

Saint Finnian Feastday December 12th

The flourishing of Christianity in Ireland, especially in its very committed monastic expression, was in no small measure due to the establishment of a monastic community by St Finnian in Clonard, Co. Meath in the 6th century. Finnian is often referred to as *'the father of Irish monasticism'* or *'the teacher of the saints of Ireland'* or even *'the father of the twelve Apostles of Ireland'*. These titles were given to Finnian by authors of the *Vitae* (Lives of the Saints written in later centuries). St Brigid of Kildare and St Enda of the Aran Islands were also among the very early leaders of this extraordinary monastic movement that took place in Ireland from the late 5th century onward.

Various sources of the life of Finnian give different details concerning his life. It is thought that he was born in the modern Co Carlow and was under the tutorship of various clergy from a young age. Some sources say he visited the monastery of St Martin of Tours in France and also spent some time in Wales where he was strongly influenced by St Cadoc and St Gildas. Eventually he returned to Ireland and initiated some smaller Christian communities before establishing the great monastery at Clonard. We hear of 3,000 people being educated and formed in the principals of Christianity under Finnian's guidance. Columba of Derry and Iona, Brendan the Navigator, Brendan of Birr, Ciarán of Clonmacnoise, Mobhi of Glasnevin, Ruadhan of Lorrha, were among the holy men who prayed and studied at Clonard. These leaders and many other men and women founded monastic communities throughout the country. This monastic movement continued to develop in the following centuries thus giving Christianity in Ireland a unique expression. Today, we have Annals, Missals, Antiphonaries, Penitentials and Gospel Books preserved in libraries here in Ireland, as well as in Britain and in Continental Europe. We treasure the Illuminated Gospel Books of Kells and Durrow, which are housed in Trinity College, Dublin. Impressive also are the sculptured High Crosses and splendid Round Towers to be found in our ancient monastic ruined sites.

What other legacy does this extraordinary period 5th-12th, century leave in the psyche and spirit of the Irish people? For that we need to look at the Spirituality that emanated from these monasteries. It was a spirituality that was in tune with creation and saw the Divine Energy (Near Dé) as being the force behind the change of the seasons, and the growth of the crops as well as giving light to the sun, swiftness to wind, depth to the sea, and stability to the earth. Our ancestors in the faith related to God as Trinity, not the distant Trinity of theological tomes but the Trinity close at hand in the everyday lives of the people. We let this ancient prayer that has no recognised authorship speak for itself:

'Three folds in the cloth yet one cloth is there

Three joints in the finger yet one finger fair

Three leaves in the shamrock yet one shamrock to wear
Frost, snowflakes and ice, all in water their origin share
Three Persons in God, to God alone we make prayer'.

One other striking feature about early Christianity in Ireland is that its leadership was not hierarchical but was community based.

Perhaps our present day Christians might be encouraged and inspired by reflecting on their rich spiritual heritage and relevance for today?

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