Field-Governed Mission Structures

# Part II: Patrick of Ireland and his Celtic Peregrini Successors

*by Joseph & Michele C.*

St. Patrick, the 5th-century Apostle of Ireland, is considered by many writers to be the single most important missionary figure of the period from the close of the New Testament to the rise of the great missionary orders in the 13th–16th centuries. Though such a sweeping and unqualified statement is an exaggeration, neglecting the Eastern Orthodox pioneers of the Slavic churches and the Syriac-speaking missionaries of the "Nestorian" Church of the East, there is no question that Patrick and his Celtic peregrini successors were instrumental in changing the course of history in Europe and (as a result) in the rest of the world. Certainly Patrick was one of the most important missionary figures of the 2nd–13th centuries.

When Patrick went as a missionary to Ireland there were perhaps a handful of mostly-foreign Christians in the country, but there was no national church to speak of. The religion of Ireland was Druidism, and it probably still involved human sacrifice (Cahill, pp. 227–228). By the time of his death, he had personally baptized "countless thousands" (Patrick's Confessio 14, 50, and Epistola 2) of the Irish people, and had ordained clergy "in every place" (Ibid.), and it appears that the majority of Ireland's population had professed faith in Christ.

But, more importantly, the example of his life, and the churches which he founded, gave birth to a huge missionary movement which utterly transformed European history from the 6th–10th centuries. For a period of five hundred years nearly all of the great missionaries of the Western Church—nearly everyone responsible for the evangelization of Northern and Central Europe—were so-called "peregrini" (wandering pilgrim-monks) who came either from Ireland or from monasteries in Scotland and England founded by Irish missionaries.

These Celtic peregrini missionaries were responsible not only for the spread of the Christian faith, but also for the spread of literacy, the preservation and copying of books, and the teaching of up-to-date agricultural techniques to the invading Germanic and other tribes who had overwhelmed the crumbling remains of the Western Roman empire. Without these Celtic missionaries, literacy and books might well have disappeared entirely from Europe along with the Christian faith. It is for this reason that writers like Thomas Cahill have argued that these Celtic peregrini "saved civilization" in the West (Cahill, p.196).

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As we will see below, the mission of Patrick and the Celtic missionary movement give us interesting examples of missions which were field-governed at the start but which came under pressure, over time, toward home-base governance.

With the passage of centuries a large number of legends have collected around the person of St. Patrick, but most of them are impossible to document as historically reliable. For example, he did not miraculously drive all snakes from the island of Ireland (Ireland has never had an indigenous population of snakes). And though he strongly affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity (Confessio 4, 14, and Epistola 21), there is no historical evidence that he ever used a three-leafed clover to explain it. However, we do have excellent historical sources for his life in two documents from his own pen which have been preserved through the centuries. Patrick's Confessio and his Epistola ad Coroticum are almost undisputed by critical scholarship as being the authentic writings of Patrick, and they contain abundant information on his life. Here is the basic outline of his life which Patrick provides in the Confessio:

Though raised in Britain in a Christian family, he says, "Deum verum ignorabam"—"I did not know the true God" (Confessio 1). At the age of sixteen he was kidnaped by Irish slave-raiders and taken to Ireland where for six years he was a slave working as a shepherd. There, in his suffering and isolation, he repented of his sins "ut converterem toto corde ad Dominum"—"so that I was converted with all my heart to the Lord" (Confessio 2). He spent large amounts of time in prayer. In response to a vision he escaped from Ireland, and through many trials (including a second captivity), and some miracles, he made his way home to Britain.

Then one night he had a vision in which he saw "virum venientem quasi de Hiberione"—"a man coming, as it were, from Ireland" (Confessio 23)—and heard "vox Hiberionacum"—"the voice of the Irish"—calling to him, "Rogamus te, sancte puer, ut venias et adhuc ambulas inter nos"—"We beg you, holy youth, to come and again walk among us" (Confessio 23).

So Patrick went to Ireland, even though his family and some of his "seniores"—"elders"—pleaded with him "with weeping and tears" (Confessio 37) not to go, offering him "munera multa"—"many gifts" (Confessio 37) if he would change his mind and stay in Britain. It is clear from Confessio 37 that his loved ones' and elders' reason for pleading with him to stay was not any lack of qualifications on his part, but rather the fact that they did not want him to return to the dangerous land of his past enslavement, where they knew they might never see him again. "Sed gubernante Deo nullo modo consensi neque adquievi illis"—"But, guided by God, in no way did I consent, nor did I acquiesce in their [wishes]" (Confessio 37).

*The mission of Patrick and the Celtic missionary movement give us interesting examples of missions which were field-governed at the start but which came under pressure, over time, toward home-base governance.*

In Ireland Patrick's mission was abundantly successful. He reports that:

> [Deus mihi tantam gratiam donavit ut populi multi per me in Deum renascerentur…et clerici ubique illis ordinarentur ad plebem nuper venientem ad credulitatem.]
>
> God gave me such grace that many people were born again in God through me…and clergy were ordained for them in every place for a people just now coming to faith (Confessio 38).

"In Domino ego baptizavi tot milia hominum…in gentem illam"—"In the Lord I have baptized so many thousands of people…among that people [i.e. among the Irish]" (Confessio 14–15). "Baptizavi tot milia hominum…Ordinavit ubique Dominus clericos per modicitatem meam"—"I have baptized so many thousands of people…The Lord has ordained clergy in every place through my tiny efforts" (Confessio 50).

This success was not accomplished without suffering. In his modest way, and in response to criticism by others, he recounts one story after another of persecution, of imprisonment, of attempts on his life, of voluntary sacrifice, etc. One is reminded of Paul's discomfort at being forced to recount his own suffereings in 2 Cor 11–12. The following are a few examples from the Confessio:

> [Breviter dicam qualiter piisimus Deus de servitute saepe liberavit et de periculis duodecim qua periclitata est anima mea, praeter insidias multas et quae verbis exprimere non valeo.]
>
> Briefly I will say how the most merciful God has frequently liberated me from slavery and from the twelve dangers in which my life was endangered, not to mention many plots and things which I cannot find words to express (Confessio 35).
>
> [Deus…vincit in me…ut ego veneram ad Hibernas gentes evangelium praedicare et ab incredulis contumelias perferre, ut audirem obprobrium peregrinationis meae, et persecutiones multas usque ad vincula, et ut darem ingenuitatem meam pro utilitate aliorum, et si dignus fuero, promptus sum ut etiam animam meam incunctanter et libentissime pro nomine eius; et ibi opto impendere eam usque ad mortem, si Dominus mihi indulgeret.]
>
> God…is victorious in me…that I came to the Irish peoples to preach the Gospel, and to endure insults from unbelievers, and to hear reproach of my missionary travels [Latin: *peregrinatio*], and [to suffer] many persecutions, even to the point of imprisonment, and to give up my birthright for the benefit of others. If I should be worthy, I am ready to give even my life unhesitatingly and gladly for His name. It is there [in Ireland] that I wish to expend [my life] unto death, if the Lord will grant that to me (Confessio 37).
>
> [Comprehenderunt me cum comitibus meis et illa die avidissime cupiebant interficere me, sed tempus nondum venerat; et omnia quaecumque nobiscum invenerunt rapuerunt illud et me ipsum ferro vinxerunt et quartodecimo die absolvit me Dominus de

potestate eorum et quicquid nostrum fuit redditum est nobis propter Deum et necessarios amicos quos ante praevidimus.]

They arrested me with my companions, and that day they eagerly wanted to kill me, but my time had not yet come. They stole everything which they found in our possession, and they put me in chains, but on the fourteenth day the Lord rescued me from their power, and our possessions were returned to us, because of God and because of dear friends whom we had previously acquired (Confessio 52).

[Cotidie spero aut internicionem aut circumveniri aut redigi in servitutem sive occasio cuiuslibet.]

Every day I expect either to be killed or betrayed or returned to slavery or whatever may happen (Confessio 55).

[Peto illi det mihi ut…pro nomine suo effundam sanguinem meum, etsi etiam caream sepulturam aut miserissime cadaver per singula membra dividatur canibus.]

I pray to [God] to grant to me that for the sake of His name I might pour out my blood, even if I should not have a grave or if my body should be miserably torn limb from limb by dogs (Confessio 59).

However, these trials at the hands of the non-Christian Irish were not nearly as painful for Patrick as the problem of tensions with his fellow-Christians in Britain. Louis Gougaud notes:

> It did not enter into the counsels of God that the soil of Ireland at this early beginning should be watered with the blood of martyrs. Trials of another kind were reserved for Patrick; and they were all the more painful to him because they came from his fellow-believers and even, it would seem, from priests, his fellow-workers (Gougaud, p. 43).

The first problem to prompt Patrick to take up his pen was political in nature. Patrick had just baptized a group of new Irish believers, and they were still wearing white robes, with the chrism still on their foreheads, when a nominally Christian British petty king named Coroticus landed with a party of slave-raiders. Coroticus and his soldiers killed a large number of the newly baptized Irish Christians, and he carried away others into slavery in Britain, together with substantial booty. Patrick immediately sent him a letter calling upon him to repent, but Patrick's envoy was laughed out of Coroticus's court.

This was the occasion of Patrick's writing a second letter, the scathing Epistola ad Coroticum (Letter to Coroticus), an open letter intended to be read by the general public in Patrick's homeland of Britain (Epistola 21). Patrick of course remembered his own experience of slavery (Epistola 10), and he noted that female slaves faced the even greater terror of rape (Epistola 14, 19, 21). In the Epistola Patrick publicly excommunicates this British "Christian" king for his acts of violence against the Irish, until such time as Coroticus may show repentance and deep sorrow for what he has done. Patrick calls upon the Christians of Britain to refuse to have anything to do with Coroticus (Epistola 7, 13), and he does not hesitate to say that Coroticus will end up in hell if he does not repent (Epistola 4, 18–20). Patrick's Epistola is one of the most vehement and uncompromising public denunciations of the institution of slavery in the history of the Christian Church, and it was written fourteen centuries before the anti-slavery work of David Livingstone, William Wilberforce, and Arthur and Lewis Tappan.

Patrick's other surviving treatise, his Confessio, was occasioned by something even more painful to him personally, and it is more directly relevant to this paper's concern, the issue of field authority versus home-base authority in mission structures. Near the end of his life Patrick came under attack (not for the first time) among the leadership of the Church in his homeland of Britain. Both his personal character and his missionary methods came in for criticism in Britain "post tergum meum"—"behind my back" (Confessio 46). Finally a delegation of church leaders came to Ireland to summon Patrick to a church meeting in Britain to answer these charges. In the event, Patrick politely refused to accede to this summons, and he insisted on remaining in Ireland. He wrote the Confessio to explain in writing his reasons for this refusal, and to answer the charges themselves. One senses the anguish of Patrick's heart in nearly every line of this document, and one senses the damage which the whole crisis did to his ministry.

The intended audience of the Confessio is clearly the bishops and clergy in Britain (Hanson, p. 108), and "the attack or accusation which was made against Patrick…was the main cause of his writing this work" (Hanson, p. 131). In an attempt to reconcile the Confessio with later legends about Patrick, some scholars in the past suggested that this attack took place (and that the Confessio was written) *before* Patrick went to Ireland as a missionary. However, R. P. C. Hanson, author of the standard scholarly biography of Patrick, has so completely refuted this (Hanson, pp. 131ff.) that no one writing since Hanson seems to question the chronology which he outlines as follows:

1) first Patrick was made a bishop to Ireland;
2) then, at some later date, Patrick was criticized in his absence among the church leadership in Britain, but an old, dear friend defended him;
3) *now*, at a yet later date (occasioning the writing of the Confessio), a delegation has come from Britain ("venerunt…illo die") after many years of his hard missionary labor in Ireland ("contra laboriosum episcopatum meum"), near the end of his life ("antequam moriar") to demand or request that he return to Britain to respond to charges being raised against him at some kind of public church synod ("coram cunctis publice"), which include the dear, old friend's having divulged a sin which Patrick had confessed to him 30 years before ("post annos triginta").

John T. McNeill, author of the standard scholarly history of the Celtic churches, agrees: "The Confession…must be dated very near the end of his labors" (McNeill, p. 55).

The text of the Confessio makes it clear that Patrick is writing after many years' ministry in Britain. He is writing ["in senectute mea"]—"in my old age" (Confessio 10). The closing line of the document reads, ["Haec est confessio mea antequam moriar"]—"This is my declaration before I die"(Confessio 62). Patrick has been the object of criticism for some time: "Olim cogitavi scribere, sed et usque nunc haesitavi"—"For some time I have considered writing, but until now I have hesitated"(Confessio 9). The fact that he has already been ministering for years in Ireland is also clear from his reference

to "laboriosum episcopatum meum"—"my laborious episcopate" (Confessio 26)—and from the following statement: "In Domino ego baptizavi tot milia hominum . . . in gentem illam"—"In the Lord I have baptized so many thousands of people . . . among that people [i.e. among the Irish]" (Confessio 14–15).

He describes the current attack on him, and the delegation that has come to see him, and he makes allusion to at least one occasion in the past when he was similarly attacked in his absence (and was defended by a friend who has now deserted him):

> [Temptatus sum ab aliquantis senioribus meis, qui venerunt et peccata mea contra laboriosum episcopatum meum obiecerunt, utique illo die fortiter impulsus sum ut caderem hic et in aeternum.]
>
> I was attacked by some of my elders who came and, against my laborious episcopate, raised the issue of my sins. On that day indeed I was dealt a heavy blow, so that I might have fallen now and in eternity (Confessio 26).

Confessio 29: "Reprobatus sum a memoratis supradictis"—"I was rejected by the people I have referred to and mentioned above [i.e. "my elders", mentioned in Confessio 26]."

> [Sed magis doleo pro amicissimo meo cur hoc meruimus audire tale responsum. Cui ego credidi etiam animam! Et comperi ab aliquantis fratribus ante defensionem illam (quod ego non interfui nec in Britanniis eram nec a me oriebatur) ut et ille in mea absentia pulsaret pro me . . . Sed unde venit illi postmodum ut coram cunctis, bonis et malis, et me publice dehonestaret quod ante sponte et laetus indulserat, et Dominus, qui maior omnibus est?]
>
> But I am more deeply hurt for my dearest friend, why we deserved to hear such an answer as this. I had confided my very soul to him! And I learned from some brothers before that defense (at which I was not present, nor was I in Britain, nor did it originate from me) that he used to fight to defend me . . . But where did he get the idea afterward that he should publicly disgrace me in the presence of the whole assembly, of both good people and evil people, for a matter which previously he had spontaneously and joyfully excused, as had the Lord, who is greater than all (Confessio 32)?

Judging from the text of the Confessio, the criticisms of Patrick and his mission seem to have contained four main elements:

1) he was irresponsibly exposing himself to danger among a barbarian people who did not deserve it;
2) he was insufficiently educated to be a bishop;
3) he had confessed a scandalous sin thirty years earlier; and
4) he was improperly enriching himself financially.

Regarding the first criticism, Patrick writes:

> [Multi hanc legationem prohibebant, etiam inter se ipsos post tergum meum narrabant et dicebant: 'Iste quare se mittit in periculo inter hostes qui Deum non noverunt?]
>
> Many were seeking to hinder this mission, and were even telling stories among themselves behind my back and were saying: 'Why does this fellow send himself into danger among enemies who do not know God (Confessio 46)?

The charge that the Irish, as godless enemies of the British, do not deserve for a British missionary to risk his life among them is one that Patrick does not even answer. Perhaps he thinks that such an unchristian assertion should not even be dignified with a reply. Regarding his lack of education, Patrick was painfully aware that this was true. His enslavement from age 16 to age 22, which he blames on his own sins (Confessio 10), interrupted his education, and he was never able to achieve the level of mastery of the Latin language or of Roman law and literature that was typical of the British bishops.

In the opening lines of the Confessio he writes:

> [Ego Patricius, peccator rusticissimus et minimus omnium fidelium et contemptibilissimus apud plurimus . . . [N]unc parvitas mea esse videtur inter alienigenas.]
>
> I, Patrick, a sinner, most unsophisticated and the least of all the faithful, and most contemptible to many . . . [N]ow my insignificance is seen to be among foreign people.

At first one might think that this is simply a pro forma expression of humility to introduce his letter. But as he repeats again and again his painful awareness of his clumsy Latin and his unsophistication, one realizes that this was genuinely a source of real embarrassment to him.

For example in the Confessio 9–10, he says that he has been thinking of writing for a long time, and that he has hesitated for fear of exposing how unpolished and unscholarly his Latin is. He says here that he is painfully aware that many in his audience are much better educated than he, having studied both law and Scripture, and that they may despise his clumsy writing. In Confessio 13, he mentions that his readers in Britain include some whom he calls "Dominicati rhetorici." There is some uncertainty about how best to translate this expression, but it is clear that he is referring to verbally sophisticated intellectuals whom he expects to despise

his clumsy Latin prose. He says in Confessio 45, that he expects such people to "laugh and scorn" him ("Rideat autem et insultet qui voluerit"). In Confessio 10, he says of his Latin writing, "Unde ergo hodie erubesco et vehementer pertimeo denudare imperitiam meam"—"For this reason today I blush and am extremely frightened to expose my clumsiness."

Scholars reading Patrick's Latin prose today agree that his Latin was indeed quite clumsy and unsophisticated, and was lacking in rhetorical touches or other evidence of a good classical education, but with one exception: Patrick knew the Bible extremely well. Both the Confessio and the Epistola quote constantly from Scripture, and they make such frequent indirect allusion to bib-

lical texts that it is clear that Patrick must have read the Bible in Latin constantly to the point where his Latin prose "breathed" the phraseology of the Old Latin (pre-Jerome) Bible.

But despite his embarrassment, even shame, at his lack of education, Patrick is clear that he does not think that this calls into question the legitimacy of his mission. Again and again in the Confessio he points out that his weakness was an opportunity for God's power and grace to be demonstrated, for God has indeed used him powerfully to lead countless thousands of Irish people to faith in Christ. Furthermore, he points out various biblical texts which show that God especially delights to use stammering tongues and ineloquent speech (e.g. Isaiah 32:4 and 2 Corinthians 3:2–3, quoted in Confessio 11).

In response to accusations about a scandalous sin from his distant past, Patrick does not deny that he committed this sin. But he notes that the sin was confessed and forgiven thirty years earlier, and had actually been committed some years before *that*, when he was a teenager and did not yet know God. He writes:

> [Occasionem post annos triginta invenerunt me adversus verbum quod confessus fueram antequam essem diaconus. Propter anxietatem maesto animo insinuavi amicissimo meo quae in pueritia mea una dia gesseram, immo in una hora, quia necdum praevalebam. Nescio, Deus scit, si habebam tunc annos quindecim, et Deum vivum non credebam, neque ex infantia mea; sed in morte et in incredulitate mansi.]
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> They found a pretext against me, after thirty years, in a confession which I had made before I became a deacon. Because of the anxiety of my troubled soul, I had privately told my dearest friend something I had done in my boyhood one day, rather in a single hour, because I had not yet become strong. I do not know, God knows, whether I was even fifteen years old at the time; I did not then believe in the living God, nor had I done so since my childhood, but remained in death and unbelief (Confessio 27).

He asks why this sin is being brought up now, when it was so long ago forgiven both by his fellow-Christians and by the Lord:

> [Sed unde venit illi postmodum ut coram cunctis, bonis et malis, et me publice dehonestaret quod ante sponte et laetus indulserat, et Dominus, qui maior omnibus est?]
>
> But where did he get the idea afterward that he should publicly disgrace me in the presence of the whole assembly, both good people and evil people, for a matter which previously he had spontaneously and joyfully excused, as had the Lord, who is greater than all (Confessio 32)?

The accusation of mismanaging finances was the most serious charge against Patrick, and it is the one to which he devotes the most space in the Confessio. It is apparently in reference to this issue that he implies that his opponents in the British church hierarchy are liars who have libellously fabricated this accusation (Confessio 7). He readily acknowledges that "In multis imperfectus sum"—"In many things I am imperfect" (Confessio 6). But in this matter of financial integrity he asserts that his opponents are lying.

He defends his financial integrity as follows:

> [Ad gentes illas inter quas habito, ego fidem illis praestavi et praestabo. Deus scit, neminem illorum circumveni, nec cogito.]
>
> As for the peoples among whom I live, I have dealt with them honestly, and I will continue to do so. God knows that I have cheated none of them, nor would I think of doing so (Confessio 48).
>
> [Nam etsi imperitus sum in omnibus, tamen conatus sum quippiam servare me etiam et fratribus Christianis et virginibus Christi et mulieribus religiosis, quae mihi ultronea munuscula donabant et super altare iactabant ex ornamentis suis et iterum reddebam illis et adversus me scandalizabantur cur hoc faciebam; sed ego propter spem perennitatis, ut me in omnibus caute propterea conservarem, ita ut non me in aliquo titulo infideli caperent vel ministerium servitutis meae nec etiam in minimo incredulis locum darem infamare sive detractare.]
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> For although I am clumsy in all things, nevertheless I have done my best to safeguard myself, even with Christian brothers and sisters and with virgins of Christ and with religious women who, without being asked, gave me little gifts and laid on the altar some of their jewelry. I gave these back to them, and they were offended by me that I would do this, but I did so out of hope for lasting results, and so that I might safeguard myself carefully in all things, so that they might not 'catch' me or my ministry of service in any pretext of dishonesty, nor would I in the slightest way give any excuse to unbelievers to defame or criticize (Confessio 49).
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> [Forte autem quando baptizavi tot milia hominum speravim ab aliquo illorum vel dimidio scriptulae? Dicite mihi et reddam vobis. Aut quando ordinavit ubique Dominus clericos per modicitatem meam et ministerium gratis distribui illis, si poposci ab aliquo illorum vel pretium calciamenti mei, dicite adversus me et reddam vobis.]
>
> But perhaps when I baptized so many thousands of people, did I expect from any of them even a fraction of a penny? Tell me, and I will give it back to you! Or when the Lord ordained clergy in every place through my tiny efforts, and I conferred the ministry on them for free, if I asked from any of them even the price of my footwear [perhaps worn out on the journeys to perform the ordinations], then tell it against me, and I will give it back to you (Confessio 50)!
>
> [Magis ego impendi pro vobis ut me caperent . . . Interim dabam regibus praeter quod dabam mercedem filiis ipsorum qui mecum ambulant.]
>
> Rather, I spent [money] for you, so that they would receive me . . . Meanwhile I used to give gifts to kings, not to mention the fees I paid to their sons who travelled with me [perhaps as protection on the roads] (Confessio 51-52).

Confessio 53: Patrick paid large sums of money to those who administered justice in the regions which he freqently visited: "Censeo non minimum quam pretium quindecim hominum distribui illis" "I think that I distributed among them not less than the price of fifteen people."

> [Patrick himself remained poor: Et Christus Dominus pauper fuit pro nobis, ego vero miser et infelix etsi opes voluero iam non habeo.]
>
> Christ the Lord was also poor for us, and I am certainly wretched and unfortunate: even if I wanted riches, moreover, I do not have any (Confessio 55).

Both McNeill and Hanson point out that these texts imply that Patrick had some external source of funding which he used to make the above-mentioned gifts to kings and judges. "The price of fifteen people" is a substantial sum of money. Particularly interesting is his assertion that "I spent money for you, so that they would receive me," though Patrick may here be addressing some Irish readers in addition to the British

*From this it seems clear that, despite great anguish of soul, Patrick insisted that decision-making authority for missions in Ireland must remain in Ireland and not in his homeland of Britain.*

hierarchy who were his primary audience.

Both Hanson and McNeill think that it is most logical to suppose that the British churches, having sent Patrick to Ireland in the first place, were continuing to support his mission financially. This might help to explain both the apparent vehemence of their criticism of his financial management and their assumption that they had a right to summon him to return to Britain when they judged necessary.

McNeill writes (p. 64):

> From some source not indicated, probably the churches in Britain, he was evidently provided with funds, which he used liberally to gain from local authorities permission to preach and protection from harm.

Hanson (p.139) writes:

> These protestations, which all come near the end of the Confessio*n*, suggest not only that Patrick was liable to be accused of feathering his own nest, but that he was constantly receiving financial support from somewhere. Everything points to Britain as the source for this. It was the Church of Britain which had sent Patrick to Ireland, and it was that Church which continued to supply him with funds, even though at times it appears to have suffered from heart-searching as to whether Patrick should ever have been sent.

We are of course particularly interested in the question of field-based authority versus home-base authority in missions. So we want to examine closely Patrick's attitude toward the assertion by the British church hierarchy of authority over his mission in Ireland. As McNeill demonstrates (p. 63), Patrick had originally been sent and commissioned from Britain by the British church. Years later, after long, fruitful ministry, and in the context of serious accusations being made against him in Britain, a delegation of British church leaders came to him in Ireland to summon him to return to Britain. What was his attitude toward this summons?

One statement he makes in the Confessio, though it is somewhat ambiguous, could be interpreted as implying that he did see himself as *accountable* to the British church: "Teste Deo habeo quia non sum mentitus in sermonibus quos ego retuli vobis" "God is my witness that I have not lied in the words which I have reported to you" (Confessio 31). This can be read as implying that he did feel bound to provide a *report* when it was requested (and of course that that report must be honest).

But it seems very clear that he did not think that *accountability* extended to include *authority to command*. Thus, in the event, he politely declined the summons to return to Britain, and he insisted on staying in Ireland. He writes:

> [Etsi voluero amittere illas et ut pergens in Brittanniis et libentissime paratus eram quasi ad patriam et parentes; non id solum sed etiam usque ad Gallias visitare fratres et ut viderem faciem sanctorum Domini mei; scit Deus quod ego valde optabam, sed alligatus Spiritu, qui mihi protestatur si hoc fecero ut futurum reum me esse designat, et timeo perdere laborem quem inchoavi–et non ego sed Christus Dominus, qui me imperavit ut venirem esse cum illis residuum aetatis meae.]
>
> Even if I wanted to abandon them [the Irish believers, especially believing slavewomen, who suffer constant terror] and to go to Britain (and I would be gladly ready, as it were, to go to my homeland and family; and not only that, but also to go on to Gaul to visit the brothers and so that I might see the faces of the saints of my Lord; God knows that I longed for this), nevertheless I am bound by the Spirit who testifies to me that if I were to do this, He would declare me guilty. Furthermore I fear that I would lose the work which I have begun–not I, but Christ the Lord who commanded me to come to be with them for the rest of my life (Confessio 43).

Hanson adds here (p. 138): "That Patrick never left Ireland once he had set foot in it as bishop seems certain. He declares that God gave him the privilege of evangelizing the Irish people at the cost of losing native land and kinsfolk; and he resolves that in spite of all attractions beyond the shores of Ireland he will never leave the country."

A.B.E. Hood provides an insightful analysis of the issues at stake:

> The reason he gave for his refusal to come to Britain was that he feared to waste the labour he had begun. He did not mean that all would be undone if he took a few weeks' leave of absence, for his plea was that Christ had commanded him to be with the Irish for the rest of his life. He meant that if he admitted the authority of the British church by attending at their summons, he would be unlikely to return to Ireland, and risked replacement. He did not trust the British bishops to win the confidence of his Irish converts. They were 'intellectual clerics', products of the opulent gentlemanly society of Roman Britain . . . and many of them regarded the Irish simply as enemy barbarians. They were naturally suspect to the Irish; Patrick's own rustic simplicity had broken down suspicion, but other British clergy, less sympathetic in their outlook, caused trouble (Hood, p. 8).

Hood goes on to report some very interesting evidence for what action Patrick and his colleagues on the field in Ireland took after this incident:

> The earliest list of ecclesiastical regulations of the Irish Church, known as the *Canons of St. Patrick*, is probably in essence the work of Patrick and his clergy in the middle of the fifth century; it includes a rule that forbids British clergy to preach in Ireland without licence from the Irish church, and the rule was clearly devised in the light of experience. The Irish church had need of British clerics, and several of those named as Patrick's younger contemporaries in the late fifth century were British by name and birth; but

> Patrick and his colleagues needed to be able to choose those who were temperamentally suited to their task, and to reject the unfit. It may well be that Patrick's rejection of unsuitable British clergy had been the occasion of the dispute, the reason that prompted the British church to assert authority. Patrick rejected the metropolitan claims of the British episcopate (Hood, p. 8).

From this it seems clear that, despite great anguish of soul, Patrick insisted that decision-making authority for missions in Ireland must remain in Ireland and not in his homeland of Britain. This was particularly important in the appointment of culturally sensitive personnel and the dismissal of culturally insensitive personnel. In view of the non-Romanized culture of Ireland and the Romanized culture of Britain, the consequences of this decision for the cultural indigeneity of the Irish church were far-reaching. Cahill points out:

> Patrick's gift to the Irish was his Christianity–the first de-Romanized Christianity in human history, a Christianity without the sociopolitical baggage of the Greco-Roman world, a Christianity that completely inculturated itself into the Irish scene (Cahill, p. 148).

This was the Christianity that spawned the Celtic "peregrini" missionary movement that for the next five hundred years was almost single-handedly responsible for the evangelization of the Germanic and other peoples of Northern and Central Europe.

McNeill introduces this movement in the following words:

> It is no negligible phase of European history that now claims our attention, as we survey the widespread activities of Celtic missionaries and scholars among continental peoples during the formative era of Western Christianity. The attention of historians had been drawn to the colorful story of warrior tribes moving westward to form a patchwork of kingdoms where unity had been imposed by Rome, rather than to the religious and cultural invasion that moved eastward from islands once thought of as beyond the frontiers of civilization. The new invaders were unarmed white-robed monks with books in their satchels and psalms on their lips, seeking no wealth or comfort but only the opportunity to teach and to pray. For more than half a millenium a stream of educated and dedicated men poured from the monasteries of Ireland (McNeill, p. 155).
>
> Ireland, with some cooperation from Celtic Britain and from Irish-trained Englishmen, exerted for six centuries a pervasive, life-giving influence upon the major part of Europe (McNeill, p. 192).

This was the movement which produced Columba (also called Collumcille) the 6th-century pioneer missionary to the Scots and the Picts; and Aidan, the 7th-

century pioneer missionary to the northern half of Anglo-Saxon England (as incoming Anglo-Saxon tribes were overwhelming the indigenous Britons); and Columbanus (also called Columban) the 7th-century pioneer in northern Gaul, Switzerland, Germany and northern Italy; and Columban's companion Gall, who became known as the founder of the Church in German-speaking Switzerland; and Willibrord, the 8th-century pioneer missionary to Frisia; and countless others. This movement was single-handedly responsible for the evangelization of Northern and Central Europe.

The impact of these Celtic peregrini can scarcely be overstated. After a list similar to the one above, McNeill states:

> Only a few have here been mentioned of an uncounted army of monks on pilgrimage for Christ from the late sixth to the early eighth century. The creative era of this strange invasion was to continue for three centuries more. That one small island should have contributed so rich a legacy to a populous continent remains one of the most arresting facts of European history. The weight of the Irish influence on the continent is incalculable (McNeill, p. 175).

In the 6th–8th centuries the impact of the Celtic peregrini was felt primarily in pioneer evangelism. In the 8th–10th centuries these missionaries' impact was often in their raising the level of scholarship throughout Europe, though we continue to see pioneer evangelists as well (McNeill, 175–177).

Gougaud thinks that the dynamism of this movement owed much to the example of St. Patrick: "He won so many [Irish people] for Christ, he founded so many churches, ordained so many clerics, kindled such a zeal in men's hearts, that it seems right to believe that to him was directly due the wonderful outblossoming of Christianity which distinguished Ireland in the following ages" (Gougaud, pp. 44–45).

During these centuries Celtic Christianity exhibited certain traits which distinguished it culturally and structurally from diocesan Roman Christianity. One distinctive of the Celtic Church which is noted by virtually all scholars is the fact that its structure was much more strongly centered on abbots, and that it saw bishops as being much less important.

Hood writes:

> [Celtic] Christianity was rooted on monasteries and identified with them…The bishop and priest were reduced to the status of ecclesiastical officials, necessary for the performance of certain specified ritual functions…From the sixth century onwards, most of the recorded bishops were monks, detached from their abbeys to serve the needs of the laity. As monks, they remained subject to the authority of their abbot, whose superior rank was [clearly] marked (Hood, pp. 11–12).

Similarly McNeill reports:

> By the [sixth century] the Church of Ireland was under the leadership of abbots who were secondarily bishops, or had bishops attached to their monasteries and under their jurisdiction…Bishops who are not abbots appear as agents of abbots or of monasteries; and bishops in such subordinate position seem not to have contended for control. Diocesan episcopacy did not flourish (McNeil, pp. 69—70).

It is Ralph Winter who sees the missiological dimension of this structural distinctive:

> The Celtic 'church' was more a series of missionary compounds than it was a denomination made up of local churches…We must remember the relative chaos introduced by the invasions, and therefore not necessarily expect to see, dotting the landscape, the usual parish churches that are familiar in our day (Winter, 1990, p. B—11).

Celtic peregrini missions were often launched by a concept known as "white martyrdom." As we have seen above, St. Patrick desired a martyr's crown but did not receive it. Despite repeated imprisonments and repeated attempts on Patrick's life and on the lives of his coworkers, Ireland turned out to be one of the few lands in history which was completely evangelized with no martyrdoms.

Perhaps it was because of this that Patrick's Celtic successsors developed the concepts of "red martyrdom", "green martyrdom" and "white martyrdom." "Red martyrdom" refers to what is usually meant literally by the word "martyrdom." "Green martyrdom" refers to a voluntary vow to withdraw permanently from human society and to live a radically ascetic life in some remote location in the country.

"White martyrdom" refers to a voluntary vow to leave one's homeland and one's kindred and never to return, never to see them again, but to spend the rest of one's life in *peregrinatio* ("wandering pilgrimage"), a term Patrick himself used in the Confessio to describe his permanent commitment to stay in Ireland and not to return to Britain. A person who undertook such a vow was thus a *peregrinus* ("wandering pilgrim")—another term Patrick used for himself; hence the term "peregrini" to describe the Celtic missionaries who evangelized Europe.

As with Patrick, so with his peregrini successors, the commitment to permanent exile from one's homeland had an obvious and direct effect on mission structures. It is pragmatically impossible for a base in a home country to exercise administrative control of missionaries on the field if everyone who leaves the home country takes a vow never to return. In the case of the Celtic peregrini, there is no evidence that their home monasteries in Ireland and Scotland and England ever attempted such control.

McNeill writes of the early peregrini missionaries:

> They were fond of citing the example of Abraham who obeyed the command: 'Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, to a land that I will shew thee' (Gen. 12:1); and this pattern they followed literally. It was typical too that in the circumstances they broke off communication with their home monasteries. *They were not directed by committees or expected to make periodic reports to a home base.* The home base was only a prized memory. With a strange eagerness they sentenced themselves to perpetual banishment and went forth never to return (McNeill, pp. 155—156, emphasis ours).

To put this in modern terms, the early Celtic peregrini missions were perhaps the purest example in history of a totally field-governed structure.

This field governance did not mean that the missionaries did whatever they felt like doing, with no accountability. On the contrary, they had strong, even draconian, rules for mutual accountability and authority among the missionaries on the field. But the fact that decision-making authority was entirely *on the field* had a direct effect on the cultural adaptability and effectiveness of their work:

> Complete freedom from superiors beyond their own communities in the mission field made them adaptable to local needs and opportunities. They rapidly enlisted Frankish and other German youth who, working harmoniously with them, made Christianity indigenous and self-perpetuating (McNeill, p. 175).

In time, however, the field-governed structure of the peregrini was questioned from another quarter. In some of the geographical areas the peregrini entered, the Romanized urban population had already been somewhat evangelized in previous centuries before the massive influx of Germanic peoples had overwhelmed the crumbling remains of the Western Roman empire. Some areas had bishops who tended small urban churches among the dwindling ethnic minority of Romanized city-dwellers, while most of these bishops apparently did little for the evangelization of the countryside or of the invading tribes. It was perhaps inevitable that tension would develop between these bishops and the Celtic missionaries who arrived and began to preach to unevangelized tribes and regions that were technically located within the dioceses of these bishops.

A good example of this tension can be found in the life of Columbanus (also called Columban). James Thayer Addison says of Columbanus:

> The most celebrated of all the Irish who came to the continent in the early Middle Ages and the great initiator of Irish monastic migration was Columban (Addison, p. 86).

Gougaud agrees:

> To St. Columban above all was due the initiation of these monastic and missionary migrations to the Continent (Gougaud, p. 140).

In the early 7th century Columbanus founded dozens of monasteries across the unevangelized areas of what is today known as France, Germany, Switzerland and northern Italy. He won many converts and recruited many new monks among the local peoples. Many of these monasteries grew quite large, their ranks swelling with local converts, and they continued to be very influential throughout the Middle Ages.

Thomas Cahill describes as follows Columbanus's tensions with the bishops in Burgundy:

> Before long he clashes with the region's bishops who are nettled by his presence. Still employing the old Roman episcopal pattern of living urbanely in capital cities and keeping close ties with those who wear crowns, the bishops tend their local flocks

> of literate and semiliterate officials, the ghostly remnants of the lost society. It has never occurred to these churchmen to venture beyond a few well-tended streets into the rough-hewn mountain settlements of the simpler Sueves. To Columbanus, however, a man who will take no step to proclaim the Good News beyond the safety and comfort of his own elite circle is a poor excuse for a bishop. In 603 the bishops summon the saint to appear before them in synod at Chalon-sur-Saône. Columbanus, who cannot be bothered to take part in such a travesty, sends a letter in his stead (Cahill, pp. 188–189).

Cahill is perhaps using a slightly exaggerated tone for effect. McNeill describes the same events in a somewhat more balanced tone, but the essential facts of the story are the same:

> He had failed to obtain the approval of the bishops who nominally controlled, but had hitherto neglected, the area of his work; and he had failed to keep on safe terms of acceptance with the rulers…Neither a worldly episcopate nor a depraved court could continue to tolerate his presence…His now numerous adherents were in no way under episcopal sway. In Ireland bishops were often functionaries of monasteries under obedience to abbots, and he had not reckoned with a system in which abbots and monasteries were answerable to bishops. There was no charge that he and his followers were heretical, but to the bishops they were schismatic and to be brought under obedience… Columban was summoned to appear before a synod of bishops meeting at Chalons sur Saône (603) to answer for his irregularities. His reply was by letter only. While the spirit of his letter is friendly and fraternal, it is not that of compliance…[The letter implies that he thinks that the bishops are not themselves doing the work of evangelizing the incoming non-Christian peoples over whom they claim ecclesiastical authority.] The view of Jonas [Columban's companion and biographer] was that through [the bishops'] negligence the Christian faith had almost disappeared from Burgundy before Columban came (McNeill, pp. 160–161).

In the end, though, Columbanus was deported from Burgundy because he had offended Brunhilda, the grandmother of king Theodoric, when he rebuked the latter for concubinage and refused to recognize the royal legitimacy of the sons produced by extramarital unions. Brunhilda and Theodoric attempted to deport him to Ireland (which would of course have been a disaster for one who had taken a vow of "white martyrdom"), but he and his companions escaped and went on to found monasteries in Germany, Switzerland and northern Italy.

Perhaps in response to this kind of problem, the abbot-bishops in Ireland and Britain apparently consecrated some peregrini missionaries as "wandering bishops" (*episcopi vagantes*), so that these could deal with diocesan bishops on the European continent as equals. McNeill (p. 172) recounts how a series of church councils in the 8th and 9th centuries, and even centuries later, repeatedly condemned these *episcopi vagantes*. But the fact that the conciliar condemnations needed to be repeated again and again over a period of centuries is evidence that these wandering bishops continued to exist. A typical example is the Council of Mainz, held in 813, which denounced the *episcopi vagantes* as monstrous creatures, "acephali…hippocentauris similes, nec equi nec homines"—"headless…like centaurs, which are neither horses nor humans" (McNeill, p. 172).

It was inevitable that gradually, through the centuries, the mobile independence of the Celtic peregrini was absorbed by the hierarchical structure of geographically-defined dioceses administered by stationary bishops. Along with that structural absorption, the missionary vitality of the Western Church also gradually disappeared. McNeill concludes:

> By the time of Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) little remained of the former Irish spontaneity and self-direction in continental lands. We need not think of this administrative absorption as complete assimilation. No doubt something very Celtic was retained in the psychology of many who not unwillingly accomodated themselves to the more efficient polity of the hierarchical church. It was the way of progress, and there was no alternative. Nevertheless, the abounding energy and apostolic impetuosity of an earlier day were no longer characteristic. In terms of great leadership and bold endeavor we enter on a descending slope (McNeill, p. 193).

However, as the Celtic peregrini movement died, missionary vitality sprang forth again in the 13th–16th centuries through the creation of the missionary orders (Franciscan, Dominican, Jesuit) which rediscovered an organizational structure which was intentionally independent of diocesan control and of the authority of geographically stationary bishops. **IJFM**

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