

A CELTIC PRAYER BOOK

SO far as concerns his native language, the Scottish Gael of to-day is illiterate. Educational policy has not been too sympathetic with the Gaelic.

This accounts for the fact that, in spite of the tenacity with which Catholics in the Highlands have kept the Faith, there is but one book of devotion, printed in Scottish Gaelic, procurable to-day.¹

A study of *Lochran an Anama*, "The Soul's Lantern," gives us a glimpse into the mind and soul of the Gael. Here we find, in addition to Gaelic translations of Latin and other prayers familiar to all Catholics, devotions peculiar to Celtic temperament. Here we are with Patrick and Columba and the other saints of Gaeldom, praying in the forms they used.

Redolent of the daily life of the inhabitants of the Highlands and Isles in those far-off times, these prayers are still appropriate to the needs of their descendants. In the Outer Hebrides the Gael's manner of life, his hopes and fears, even his natural surroundings, have altered less in 1,200 years than those of his neighbours in the course of a century.

The sea and the mountains still provide the chief perils, whilst tilling the soil, herding the cattle, and fishing from small craft in stormy seas constitute the principal means of existence.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
Be the Three-in-One with us by day and night,
In the trough of the sea, or on mountain-side
Be our Mother with us, and her arm about our head.

"The Consecration of the Three Narrows" (Wrists, Waist and Ankles), a prayer to St. Columba for the sanctification of every bodily act, is probably one of the oldest Celtic prayers we have.

It begins with the Latin "In nomine patris," followed by the Gaelic "I consecrate the Three Narrows of the Hands, the Body, the Feet, in memory of Holy Colum of the

¹ *Lochran an Anama*. (Sands & Co.; 2/-.)

Chapel." This is repeated with the addition, "and in the presence of all the Gaelic Saints." Then again in Latin, the verse "Spero in Deo" and the Gloria Patri. The act of consecration repeated and the following conclusion, reminiscent of "St. Patrick's Breastplate":

O Holy Colum! Pray swiftly, completely, earnestly. Pray north and south, east and west; pray down and up, here and yonder; pray behind and in front, to and fro; and till the Day of Doom.

An Evening Hymn, exquisitely simple in the Gaelic, begins:

I lie down this night before Mary and her Son,
Before the Mother of my King, who keeps me from all harm,
I will not lie down with Evil, nor Evil with me,
But in God's Presence I will lie down, and my God beside me.

The Right Hand of God under my head,
The Light of the Spirit above my head,
The Cross of the Nine Angels covering me
From the crown of my head to the sole of my foot.

The hymn concludes with a prayer to be preserved from the pains of Purgatory and "the fire that is not quenched."

This short Act of Commendation is for morning or evening:

God be with me lying down,
God be with me rising up,
God be with me each hour of daylight,
No hour without Him,
God steering me, God guiding me.

A prayer to the Divine Humanity is typical of the Gael's use of unusual simile:

Pray, to the Feet of Christ white as milk,
To the Knees of Christ strong as the rock,
To the Winding-sheet of Christ transparent as the mist,
To the Bosom of Christ soothing as the wave,
To the Shoulders of Christ broad as the hills,
To the Mouth of Christ perfect as a flower,
To the Arms of Christ supple as thongs,
To the Fingers of Christ commanding as the heavens;
And to His Holy Head.

Protection of the cattle from dangers, real or imaginary,

BLACKFRIARS

must always have been one of the chief anxieties of a people whose circumstances have never, at the best, been far removed from poverty, and at the worst have seen the race decimated again and again by sheer starvation.

“The Blessing of the Flock” shows that anxiety relieved by prayer and resignation to the Will of God:

I send these cattle before me
According to the Will of the King of the Universe,
Mary keeping, attending, watching them
O'er mountain, glen and plain.

From crag and snowdrift and stream,
From wandering, from the thousand pits,
From the arrows of the slender fairy folk,
From the heart of mischief, from the evil eye.

Mary Mother, herd all the young;
Brigid of the smooth palms, protect my kine;
Coluncille, Saint of highest virtue,
Protect the young, increase the flock.

O my Lady, O my Mother, remember I am thine,
Keep me, defend me, as thine own and as thine own inheritance.

This “Blessing” is not, perhaps, in general use to-day, but thirty years ago the compiler of *Lochran an Anama*, Father Archibald Campbell, S.J., evidently thought proper to include it. Since that date another book, *Iul a' Chriosduidh* (The Christian's Guide) has been popular with the younger generation.

This latter book, which is a translation into Gaelic of prayers familiar to all Catholics, was published in Antigonish, Canada, but is now out of print.

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