

Monastic Scribe XIX: January 21, 2022

BRIDY – MARY OF THE GAELS

Are you ready for Spring? Well, the Celtic calendar celebrates the beginning of Spring on February 1st, one of the four seasonal feasts of the year. It is known as Imbolc. In mild climates this is the time when new life shows itself in lambs being born and the whole earth beginning its reciprocal giving of life with all creatures, including humans. In the Church, this is also the feast of Saint Brigid of Kildare (452-524). Reflecting on Saint Brigid (aka Bridget) gives us the opportunity to acknowledge the important place that feminine leadership has exercised in the church over the centuries despite efforts of a male hierarchy to contain them.

Brigid was certainly an historical figure. She has been heralded as a patroness of Ireland, along with Saint Patrick, and been venerated in many other countries as well. In popular religious devotion, Brigid has been called “Mary of the Gaels” and, at times, eclipsed Mother Mary as the central feminine figure of Christianity. Brigid was the abbess of a double monastery of women and men in Kildare. Her monks under her included a Bishop and priests who had pastoral responsibilities. There is a life of her available to us that was written in the century after her death by the monk, Cogitosus. Still later lives include various legends of her power and achievements. One of them includes the story of her being consecrated as a Bishop!

But Brigid’s life and story have also been shrouded in great mystery. She has become a symbol of some aspects of Christianity that have often been lost in the hierarchical accounts of Church. Myth, not to be disregarded as falsehood but seen as another level of understanding, understood Brigid in the image of the pagan goddess, Brigid, a three-fold figure who represented the phases of a woman’s life as maiden, mother, and wise old crone. She was associated with poetry, healing and hearth. In the peculiar way of Celtic sense of time, she was pictured as the midwife to Mary at Jesus’ birth.

Historically we know that the early nuns at Kildare preserved an eternal flame as a sign of Christ’s light in the world. The flame continued for centuries until the suppression of monasteries under King Henry VIII who declared himself to be the King of Ireland in 1541. Some thirty years ago modern Sisters of Saint Brigid have relit the flame, developed a center of devotion to Brigid, a retreat center, and led

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people on pilgrimage to Saint Brigid's well. The flame has been sent, at times, to gatherings of women of the church.

Brigid thus exemplifies two aspects of Celtic Spirituality. One was its fit into a local culture and lead people to a deeper understanding of what they already believed. The second exemplified her as woman. This follows the feminine and poetic dimensions of the early Celtic Church. Kildare was not the only double monastery under a woman. We also know of others, such as Saint Hilda at Whitby in Northumbria. Brigid was a strong woman who faced kings and bishops alike. She had a great sense of humor and a great concern for the poor.

My own pre-adolescent years were spent in the world of women. Beside my mother, a strong woman, one of her sisters or a great- aunt lived with us. My father was often away. In my eight years of grade school, I had only women teachers, all good and kind religious women. My older brother was a lone male model for me but not an authority figure. The parish priest was a distant, authoritarian figure. Authority figures, both religious and mainstream, were all male. It was in my teen and early adult years that I found men, as well as women, important in my life. My attraction to the priesthood was the example of heroic missionaries who led an adventurous life in foreign lands.

Formal studies began to reinforce models of male authority and leadership in the church. "That's the way it was" was what I learned. Like many practices in the church and the religious life, I never thought of questioning them. Only in later life have I begun to see and understand the neglect of the feminine and women's rights in the life of the church.

Now I know enough history to recognize the place women have served in the 2000 years of church history. It is believed they were the first to practice monasticism, often eager to escape male domination. Over the centuries they have been martyrs, organizers, leaders, mystics, educators, administrators; they have run schools, universities and hospitals. In mission lands they have often been the face of the church. History has been written mostly by men and thus women have not received the credit they deserve. In the nineteenth century alone, for instance, I have taken notice of a number of heroic women who had the courage, vision and fortitude to blaze new trails. Elizabeth Ann Seton and Frances Cabrini come to mind as does Dorothy Day in the succeeding century.

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The place of women has become in our times a major issue in the church, particularly in leadership roles in liturgy and ministry. The Pope and many bishops have begun to appoint women in positions of authority. I hope the movement to ordain women as deacons soon comes to pass. That will only be the beginning of a reformed church. More will have to follow as hierarchical examples of church leadership, the scourge of clericalism, and the remnants of patriarchy have given way to more human, adult ways of living the Christian life.

I am confident that many of you will agree and some will disagree. You can share your thoughts with me at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org
In the synodal manner of dialogue, let us listen to each other respectfully.
Let us pray for the courage to know the mind of Christ in the future of the church.

Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL

Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.