

BOOK REVIEW
Celtic Spirituality
Paulist Press, New York, 1999

Celtic Spirituality is one book from the lengthy series, *Classics of Western Spirituality*.

Perhaps in its simplest form spirituality is nothing more than becoming like God in character and learning to live in His presence daily-"walk humbly" with him in the words of Micah 6:8. In theological terms, as expressed in the introduction, spirituality is learning to live with the immanence of God.

This present work is a collection of writings from the early stages of Christianity among the Celtic people. In the introduction the editor notes the difficulty with the very designation Celtic although he seeks merely to provide us with a glimpse at the writings and spiritual lives of the early tribes primarily in Ireland and Wales prior to and including the middle ages. The collection includes histories of Celtic saints, poetry, liturgical texts, homilies, exegetical texts, and theological essays. According to the editor, more than reflecting a fascinating bit of historical reality these texts demonstrate the struggle of a culture to express Christianity through its own mediums and with its own symbols. This is not a book that explains or posits a particular notion of spirituality. It presents texts from a specific time and place and leaves the texts to expose their own unique spirituality and theological perspective.

There are too many significant observations for such a brief review, and I found myself wanting to engage the texts in theological discussion at numerous points. Particularly in view of my Roman Catholic background I found it difficult not to write a theological critique. Not only does space limit serious reflection, but also the texts involved raise complex ideas that demand more theological precision than can be offered here. Suffice it to say that reading these provided this reviewer with a significant understanding of his past as well an intriguing look into a period of Christianity's more distant past.

Concerning individual parts of the book the following observations may prove helpful. James Mackey's preface and Oliver Davies' introduction make numerous pertinent observations

for the interpretation of these texts, but they display their own theological biases that may get in the way of the reader's interpretation. For example Mackey insists that these texts are thoroughly biblical merely because they reflect commentaries on the Bible. However, one might question whether a thoroughly biblical point-of-view is represented by the mere presence of biblical commentary. In addition Davies assumes (almost encourages?) that the reader will critique these readings with certain contemporary theological biases. Perhaps a more legitimate primer would be to encourage the modern reader not to assume that the ancient writer is incorrect. Biases aside, a discerning reader can enjoy the perspectives found within these pages.

The lives of the saints read to an uncanny degree like biblical narratives. Patrick, Brigit, and Brendan all mirror the miracles and deeds of the greatest of the Old Testament heroes. The alleged foreordained nature of some of these saints sounds like the lives of King David and others who were preordained before birth for greatness in the Kingdom of God. In addition numerous exegetical texts provide the reader with the Celtic interaction with Scripture and may reflect a school of biblical studies that seems to have flourished in southern Ireland in the latter half of the seventh century (p. 51). Of further interest will be the homilies and theological pieces. Attention to biblical texts and ideas remind the reader that despite theological differences many of these people were sensitive to the authority of the Bible and strove to incorporate its message into their lives, one mark of the truly spiritual man.

According to the introduction penance is one of the theological centers of Celtic spirituality. Statements such as "By praying to the saints, Every Christian shall receive forgiveness," (p. 272) and "Beautiful too they who pay Adam's debt," (p. 284) will strike us as well off the theological target. However, our own spiritual sensitivities should lead us more to cautionary judgment than complete dismissal of the writers. The same spiritual leaders who insisted on detailed instructions for penance also insisted, " ... every day we must pray, labor, and read," perhaps more marks of the spiritual man.

Celtic Spirituality will be an enigma to many contemporary readers, and it will certainly spawn debate over the ideas of those early practitioners of the faith. Nonetheless, anyone who has tried and failed to live the immanence of God will be quick to recognize the imperfection of most any attempt. This present volume will not be the perfect place to start if your search for spirituality is at its beginning, but it will at some point deserve more than a passing glance. This present volume is best suited to the theological classroom, for those willing to grapple with a much older expression of faith. Students will do well to spend time pondering and critiquing this influential slice of Christian history.

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