

INTRODUCTION

I live in a country where religious practices have changed utterly within my lifetime. Churches have emptied out. Seminaries have stopped producing priests. Nuns and brothers have disappeared from our streets, our schools, and our hospitals.

In the space of half a century, the bulk of the Irish Catholic population has shifted from being orthodox, loyal, and church-going, to being shocked, alienated, disillusioned—and no longer church-going.

While the lowest point may have yet to come, that church's highest point was not long ago. It came in 1979. The moment was the visit to Ireland of Pope John Paul II. During that visit, a total of 3.5 million people attended the events, representing 70% of the population of the Republic. It was a case of 'the higher they rise, the harder they fall'.

On that occasion, I attended an event in Galway with a bus load of teenagers from our prayer group in Dundalk. We joined 300,000 other youth from all over the country. Those youth were enthusiastic participant members of the Catholic church at that time. I am sure the Pope and other clergy in attendance believed that these young people would be active and loyal members of this church throughout their lives.

But, looking back over that visit, the rot had already set in, even though it was not yet visible. On the platform with the Pope, at the Galway event, were two national celebrities: Bishop Eamon Casey and Father Michael Cleary— both popular among the youth. Years later they were both disgraced when it was revealed they had had affairs and fathered children. These scandals were mild compared to the church scandals that were to follow.

From that first shockwave breaking, of Bishop Eamon Casey in 1992, wave after wave of further revelations has hit our shores, one scandal after another—each more shocking than the last. We have had stories of the abuse of borstal boys in places such as Letterfrack, the abuse of young women in Magdalen laundries, and the abuse of mothers and their children in Mother and Baby homes. And, of course, similar revelations have occurred worldwide.

The fallout from this collapse has been spectacular. Ireland quickly shifted from being a conservative church-dominated society to being one of the most liberal secular and pluralist societies in the western world. During this shift, referendums were held which made changes to the Irish Constitution. These changes de-criminalised homosexuality, introduced divorce, permitted abortions, and recognised gay marriages. The Catholic church was side-lined and stripped of its authoritarian hold on the people.

This collapse however has led to a vacuum. I see it every day in my work as a celebrant and pilgrim guide. Young adults, whose parents reared them as Catholic, balk at the idea of getting married in a church. They want a spiritual ceremony, but outside of religion. Their spirituality is not well defined or developed, and so they search around hoping to find something that resonates with them. Later, they have children, but hesitate at the idea of baptising them, or putting them forward for first communion and confirmation. They search for alternatives. But what or where are the alternatives? They are not easily found.

This situation is true not just in Ireland but in many other countries. From my work with pilgrim groups, I find that there is a general discontent across the Christian denominations,

even among the clergy. Many of the pilgrim groups I meet are church connected. They come mainly from the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and various European countries. The issues they have with their church generally relate to authority structures, the role and treatment of women, the inadequacy of the liturgy, and the stifling nature of the theology.

I also cater for groups or individuals who are not church related and who often describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. I get the impression that this cohort is growing exponentially in many countries at present. On a positive note, the common thread in these groups is their interest in spirituality over religion and often specifically in Celtic spirituality.

I have something in common with these people. I too have felt this discomfort with the church institution; I too have been attracted to Celtic spirituality; I too am searching for new ways to understand the divine, and new ways to celebrate and ritualise the sacred moments in our lives.

If clergy leave their role within an institutional church, but wish to continue with equivalent work in a healthier, more supportive, and creative environment, where do they go? I faced that problem myself in 1996, when I chose to leave the Catholic church but to remain a priest. People asked: how will you do this? How can you be a priest without a church structure, a church building, a parish, a bishop? My answer was that I didn't know, but I was going to find out.

I have since found out that it is very possible to act as a priest without these institutional or material structures. I offer a service to people and, if they want it, they respond. It is that simple. My services correspond to most of the roles I had as a Catholic priest, but I now offer these services without the Catholic baggage and with input from our own Celtic spiritual tradition, both pre-Christian and Christian. I am free, in collaboration with those I serve, to be creative, inclusive, and relevant in the ceremonies I perform.

This book is for people who feel, like me, that they are on a spiritual journey but have not yet arrived. They are searching. The old ways no longer appeal or resonate, but the new ways have yet to be clarified. Lying ahead on the immediate horizon is the existential and apocalyptic threat of climate change and biodiversity loss. Our traditional religious beliefs and church institutions are not adequate to deal with these threats and are even contributing to their cause. But it is not just our religious beliefs, but also our lifestyles, our very way of being in the world, are now in question. All the systems and institutions we are familiar with — economic, educational, health, housing, transport — must change and adapt to this new oncoming existential threat.

This situation can be frightening, but it can also be energising. Old encrusted and embedded ways are now breaking up. The ice melting, while alarming as a physical reality on our planet, is symbolic of this loosening up and of energy beginning to flow again. The future is full of possibilities for creativity and imagination. The challenges can be felt as invigorating. The wisdom of the ancients teaches us that we must face and embrace our fear and not act out of it. We live best in these threatening circumstances when we exercise our faith, our hope, and our love.

By faith here I do not mean the ancient creeds of our traditional religions, but a confidence in life itself and in its purposeful evolution. Within us there are the seeds of our own healing and salvation, as well as that of the earth and all its other species. The challenge now is to dig deep, to be willing to grow and change, and to embrace the future receptively and even enthusiastically.

I believe that Celtic spirituality can help us do this. It has been part of my life in a focussed way since 1985. The metaphor that I use most to describe my experience of it is the treasure in the field¹. However, I would now say, after over 30 years of searching, that this field has multiple treasures. I have found some of these treasures, but there are a lot more. This makes the journey exciting and adventuresome.

Therefore, while the first part of this book looks at the inadequacies and distortions of the 'Father God' image of the divine, the dysfunctional institutions that grew out of that image, and how this has affected our society and our ways of thinking, another substantial part of this book outlines where we can go if we choose to leave this all behind. Celtic spirituality has the potential to fill the vacuum for many people. This spirituality has not been institutionalised, it does not require belief in a creed, nor is it prescriptive in issuing commandments.

What Celtic spirituality does offer is a way of experiencing the divine in everything. Through learning about Celtic spirituality, and then practicing it, we can begin to recognise the sacred in our midst. We can not only recognise it with our minds but experience it in our bodies.

Celtic spirituality also, uniquely, offers us a way of integrating the understanding and love we may have for Jesus into that spiritual practice. Celtic spirituality has a Christian dimension.

The Celtic spiritual tradition, both pagan and Christian, offers us a path for personal growth, for discovering our true destiny, and for the fulfilment of our potential as humans. It reflects the advice of Mahatma Gandhi who said: "*If you want to change the world, be that change you want to see.*" Change will come through each of us improving our own lives, being true to who we are, and reaching our full potential. We will be '*the salt of the earth*' and '*the light of the world*', as indeed Celtic monks were during Ireland's Golden Age in the 7th and 8th centuries CE.

Celtic monasticism offers a formula for community that is inclusive, tolerant, and non-hierarchical. These monasteries focussed on living according to an inspirational vision first enunciated by their founders. They were intentionally limited in size so as not become institutionalised.

Finally, Celtic spirituality is a spirituality very suited to tackling the climate and biodiversity crisis. It puts the sacred back in nature and invites us to experience the divine in the presence of all living species. That sense of a sacred presence will motivate us to change our lifestyles and our habits, to live more in harmony with nature and with other living species. We will work together to create the best possible future on this planet for all to survive and thrive.

¹ This is a reference to the gospel story found in Matthew 13:44-46.

As this is a continuing journey, in which many can participate, I invite you to join with others in receiving the Aisling Newsletter. That way we can monitor together our progress on this journey and offer each other support and encouragement.

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