



Skellig Michael

Private Confession: The Gift the Irish Monks Made to the World

SUSAN GATELY describes how Irish monks were among the first to dispense the medicine of penance to individual souls entrusted to their care

The sight of Skellig Michael rising majestically from the Atlantic Ocean to the sky is stunning. And when you climb the ancient stairway of 618 steps hewn in solid rock to its summit you are transported to another age and world.

Irish monks lived on this wind-buffed and inhospitable island for nearly 600 years. They dwelt in finely built beehive huts, which, a thousand years later, still keep out the wind and rain. Free from the threat of a red martyrdom, the martyrdom of blood, they voluntarily chose what became known as a 'green

martyrdom'. Exiling themselves from home, family, a life in the world they embraced an austere, robust life of prayer, fasting and community.

From possibly as early as the sixth century, monks lived on Skellig Michael. There is no fresh water on the stone island, which is home to tens of thousands of gannets and puffins. So the monks prayed, fished, grew vegetables, collected rainwater and birds' eggs, and lived, we suspect, a life of Gospel simplicity. It is an extraordinary place, and not surprisingly designated a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The monks remained on Skellig Michael until the late twelfth century, when storms and cold weather, and changes in the structure of the Irish Church resulted in their leaving the island for good.

Many of us know of the monks on Skellig Michael, but perhaps we are not so aware of the amazing gift that these and other monks of the time made to the universal Church – the gift of individual confession. In the early Church, Confession was a once in a lifetime event, administered by the bishop and normally in public. You stood up and proclaimed yourself a sinner. Typically a person would receive the sacrament towards the end of his or her life.

What became known as 'Celtic penance' grew up around the monasteries following the example of the monks. "We didn't have the great cities that characterised mainland Europe, but we did have monasteries, centres of civilisation which were places for the people," explains Monsignor Hugh Connolly, President of St Patrick's College Maynooth.

"And so you had these concentric circles, the monks at the centre, beyond that you had the people who lived in the vicinity and it was natural for them to take up the practise of the monastery." Each monk had his own 'anam cara' or soul friend, to whom he would lay bare his soul. Seeing the way the monks lived, the people who lived close by wanted to share in this practice.

"Usually a senior monk was entrusted with a junior monk," says Monsignor Connolly, "and he would conduct a review of life with the monk, and with people who asked for this, and he would reveal the areas of life where they needed to improve in the light of the Gospel." What was new about the practice was that it could be repeated over and over again.

The 'anam cara' accompanied the penitent, conscious of his own sinfulness. "It wasn't helping from on high. It was the idea that all were engaged as human beings in the human condition," comments Monsignor Connolly. The notion of restorative justice or satisfaction, so strong in Brehon law, became enmeshed in the practise of Celtic Penance. If a man killed the breadwinner in a home, for example, he might be asked to provide for the family.

"There was a very strong sense that those going to confession should do something to undo some of the harm they had done," comments Monsignor Connolly who is an expert in the early Irish monastic penitentials.

Another principle operating in Celtic Penance was the principle of 'contraries'. Here the idea was that to change human behaviour, every vice should be opposed with a virtue. If a person confessed to greed, the confessor would advise him or her, to do something generous. "They might say 'we expect you now to go and give to the poor because you are an avaricious person and so we've got to get over this sense of hoarding and holding on and learn how to give and be someone who is generous.'"

Over time, senior monks drew up lists of 'Penitentials' – charts of sins, and their requisite penances. Younger monks learned these off by heart.

"This was to help young men who, perhaps, were not well versed in the skills of reading, or discerning the manifestation of conscience of others so that they would, at least, have a very good steer as to what penance they should give to those who came to them," comments Monsignor Connolly.

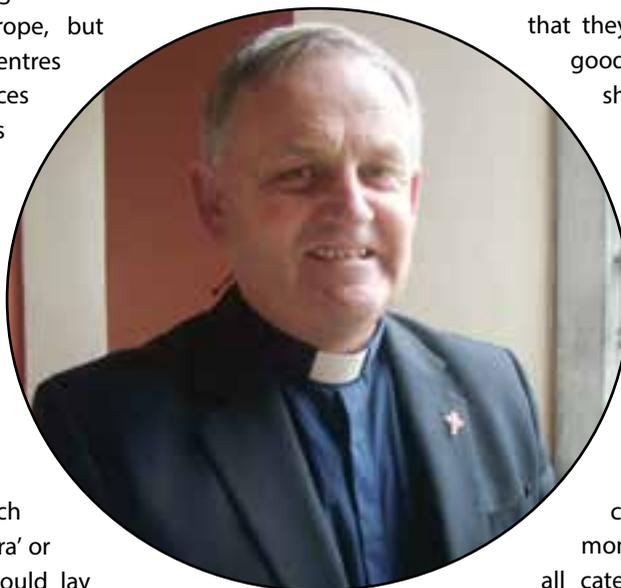
The 'Penitentials' laid down practical prohibitions and prescribed "enormous quantities" of fasting and abstinence, but had humanising elements too. For instance, in a monastery, it was a sin to fast on a feast day. They were clearly addressed not just to the monks, but also to lay people, with all categories of people mentioned, and "how they are to be dealt with by the medicine of penance."

Over time, the discipline and practises of the Irish monasteries migrated across modern Western Europe. "It really spread by people voting with their feet as the Irish monastic movement spread through the wanderings of these Irish monks who came from Ireland into a Europe which had grown cold in terms of its faith," explains Monsignor Connolly.

"They became the sparks of light. In addition, the practises, which they brought with them, became little flames of light as well. And the older canonical model of penance, literally gave way over time to the private penance."

Looking at how radical Celtic penance was, it is spontaneous to ask if the Church perhaps needs to return to a stronger form of sacramental penance. Monsignor Connolly agrees. "Have we overly verbalised the ritual of repentance and perhaps not given enough attention to how human beings might undo some of the hurt that we inevitably cause others?" he asks.

"If we are sorry shouldn't we try to express it in a way that actually undoes some of the harm and the hurt we caused?"



Monsignor Hugh Connolly