

12 Celtic spiritual practices to celebrate God

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Celtic Christian spirituality refers to a set of especially monastic practices and beliefs that developed in the early 5th century. Many of these practices resonate with desert spirituality, as Celtic monks saw in those teachings as essential wisdom. Celtic pre-Christian culture, dating back to 500 B.C.E., permeated the land, and this also strongly influenced Celtic spiritual practices. Much Celtic Christianity can thus be characterised as strongly incarnational theology: The natural world, especially, 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.

As a way to renew our spiritual lives and community worship, here are 12 Celtic Christian practices for modern 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 when old structures start to fall away and we begin to envision something new. The Celtic peoples had a love boundary places, and 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 — *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

A good way to remember dreams is to place a journal and pen by your bed at night. Even if you awaken with only a fragment or a feeling, record that upon waking.

Scripture meditation - *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 —*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 everyday things as openings into the depths of the world. The steam rising from coffee, the bird singing from a tree branch outside a window, the doorbell announcing a friend's arrival, the meal that nourishes our bodies for service all bring us closer to God's grace. Consider writing a blessing of gratitude for each ordinary thing that sustains you during the day.

Scripture meditation —*Genesis 9:12–13*

5. Soul friendship

Another key practice 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, of whatever gender, was expected to have a spiritual companion on the soul's journey. This was a person in whom they could confide all of their inner struggles, 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 —*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*

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 —*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 that number's sacredness in the Celtic imagination. There are pattern days associated with different holy places and a set number of rounds to walk in specific places 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 favourite 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 —*Exodus 3:4–5*

8. Learning by heart

The Celtic monks are known for illuminated sacred texts, but 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 monks sang psalms throughout each day as a central part of their prayer, immersing themselves in this poetry and ancient call to see God active in the whole world. They likely memorised 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. 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 —*Jeremiah 31:33*

9. Solitude and silence

The desert tradition profoundly influenced the Celtic monks; while many 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 a Celtic 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 St. Colman and St. 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 centre or monastery and listen deeply to the sacred stirrings within.

Scripture meditation - *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 - *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. 9th-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 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..

Scripture meditation —*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. Ita of Killeedy, for example, focused on faith, simplicity, and generosity. 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 - *Micah 6:8*