

# Celebrating Women Witnesses

## A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

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...stories with a theological message. They contain the larger truths of the saints' lives that moved them (and can move us) toward greater self awareness and self-

acceptance, wholeness and holiness, meaning and God. Like the world of mythology, hagiography is full of symbols, mythic components, and the language of dreams, of fairy tales, of the soul. <sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The exact history of the sixth century abbess, Brigit of Kildare will never be known. Like many prominent figures of ancient times, her fame first spread by word of mouth among Celtic Christians who populated Ireland, England, Wales, Scotland and northern Europe. Brigit's life was not written down until some 150 years after her death by a monk of Kildare named Cogitosus (ca. 620-680). Cogitosus modeled his work on earlier Christian classics such as Athanasius' *Life of Antony* (a desert monk) and Severus' *Life of St. Martin* (Bishop of Tours).

Like these earlier "lives," Cogitosus' portrays Brigit as heroic, worthy of emulation but still subject to human suffering. However, unlike the lives of Anthony and Martin, Brigit's story does not present asceticism and a solitary lifestyle as ideals for holiness. Instead, Brigit's ministry to the poor, sick and marginalized is the primary focus. *The Life of Brigit* is filled with deeds of hospitality, healing, generosity, kindness and compassion.

Rather than removing herself from people, she draws them together out of love. Unlike the desert fathers, she is not reluctant to serve as a spiritual mentor to those seeking her help. She is a willing *anam cara* or "soul friend" to God-seekers and highly recommends this method of spiritual growth to others.

Cogitosus' work and a later 15th century *Life of Brigit* found in the *Book of Lismore* are largely hagiographic, which differs from modern understandings of biography. The Celtic scholar Edward Sellner defines hagiographies as:

## BRIGIT of KILDARE

### Bishop and Abbess



BRIGIT OF KILDARE

By the Middle Ages, Brigit's cult had spread widely and stories of her life were translated into Old French, Middle English and German. They were popular throughout Europe among both monks and educated lay people.

### Celtic Cultures before Christianity

The story of Brigit, the abbess of Kildare, cannot be easily separated from the story and values of Brigit, the Celtic goddess who preceded her in the hearts of pre-Christian peoples who worshiped God in feminine metaphor as well as masculine. Brigit the woman was born at a time when Christianity was replacing nature religions throughout the west. Many scholars believe her cult spread so widely precisely because she embodied feminine aspects of the deity missing in Christianity. <sup>2</sup>

The Celts originated from the Indo-European peoples from which also came present day European, Middle Eastern and Indian races. By the third century BCE they dominated Europe. They invaded Ireland between 900 and 300 BCE. Celtic peoples believed the supernatural was present in every part of life and that spirits resided in ancient trees, mountaintops, rivers, sacred groves and holy wells. They worshipped the great forces of nature (sun, wind, moon, ocean) and their gods and goddesses had power over every aspect of their lives. Possibly the most ancient deity was a goddess named Danu, also called Ana. Some believe that

legends associating Danu as universal mother and oldest of all the gods, show the matriarchal origins of Celtic society.

One of the major Celtic gods was Dagda or “Good Father,” whose daughter Brigit or Brighid (“the exalted one”) was worshipped as a goddess of wisdom, song and poetry. She was especially known as the goddess of the fire and the hearth. Some saw her as the most important child of Dagda and she is associated with two sisters of the same name, one a patron of healing and the other the patron of metal workers. All three were identified with the goddess Brigit whose feast was celebrated on February 1st, the festival of spring, one of the Celts’ four most important feasts (and the present day feast of St. Brigit of Kildare).

For Celtic peoples, the number three had special significance. Many allusions to such triplism recur in Celtic mythology and Irish literature. Christian understandings of the Trinitarian nature of God and God’s presence signified as fire also find parallels in Celtic spiritual symbols and, as we shall see in the legends of Brigit, the Christian saint.<sup>4</sup>

### A Study in Liminality

Edward Sellner has described Brigit as “a study in liminality, for she lives on the boundary between pagan mythology and Christian spirituality, between what was and what will be.”<sup>5</sup> He continues:

*Though historians differ in their assessment of how much about Brigit as a saint is historically accurate, we must not limit ourselves to only considering absolutely verifiable evidence (i.e. “the facts”). While historicity is an important criterion...it is not the only one to be considered. Our task is that of discerning and naming the larger truths the stories from mythology and Christian hagiography reveal, and what sort of meaning and guidance they might provide...we do know that there is a very long and ancient tradition linking a woman named Brigit with the monastery at Kildare ...these early Christian legends were based upon the collective memory of a people...who obviously admired and loved her, and recognized in her tremendous spiritual power.<sup>6</sup>*

*The Life of Brigit* as found in the *Book of Lismore* is based on early hagiographies including that of Cogitosus. As in all early hagiographies, it follows a certain pattern. First described is the saint’s distinguished ancestry and birth normally accompanied by prophetic dreams and unusual events. Second, the saint finds a worthy mentor (either human or angelic) from whom wisdom is learned. In the third stage the saint performs many miracles demonstrating his or her spiritual power. In the last stage, the saint may travel to distant lands and/or be forewarned of her death. The deathbed scene includes final words of wisdom or warning which then become part of the sacred legacy.

*The Life of Brigit* is organized in similar fashion. She was born the illegitimate child of the union between a pagan chieftain, Dubthach, and a Christian slave woman Broicsech, around the year 450. From the beginning she

straddles two worlds, both that of illegitimacy (from whence no doubt come the many stories of her wide compassion for the marginalized) and that of the pagan and Christian milieus in which she lived. A druid prophesies that the child will be “Marvelous: her like will not be on earth,...a daughter...who will shine like a sun among the stars of heaven.”<sup>7</sup> Not to be outdone, legend also tells of two Scottish bishops who come to bless and prophesy about her before her birth. To Christians, she will eventually be known as “the Mary of the Gael.” Christ is called “Mary’s son” attesting to the rich matriarchal soil from which Celtic Christianity emerged.

Not surprisingly, Dubthach’s wife objects to having the pregnant Broicsech in her household and he sells her to a druid in a neighboring province. The unborn child Brigit however, will remain Dubthach’s property. Brigit is born in the home of the druid who teaches and rears her as his own daughter though Broicsech (who was herself probably evangelized by Patrick or his followers) sees to it that she is baptized. The story is told that Brigit’s anonymous druid foster father awakens one day to find three angels disguised as clerics baptizing the child. The third angel tells the druid to name her Brigit.<sup>8</sup> Again we see the importance of the number three in Celtic belief attesting to the child’s special favor from God. From her beginnings, Brigit’s holiness is affirmed by the two spiritual traditions from which a uniquely Celtic Christianity gradually emerges.

### Girlhood, Abundance and Non Violence

There are many stories about how everything Brigit touches as a young girl inexplicably increases, particularly numbers of calves and amounts of butter which expand exponentially as she helps her mother with the dairy herd. Brigit shares her abundance with the poor. This charming song is attributed to her:

*O God, bless my pantry! Pantry which the Lord has blessed, never be lacking in aught! Mary’s Son, my Friend, come and bless my pantry, let there be abundance ever on the board!<sup>9</sup>*

As the story goes, Brigit’s druid foster father is so amazed at her abilities that he frees her mother and eventually becomes Christian himself. When Brigit comes of age, he returns her to Dubthach’s household where she liberally distributes some of her wealthy father’s goods to the poor. The last straw comes when she gives away Dubthach’s prized sword, an act which required the intervention of the pagan high king:

*He asked Brigit what she had done with his sword. “I gave it,” Brigit said “to a poor man who came to beg of me.” Dubthach was extremely angry with her ... When Brigit came before the king, he said: “Why did you steal your father’s property and wealth, and, what is worse, why have you given the sword away?” Then said Brigit: “The Virgin Mary’s Son knows, if I had your power, with all your wealth, ... I would give them all to the Lord of the Elements.” Said the king to Dubthach: “It is not right*

*of us to deal with this maiden for her merit before God is higher than ours.*"<sup>10</sup>

From this time on, Dubthach is eager to rid himself of Brigit and tries to marry her off. Brigit however, has already dedicated herself to God. When Dubthach persists, she disfigures herself so that no man will want her. With seven women friends she approaches Bishop Mel to take her vows. At her profession, her appearance is radiantly restored and: "a fiery pillar rose from her head to the roof-ridge of the Church." This is the second unusual appearance of fire in Brigit's story, the first being "a flame and a fiery pillar" rising from her mother before her birth." Again we see in symbolism dear to all Celts, pagan and Christian alike, a powerful signification of God's presence.

**"Then, filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, Bishop Mel read the form of ordaining a bishop over Brigit...MacCaille, Bishop Mel's assistant, complained that a bishop's rank was bestowed on a woman. Bishop Mel argued: 'But I do not have any power in this matter. That dignity has been given by God to Brigit...'"**

### **Bishop and Abbess**

At the time of her religious profession, Brigit is also consecrated a bishop perhaps inadvertently:

*Because of her humility, Brigit held back so that she might be the last to whom a veil should be given... Then it happened that, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, the form of ordaining a Bishop was read over Brigit. MacCaille, Bishop Mel's assistant, complained that a Bishop's rank was bestowed on a woman. Bishop Mel argued: "But I do not have any power in this matter. That dignity has been given by God to Brigit beyond every other woman."*<sup>12</sup>

While the text seems to say that only Brigit could be a bishop, her successors at Kildare continued to exercise a bishop's authority and in fact, other Irish bishops customarily sat at their feet until the Synod of Kells ended this custom in 1152. The office of monastic bishop was peculiar to Irish law and reveals the powerful positions held by abbots and abbesses of the great monasteries in the Irish Church.<sup>13</sup>

Kildare, which means "Church of the Oak" is situated

thirty miles from Dublin and has a long history predating Christianity. Nearby is the important Iron Age religious site: Dun Ailinne named for an ancient goddess. There is evidence that a sacred fire burned at Dun Ailinne long before Brigit's eternal fire at Kildare. Most scholars now believe that Kildare itself may have originally been a pagan sanctuary. In pre-Christian times, the area surrounding present-day Kildare was known as *Civitas Brigitae* (the City of Brigit). There are records of a famous school which existed there whose leader was regarded as the incarnation of the goddess and automatically took the name Brigit when elected.<sup>14</sup>

Kildare's ancient history gives fresh evidence of the blending of pagan customs into the new Christian religion. Brigit's monastery at Kildare, like other Celtic Christian monasteries in succeeding centuries, was to play an important role in preserving western civilization during the "dark ages" after the disintegration of the Roman empire.

Celtic Christian monasteries differed in significant ways from their European counterparts however, and were particularly suited to Celtic cultural realities:

*... spirituality was more familial, personal and democratic rather than curial, legal and republican. This was not only because of the direct influence of the Gallican monks, but because their monastic spirituality was more richly compatible with the structure and values of Celtic culture than was the legalistic diocesan form.*<sup>15</sup>

Brigit's monastery was composed of many small huts in which each monk or nun lived alone. These surrounded a larger structure suited for worship and meetings. They were safe havens for travelers, often in danger from bands of thieves. Kildare was a double monastery containing both monks and nuns. Brigit was its abbess and as the following passage from Cogitosus attests, her influence was widespread, even requiring her to seek a bishop with whom to share her authority:

*Wishing to provide wisely and properly for the souls of her people and anxious about the churches of the many provinces that had attached themselves to her, Brigit realized that she could not possibly do without a bishop to consecrate churches and supply them with various levels of ordained clergy. So she sent for a distinguished man, known for his virtues who was then leading a solitary life in the desert...From then on the anointed head and leader of all bishops and the most blessed leader of virgins, in pleasant mutual agreement...built her principal church at Kildare.*<sup>16</sup>

Unlike most hagiographies Brigit's story has no deathbed scene. Instead the *Book of Lismore* concludes her story with that special liminal imagery so suited to her place in history: "And though great be her honor here at present, greater by far will it be, when she shall arise like a shining lamp in completeness of body and soul...in the union that is nobler than every union, in the union of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost."<sup>17</sup>



## Conclusion

While Brigit's life is shrouded in myth as well as in history, there is much that the thoughtful Christian can take from her story. Foremost is her apparent ability to stand at the threshold of shifting cultural paradigms and, like the wise householder of scripture, bring forth good things, both old and new. As a preeminent bridge builder between ancient and new ways, Brigit's story is strangely compelling for earth's peoples in the second millennium CE. More than ever we are required to respect the religious understandings of people different from ourselves. Brigit's story can help us value what is clearly of God and respect, in the words of Vatican II: "*the genius and culture of the different peoples. [so that] ... with and through their own human culture, assumed and transfigured by Christ, ... the multitude of God's children has access to [God], ... in the one Spirit.*"<sup>18</sup>

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18. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* found in # 1204 *Catechism of the Catholic Church as adapted*.

The feast day for Brigit of Kildare is celebrated on February 1. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that date or at another appropriate time.

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## A Prayer Service in Honor of St. Brigit of Kildare

*Celebrate Brigit's feast on February 1 or at any other time*

*Since Brigit's life exemplified feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, it seems appropriate to include a "small eucharist" agape or bread breaking ritual. This may be used in a small faith community or adapted for a parish Communion service. If used for a bread breaking ritual, you will need a loaf of freshly baked bread, a candle and a tablecloth.*

**Greeting:** *The prayer leader welcomes the group and makes sure people are introduced.*

**Opening Song:** *Table of Plenty* (© 1992 Daniel Schutte, OCP Publications #309 in *Today's Missal Music Issue*)

**Guided Prayer:** *The prayer leader slowly recites the following prayer pausing after each line.*

Sit still for a moment and quiet your soul... Breathe in deeply the tender love of God...

Breathe out compassion for all living things... The love and affection of the Holy One is with us...

The love and affection of the angels and saints surround us... The love and affection of heaven empowers us as we seek to live hospitably and compassionately each day...

**Sung Refrain:** *"Come to the feast of heaven and earth, come to the table of plenty. God will provide for all that we need, here at the table of plenty..."*

**Scripture Reading (ALL):** "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." (Mt 24:35 NRSV)

**Reader 1:** "Hospitality, a traditional characteristic of Celtic people, was also a hallmark of Brigit's life. Brigit was a woman of abundance. All were welcome at her table. She saw to it that there was more than enough food, drink, and love to nourish all who came to her hearth. One Easter season Brigit found there was not enough ale for seventeen of her churches. Legend says she changed water into beer to make sure that her churches were well supplied."

**Reader 2:** "Brigit was renowned as a peacemaker, for in her time there were many disputes that threatened to erupt into armed conflict. As Mary Condren says '...she caused enough confusion that she fooled each side into thinking it had won, thereby ending the battle without bloodshed.'"

**Sung Refrain:** *"Come to the feast of heaven and earth, come to the table of plenty. God will provide for all that we need, here at the table of plenty..."*

**Reader 3:** "Once when Brigit was traveling, evening drew near and she sought hospitality in a village woman's home. Because of her poverty the woman had little food with which to entertain her guest. Rather than offer her nothing, she broke up the loom on which she had been weaving and used the wood to roast her precious calf which she slaughtered for the occasion. She lit the fire with a willing heart. After they ate, the two women passed the night in vigil. When the village woman arose the next day she found a calf exactly like the one she had slain, and in front of the hearth was her wooden loom, also restored."

**Reader 4:** "A woman of compassion, Brigit's biographer recalls that no person who was poor without resources ever left her presence without sustenance. One time Brigit gave Bishop Conleth's elaborate feast day robes to the poor. When a feast day came around, St. Brigit gave the bishop a new set of vestments similar in both weave and color to those she had given away. Brigit believed she had received replacements from Christ just when they were needed. In yet another story, Brigit promptly gives away a basket of apples which had been given to her. When her benefactor complained, she replied, "What is mine is theirs."

**Sung Refrain:** *"Come to the feast of heaven and earth, come to the table of plenty. God will provide for all that we need, here at the table of plenty..."*

**Reader 5:** "Brigit's attitude of openness and generous welcome provides a model for us. She lived the spirit of Jesus who himself challenged the authorities of synagogue and Temple, and dined with those on the margins. Like Jesus, Brigit's inclusivity reminds us that we all belong at the Banquet of Love, the heavenly feast. Here we find our home, the place where we are loved totally, tenderly, and passionately in the heart of God." (All excerpts from *Celebrating Women Witnesses* essay on Brigit by Bridget Mary Meehan sfcc available at [www.futurechurch.org](http://www.futurechurch.org))

**Scripture Reading (ALL):** I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." (Mt 24:35 NRSV)

**Sung Refrain:** *"Come to the feast of heaven and earth, come to the table of plenty. God will provide for all that we need, here at the table of plenty..."*

**Wisdom Sharing:** *At this time a brief reflection on the readings may be given by the presider, or (if a small group) members may share their own reflections after a moment of silence.*

### Agape Ritual

**St. Brigit's Table Blessing** (*Presider leads*): "I should welcome the poor to my feast, for they are God's children. I should welcome the sick to my feast, for they are God's joy. Let the poor sit with Jesus at the highest place, let the sick dance with the angels."

**Prayers of Intercession:** *Presider invites each person to "Take a moment to voice aloud what gift or grace you ask of God for yourself or for another or for the world."*

**All Pray:** Give to us this day, O God, sufficient bread for the journey-the bread of the compassion and mercy, the bread of justice and peace. Give us enough and more than enough. Give us the grace to share generously with those who are in need. Satisfy all who hunger for food or life's basic necessities with good things in abundance, pressed down, running over, today, tomorrow, and every day, and hear us as we pray:

*Our Mother, Our Father, on earth and in heaven  
blessed be your compassionate presence, Your images and names  
Fill us with your Spirit, Show us the wisdom of Your ways.  
Forgive us. Teach us to forgive. Shield us from temptation and  
protect us from all the harm. Prevent us from hurting the ones we love,  
from injuring others in word or in deed, from desecrating our planet.  
Be with us and within us now and always. Amen. (MT Winter, Eucharistia ritual)*

**All Sing:** *I Myself Am the Bread of Life* (© Rory Cooney, 1987 NALR #593 in *Gather*, G.I.A. Publications) or *Gift of Finest Wheat* (by Robert E. Kreutz, © 1977 Archdiocese of Philadelphia in *Today's Missal Music Issue* #329 OCP)

**Presider:** We take, bless, break this bread and share it with each other as sign and symbol of our desire to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and of Brigit: doing justice, loving others, proclaiming the presence of the living God around us and within us.. (Bread is shared)

**Thanksgiving:** Give thanks for a blessing received, either aloud or in the silence of your heart.

**Closing Encompassing Blessing from Brigit** (*By presider*):

The encompassing of God be on you, The encompassing of the God of Life.  
The encompassing of Christ be on you. The encompassing of the Christ of Love.  
The encompassing of Spirit be on you. The encompassing of the Spirit of Grace.  
The encompassing of the Three be on you. The encompassing of the Three preserve you.  
The encompassing of the Three preserve you. (*Carmina Gadelica*, #249, p 221)

**Closing Song:** *This Day God Gives Me* (© 1969 Traditional Gaelic Music Text ascribed to St. Patrick, adapted by James D. Quinn SJ, 1919 #574 in *Today's Missal Music Issue*), *Sing Out, Earth and Skies* (Marty Haugen © 1985, G.I.A. Publications, #619 in *Today's Missal Music Issue*), or *Lord of All Hopefulness* (Traditional Irish Music © Oxford University, London #327 *Today's Missal Music Issue*)

*Prayer service developed by Christine Schenk csj using resources from Bridget Mary Meehan co-author of Praying with Celtic Holy Women (Liguori) and from Miriam Therese Winter's Eucharistia prayer developed for the FutureChurch 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration 11/3/2000. Winter is the author of Woman Word, Woman Wisdom, Woman Witness (Crossroad).*

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*Brigit of Kildare: Bishop and Abbess*

1. Brigit of Kildare lived between two worlds-- between "what was" and "what will be". Explain how the circumstances of her birth illustrate these two worlds.

2. What did Brigit do to make her father Dubthach angry enough to want to get rid of her?

3. What did Brigit do when her father tried to marry her off after she had already dedicated herself to God?

4. Give three ways that Brigit of Kildare was like the pagan goddess Brigit or Brighid.

a.

b.

c.

5. The number three (#3) is symbolic in Celtic mythology and Christian spirituality. How are each of these three groups of three related to Brigit?

a. three goddesses

b. three angels

c. three fires

6. How did Brigit become a consecrated Bishop?

7. A recent bestseller called How the Irish Saved Civilization. (Thomas Cahill, Doubleday, 1995) tells the story of how the influence of Celtic thought preserved civilization during the “dark ages”. What were some of the differences between Celtic monasteries, like the one at Kildare and European monasteries?

Celtic Monasteries	European Monasteries

8. Catholic spirituality sees the whole world as holy and “sacramental”—a way to encounter God. How does this resemble ancient Celtic spirituality?

9. The author describes Brigit as an *anam cara*, a “soul friend” to God seekers. How did Brigit minister to people both physically and spiritually?

10. Explain in a brief paragraph how Brigit embodies the feminine aspects of God.

11. Fifteen hundred years ago Brigit lived on the threshold of new times. What would Brigit have to say to Catholics today about living between what “was” and what “will be” in the Church?