



The Monastery of Saint Anthony

Lord God:  
you alone are holy,  
you who work wonders!  
You are strong, you are great,  
you are the Most High,  
you are the almighty King,  
you, holy Father, King of heaven and earth.

Lord God: you are Three and you are One,  
you are goodness, all goodness,  
you are the highest good,  
Lord God, living and true.

You are love and charity, you are wisdom,  
you are humility, you are patience,  
you are beauty, you are sweetness,  
you are safety, you are rest, you are joy,  
you are our hope  
and our delight,  
you are justice, you are moderation  
you are all our wealth  
and riches overflowing.

You are beauty, you are gentleness,  
you are our shelter, our guard  
and our defender,  
you are strength, you are refreshment,  
you are our hope.  
you are our faith.  
you are our love,  
you are our complete consolation,  
you are our life everlasting,  
great and wonderful Lord,  
all powerful God, merciful Saviour!

(A prayer of St. Francis)



# Study 2 - Community

## The Working Life

Life revolved around the monastic community for the early Christians, led and taught by charismatic leaders. Their example came from Egypt and the early Church Fathers. St David came from a monastery founded by a disciple of St John Cassian (c 360 – 435) an influential Christian who founded an Egyptian-style monastery in southern Gaul, near Marseille, a complex of monasteries for both men and women and one of the first such institutes in the West.

## Community Life

Daily life for the first Christians in Britain and Ireland could be tough. Charismatic teachers attracted their followers and established communities in isolated places, sometimes developing their own distinct rules of life. The Monastic Rule of St David in the west of Wales prescribed that monks had to pull the plough themselves without draught animals; to drink only water; to eat only bread with salt and herbs, and to spend the evenings in prayer, reading and writing. David also taught his followers to refrain from eating meat or drinking alcohol.

There was a simple life, following what they saw as a biblical principle of working for their daily bread (2 Thess 3:6-13). Work was seen as being part of a

person's spiritual life, a demonstration of their devotion to God.

Maelruain, who was abbot of Tallaght monastery in Dublin in 792, is quoted as saying "Labour with devotion is the most excellent work of all". Again, there is a biblical principle here, with Jesus sending out his disciples to other towns with the expectation that others would provide for their needs, and be blessed in doing so (Luke 10:5-12). The letter to the Hebrews also encourages hospitality;

*'Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.'* Hebrews 12:2

The monasteries also took care of their sick, using herbs and other plants grown in their own gardens. Through working hard they provided not only for themselves, but also for those in need around them. For example, at one time the monastery at Bangor, Northern Ireland, was providing food for over 1000 people per day.

Many of the Irish monks went on long and strenuous journeys, depending on God's provision often through the hospitality of others. The monks themselves gave an example by welcoming in other monks and even unbelievers, meeting the needs of the strangers that came to them.

The Monastery of Saint Anthony stands in an oasis in the eastern desert of Egypt. Its founder, Saint Anthony, one of the fathers of modern Christian monasticism was born to a wealthy family in Lower Egypt around 251 C.E.

At the age of 34, Anthony gave away all of his worldly possessions and ventured into the Eastern Desert to seek a life of humility, solitude, and spiritual reflection. He made his home in a small cave where he devoutly practiced an ascetic life.

After his death his followers lived in solitary cells surrounding a communal worship centre where they performed the Divine Liturgy. They took their daily meals in a basic refectory.

Over the years life of an Antonian monk slowly evolved from one of solitary asceticism to one that allowed for a communal way of living.

Question: What do you understand by 'spiritual reflection' and should it be a part of your life?

Columba, aged 42 years, set out from the coast of Derry with twelve companions during 563. He was obliged, following his arrival in Iona, to journey to what is now Inverness to obtain permission from King Brude to establish a monastery at Iona. The monastic approach which he developed became established elsewhere. Its rule of life required that the monks lived only for God, praying constantly, with regular study of the scriptures (the Psalms were held in deep veneration), owning no luxuries, eating only when hungry, sleeping only when tired. Novices would study in preparation for taking monastic vows.

The Venerable Bede in his "Ecclesiastical History of the English People" (completed in 731 AD) wrote that "the Iona community was characterised by their purity of life, love of God and loyalty to the monastic rules".

Dictionaries define community as, among others, 'a unified body of individuals.' or 'A body of people having common rights, privileges, or interests'

Question: How would you describe your church community?

## Life Together

Monastic communities were often of modest size, resembling a small village of wooden or stone buildings with a stone wall surrounding to keep animals in and thieves out.

There have been many models of Christian community over the centuries, some consisting of people living and working together and others more loosely knit. The Iona community calls itself; 'a dispersed Christian ecumenical community working for peace and social justice, rebuilding of community and the renewal of worship.'

Members share a common Rule which includes: Daily prayer and reading the Bible, mutual sharing and accountability for our use of time and money, regular meeting together, action and reflection for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. They meet regularly throughout the year in local groups and in 4 plenary gatherings, including a week on Iona.

There are estimated to be over a half-million Franciscans worldwide in the various denominations of this Christian community, who belong to the Third Order of the Society of St Francis. The Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order are vowed to lifelong Commitment to Christ and bear witness to the Gospel of Life in their homes and in the occupations to which they believe God has called them. They are those, married or single, ordained or lay, who though following the ordinary patterns of life, feel called to a lifelong dedication under a definite discipline.

Discuss: What do you think would be the advantages and disadvantages of this more loosely-knit style of 'monastic community' ?

Families did not live in separate rooms, but all together; only hermits and anchorites (those who, for religious reasons, withdraw from secular society so as to be able to lead an intensely prayer-oriented, ascetic and, circumstances permitting, Eucharist-focused life) felt a calling to be alone in spiritual solitude with God, although monks had separate cells, just as in the Egyptian tradition. The idea that people are separate individuals from the group was not only unheard-of, but would have been considered dangerous, even heretical.

Daily life would revolve around work, prayer and learning. Pre-Christian Celtic society had a class of bards who functioned not only as the tribe's musicians, but also as their poets, historians, and teachers. When the Celts embraced Christianity they now focussed this creative spirit on the scriptures, spending long hours learning Greek and Latin and in memorising large portions which they would recite through the day.

Illtud, we are told, was the most learned of all the Britons in the knowledge of Scripture, both the Old and the New Testaments.

Saint Patrick is very clear that his faith and understanding of the world was deeply shaped by the Scriptures.

*'For there is no other God, nor ever was before, nor shall be hereafter, but God the Father, unbegotten and without beginning, in whom all things began, whose are all things, as we have been taught; and his son Jesus*

*Christ, who manifestly always existed with the Father, before the beginning of time in the spirit with the Father, indescribably begotten before all things, and all things visible and invisible were made by him. He was made man, conquered death and was received into Heaven, to the Father who gave him all power over every name in Heaven and on Earth and in Hell, so that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and God, in whom we believe. And we look to his imminent coming again, the judge of the living and the dead, who will render to each according to his deeds. And he poured out his Holy Spirit on us in abundance, the gift and pledge of immortality, which makes the believers and the obedient into sons of God and co-heirs of Christ who is revealed, and we worship one God in the Trinity of holy name.'*

Excerpt from the Confessio of St Patrick c.450AD

The monks would not only collect books, but illustrate in a beautiful manner the Psalms and other scriptures – many of which, such as the Book of Kells from the 8th or 9th century have survived to this day.

Question: Compare the work ethic of the early monastic community with the culture that you live in. What has been lost?

## The Soul Friend

There was a tradition in the Celtic Church of having a spiritual guide, a soul friend, who would offer support for the spiritual journey through life. John Cassian (c. 360 – 435) wrote about the purity of the heart and the ability of spiritual mentors to listen to the secrets of others without judgment:

*“An evil thought sheds its danger when it is brought into the open . . . It’s dangerous promptings hold sway in us as long as these are concealed in the heart.”*

Soul friends have a deep respect for each other’s wisdom and their common values. They are able to challenge each other when it is necessary to do so. Their relationship is centered not on each other but on God.

## The Role of Women and children

Within the Celtic Church there was an openness in accepting the ministry of women, although those appointed to high office would normally be from aristocratic roots. A famous example would be that of Hilda. This well-respected Abbess of Whitby was influential at the time that the Church was in conflict with Rome, resolved by the Synod of Whitby in 664. The historian Bede tells us that all called Hilda 'mother' and it is evident that she had the confidence of bishops and kings alike, and had developed Whitby into the foremost centre of learning in Britain and the world.

In Ireland, under the ancient Brehon Laws of Ireland, women had specific legal rights that allowed them to divorce their husbands as well as to protect, when necessary, their dowries. Following the Synod of Whitby, which brought the Celtic Church more into line with Rome, this openness to women’s ministry was gradually lessened.

Several Celtic Saints are recorded as having responded to God’s call on their lives as young people. Cuthbert was the subject of a prophetic forecast about his future whilst still a boy, and Cedd, Cynebil, Caelin and Chad were taken on as boys for training and teaching in the Scriptures at Lindisfarne by Aiden.

This training covered a wide range of life experience that included teaching and preparing children and adults for life as monks; memorising Scripture; a daily rhythm of prayer and worship; the learning of English and Latin and participation on evangelistic missions. There was an underlying expectation that the children would encounter God in experiential ways.

## Mission

Evangelistic mission was an important part of a monk’s life, and there are many tales of wanderings to distant places, spreading the Word and establishing new communities in often remote places. This aspect of their life will be examined in another study.

## Discussion:

1 The Celtic Christians had a love of poetry, music and the artistic. Within your church do any of these feature regularly within the life of your fellowship? Could they be introduced in a way that would be both acceptable and accessible?

2 Learning the Scriptures was an important part of community life. How well do you know your Bible? Would the discipline of memorising key passages be important in your life and in the mission activity of your church?

3 How does the group feel about having a 'soul friend'? Would it be good to have someone with whom to share your spiritual journey?

4 Are the gifts of all members of the fellowship appreciated and used? What about the women and children? How might we best serve the needs of the children, if there are any? Do they feel wanted and appreciated?

5 For those who experienced church as a child, what are your abiding memories? Do you see this part of your life as important in your spiritual development? For those who became Christians later in life, do you see this as an advantage or disadvantage?