

THE IRISH PENITENTIALS AND CONTEMPORARY CELTIC CHRISTIANITY

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CELTIC CHRISTIANITY, as it is understood and practised today, has an influence that appears to be spreading widely and rapidly through the many old and new denominations and forms of Christianity, not only in the old Celtic heartlands of Britain but throughout the Christian world, particularly, as in the US and Australia, where there is a British heritage. The phenomenon is difficult to define with any accuracy; but there are a few Christian communities that consciously seek to use theological insights and practices based on their understanding of the ancient traditions of Celtic Christianity, and I should like to argue that their influence is ‘trickling down’ into twenty-first-century Christianity. This is especially true in those places where an effort is being made to develop a church consciousness that is genuinely expressed in and through the local culture or sub-cultures. Approaches to penance based on Celtic Christianity are an important part of this process.

I should like to explore the influence of three communities—the Iona Community, the Northumbria Community and the Community of Aidan and Hilda.¹ Each of these was founded in the twentieth century, with greater or lesser reliance on the Celtic Christian tradition, but their awareness and their use of the ancient Irish Celtic approach to penance varies greatly.

¹ See www.iona.org.uk, www.northumbriacommunity.org and www.aidanandhilda.org.

Handbooks for Busy Practitioners

To begin at the beginning we need to start with the penitentials: handbooks of penance completed largely in the sixth to ninth centuries in Ireland and Celtic Britain. They are regarded now by historians and theologians as unique documents that were a response to a particular situation in the Christian Church at a particular time and place.² Hugh Connolly speaks of ‘the wisdom of one moment of the Church’s tradition’,³ and Thomas O’Loughlin of the ‘local theology’.⁴ The penitential authors frequently claim that their works are based on the traditions of the Fathers and on scripture. Nevertheless, they do not have any obvious or extant precursors either in the Eastern tradition, which has most direct influence on Celtic Christianity, or in the emerging Roman tradition. These handbooks for dealing with the sinfulness of ordained, monastic and lay men and women not only emerged suddenly, but in some cases were in common use across the whole of Christian Europe and into the Latin heartlands within a few generations.

They became the basis for building a whole theological edifice around forgiveness, responding to the undeniable fact of the ongoing sinfulness of baptized Christians. Severed from their Celtic roots and grafted on to an alien culture and judicature, the Irish penitentials eventually resulted in the mechanical judicial system and lucrative industry surrounding confession, repentance, penance and indulgences that was the cause of widespread discontent, and some revulsion, by the time of the Protestant Reformation. The Roman sacrament of confession, absolution and penance, policed by priests, developed along the cultural tramlines of a retributive justice system. It included elements of judgment, sentence and punishment according to a more-or-less fixed tariff that looked and felt very different from the harsh-sounding but personal, pastoral, responsive, inclusive and restorative beginnings of the Irish penitentials.

² See for example Hugh Connolly, *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1999), chapter 1, and Thomas O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings* (London: Continuum, 2000), chapter 11.

³ Connolly, *The Irish Penitentials*, 201.

⁴ O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 205.

Some Distinctive Features

James Kenney makes the important point that although Celtic Christianity was not in any way a break-away branch of the Church, there were some key cultural differences that caused friction:

Fundamentally, the Church in Ireland was one with the Church in the remainder of Western Europe. The mental processes and the *Weltanschauung* of the ecclesiastic who looked out from Armagh or Clonmacnois or Innisfallen were not essentially different from those of him whose centre of vision was Canterbury or Reims or Cologne. But in many important aspects, and particularly those of organisation and of relationships with the secular powers, the Church in Ireland presented a marked variation from that on the Continent. These divergences were the occasion, in their own times, of friction culminating in accusations of heresy⁵

If the unique position of the Irish Church could cause friction, it could also give rise to creativity, however. The system of confession, penance and absolution that had developed in the Church from the days of the Apostles up to the fifth century and the beginnings of Christianity in Ireland was extremely limited. Once Christians had been baptized, the expectation was that they would not sin, at least in a major way. There was the possibility of one, but only one, opportunity for public repentance and restoration for serious wrong-doing, such as murder, apostasy or fornication, but the penances involved were rigorous and could take many years to complete. It became common for people to wait until they were dying before being baptized, this being much the easiest option to be sure of achieving and maintaining their salvation. Kenney describes the limitations of public penance in the West:

A system of penitential discipline had, of course, been enforced in the Christian Church from primitive times This system ... was less rigorously enforced in Western Europe than in the East and it is doubtful if it was ever observed in the British Isles.⁶

⁵ James Francis Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: An Introduction and Guide* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1997 [1929]), 156.

⁶ Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, 238.

He goes on to introduce the way of the Irish penitentials as a different approach:

In the seventh century a new penitential system appeared in continental Europe It was penance imposed privately by the confessor and performed privately by the penitent, penance of which the essential was prayer, mortification and good works, the amount being proportioned to the number and character of sins in accordance with a fixed tariff set down in a penitential book.⁷

This marked a profound change in theology. Christianity became more of a journey into holiness than a once-and-for all conversion—as O’Loughlin puts it, ‘the life-long struggle to grow more like Christ’.⁸ This perhaps represented a return to the early years when the Church was known as the Way and Christians were disciples, learners, on that Way. It also marked a rediscovery of the real part that sin and repentance have to play for real, fallible people in the growth into holiness. This contrasted with the disconnection that had developed between what people were actually like—sinners—and what they should have been like in theory after baptism—holy.

Kenney’s description of a ‘fixed tariff’ suggests a rigid system of penalties or punishments for offences committed, with the emphasis on the unchristian acts of the sinner in question. But Ludwig Bieler, in tune with more recent work by writers such as O’Loughlin and Connolly, maintains that the Irish penitentials take pains to make the ‘penance appropriate to attitude rather than acts’.⁹ Bieler quotes a passage from the Penitential of Finnian, usually accepted as the earliest complete example of the penitential genre and dating from about AD 525–550, to back up his argument:

If a cleric is wrathful or envious or backbiting, gloomy or greedy ... there is this penance for them, until they are plucked forth and eradicated from our hearts: ... we shall continue in weeping and tears day and night so long as these things are turned over in our heart. But by contraries, as we said, let us make haste to cure contraries and to cleanse away the faults from our hearts and introduce virtues in their places. Patience must arise for wrathfulness; kindness, or

⁷ Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, 238.

⁸ O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, 51.

⁹ Ludwig Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1975), 45.

the love of God and of one's neighbour, for envy; for detraction, restraint of the heart and tongue; for dejection, spiritual joy; for greed, liberality ...¹⁰

This approach may appear on the surface to be merely a Mikado-like attempt to ensure that the 'punishment fits the crime', as in this extract from the Penitential of Coloman:

The talkative person is to be sentenced to silence, the disturber to gentleness, the gluttonous to fasting, the sleepy fellow to watchfulness, the proud to imprisonment, the deserter to expulsion; everyone shall suffer suitable penalties according to what he deserves, that the righteous may live righteously.¹¹

But in fact it is considerably more complex than this. Finnian's work locates the problem of sin in the 'heart'. The idea, assimilated from John Cassian, is of sin as a sickness of the heart. Penance then becomes not a punishment or a payment but a kind of medicine for the sin-sick soul. The sins—the acts—spring from the eight vices—wrong attitudes—which were identified and listed first by Cassian. Cassian and Finnian, and those Doctors of the Soul who followed them, worked with the then widely accepted notion that 'contraries ... cure contraries'. Therefore there always seems to be a liberal dose of fasting and bread-and-water to counter the poison or disease of over-indulgence, and long periods of abstinence to counteract sexual sicknesses and excesses. The healing imagery is made very clear at the beginning of Cummean's Penitential:

**Sin as a
sickness of
the heart**

Here begins the Prologue of the health giving medicine of souls. As we are about to tell of the remedies of wounds according to the determinations of the earlier fathers ... first we shall indicate the treatments¹²

¹⁰ *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, translated by John Thomas McNeill and Helena Margaret Gamer (New York: Columbia UP, 1990), 92–93.

¹¹ *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, 251.

¹² *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, 99.

The Local Context

From this brief overview of the distinctive features of the Irish penitential literature, three models of penance begin to emerge: penance as healing, as restitution for an offence, and as journey. When examining what is known of the Celtic legal system, the Celtic social context and the Druid religion, ideas of Christian penance as healing, as restitution and as journey can be seen to have developed from within this local Irish context into the worked-out system that comes to us as the body of Irish penitential literature. One further way of looking at penance, as spiritual battle, also emerges strongly from this Celtic context.

The tradition of law in ancient Ireland comes to us as the Brehon codes. This body of law, Hugh Connolly tells us,¹³ was based on custom. It appears more akin to the modern concept of restorative justice¹⁴ than to the retributive justice system of the Latin world. Compensation was ‘commensurate with the extent of the injury and the status of the injured party’.¹⁵ This certainly fits with the carefully

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Celtic High Cross, Monasterboice

graded and differentiated lists of penalties in most of the penitentials.

According to Connolly, the Druids may possibly have prepared the way for the use of penance as a way of ensuring a continuous fresh start on the journey. Our knowledge of Druidic beliefs and practices comes to us largely mediated through later Christian interpreters, and these beliefs and practices clearly varied. Connolly also warns that ‘our lack of accurate historical knowledge

¹³ Connolly, *The Irish Penitentials*, 3.

¹⁴ See www.restorativejustice.org.uk.

¹⁵ Connolly, *The Irish Penitentials*, 3.

renders such speculation very tenuous indeed'.¹⁶ In the system operating in Gaul, the universe was seen as having a threefold structure. The truths and laws of the universe were then laid out in a series of 'triads', one of which was 'suffering, choosing and self-renewal'.¹⁷

Connolly appears to feel himself on firmer ground when discussing the contribution of the Druids to the healing and wholeness model of penance found in the penitentials. He points out similarities between Christian and Druid understandings, and writes about the Druidical idea of health as achieving the mean-point between two poles. This mean-point was 'the point of harmony ... whereat human life would flourish to the full'.¹⁸ Such a background would be likely to make John Cassian's ideas about curing by contraries attractive to Celtic minds.

The social system within which it became established gave the Celtic Church much of its distinctive flavour. Many leading Christians were from noble families used to ruling and used to fighting. Yet followers of Christ did not become martyrs in Ireland. Instead the fighting spirit was harnessed in the spiritual battle, with the growth of the notion of 'white martyrs', who battled over a lifetime with their own vices and with the powers of evil and hell inside and outside their own communities. They were ranked alongside the 'red martyrs' who had shed their blood in the cause.

The People Involved

Another feature of the penitentials is that priests, religious and the laity all had access to this spiritual help, albeit with differing 'tariffs'. Although much more was expected of ordained men or monastic men and women, it is one of the marks of the Irish penitentials that lay men and women were encompassed by and encouraged within the system. There was an inclusivity about it missing from much of the rest of the Church at that time.

The Irish penitentials are also inclusive in the sense that they do not deny the part that the body has to play in a Christian's journey into holiness. While the way the body is treated in the 'cure by contraries' prescribed by these Doctors of the Soul seems harsh and even extreme

¹⁶ Connolly, *The Irish Penitentials*, 6.

¹⁷ Connolly, *The Irish Penitentials*, 6.

¹⁸ Connolly, *The Irish Penitentials*, 7.

to twenty-first-century Christians, the aim is to bring harmony and relief of disease to body, mind and spirit. While, unsurprisingly, there is no sign of anything like a modern understanding of physiology or psychology, people are approached as integrated human beings and treated as such.

A distinctive feature of the Irish penitentials is the nature of the person who does the prescribing. By contrast with later, more formalised sacramental rites of confession or reconciliation, here the 'doctor' is also a friend and a peer, albeit possibly an older or wiser one. There is no understanding that the 'doctor' should be an ordained, or necessarily learned, person. The usual place to look for spiritual medicine seems to have been the local monastery. Help was available to all. Both within and outside the monastery people were encouraged to find a 'soul-friend', an *anamchara*. The nearest counterpart to this in the Christian world of the time was that of the Desert Fathers in the Eastern tradition, who had practised 'the opening of one's heart to another'.¹⁹ In the Druid tradition, Irish royal households made use of the skills of wise counsellors, teachers and healers. The *anamchara* seems to have emerged from the convergence of these two visions. The penitentials themselves were written as guides to prescribing for spiritual sicknesses for soul-friends who were not necessarily 'professional' doctors of the soul.

A Twenty-first-century Celtic Context

Having outlined the distinctive features of penance in the Irish penitentials, we can return to present-day Celtic Christianity and look for any traces of these features, and for different approaches and influences

A survey of the Iona website and the major publications associated with the Iona community does not reveal any specific approaches to penance, or even any mention of the subject. Although some of the published liturgies, though by no means all, contain elements of public confession of personal as well as corporate sin, this remains an area that is largely undeveloped, if not ignored. There are no references either to soul-friendship or more generally to spiritual direction. Not all publications, of course, have been reviewed, but it is tempting to begin to formulate a provisional hypothesis.

¹⁹ Connolly, *The Irish Penitentials*, 14.

The Iona community's website says:

The Iona Community, founded in 1938 by the Rev. George MacLeod, is an ecumenical Christian community of men and women from different walks of life and different traditions in the Christian church that is committed to seeking new ways of living the gospel of Jesus Christ in today's world.²⁰

The community's Wild Goose publishing house describes itself as '... established in the Celtic Christian tradition of St Columba ...',²¹ but, although the Iona Community is widely perceived as having Celtic 'roots', these are perhaps more to do with geographical location and the use of Scottish folk tunes for modern hymns and worship songs than with any more profound attempt to build out from the Celtic Christian heritage.

Coming from within the reformed tradition, George MacLeod set modern theological parameters, including an incarnational and communal way of living and expressing Christianity. These have far more in common with the liberation theology of the second half of the twentieth century than with the theology of the people who produced



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Cloisters, Iona Community

²⁰ www.iona.org.uk.

²¹ www.ionabooks.com.

the Irish penitentials in the sixth to ninth centuries. Some common themes have been noted, such as an awareness of the natural elements and the rhythms of the seasons, but others that are not so attractive to the twenty-first-century mind have been largely ignored.

There does not appear to be a place for individual confession of sin or for penance as a healing restorative process mediated through a soul-friend. The references to healing, restoration and justice in the published liturgies all point to a corporate, even a global and political, process rather than the Celtic one which places an individual's soul firmly at the centre of a knot or fabric of relationships which mirrors the Trinity.

It appears that the Iona community reflects its Celtic heritage only by adopting some of its perceived trappings. They have little of substance in common. There is no place for a Celtic Christian understanding of penance in the community today. This is not surprising if both are viewed as 'local theologies', developed as much from the contingencies of very different times and cultures as from their common Christian tradition.

The Northumbrian community, a dispersed community with a 'mother house' in Northumbria, on the other hand, more consciously seeks to build on the heritage of its local Celtic saints in its contemporary expression of Christianity. Dispersed communities share a rule of life, which often includes a prescribed or agreed pattern of daily prayer, study and retreats.

Our Rule is a Way for Living as 'internal émigrés' in the current cultural climate. First of all, we are called to Availability: to God in the cell of our own heart where we can seek Him for His own sake, as the 'one thing necessary'. Then to be available to others in a call to exercise hospitality, recognising that in welcoming others we honour and welcome Christ Himself. We are then called to be available to others through participation in God's care and concern for them by praying and interceding for their situations in the power of His Holy Spirit. We are also called to be available for mission of various kinds according to the leading and initiatives of the Spirit. Then as our Rule is an ongoing exploration of 'How then shall we live?' it also involves an intentional Vulnerability expressed through being teachable in the discipline of prayer; through applying the wisdom of the Scriptures; and through a mutual accountability in the advocacy of soul friends. Also we live the vulnerability of embracing the 'heretical imperative' by challenging assumed truth; being receptive to constructive criticism; affirming that relationship

matters more than reputation and by living openly among people as 'Church without walls'.²²

There appears to be more space here for the kind of penance as discipleship envisaged in the Irish penitentials, particularly in the references to mutual accountability, with the use of soul-friends and the emphasis on prayer and intercession for individuals. However, although there is an emphasis on confession of sin in the *Celtic Daily Prayer* of the Northumbrian community, there is no specific mention of penance in any form. When they 'explore the old paths' this is a matter of general themes that attract and have been found useful rather than any close reworking of the original sources. The authors put it this way:

While resisting the temptation to hark back to some mythical 'golden age' (which probably never existed), we have attempted to be true to what we have learnt and lived in the shadow of the Northumbrian saints and their teachers.²³

Penance itself does not appear to play a significant part in this community's contemporary expression of Celtic Christianity, but they share the mind-set of mutual accountability and spiritual help that gave rise to the penitential literature.

The third community to be considered is that of Aidan and Hilda, an ecumenical community that seeks to include both members of established denominations and those who have found that they cannot thrive within these existing congregations. The community actively looks to spread teaching and lifestyle patterns which reflect the Celtic Christian heritage and encourages new expressions of church which are rooted in the life of the wider community.²⁴ It is another dispersed community. This extract from the Rule of Life of the Community of Aidan and Hilda gets round to the subject of penance:

SOUL FRIENDS: The Celtic church affirmed and used the ministry of the Anamchara or soul friend. A Soul Friend needs to be a mature Christian who is in sympathy with the aims of the

²² From the Rule of the Northumbrian Community, at <http://www.northumbriacommunity.org/WhoWeAre/howeareThe%20Rule.htm>.

²³ The Northumbria Community, *Celtic Daily Prayer: Prayers and Readings from the Northumbria Community* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 7.

²⁴ This is laid out more fully in Ray Simpson, *Church of the Isles* (Stowmarket: Kevin Mayhew, 2003).

Community. (S)he does not need to belong to the Community of Aidan and Hilda but it is clearly helpful if they do. Each member of this Community will have a Soul Friend to work with them in developing a Way of life that is personally suited to them

A Soul Friend is a friend with whom we openly share our spiritual journey. We meet with our Soul Friend at least twice a year. (S)he is someone who is familiar with the Community of Aidan and Hilda and seeks to discern with us where we are on that journey, what the Spirit is doing in our lives, and how God is leading us. The Soul Friend respects the tradition that we come from. Thus, for example, some will seek a Soul Friend who is familiar with formal confession and penance.²⁵

The Guardian of the Community, Ray Simpson, deals with the subject of penance in his book *Soul Friendship*, where he uses Columbanus' Penitential as an example of the ancient Celtic approach.²⁶ He reworks the images of the doctor and medicine for the soul in the form of a trainer for spiritual fitness and a gym routine. Penance becomes the training programme put together by the trainer. This image is expanded in *The Joy of Spiritual Fitness*,²⁷ a consciously accessible book offering a year of spiritual exercises, some of which can be seen to be an attempt to rework the penitentials for a postmodern audience. In true Celtic style, the reader is encouraged to seek out an *anamchara* and to engage in spiritual training in relationship within the community and not in an individualistic way.

The community of Aidan and Hilda is the nearest of the three that I have looked at to an expression of current Celtic Christianity that has found a place for something like the ancient Celtic practice of penance. Even here there is a remarkable shortage of bread and water diets and prescriptions of abstinence. This may reflect a contemporary preference for body-affirming over appetite-denying practices. However, in dispensing with the bread and water, Ray Simpson does not align himself with the more 'New Age' end of the current fad for all things Celtic. He returns to the roots of the Irish penitentials and to the formative ideas of John Cassian. He revisits the eight vices that Cassian identified, and which became so influential in both Roman and Celtic thinking:

²⁵ www.aidan.org.uk.

²⁶ Ray Simpson, *Soul Friendship* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1999).

²⁷ Ray Simpson, *The Joy of Spiritual Fitness* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

These prescriptions [of Columbanus] focused on eight principal vices that destroy our ability to be effective human beings: gluttony, avarice, rage, self-pity, lust, slackness, vanity and pride. They had to be healed by 'taking', as medicine, their opposite virtues. The principle was cure by contraries. These vices can also be viewed as hurdles that runners in a race have to overcome.²⁸

Four elements are identified, using terminology borrowed from contemporary psychology and spirituality. These elements lead to the development of the virtues opposite to the vices, and so lead to growth in holiness:

1. To acquire mastery over personal drives by doing without good, as well as bad things.
2. To develop positive strengths by doing good works. The purpose of these was to learn to channel energy creatively that had previously been used in a negative way.
3. To instil habits of appreciation, particularly of God's presence in all things and at all times. The chanting of psalms was the main method.
4. To start a healing process by making restitution to any wronged person.²⁹

Cure by contraries is abandoned as too medieval, and more modern understandings are substituted: using the list of eight vices and the four principles of penance, it is suggested that the soul-friend and the disciple can work together to diagnose difficulties and draw up a treatment plan.

The Wider Church

It is impossible to assess what kind of impact the Guardian of one small, dispersed modern Celtic community may have on contemporary Christianity. However, there are movements within the Church that, while they might not have obvious Irish penitential roots, appear to share some underlying trends or principles with Celtic Christianity and the penitentials. Whether these trends, which seem to come from a variety of

²⁸ Simpson, *Soul Friendship*, 130–131.

²⁹ Simpson, *Soul Friendship*, 131.

sources, have influenced a renewed interest in the penitentials, or whether the movement is the other way round, is difficult to judge.

Among these trends is the increasing focus on prayer and meditation in current Christian spirituality that has led many to explore the tradition of fasting and other spiritual disciplines. Early leaders of this rediscovery, such as Richard Forster in his *Celebration of Discipline*, are being reprinted,³⁰ and Ignatian retreats are becoming increasingly popular.

The newer charismatic Churches are discovering for themselves the spiritual value of 'good works' and are beginning to engage in a coordinated way with the poor and disadvantaged in their communities, guided by leaders such as Steve Chalke of the Faithworks initiative.³¹

The restorative justice movement, working in many countries, is beginning to have an impact on Christian views and practices, as we rethink our assumptions about law and order, justice and punishment, and conflict resolution. A restorative justice programme widely used by Christian leaders within British prisons, the Sycamore Tree Project,³² is reported significantly to change attitudes and behaviour for the prisoners who complete the course.

The Roman Catholic Church continues to work on its Sacrament of Reconciliation. Hugh Connolly's book on the penitentials, indeed, is aimed at influencing this process by clarifying the place of the Irish penitentials within the development of doctrine and practice. The Methodist Church now includes a Service of Reconciliation in its written liturgies in the Worship Book,³³ and there is advice about counsel which leaves an option for 'suitable acts' of penitence.

The use of spiritual direction of one sort or another is increasingly recommended in many places and to many individuals within the Church. Kenneth Leech makes a plea in the new edition of his book on spiritual direction for a return to the idea of the Celtic soul-friend in the face of what he sees as an increasing trend for the spiritual director to become a specialist or a professional.³⁴ He argues that healing and growth happen

³⁰ Richard Forster, *Celebration of Discipline* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980).

³¹ See, for example, Steve Chalke and Simon Johnston, *Faithworks: Intimacy and Involvement* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Communications, 2003).

³² See www.pfcjr.org.

³³ See Trustees for Methodist Purposes, *The Methodist Worship Book* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999), 422.

³⁴ Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994).

when we open up to one another, as people make themselves available, and therefore vulnerable, to the other. Counsel may take the form of agreed restitution or another kind of penance, but, as in the ancient Celtic model, this is agreed in dialogue.

Perhaps the fact that such a plea for non-professional soul-friends is necessary tells us something about the position of penance in much of Celtic Christianity as well as in the wider Church today. The renewed interest in Celtic Christianity is part of a turn towards spirituality generally. Much of this spirituality, even within the Churches, is of an eclectic and unconsidered kind. The Irish penitentials of the sixth to ninth centuries may have come in for some renewed interest, but what emerges from current historical and theological scholarship is a phenomenon that is alien to our thinking and our lives in many ways.

Even when the historical bridges have been built and we begin to understand 'where they are coming from', what the Irish penitentials reveal about humankind's selfishnesses and addictions makes their message, to our minds at least, depressing. On the other hand, there is also something exhilarating about being given some weapons with which to fight back:

In the Celtic tradition penance is thought of in a positive light, as making an act of dedication for love of God, in order to leave behind the things that have hindered that love. The person making an act of penance is like a lover saying to their spouse, 'I give you



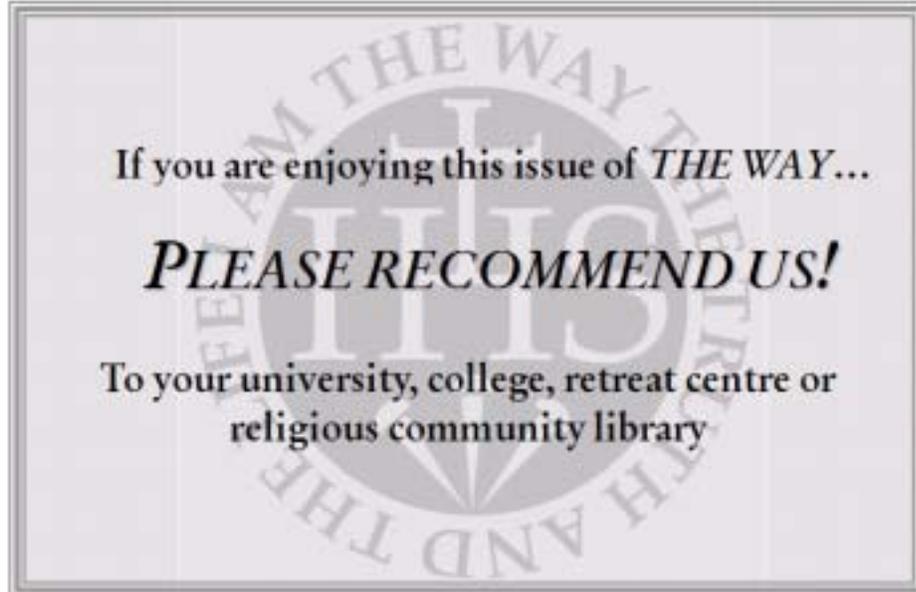
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*Modern Celtic crosses in Glasnevin Cemetery,
Dublin*

the gift beyond price—all of myself, always. To help me to do this, and to show it, I will visibly leave behind all counter attractions to you, and accompany only you. In this way you will know that at all times you are the love of my life.’ In this light penance becomes something beautiful.³⁵

Despite the superficiality of some versions of modern Celtic Christianity, by bringing together current understandings of our bodies and our minds from anatomy, physiology, psychology and sociology with the early Celtic understanding of the diseases of the soul, we have an opportunity to rework the principles and practice of penance for our own time, to help us help each other, as integrated human beings, on our way into the love and goodness of God.

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³⁵ Simpson, *Soul Friendship*, 129–130.