

THE PATH OF  
CELTIC PRAYER

*An ancient way to contemporary joy*

CALVIN MILLER

# CONTENTS

To the reader .....	6
Introduction .....	11
1 Trinity prayer: the art of loving all of God .....	26
2 Scripture prayer: praying the Bible back to its author .....	42
3 Long, wandering prayer: seeing life as a single, unending prayer .....	60
4 Nature prayer: poetry and praise in ordinary life .....	77
5 Lorica prayer: asking God for protection .....	97
6 Confessional prayer: living in agreement with God .....	112
Afterword .....	133
Notes .....	136

## TO THE READER

I am not a groupie. I am not a celebrant of any new form of faddish theology. I did not take up my current interest in Celtic theology because it has achieved a popular fascination. It's just that something happened to my worldview when I stood on the deck of a ferry crossing from the Isle of Mull to the Isle of Iona. Call it romantic nonsense if you will, but there are epiphany moments, in which new revelations seem to summon us from a contentment with who we are to new spiritual adventures. These epiphanies enable us to cast off our dull religious comforts in favour of a riskier pilgrimage.

As I stood there surveying Iona, I asked myself, 'Why in the name of all that is Oklahoma in my origin am I on the rough waters that separate endless islands of the Hebridean archipelago?' So I opened up to the possibility that I had not finished learning all about prayer that God wanted me to know.

In the distance across the waters, I could see the abbey of Iona, not a notable structure when compared with the great cathedrals of Europe but a reminder of people who had lived on the island a thousand years before and who, in talking with God in the wild wind and sea, had formed a view of God that sent missionaries around the known world. This fire that burned in the century after Rome had burned was a flame fuelled by an ardour that most Western Christians have never known. I wanted to find the flame again. For it is sometimes by looking at the past that the present amends its dead soul, and there is a chance that the future is born with new vitality.

I have learned that I am not alone in the quest.

This book is not a history or cultural study of the Celts but a book on prayer. From my limited studies of the Celts,<sup>1</sup> I have discovered certain practices and ideas that have enhanced my

worship and prayer life. In this book, I hope to offer you some aspects of Celtic spiritual practices as a springboard that might enable your prayer life to reach new heights.

## GETTING TO KNOW THE CELTS

Celts have often been called the first Europeans or European aborigines. The word ‘Celt’ is from the Greek (*keltos*) and can be translated ‘alien’ or ‘stranger’. Exactly where the Celts came from, and when, has fostered a long anthropological debate. Some scholars place their beginnings as far back as 1500BC. Others say they came from no further back than 500BC. Some believe they had their origin in the regions north of India, while others think they were middle European. Whatever their origin, the Celts have come slowly into our awareness with the advance of archaeology. In the centuries before Christ they seem to have been workers in and perhaps owners of Austrian salt mines. We know for sure that Celtic tribes were in England long before the Saxons and Angles arrived to give it the name of ‘Angle Land’ or England.

Julius Caesar fought with the Celts (or Gauls, as they were called on the continent) and boasted about killing over one million of them in his attempt to Romanize the barbarians on the northern frontier of the expanding empire. Although we are not sure, it is possible that later Romanization drove the Celts into what is now modern England, Scotland and Wales, and then finally to Ireland.

Seán Ó Duinn, my favourite Celtic scholar and a Benedictine monk, speaks Gaelic (a Celtic tongue) and is as authentic and homegrown as Celtic scholars come. Of his Irish heritage he says:

*The remains of this once great civilization, which at its height could be felt as a presence in areas reaching from Ireland to Asia Minor, is now reduced to a tiny remnant in six areas of Western Europe—Brittany, Wales, Cornwall, Scotland, Isle of [Man], Ireland. The Celtic languages still linger on but only as a whisper. In view of the mighty power of Anglo-*

*American culture, it is surprising that Irish and Welsh are still spoken even in such sadly reduced circumstances. It is surely a sign of their tenacity and vigour in the face of such appalling odds.*

*While death beckons menacingly at the once great civilization, a lingering breath still remains which perhaps could be the breath of life for the jaded victims of the consumer society. For myth is the great strength of the Celts and myth is associated with the hidden powers of renewal.<sup>2</sup>*

By 'myth' Ó Duinn really means the mystical soul of Ireland, a heritage that is bringing new insight into genuine spirituality for many Christians.

In Ireland these ancient people met the missionary Patrick, whose evangelistic zeal led thousands of Celts to faith in Christ. There are many popular books that discuss the historical aspects of Patrick's missionary crusade. These books include Thomas Cahill's *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (Sceptre, 1993). See also Timothy Joyce's *Celtic Christianity* (Orbis, 1998), *Celtic Spirituality* edited by Oliver Davies (Paulist Press, 2000), and Philip Freeman's *St Patrick of Ireland* (Simon & Schuster, 2005). It may be that the subjects I cover in this book will increase your own hunger to understand the Celtic ways. If so, I will be more than satisfied to have stirred you to consider this new way of bringing vitality to your walk with Christ.

I have written this book for two reasons. First, I want to address the way the Celtic people related to God to keep their devotion centered on the Saviour, but I also want to demonstrate how these ancient lovers of God were able to strip away institutional business and empty religiosity that can separate from Christ.

Many Christians suffer from historical shortsightedness. They seem to believe that all real spiritual vitality began with the Reformation or with the Great Awakening or with Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Yet all through history there have been great men and women of God who loved Christ and pursued an ever-deepening relationship with him. It is wholly reasonable to seek among these brothers and sisters of ours a spiritual vitality and a way of life that

we seem to have mislaid. Celtic spirituality may be able to breathe a 'right now' life into our discipleship.

Within this book I present six principles of prayer that I have put to work in my life. I hope they may be put to work in your life as well. Then Christ will find a living centre of praise within both of us.

*The Stowe Missal* (an ancient prayer book) was written sometime between AD790 and 820. It is not Celtic in its origin but is Celtic at its heart. If in these pages I can bring you toward the God of *The Stowe Missal*, we will both find much that we need to bring us into conformity in Christ. The Missal calls to us in this way.

*Father, all powerful and ever-living God,  
we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*You (O Father), with your only begotten Son and the  
Holy Spirit are God.*

*(You are) God, one and immortal;*

*(You are) God, incorruptible and unmoving;*

*(You are) God, invisible and faithful;*

*(You are) God, wonderful and worthy of praise;*

*(You are) God, strong and worthy of honour;*

*(You are) God, most high and magnificent;*

*(You are) God, living and true...*

*We believe you;*

*We bless you;*

*We adore you;*

*And we praise your name forever more.*

*(We praise you) through (Christ) who is the salvation of the universe;  
through (Christ) who is the life of human beings;  
through (Christ) who is the resurrection of the dead.*

*Through him the angels praise your majesty;  
the dominations adore;  
the powers of the heaven of heavens tremble;  
the virtues and the blessed seraphim concelebrate in exultation;  
so grant, we pray you, that our voices may be admitted  
to that chorus, in humble declaration of your glory...<sup>3</sup>*

I invite you therefore to walk with me by the glow of an old lamp  
whose light burns new in this generation.

# INTRODUCTION

*God shall not  
refuse or reject  
whoever strives to praise Him  
at the beginning and end  
of the day.*

A WELSH POEM

*In my study of the years following the heroic age of the beginnings of Celtic Christianity I discovered that while some characteristics and practices did change, many of the original features of Celtic Christianity endured... [T]he basic vision endured: creation is graced by God and by the immanence of this God; creation is filled with God's presence and with the presence of those who have died and are now in the bosom of God. The Celtic propensity for intense religious longing endured. A mythic and imaginative stance toward the world continued to be expressed in the great outpouring of literature and art... No matter how things were changing around them, however, there were still many people living an intense Christian and holy life.*

TIMOTHY JOYCE

Human beings are innate believers. While agnostics are sometimes celebrated for their unsure notions about God, atheism isn't likely to take hold in any permanent way. Why? Because we are so needy, helpless and insecure that we remain obsessed with something or Someone greater than ourselves. Not only are we needy, we hurry our lives deathward in a dead heat with that great universal clock that is destined to outrun us. We live face to face with our temporariness. And while we are trapped in the busy, empty *now*, we are convinced there must be—or must have been—a day when God seemed nearer and more accessible.

Our discontentment with our present affairs keeps us looking backward, hungering for times in our lives when we experienced God as clearly present. Even our casual reading tastes have found us out. The recent rash of novels about Christ's second coming may be popular because they hold forth a kind of promise that when Jesus comes again, all the pain of our empty age will be swallowed up in the warm presence of God. But at the foundation of such hope lies a reality much greater than current popular fiction. We—at least in our searching moments—want Jesus to come again. Why? We are eager for union with Christ. The second coming promises an end to our rollercoaster relationship with God.

Yes, we are inebriated with a yearning after God. We are like earthly junkies needing our 'God fix' to live. 'The Celt was very much a God-intoxicated man,' says John Macquarrie.<sup>1</sup> This narcotic state of heart is indeed intoxicating. For when we have drunk deeply of the nature of God, there is born within us a God-thirst that can never be slaked by any lesser stream. The Celts of the sixth century also believed that Jesus was coming soon, and their expectation of the second coming created a faith of great vitality.

*While later Christians in the Celtic lands did not follow Patrick in viewing the end as imminent, they did believe they were living in the final times. This is what Adomnán wrote in the preface to his Vita Columbae: 'In these final times of the earth, (Columba's) name shall be a light to the oceanic island-provinces.' Slightly later an anonymous Irish preacher wrote: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ has announced this to us... that the end of this world is coming closer every day... I hope his coming will be in the very near future and that he will judge the whole universe with fire' (In nomine Dei summi, homily 2). This is an alien notion to Christians today, for we think of time as just rolling on, day after day, and while we may measure time as 'AD' all this means is that we are using a Christian (or convenient) reckoning system; we no longer place the emphasis where these Celtic writers did, on 'the year of the Lord'.<sup>2</sup>*

Our failure to perceive Christ's imminent return as our 'blessed hope' (Titus 2:13) has contributed to our feelings of separateness from God. The problem is not so much that we seldom think about his coming but that we are no longer excited by the prospect. Paul says there is a crown laid up for all those who long for his appearing (2 Timothy 4:8). But do we love and anticipate his appearing? What of our blasé contentment with things as they are, Christless and self-managed? Many of us are secular captives, separated from God and content with the divorce.

This book proposes a kind of prayer that can end our amputated feelings of separateness from God. I believe that God's seeming remoteness can be partially healed by looking backward to a distant, vital day. Long ago when the Celts built their own rustic kingdom of God in what would later be the British Isles, their fervour in prayer washed their world in a vital revival.

The Celts found God no casual diversion. They were too needy to talk about spiritual things over tea cups and pastries. As in much of Europe, the world was always falling down around them. Infant mortality was as high as life was short. Leprosy was common, the plague pandemic. Medicine was unknown and hospitals were centuries in the future. Their todays were unsteady and their tomorrows obscure.

In desperate times, living becomes an altar where we pray and sing because the only good news of the day is that God lives longer than we do. And God promises us that even if our days are few, our dying is not a wall but a set of gates. Beyond this portal lies a reason to value our life. God stirs the ashes of our old hopes when we have faced the fact that our lifespan is short. But our prayers endure for ever. None of them dies. They live in the air about us and they move us like the breeze of Pentecost. They may appear dead, but they sometimes lie like an ember in the dull, grey ash of the present moment. Then the Spirit blows, the coals flare and the fire burns hot. Even now, the Celtic embers of spirituality are catching fire all around us.

A blazing church is not what most people find when they go

to a typical worship service today. Disinterest, sparse attendance, boredom: these are more common perceptions. Writer Ian Smith berates the church for its lack of spiritual vitality:

*When little is demanded from members, little is given. If commitment requires no more than occasional attendance at Communion, it is not surprising that the average level of participation among members is low. There are large numbers who belong and believe, but contribute very little. In order to grow—indeed, just to stand still—it is essential that the church starts to tap and to mobilize these underutilized resources. The important thing is not only regular attendance at worship but involvement in church activities during the week. How can this level of commitment be achieved? The answer lies in inverting the first principle: when much is demanded from members, much is given.*<sup>3</sup>

Such spiritual lethargy was not the nature of Celtic trust. Vitality—flame and gale—was the heart of the Celtic faith. This is both the practice and the hope of all that is being born in current Celtic revival. Early in the fifth century Patrick (c.390–c.460) brought a living faith to Ireland, then in the sixth century Columba (c.521–597) brought it to Scotland. These two missionaries were like a spiritual wind, driving its warm advance across a cold and Christless world. From the Spirit's breath a new kind of worship is now rising out of ancient devotion. The Celtic way born long ago in the cold, dank Hebrides stirs anew.

## THE CELTIC FORMS OF PRAYER

The Celts' way of devotion was so rich and varied that it is foolhardy to limit them to a mere six types of prayer. Yet this is precisely what I want to do—in order to allow us to get some practical handles on their devotion. Thinking of it in this limited way will allow us to grasp the significant aspects of their devotion that are transferable to our age.

The Celts prayed in ways that were most natural and contextual in their society. Like all ‘unmissionized’ people, the Celts were not just idly waiting for someone to bring them a theology. When the first missionaries arrived, the Celts had their own pantheon and natural theologies. They, like Israel in Exodus with its Baals and other idols, lived outside a lot. They worshipped their own gods that they had drawn from the natural world. Because nature is too vast for humans to grasp, the pre-Christian Celts looked to the gods of sea and forest for help. They thought these outdoor deities could be manipulated with prayers and incantations. A dry cow, a sick sheep, a poisonous well, a fevered child, the advance of plague: all of these things had to be dealt with. So they appealed to their pantheon of gods with songs and prayers and incantations that they believed would bend divine favour in their direction.

Into this mix of nature and faith, the good news of Christ, brought by Patrick and Columba, swelled like new music among the natives of Ireland and Scotland. Patrick and Columba were saints in the best sense of the word. We sometimes get the feeling that saints are heavenly-minded Christians who fast and pray until they are interrupted by someone needing a miracle. After performing the miracle, they go right back to praying. But in truth, Patrick and Columba were pastors in touch with the communities they served.<sup>4</sup> They lived among the unconverted, and preached evangelistically. They shaped their cultures with the passion of Christ’s original apostles.

When Patrick, Columba and other Christian missionaries brought the gospel to Ireland and Scotland, the Celts ceased being insecure pagans and became secure Christians, and because they remained rural peoples, they came to see the Christian God as the King of nature. Having made the world and all that was in it, God had displayed himself in every aspect of his creation. This invocation typifies Celtic devotion:

*Thou King of the Moon*  
*Thou King of the Sun*

*Thou King of the Planets  
Thou King of the Stars  
Thou King of the Globe  
Thou King of the Sky  
Oh! Lovely thy Countenance  
Thou Beauteous Beam.*<sup>5</sup>

Celtic spirituality is filled with nature runes (poems or incantations) extolling the virtues of the triune God as he fills the natural world. The Celts sometimes struggled not to confuse God and nature; God is always greater than and separate from his creation. Nonetheless, we have much to learn from the way in which they allowed nature to inform their spirituality. For example, in this rune we see Jesus, who they understood as ever one with the Father, as the ‘Lightener of the Stars’.

*Behold the Lightener of the Stars  
On the crests of the clouds,  
And the choralists of the sky  
Lauding Him.  
Coming down with acclaim  
From the Father above,  
Harp and lyre of song  
Sounding to Him.*<sup>6</sup>

## SIX FORMS OF PRAYER

At the heart of Celtic devotion was a force called the *neart* (sometimes spelled *nirt*). The *neart* was the spiritual energy behind all living things. Ó Duinn tells us, ‘In St Patrick’s Breastplate [an ancient Celtic prayer], the person rises up and binds himself with the *neart* or creative power coming from the Trinity, from the acts of Christ’s life, from the angels and saints and from the elements—the forces of nature: sky, sun, moon, earth, sea, rock.’<sup>7</sup> When we

pray to the triune God, we tap into the *neart*. In our pursuit of this spiritual energy, this power of passion, we will examine the following six forms of Celtic prayer.

#### TRINITY PRAYER

God, for the Celts, was always triune—the Three-in-One—and they served this great paradox well. They never allowed the Father and the Son and the Spirit to become separate. Celts thought of God as ‘the three of my love’. While they held an adoring view of the Trinity, their perception was never allowed to become either too syrupy or too formal. A strong trinitarian formula pervades the whole of Christian Celtic literature. Consider this simple prayer for grace:

*I am bending my knee  
In the eye of the Father who created me,  
In the eye of the Son who died for me,  
In the eye of the Spirit who cleansed me.*<sup>8</sup>

This inclusion is an example of what I call ‘Trinity praying’. It entails praying to the full Godhead. Generally speaking, the God who creates and pervades the natural world is never separate from the Son who redeems, nor the Spirit who indwells each believer.

The Trinity, for the Celts, ordered all of life and pervaded nature. The Triune God, for the Celts, was not so austere or grand that he couldn’t take care of ordinary concerns. There are many runes and prayers that these ancients recited to free themselves of daily aches and pains. One of these many trinitarian prayers was for clearing a mote from one’s eye:

*In name of Father,  
In name of Son,  
In name of Spirit.*

*Triune, all alike in might holy,  
Triune, all alike in power of wondrous works,  
Triune, all alike in righteousness and love.*

*My trust is in the Being of life.  
The mote that is in the blind eye,  
That the true King of my devotion,  
Will gently place it hither on my tongue.<sup>9</sup>*

The Celts also prayed to the Trinity to protect them from the slurs of speech by which others directed the venom of hate toward them.<sup>10</sup> Here is another prayer to the Trinity to protect a newborn babe from epilepsy:

*In the name of Father,  
In the name of Son  
In the name of Spirit,  
Three just and holy.<sup>11</sup>*

While they prayed, they wound a straw rope around the baby's body three times. Then the rope was cut into three equal lengths. On and on go these prayers offered to chart the simple course of everyday life. No need was too minuscule for the Trinity to help with.

In looking at their trinitarian entreaties, we might wonder at their naive simplicity in calling all of heaven to meet their need, but they did not see such praying as unreasonable. Simple or not, there was something beautiful in their utter dependency on God. He was, after all, their Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, and definitely on their side in every issue of life.

#### PRAYING THE SCRIPTURE

The Celts took seriously the form of prayer later called 'praying the scriptures'. Their fondness for the natural world led them to focus

on the Psalms, and their huge optimism led them to a stance of continual gratitude as they prayed. The Psalms' celebration of nature was for the Celts, as it is for all of us, a rich form of praise and thanksgiving, so Celts would open their hearts and pray the Psalms in celebration of their natural world.

The Celts believed that the mere recitation of scripture held a kind of power. For instance, they believed that Psalm 119, which they called *Biáit* (also called the *Beati*) had such efficacy that it should be memorized and recited at any point of need. When recited aloud, this psalm had great power to heal or deliver. Many of the psalms contained healing force and they were used to drive out demons or disease, as well as to draw the speaker closer to God.

Although Psalm 119 was their favourite prayer of power, the Celts also believed that the Gospels were special. The words of Christ could be summoned into the arena of prayer with the anticipation of deliverance. Thus, an intimate knowledge of the Gospels was the lifelong pursuit of the Celtic monks of Iona, who probably copied the Book of Kells. Their painstaking and ornate illumination of the Gospels reveals the special place that the word of God held in their walk of faith. There is but a thin line separating the devotional reading of and the praying of scriptures. When the heart adores Christ as it reads the Bible, it transcends the act of repeating mere words. When we read the Bible while fixed on Christ, it becomes an act of adoration. Reading then becomes prayer.

## NATURE PRAYER

The natural world was the only world the ancient Celts knew. Many of us may sometimes leave our enclosed world (houses, cars, offices, shops, churches) and go camping, but the Celts weren't camping; they lived in nature. They lived with and prayed to and worshipped a God who surrounded them as truly as the fresh air of their green world did. Their intense and natural devotion suggests

that the closer we are to nature, the more apt we are to pray and the more fervent our prayers will become. Look, for example, at Israel in Sinai. Their outdoor sojourn revealed Yahweh as the 'breath'—God of the storms—whose wind (*ruach*) created and threatened, and gave life to these trembling, ragtag pilgrims. The glorious words of Psalm 19 or Job 37 make it clear that Yahweh was not just a fixed temple icon who hid out in a gilded inner sanctum, his holy of holies. God could be found among rocks and in bushes. His indisputable power was demonstrated in cobras and earthquakes, hail and fire, quail and manna. To some degree the God of the exodus tabernacle—a portable temple—was the God of the Celts. He was the outdoor Almighty who rubbed against the world where the world could best feel the rubbing—outside.

The Celts added up all the attributes of God as depicted in scripture and prayed to all aspects of his triune being. Neither God's oneness nor his threeness was ever in doubt. Nor was this paradox troubling to them. Its ambiguity was welcome in their creature praise; its mystery was the substance of their worship.

### LONG, WANDERING PRAYER

Another special form of Celtic devotion is 'long, wandering prayer'. This kind of prayer characterized the devotional exile and pilgrimages of Celtic monks. These missionaries were called the *peregrini*, wandering pilgrims who journeyed not to particular shrines or destinations. They spent their lives in worship and ministry as exiles and aliens and strangers. They prayed as they journeyed, always thanking God for the day and asking him to reveal his will for the land that they traversed. Coupling prayer with trekking, they partook in what today's pilgrims might call 'prayer walking'.

Though the travels of Brendan and his 'Sanctinauts' in the tales of *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* seem more like myth than real prayer-journeying, the fanciful account reveals the huge missionary imperatives that defined the zeal of the *peregrini*. They made

journeys of prayer throughout strange seas and lands. In prayer, they advanced in trust to serve the living God. Regarding these travellers, Hugh Connolly wrote:

*The Celtic image of pilgrimage affords a vision of the Christian life wherein the individual will inevitably encounter suffering and sin, but where he also has the means, through penance, to cleave to that graced process, whereby he is freed from the un-Christ-like elements which impede the growth of his humanity into the kingdom.*<sup>12</sup>

So these fantastic voyages should not be taken lightly. Their little coracles (circular boats) were driven by the breath of the Holy Spirit. They were missionaries who went abroad for 'the love of Christ'.<sup>13</sup> They journeyed in prayer, and the open sea was their highway to obedience. Sea captains and their crews recited litanies to each other. Their ships were small, and the waters of what we would later call the North Atlantic were perilous, so these *peregrini* chanted their cries for protection.

'Blest be the boat!' cried the pilot.

'May God the Father bless her!' cried the crew... 'Ever eternally.'<sup>14</sup>

Only after this liturgy, prayed as often by rough seamen as by priests, was the journey undertaken. Religion and prayer were not the special preserve of religious professionals. Everyone knew and used the rituals of the holy life, whether or not the culture saw them as holy men and women.

In their travels, the *peregrini* turned very naturally to ministry. Mother Teresa of Calcutta said that we must never keep our hands so folded in prayer that we refuse to open them to do Christ's service; so it was with the *peregrini*. They were monks who had said goodbye to the cloister and set sail to pray and minister. They went for God and they went with God. They used their never-ending prayer pilgrimage as a mission to redeem the world and thus enjoyed God's never-ending presence.

## THE LORICA

The *lorica* is a breastplate. The prayers that the Celts dubbed by this name were used to call on God to protect the petitioner with grace. The breastplate as Paul describes it in Ephesians 6 is as near a definition of the Celtic armour as we might get. The Celts lived in an insecure world where people often died in infancy and life expectancy was about 30. They were not reticent to ask God to safeguard their health. It was for his service that they existed. So they turned to God to protect them, and these prayers were called the *loricae* (plural).

The blessing we offer others—for birth, life and occupation—will make our life complete until we pray our final prayer. This continuing confession will eventually lead us to bless our death. Our dying is, after all, the final set of gates that brings to an end, as well as a beginning, our lifelong conversation with the Keeper. The following is a Celtic ‘death blessing’ that was offered over those who lived a fulfilled life:

*God, omit not this woman from Thy covenant,  
And the many evils which she in the body committed,  
That she cannot this night enumerate  
The many evils that she in the body committed  
That she cannot this night enumerate.*

*Be this soul on Thine own arm, O Christ,  
Thou King of the City of Heaven,  
And since Thine it was, O Christ, to buy the soul,  
At the time of the balancing of the beam,  
At the time of the bringing in the judgment,  
Be it now on Thine own right hand,  
Oh! on Thine own right hand.*

*And be the holy Michael, king of angels,  
Coming to meet the soul,*

*And leading it home  
To the heaven of the Son of God.  
The Holy Michael, high king of angels,  
Coming to meet the soul,  
And leading it home  
To the heaven of the Son of God.<sup>15</sup>*

## THE CONFESSION

The final Celtic prayer we will consider is the confession. Strictly speaking, St Patrick's *Confession*, the most famous of all Celtic confessions, is not a prayer. These confessions really are an account of the spiritual pilgrimage of the confessor and are often more of a *vita*, a 'life', of the confessor. Still, the ancient confessions settle on us as a force of the Spirit, and their impact stirs us to write and then pray a confession of our own.

The prayer of every confessor centres on coming to Christ and the power of that transformation. This is, of course, often the noblest and highest work of prayer—to come into the presence of God, begging his forgiveness as we seek to own his enduring love. Such confession brings us face to face with God, and then our forgiven status rushes forward to a celebration point. So the confession stands very close to the beginning of our prayer life, but it is also the ongoing conversation that constantly renews our experience.

Patrick's confession reveals his dependence on and close union with Christ:

*I Patrick, a sinner, a most simple countryman, the least of all the faithful and the most contemptible to many, had for father the deacon Calpurnius. . . he had a small villa where I was taken captive. . . And the Lord brought down on us the fury of His being and scattered us among many nations. . . And there the Lord opened my mind to an awareness of my unbelief in order that even so late, I might remember my transgressions and turn with all my heart to the Lord my God.*

## ENLARGING YOUR WORLD

The forms of prayer in this book should not be seen as wholly individual and separate. They are found together in almost every instance of my own devotion. Thus you will see all of these forms of prayer winding through each chapter. The prayer exercises at the end of each chapter will demonstrate how effective they become when they are used together.

These six forms of prayer will enlarge your world as you walk with Christ, but there is one final aim that you should seek in these exercises: union with Christ. Here lies the ultimate spiritual goal of the believer. Hunger for Christ keeps us talking to God till our separation is swallowed up in our unending togetherness with him. Until this union is complete, he who keeps our prayers awaits our union. After all, God hungers for union with us even more than we desire union with him, and prayer is the rail on which our two desires move toward each other. Our devotion moves us from separateness into oneness with God, and the resulting joy is worth the journey.

I want you to understand that the discipline of prayer—vital and deep prayer—though sometimes arduous, does not always remain so. As our love affair with God deepens, our romance with the Trinity will become more satisfying than mere human romance might ever be. As we learn to live for ever in God's presence, our prayer achieves a lightness of being.

The following Celtic prayer reveals a woman who has just risen in joy to rebuild her fire, praying even as she stirs the grey ashes of the night before and looks for the bright embers of warmth. Though she prays in the presence of all angels, she names only two, archangels Airil and Uiril (customarily spelled Ariel and Uriel). Yet she craves more than the presence of the angels; she hungers for the presence of God.

*I will build up my fire today in the presence of the holy angels of heaven,  
in the presence of Airil of most beautiful form, in the presence of Uiril*

*of all beauty without hate, without envy, without rivalry, without fear, without horror of anyone under the sun, for I have the holy Son of God as my sanctuary. O God, enkindle in my inmost heart the flaming spark of love for my enemy, for my relative, for my friends, for the wise person, for the foolish person, for the unfortunate person, O son of gentle, shining Mary, from the lowest most perverse person to the one of highest fame.*<sup>16</sup>

May the simple tasks that occupy our current day provide for us such a matrix for devotion.