that with this book you will be able to draw from the well of our collective experience and suggestions and be lifted into the Divine heights and transcend the mundane and experience a little Divine glory.

I hope that what you discover and encounter over the following pages will not only inspire you and deepen your own walk with the Divine, but also that it will give you beautiful resources to use and share with others to help deepen their walk with the Divine.

David Cole (Brother Cassian)

UK Deputy Guardian, the Community of Aidan and Hilda⁶

Introduction

- 1 Calvin Miller, *The Path of Celtic Prayer: An ancient way to contemporary joy* (BRF, 2008), p. 65.
- 2 For more on this, see my book *The Art of Peace: Life lessons from Christian mystics* (BRF, 2020).
- 3 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Shambala Publishers, 2003), p. 170.
- 4 Bishop Adamnan, *The Life of Columba* (c. 700).
- 5 Although the prayers in the *Carmina Gadelica* (collected in the Scottish Highlands in the late 19th century) strongly reflect what we know of the life and spirituality of the ancient Celtic peoples, they are taken from the oral tradition, as so they cannot be proven to be any older than three or four generations. However, because of their strong reflection of what we know of the ancient Celts, they are often found in Celtic prayer books.
- 6 To find out more about the Community of Aidan and Hilda, email aidanandhildacommunity@gmail.com.





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Even the most committed pray-ers can get stuck in a rut. Loved and familiar ways of praying can become dry and stale and it can be difficult to rekindle the spark, especially if you've only ever known a handful of ways to pray. But help is at hand in this wide-ranging and exciting new collection from the Community of Aidan and Hilda. Edited by David Cole, with contributions from 30 members of the dispersed community, *Celtic Prayer – Caught Up in Love* explores 20 different ways of praying from the Celtic Christian tradition. Accessible and inspiring, it will refresh your spirit and draw you deeper into knowing God.

With contributions from: Ash Barker, Mark Berry, Graham Booth, Ruth Booth, Scott Brennan, Sue Clarke, David Cole, Liz Crichton, Stella Durand, Becky Mairi Farrell, Carol Few, Jane Franklin, Geoff Holt, Joy Holt, Sandi Kerner, Charlotte Lobb, Heather Macdonald, Kenneth McIntosh, Sally McLean, Michael Mitton, Dorothy Neilson, Peter Neilson, Sue Oliver, Russ Parker, Simon Reed, Nicolette Rodden, Maureen Simpson, Ray Simpson, Ruth Stock, Penny Warren

- Part I Caught up in love
- Part II God's kingdom come
- Part III Come, Holy Spirit
- Part IV When the old wells run dry

'This book is the antidote to desiccated prayer. A book of fresh and new ways to commune with the Divine when your prayer life might have become dry and lifeless.'

Nicolette Rodden, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusivity Coordinator
for the Community of Aidan and Hilda

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