Celtic Saints and the Ecology of Death

by Paul Santmire

Abstract: Romantics mislead us when they depict nature as a garden where we feel at home. What drives nature is death, death with all its blood shedding pain. Death drives natural selection in evolutionary biology. The Celtic Saints in Ireland developed a rich spirituality that acknowledged the dominant role of death while trusting profoundly in divine providence.

Key Terms: death; nature; ecology; Celtic.

The classical Celtic saints and the monastic movement they fostered have been widely celebrated in our time because of their rich sensitivities for nature. Celtic spirituality seems to speak directly to our postmodern search for a viable ecological consciousness.

But the truth of the matter is at once more complicated and more compelling. It all has to do with what can be called the ecology of death. The Celtic saints and their followers, who flourished spiritually in Ireland, Wales, and Scotland from about the 5th to the 10th centuries A.D., are well-equipped to be our spiritual mentors in this our ecological era preeminently because they can lead us through the valley of the shadow of death. Other popular ecological guides today—romantic poets, wilderness enthusiasts, agrarian sages, ecosophists, New Age gurus—are often unwilling or ill-equipped even to embark on that journey. Truly to encounter nature, we must be prepared to take to heart the ravages of death in nature.

Denying Death

Americans generally are not inclined to do that. Much of our popular culture is predicated on what Ernest Becker called, in his seminal book by that title, The Denial of Death. Notwithstanding all the horror-movies and all the fascination with violence and death in our news media, we Americans do tend to soft-pedal the realities of death and dying, if not deny them outright. Nowhere is this more apparent than in our patterns of behavior and our attitudes toward nature.

The “wild nature” films that some watch, which feature bloody attacks by a variety of predators, seem to be mainly livingroom diversions, like other “action” videos. In fact, Americans tend to think of encountering raw nature as driving through Yellowstone Park in an air-conditioned sports utility vehicle or roughing...
it at a backyard barbecue. Numbers of the more affluent in our society “get close to nature” by taking refuge in “gated communities,” surrounded by the manufactured serenity of forested exurban developments. More generally, across the land, Americans’ passions for their natural surroundings are extensively and expensively—some $40 billion a year—invested in lawn care. No other crop grown in America occupies more land. Some 40,000 square miles of lawns are under cultivation, roughly the size of the whole state of Pennsylvania. The nature that many Americans seem to know best, and the nature that many Americans surely love, is a nature that has been tamed, pacified, and refracted through the lenses of Disney, a nature where one can be at home: “where the buffalo roam, and the deer and the antelope play, where never is heard a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day.” Nary a word about death or violence here.

Even the eminent Henry David Thoreau, over a century ago, who is celebrated today by many for his passion for wilderness and for his life apart from civilization in the primal naturalness of Walden, typically managed to leave his retreat in the wilds and to go home once a week, where, among other things, his mother did his laundry. Thoreau’s comfortable passion for the wilds did change markedly when he hiked up Maine’s Mount Katahdin, on the slopes of which he encountered that state’s horrendous blackflies. Thereafter his romance with the wilderness was considerably muted.

The truth of nature, as a matter of fact, is more nearly expressed by the blackflies than by the backyard barbecues. The truth of nature is suffering and death. People die. The birds of the air and the lilies of the field die. The extraordinarily beautiful garden planet on which we humans live will one day die. Our solar system and our local galaxy will, in due course, surely perish. Likewise for the whole universe, whether with a bang or a whimper: the last destiny of the entire cosmos, by any thoughtful contemporary reckoning, is unquestionably—death. As “everything is related to everything else” in nature, so nature, in truth, is a vast nexus of violence and death, sometimes etched with wrenching individual pain, sometimes with catastrophic cosmic upheavals.

Death Drives Nature

This truth about nature has been given a scientific currency in the modern era—however much it has been domesticated or otherwise denied in our popular culture—by evolutionary biologists, beginning with Charles Darwin himself. Some scholars, to be sure, have more recently sought to highlight evidences of altruism and cooperation in nature. But the final word of evolutionary biology always seems to come to this: death is the engine of nature. Death drives nature. Living things over-populate their territories: large numbers of any species typically perish; a few, normally the best adapted, survive. The commanding metaphor of life on this planet, the “survival of the fittest,” is therefore really a metaphor of blood and gore. Nature, if we see it with our eyes wide open, is the world of death par excellence.

No one has given expression to this truth more memorably than the contemporary American essayist and poet, Annie Dillard. This is her classic description of her encounter with a frog in a pond—a setting which a Wordsworth or a Thoreau or any one of their less gifted heirs might well have romanticized, in terms of peace and life. Dillard tells the unvarnished, unromantic truth of warfare and death in nature:

He was a very small frog with wide, dull eyes. And just as I looked at him, he slowly crumpled and began to sag.... His skin emptied and drooped; his very skull seemed to collapse and settle like a kicked tent. ... Soon, part of his skin, formless as a pricked balloon, lay in floating folds like bright scum on the top of the water: it was a monstrous and terrifying thing. I gaped bewildered, appalled. An oval shadow hung in the water behind the drained frog; then the shadow glided away. The frog skin bag started to sink.

What had happened? The frog had been attacked by a giant brown beetle:
It eats insects, tadpoles, fish, and frogs. Its grasping forelegs are mighty and hook inward. It seizes a victim with these legs, hugs it tight, and paralyzes it with enzymes injected during a vicious bite. The one bite is the only bite it ever takes. Through the puncture shoot the poisons that dissolve the victim’s muscles and bones and organs—all but the skin—and through it the giant water bug sucks out the victim’s body, reduced to a juice.

The Grim Reaper, in this case the great water beetle, is the truth of nature, as far as Dillard is concerned, a truth which she expounds with breathtaking perspicacity in her most famous work, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and all the more intensely in her more recent study, *For the Time Being*.

**Embracing an Ecology of Death**

Sensitive souls throughout the ages have, as a matter of course understood nature in such violent terms. And, refusing or unable to follow the path of denial, they have been driven to find other, more viable spiritual responses to the ecology of death.

Many, Christians included, have for this reason turned to a spirituality that has promised to take them away from it all, “the flight of the alone to the Alone”: the quest to rise above the painful and death-ridden biophysical world toward unity with an eternal and all-transcending spiritual Deity above. This kind of spirituality was profoundly attractive to St. Augustine in his early years. Numerous mystics and commonplace believers have been attracted to the same kind of world-transcending spiritual quest.

*Can we in fact do otherwise, spiritually?* Is it really possible for us to embrace the ecology of death? Is it spiritually realistic to aspire to encounter nature untamed, unpacified, and unromanticized, with all its ambiguities, with all its death-driven violence, as a gift from the Giver of every good and perfect gift, as a tabernacle, indeed, of the Most High, and thereby to be able to embrace nature spiritually, as a world charged with the glory of God, overflowing with blessings, beauty, and goodness?

That is what the classical Celtic saints did. And that is why we need them as our mentors today: not primarily because they celebrated nature, but first and foremost because they faced up to death. For them, indeed, these two experiences were one and the same.

**The Perilous Journey**

Perhaps the single most important metaphor of the spiritual life for the Celtic saints was the image of the perilous journey, especially journeys on the sea. They were well-acquainted with seafaring—witness the case of St. Patrick who was captured by pirates as a slave early in his life. The coastal waters around Ireland, Wales, and Scotland and the rivers that flowed into those waters were as much the spiritual milieu of the Celtic saints as the monastic communities many of them so laboriously constructed at the edge of the sea or in secluded settings inland.

As the metaphor of the sea-journey suggests, life for them was a perilous journey toward death, toward the “place of my resurrection,” as St. Columba said. And the saints consistently enacted that personal, eschatological vision. They regularly uprooted themselves, and their followers, and set off fearlessly for the foreboding unknown, on land or sea, seeking to establish yet another community, where they could await the Kingdom of God, at the place of their resurrection. Some lived to tell their stories, once they were able to found or to join a variety of monastic communities. Others, we may well imagine, were never heard from again, as they succumbed to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune along the way, long before they had reached the communal safe havens for which they had been searching.

For all these spiritual luminaries, in any case, life was also much more than a perilous journey toward death. That, indeed, it was. But all the more surely it was a perilous journey, led by and empowered by, the crucified and risen Lord. Their personal, eschatological journey was self-consciously and emphatically christological. Theirs was a pilgrimage to death in the
midst of which the One who was to come had already arrived and had taken to the road with them, akin to the experience of the disciples with the risen Lord on the way to Emmaus. Like the women who had just come from the empty tomb of the crucified Jesus, too, the Celtic saints encountered the risen Christ along the way, and heard him tell them, as they journeyed, to go still further, to yet another Galilee, to meet him there.

For such reasons it was easy for the Celtic saints to envision the risen Lord, their companion on the journey, as the Captain of their salvation – an image which is not anachronistic, even though we may know it best as it was voiced so powerfully in the 20th century by Ralph Vaughan Williams. That image would easily have come to the minds of many of the Celtic saints, beginning at least as early as Patrick’s time, familiar as most of them were with the perils of seafaring and assured as all of them were of the ever-present, personal care of the living Christ. We meet the image dramatically in the words of the captivating “Lorca” or “Breastplate” prayer attributed to St. Patrick (in all probability this magnificent hymn was composed some three centuries after his death). Invoking first the Trinity, then the power of Christ’s life, from birth and baptism to resurrection and ascension, and also the powers of the hosts of heaven, angels and archangels, prophets and apostles, the writer calls upon God “to pilot me.” He or she prays for Christ to protect him or her “against poison and burning, against drowning and wounding” so that he or she might be safe and saved in Christ’s presence: “Christ with me, Christ before me, behind me; Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me ... .” Another poem tells the same story, a ninth century hymn, attributed to St. Sanctan:

May Christ save us from every bloody death from fire, from raging sea ... may the Lord, each hour to come to me against wind, against swift waters.

The image of the perilous sea voyage captained by the risen Christ is perhaps most impressively illustrated in the 9th century Christian epic, The Voyage of St. Brendan. Drawing on the rich traditions of the voyage motif in archaic Irish oral poetry, this epic narrates a search for the Promised Land or the new Paradise witnessed to by the Bible. During the course of this voyage narrative – a testimony akin to the witness of the Breastplate of St. Patrick – we hear how Brendan always depends on the vital and personal presence of the Savior. Thus, the story tells us, without food and water, after forty days on the sea, “the brothers were greatly harassed” as they approached an island with perilous cliffs and no apparent access. Brendan comforts them with this promise: “The Lord Jesus Christ after three days will show his servants a landing place and a place to stay, so that our harassed brothers will be restored.” The risen Lord is constantly and actively and caringly present for and with the Saint, which, in turn, makes it possible for Brendan to experience the whole range of Divine glories in the created world around him, along the way. “The Lord Jesus Christ,” the voyager is told, “did not allow you to find [the Promised Land] immediately because first He wished to show you the richness of His wonders in the deep.”

Nature’s Death and the Risen Christ

In this sense, the Celtic saints set one of the Church’s most popular traditional spiritualities on its head. Spirituality no longer meant for them the flight of the alone to the Alone, rising above it all to commune with the spiritual One above, but rather encountering the enfleshed One who had overcome the powers of death, the risen Lord, in, with, and under the world of nature: “Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me ... .” The Celtic saints could embrace the ecology of death in nature, not because they were embracing nature as such, but because, when they embraced nature, they were there embracing the risen Christ. They knew all the terrors of nature, as this poem by Deccan mac Luigdech shows. It evokes the perils of Columba’s sea-journey to Iona with his companions, from the perspective of a century later:

In scores of currags with an army of wretches he crossed the
long-haired sea. He crossed the wave-strewn wild region, foam-flecked, seal-filled, Savage, bounding, seething, white-tipped, pleasing, doleful.

On the other hand, those perils were not the defining milieu of the journey. That more comprehensive existential definition was given by the risen Christ, near to all of them on the journey, as Columba himself wrote so powerfully:

I beg that me, a little man trembling and most wretched, rowing through the infinite storm of this age, Christ may draw after Him to the lofty most beautiful haven of life...

That encounter with Christ then took away “the sting of death” for them, however painful that sting might actually have been, and freed them to rest their souls contemplatively in the beauties of earth, sky, and water, and to love all the creatures, large and small, they encountered there. As in these moving lines, attributed to Columba, contemplating the world of nature from the perspective of the island of Iona:

Delightful I think it to be in the bosom of an isle, on the peak of a rock, that I might often see there the calm of the sea. That I might see its heavy waves over the glittering ocean, as they chant a melody to their Father on their eternal course. That I might see its smooth strand of clear headlands, no gloomy thing; that I might hear the voice of the wondrous birds, a joyful course. That I might hear the sound of the shallow waves against the rocks; that I might hear the cry by the graveyard, the noise of the sea. That I might see its splendid flocks of birds over the full-watered ocean; that I might see its mighty whale, greatest of wonders. That I might see its ebb and flood-tide in their flow; that this may be my name, a secret I tell, ‘He who turned his back on Ireland.’ That I might bless the Lord who has power over all, Heaven with its pure host of angels, earth, ebb, flood tide.

**Celts, Crosses, and Circles**

This testimony to the encounter with the risen Christ in the midst of the perilous journey in the wilds of nature and the resultant celebration of nature itself as a world of Divine blessings and Divine fecundity came to its most impressive and most complete symbolic expression in the imagery portrayed by the classical Celtic crosses. These crosses tell the whole story—with a universalizing christological and eschatological vision. The Christ who is the companion on the perilous journey is herewith revealed to be the Lord and King of the whole creation, who will one day preside over an eternally renewed creation.

The distinctive mark of this cross is, of course, the circle surrounding the point where the arms of the cross intersect. But the reasons for the circle itself are historically obscure, although frequently discussed. Some say the circle was originally put in place for practical reasons. Since those large crosses—many of them served as towering boundary makers—were originally carved from a soft kind of stone, the horizontal arms of the crosses tended to break off. So new and improved crosses had to be thus secured. Others say that, notwithstanding such pragmatic purposes, the circle was first intended to represent the halo of the Christ figure.

But the truth of the matter is probably rooted more deeply, more a matter of theological symbolism than architectural or didactic practicality. Historically, as Philip Sheldrake has noted, those crosses may well have carried with them various kinds of cosmic meanings. The pillar or standing stone of pre-Christian Celtic religion symbolized the axis mundi, the pole that was understood to link heaven and earth. While, however, such archaic historical roots are worthy of note, it appears that the cosmic symbolism of the circle is much
more formative here, since it is so much more an integral symbolic element in Celtic Christian experience. The Celtic saints and their followers characteristically built their monastic communities, wherever possible, according to a circular design. And that was because those communities were intended to represent the Creator’s embrace of all things and the Creator’s purpose to unify all things in the eschatological Kingdom of God, by the mission of the risen Lord. So Sheldrake comments that the circular design of the monastic communities “undoubtedly suggested that such places were replicas of the cosmos, microcosms of the macrocosm.” Subliminally, then, if not self-consciously, the circles of the Celtic crosses may well have functioned as testaments to the unity of all things in the Crucified, according to the witness of the Letter to the Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth. ... all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead. ... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:15-20)

That kind of cosmic symbolism was well understood in early Celtic Christianity. As Esther De Waal has observed, “The Eastern idea of Christ as the head and center of the created world was well preached when Christianity was first introduced into Ireland, and there is much in the early monastic writings ... which speaks of Christ’s kingship as the center of life in the Trinity.”

This christocentric cosmic interpretation of the Celtic cross also makes good historical and spiritual sense more generally, since the vision of classical Celtic monasticism was inclusive, rather than exclusive. In forming their monastic cities – this is the best terminology, not “monasteries,” a term that suggests walls and separation from this world – the Celtic saints sought to explore openings to communion with the One who is the Center of this world, in whom all things consist, who is to come again to judge all things in righteousness and to renew the face of the whole earth.

And in communion with Him, they as a matter of course experienced unity with all things. All things – the ta panta of Colossians 1:15ff. – were, for them, included within the circle of God’s grace and power: the invisible company of the saints and angels as well as the visible company of the citizens of this world, creatures of nature as well as humans, all peoples not just their own kind, women as well as men, the married as well as the celibate, the sick and the disabled as well as the able-bodied, the poor and the oppressed as well as the rich and the powerful.

The same kind of “totalizing” vision is also evident in the Christian poetry of the period, as Thomas Finan has observed: “... hymns or poems about Christ tend to tell the whole story, to set him in the context of the complete cosmic epic of creation, Fall, Incarnation, Redemption, and Consummation.” Likewise for many of the great Celtic crosses themselves. They are replete with representations that allude to the whole history of creation and salvation, and geometric images, in addition to the circle, that suggest the fullness of the created world. For this type of spirituality, Christ was self-consciously the cosmic center of all things and the foretaste of the cosmic feast in the consummated Kingdom of all things yet to come. A sixth century monastic poet, Blathmac, gave testimony to these themes, addressing God the Father:

This is my clear announcement: your son is king of the heavens. His the brightly clothed sun, his the gleaming moon. His is the earth to his will; it is he who moves the sea; both has he endowed, the one with plants and the other with sea-creatures. He is the most generous that exists; he is a hospitaller in possessions; his is every block that he sees; his the wild beasts and the tame. Your
son of fair fame owns every bird that spreads wings; on wood, on land, on clear pool, it is he who gives them joy.

Accordingly, in communion with the risen Christ, the King of creation, the Celtic saints established their monastic “circles” not to reject the world, but to embrace the world, in peace and harmony. Their oft-noted ecological sensitivities and their celebrated affirmations of nature were, for them, profoundly rooted in their universalizing eschatological and christological convictions.

So their expansive monastic cities were constructed to be prefigurations of the new Edenic world of the Kingdom to come, where the lamb would lie down with the lion and all the saints and angels would be as one body with the whole creation. The Celtic saints were surely acquainted with the brutalities of the Grim Reaper, but all the more so they knew themselves as claimed by the healing and life-giving powers of the gloriously enfleshed Son of God, in whom all things consist, who holds all things together, and who made peace with all things by the blood of His cross. For this reason they sought to make peace and to live in peace with all creatures.

Now, as a matter of brute historical fact, the actual lives of the Celtic monastic communities sometimes left much to be desired. The abbots were typically tied in with the ruling classes, and often got embroiled in tribal aggrandizements. Columba’s celebrated spiritual pilgrimage from Ireland to Iona appears to have been occasioned, if not totally driven, by banishment from his own community, since he had sided with a losing political faction. On occasion, moreover, monks from one monastic city actually waged war on other monastic communities. In one conflict, more than 200 monks were killed (!). But compared to the rampant social and political strife of their times, the regular patterns of waging war on both humans and nature, those monastic cities were indeed “liminal” centers, places where perhaps as nowhere else the transcendent values of inclusion and social justice and peace and harmony with nature could be celebrated and to that degree constantly advanced, notwithstanding the ravages of death.

This is how Sheldrake instructively describes the exemplary monastic cities that the saintly Celtic founders sought to establish:

Overall ..., a religious enclosure was simply a privileged space within which a particular vision of the world could be lived out. Thus, monks in the tradition of Columbanus saw monastic settlements as anticipations of paradise in which the forces of division, violence and evil were excluded. Wild beasts were tamed and nature was regulated. ... The Columbanian tradition, for example, believed that all people were called from birth to the experience of contemplation. So, “monastic” enclosures were places of spiritual experience and of non-violence and also places of education, wisdom, and art. Within the enclosures there took place, ideally speaking, an integration of all elements of human life, as well as of all classes of human society.

That very story of cosmic inclusiveness was told visually and powerfully by the remarkable Celtic crosses, which united the excruciatingly mortal center with the liminal, all-inclusive, life-affirming cosmic circle. Firm in the knowledge that the Savior had made peace with all things by the blood of His cross, and that He was with them on their perilous journey as the Lord of life, they then could devote themselves to a life of making peace with all God’s creatures, wherever the Savior would take them on their journeys.

Intimacy With Nature

Peter Brown has offered a strikingly different picture of Latin Christianity, in his study, *The Cult of the Saints*. He argues that Latin Christianity desacralized nature, as the cult of the saints spread throughout the late Roman Empire. “It seems to me,” he concludes, “that
the most marked feature of the rise of the Christian Church in western Europe was the imposition of human administrative structures and of an ideal potentia linked to invisible human beings and to their visible human representatives, the bishop of the town, at the expense of traditions that had seemed to belong to the structure of the landscape itself."

Be that as it may, the Celtic saints and their followers, it appears, never lost touch with the landscape or the seascape, for that matter. On the other hand, neither did they flee from either the perils or the promise of gathered, public human communities, the urban ethos of human life. On the contrary, they established and shepherded such communities: but not at the expense of, or over against, the larger natural environs. The perilous journeys of the Celtic saints, and the life of the communities that they sought to establish, were intended to be lived in communion with the earth and the sea and all the more so in communion with the Creator and His Son, whom the saints encountered in the terrors and the beauties of earth and sea.

This sense of intimacy with nature and with God-in-nature then allowed the Celtic saints to call upon the whole creation, things visible as well as invisible, for life and assistance, as we can see in the moving words of the Breastplate of St. Patrick. In the same spirit and surely in their spiritual aspirations, the Celtic saints eschewed the kind of might-makes-right potentia over nature and humans that Latin culture seems to have carried with it everywhere and often self-consciously celebrated. For the Celtic saints, the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, first and foremost, not something to be owned or dominated by anyone. In that sense, for them, earth and sea were very much sacral realities.

In that sense, too, the Celtic saints can indeed be our spiritual mentors in this our ecological age, as we, too, must face up to the ecology of death. They can guide us through the valley of the shadows and can show us, along the way, a captivating christological truth about the journey, which, when we take it to heart, will allow us to see that our journey in the valley is at once a journey through a “very good” world of Divine fecundity and Divine blessings, in the midst of which we are free to be, and therefore called to be, at peace with every creature.