

12 Celtic spiritual practices to celebrate God in our world

Renew your spiritual life and community worship with these adaptations of ancient Christian practices.

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Celtic Christian spirituality refers to a set of practices and beliefs in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales that developed in the early fifth century during the development of the monastic tradition. Many of these practices have roots in desert spirituality; Celtic monks considered the teachings of the desert mothers and fathers essential wisdom.

Celtic pre-Christian culture, dating back to 500 B.C.E., permeated the land, and these beliefs also strongly influenced Celtic spiritual practices. As a result, much of Celtic Christianity can be characterized by a strongly incarnational theology: The natural world, in particular, reveals the sacramentality of all creation. Matter is infused with the divine presence and offers glimpses of the world behind the surface of things. This spirituality celebrates the human imagination, cultivating creativity through various art forms such as manuscript illumination and vibrant metalwork.

There has been a recent strong revival of interest into Celtic Christianity as a way to renew our spiritual lives and community worship. What follows is an exploration of 12 Celtic Christian practices for modern Catholics' daily spiritual lives, along with scripture passages for meditation.

1. Thresholds

Thresholds are the spaces between when we move from one time to another, as in the threshold of dawn to day or dusk to dark; from one space to another, as in times of pilgrimage or in moving from secular to sacred space; and from one awareness to another, as in times when old structures start to fall away and we begin to envision something new.

The Celtic peoples had a love of edges and boundary places, most likely as the result of living on an island, but they also held a keen sense of the Otherworld as a place just beneath the veil of this one.

Celtic Christian monks were also drawn to edge places, inspired by those who fled to the desert. They found their own threshold places, such as Skellig Michael, a jagged stone island jutting out into the Atlantic on which the ruins of a monastic community are still perched on top.

In daily life

Become aware each time you cross a threshold. This might be across a doorway, in moving from one activity to another, or the thresholds of the day, especially at dawn and dusk. Pause at each of these and offer a short prayer of gratitude.

Scripture meditation

*Thus says the Lord:
Stand at the crossroads, and look,
and ask for the ancient paths,
where the good way lies; and walk in it,
and find rest for your souls.*
—Jeremiah 6:16

2. Dreams

In ancient times dreams were respected as signs from God. Dreams play a significant role in scripture, with guidance and direction often arriving in these night visions.

Joseph of the Hebrew Bible, Jacob's dream of a staircase from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending, Daniel's dream of the four beasts, and Joseph the father of Jesus' four separate dreams are all notable examples from scripture.

Many Irish saints had meaningful dreams as well. Legend says St. Patrick had a dream in which he was visited by an angel who encouraged him to flee captivity and helped arrange a miraculous escape. He later had another dream in which he heard the Irish people calling out to him to return to the land of his enslavement and help Christianity flourish.

In daily life

One of the best ways to remember your dreams is to place a journal and pen by your bed at night and then ask God for a dream before sleep. Even if you awaken with only a fragment or a feeling, record that upon waking.

Scripture meditation

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you."
—Matthew 2:13

3. *Peregrinatio pro Christo*

In the Celtic monastic tradition, wandering was a powerful practice inspired by the biblical story of Abraham. There is a unique term for this wandering: *peregrinatio pro Christo*, or the call to wander for the love of Christ. It differs from pilgrimage and is a phrase without a precise English definition.

The wandering saints set forth without destination, often getting into a small boat with no oars or rudder, called a coracle, and trusting themselves to the currents of divine love.

They surrendered themselves completely to the wind and ocean and let themselves be carried to what they called the place of their resurrection, the place where they would live and work, die and be buried, and where their remains would await their resurrection on the Last Day.

In daily life

Each evening reflect on the previous day and notice the signs of the divine presence. Where have you felt nudges to move forward? How have you been invited to surrender into trust? Where have you turned away from these? In what ways did you resist or ignore the holy impulses?

Scripture meditation

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."

—Genesis 17:1–2

4. Blessing each moment

In the Celtic tradition, one of the practices that aids in loving attention to daily life is blessing. Blessings are prayers celebrating the ordinary tasks of the day. There is a beautiful book of Scottish blessings called the *Carmina Gadelica*, collected by Andrew Carmichael in the 19th century in Scotland's Outer Hebrides. It is filled with blessings of the day's unfolding.

Blessing is an act of acknowledging the gifts and graces already present and offering gratitude to God for them. All the mundane activities of the day are opportunities to witness grace at work.

In daily life

We can begin to see the everyday things of our lives as openings into the depths of the world. The steam rising from my coffee, the bird singing from a tree branch outside my window, the doorbell announcing a friend's arrival, the meal that nourishes my body for service all bring me closer to God's grace. Consider writing a blessing of gratitude for each of the ordinary things that sustain you during the day.

Scripture meditation

God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth."

—Genesis 9:12–13

5. Soul friendship

Another key practice for the Celtic saints was having a soul friend, inspired by earlier desert traditions. St. Brigid is often quoted as saying, “Go forth and eat nothing until you get a soul friend, for anyone without a soul friend is like a body without a head; is like the water of a polluted lake, neither good for drinking nor for washing.”

Everyone, whether lay or clergy, man or woman, was expected to have a spiritual mentor and companion on the soul’s journey. This was a person in whom they could confide all of their inner struggles, someone who would help them find their path and who could midwife them in discernment. There was a sense of genuine warmth and intimacy in this relationship and deep respect for the other’s wisdom as a source of blessing. Age or gender differences did not matter.

In daily life

I invite you to spend some time seeking out a soul friend. You may already have one in your life: a spiritual director, a wise guide, someone you can turn to when things feel challenging and to whom you entrust the secret desires of your heart.

Scripture meditation

*Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.*
—Ruth 1:16

6. Encircling

*Christ with me, Christ before me
Christ behind me, Christ in me
Christ beneath me, Christ above me
Christ on my right, Christ on my left
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down
Christ when I arise, Christ to shield me*
—Prayer excerpt attributed to St. Patrick

In the Celtic monastic tradition, a *lorica* is a type of prayer seeking protection, invoking the power of God to safeguard against darker forces. You are probably familiar with the *lorica* prayer above, attributed to St. Patrick. The biblical inspiration may come from Ephesians 6:14, which refers to putting on the breastplate of righteousness.

This practice is rooted in the precarious sense people often have of our own existence. Travelers especially faced dangers at night from thieves or wild animals with only fire and prayer as protection.

In daily life

These breastplate prayers name the presence of Christ in all directions as a shield against harm and a reminder of God's loving presence. You can extend this circle beyond yourself to include your family, your community, your country, and the earth.

Scripture meditation

*You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust."*

—Psalm 91:1–2

7. Walking the rounds

A central Celtic practice at sacred sites, such as churches, graves, crosses, and holy wells, is known as "walking the rounds."

This involves walking sunwise (or clockwise) in a mindful way around various markers or monuments. The number of rounds varies but is often three to reflect the sacredness of that number in the Celtic imagination. There are pattern days associated with different holy places and a set number of rounds to walk in specific places along with certain prayers.

Walking helps to arrive to a place and slow down. Walking in a circular manner helps to move us out of linear ways of thinking and to open our hearts to receive God's grace.

In daily life

Find a holy place to walk around. It might be a sunwise journey around a favorite tree, your church, or around the edges of a labyrinth. While walking the rounds, you might say traditional prayers like the Hail Mary and the Lord's Prayer, but any prayers of the heart are welcome.

Scripture meditation

When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

—Exodus 3:4–5

8. Learning by heart

While the Irish monks are known for their illuminated sacred texts, books were rare and valuable, so they would have had to learn many scripture passages by heart to be able to pray with them. This was a continuation of the older Druidic tradition, which was primarily an oral culture that prized memorization rather than writing.

The Irish monks sang psalms throughout each day as a central part of their prayer. They were immersed in this poetry and ancient call to see God active in the whole world. They likely would have memorized all 150 psalms, as their days were intertwined with their imagery.

In daily life

Begin by finding just two lines of a scriptural text or poem that are meaningful to you. It could even be one of the suggested texts in this article. Spend time each morning with these lines, repeating them gently to yourself until you have learned them by heart and then recall them throughout the day.

Scripture meditation

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

—Jeremiah 31:33

9. Solitude and silence

The desert tradition profoundly influenced the Celtic monks; while many monks were unable to go to the literal desert, they sought out the wild edges and solitary places of wilderness.

There are many sacred places in Ireland and Wales with the word *dysert* or *disert* in the name. This is the Irish word for *desert* and refers to a place of solitude and silence, a retreat for those who long for a more intimate encounter with God and where attention can be cultivated with few distractions.

There are many stories of Irish monks who lived as hermits for a time, including Sts. Colman and Kevin, who both lived in caves and had animals as their companions.

In daily life

Begin by making a commitment to spending 5–10 minutes each day in silence. Turn off any notifications from your phone or computer and ask others in your house not to disturb you. Then extend this by finding a whole morning or afternoon to go to a nearby retreat center or monastery and listen deeply to the sacred stirrings within.

Scripture meditation

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

—Exodus 20:1–3

10. Seasonal cycles

The unfolding of the seasons was an overarching template for the Celtic imagination. In the pre-Christian tradition there are significant feast days aligned with the equinoxes and solstices. And

then there are the cross-quarter days, which are the midway points between them and part of the harvest cycle.

The Christian calendar incorporates many of these rhythms, with Christmas falling near the winter solstice, the feast of John the Baptist at the summer solstice, and Easter after the spring equinox. The monastic prayers of the Liturgy of the Hours also respects these sacred rhythms of nature's rise and fall, birth and death.

In daily life

Make time for contemplative walks outside in your neighborhood. Instead of trying to get somewhere specific, simply pay attention to the world around you and how God might be speaking to you. Pay particular attention to the signs of the season—what flowers might be in bloom, whether the trees have their leaves, and the height of the sun in the sky. Ask yourself what season your own soul is in right now.

Scripture meditation

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die.

—Ecclesiastes 3:1–2a

11. Landscape as theophany

The Celtic imagination considers sacred places to be “thin,” or places where the veil between the worlds, meaning heaven and earth, seem especially near to each other.

Ninth-century Irish theologian John Scotus Eriugena taught that there are two books of revelation: the book of the scriptures and the book of creation. Both are required to know the fullness of the divine presence.

Just as God can speak through the words of the scriptures, so can we hear the voice of the divine in the elements and in creatures. The landscape can become a theophany, or place of divine manifestation. The Celtic monks sought out places in the wilderness to receive this gift of revelation.

In daily life

Make a commitment in the coming days to spend time in nature and be present to it as a place of revelation. Bring the prayers of your heart and ask God for signs and symbols to guide you on the way. Consider making a pilgrimage to a landscape that feels especially sacred to you, whether desert, mountain, sea, river, or plains.

Scripture meditation

“Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

—1 Kings 19:11–12

12. Three essential things

Three is a sacred number in the Celtic tradition, and often the saints expressed their own desires or commitments in terms of the number three.

St. Columba of Iona asked God for three things: virginity, wisdom, and pilgrimage. St. Ita of Killeedy focused on faith, simplicity, and generosity. Each is a variation on wisdom for the three essential things one must do in life.

None of the monks say the same three things, which open us up to the possibility that what is essential to one person will be different to another. Similarly in different seasons of life, what is essential for us might change.

In daily life

Reflect on the three things in your own life you count as most essential. Hold them as principles or touchstones for your life right now as you continue your spiritual journey. One way to do this is to imagine you are at the end of your life looking back. For what do you want to be remembered?

Scripture meditation

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

—Micah 6:8

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<https://uscatholic.org/articles/201905/12-celtic-spiritual-practices-that-celebrate-god-in-our-world/>