

## CÉLI DÉ—ASCETICS OR MYSTICS? MÁELRÚAIN OF TALLAGHT AND ÓENGUS CÉLE DÉ AS CASE STUDIES

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**ABSTRACT.** The Céli Dé monks as we see them in the texts associated with their monasteries had a reputation for extreme asceticism. Following their leader, MáelRúain, who had an especially stern reputation for rigorous observance, they believed heaven had to be earned by saying many prayers, by penitential practices and by intense personal effort and striving on the part of each individual monk. To this end, they engaged in such practices as rigorous fasting, long vigils, confession of sins, strict Sabbath observance and devotional practices involving many prayers. Their view of humanity and of creation generally was negative and they saw God as a stern judge. However, there was another aspect to Céli Dé monasticism which we see in the *Félire Óengusso*, the metrical martyrology compiled by Óengus the Culdee, a monk of Tallaght. We see from his *Félire* that he understood holiness as a gift of God's grace, both for the saints in heaven, whom he describes as 'radiant' and 'shining like the sun', and for those still on earth, through the mercy and graciousness of God himself. His *Félire* was compiled as an act of devotion to Jesus and the saints, whom he addresses in terms of great warmth, tenderness and intimacy, in expressions which prefigure the language of the medieval mystics. So by studying the lives of these two monks, MáelRúain and Óengus, his protégée, as case studies, we can see that for the Céli Dé, holiness was less a matter of 'either asceticism or mysticism', but rather 'both and'.

**KEY WORDS:** asceticism, mysticism, martyrology, Céli Dé, monasticism

### **Introduction—Who Were These Monks?**

The received position regarding the Céli Dé monks, following Peter O'Dwyer's oft-quoted work, is that they were a reform movement of great potential within the early Irish Church, whose influence was brought to an untimely end by the Viking depredations. O'Dwyer remarked: 'The coming of the Danes certainly hindered this movement from having a lasting effect on the religious life of the country.' (O'Dwyer 1981: 200). However, current research sees the Céli Dé less as a self-conscious movement and more as a

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group of monks whose vision of themselves was as a kind of ‘spiritual elite’ committed to a regime of stricter fasting, more prayer, and more pronounced asceticism, rather than as being a conscious and deliberate ‘reform movement’ in the Irish church at the time. In this paper, I will show that, although as we see from the *Rules* which guided their lives that very severe asceticism was a hallmark of their monasticism, there was also a gentler side to their religious outlook and that in the writings of at least one of their number, Óengus Celei De, we see an element of mysticism.

Following the example of their leader, MáelRúain, they seemed to have had an understanding of sanctity in terms of great personal effort and rigorous penitential practices (Follett 2006; Rumsey 2007; Lambkin 1999). For them, holiness was a matter of keeping aloof from ‘the world’ and the dangerous influences and temptations it offered. We find their outlook described in the *Rules of the Céli Dé (Rules)* and the *The Teaching of Máel Rúain (TM)*, texts which are prescriptive of monastic life as it was apparently lived by this group of monks in Tallaght c. 800. These texts reflect the religious practices of this movement and current research has stressed the amount of personal effort and asceticism practised by these monks in their search for holiness. Their custom of reciting the ‘Three Fifties’ (which meant saying, as a matter of strict obligation, the whole 150 psalms of the psalter each day as well as the Canonical Hours of the Divine Office) seems to have been an act of piety on the part of individuals, rather than as a community Office, and to have been interspersed with other exercises of devotion such as multitudinous genuflections and prostrations, the ‘Breastplate of Devotion’, the Cross vigil, and other prayers and hymns to the saints. How these various acts of piety were combined differed from monk to monk according to the devotion of each, but for them all, holiness had to be won by unrelenting personal effort of prayer, including subjective pious practices and extralitururgical devotions and physical austerities and penances such as fasting, prostrations, genuflections, and castigation. However, the *Féilire Óengusso* provides evidence that at least some of those associated with the Céli Dé (here, specifically Óengus, who is listed in the *Book of Leinster* as one of the twelve monks particularly close to MáelRúain, whom he describes in very warm terms) had a broader and more positive view of holiness and what was needed to attain it in this life. This paper looks particularly at the following question: was holiness seen to be something external to this earthly life, a quality that had to be attained, reached out for and sought after by assiduous penance and asceticism to bring it into the orbit of human existence? Or is holiness a gift from God to be found already present deep within the very ‘stuff’ of every human person and their experience of daily life and mortal existence?

### The Céli Dé Understanding of Holiness—MáelRúain the Ascetic?

I begin this study by examining in more detail the evidence, both textual and anecdotal, for what constituted holiness in the understanding of the Céli Dé monks and what they saw as the best way to attain it. The Kingdom of heaven was the ultimate goal of the Céli Dé, as it has been for all Christians both before and since, and this can be seen from the heartfelt little prayer with which the *Rule of the Céli Dé* concludes:

*Roísam uile in flaithe sin, rosairillem, rosaittrebam in secula seculorum.* ‘May we all reach that kingdom, may we deserve it, may we dwell therein forever and ever!’ (*Rules* 1927, n. 65).

We find these same sentiments occurring elsewhere in the same text:

*Intí dino conaing eclais De co n-umaloit 7 aurlata 7 comallad forsna timna-sa Patraic, ronbe céit diabla isin bith frechnaircc 7 flaitheus nime cen forcend.* ‘But he that protects the church of God with humility and obedience and observance of these behests of Patrick, may he receive a hundredfold in the present world, and [inherit] the kingdom of heaven without end!’ (*Rules* 1927, n. 65).

*Is he tra doroisce do shaethraib in saethar-sa .i. saethar hi crabud. Aire doberar flaitheus nime donti lasa legthar 7 nollega 7 dotcossig in nech bis icon legand.* ‘This is the most excellent of all labours, to wit, labour in piety; for the kingdom of heaven is granted to him who directs study, and to him who studies, and to him who supports the pupil who is studying’ (*Rules* 1927, n. 63).

As well as by studying, as mentioned above, they saw the way to the kingdom of heaven to be through the sacraments and the liturgy and the Word of God, ministered to the faithful by the priests, and by the practical living out of the Gospel message:

*Fobith is treothu ata cosnaigthe flaitheussa nime, eter bathis 7 comna 7 gabal n-ecnarci 7 audpáirt chuirpe Crist 7 a fholau 7 procept soscela 7 cumtach eclaisi De 7 aentu rechta 7 riaglaí, 7 issed on tolaigther do Dia hi talum.* ‘[...] seeing that it is through them that the kingdom of heaven is to be won, by means of baptism and communion and intercession, and by the sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ, and by preaching of the gospel, and by building up the Church of God, and by unity of law and rule; and this is what is pleasing to God on earth’ (*Rules* 1927, n. 64).

This same ultimate goal of the Kingdom of heaven can also be seen in the story told of Samthann, the abbess of Clonbroney in Co. Meath, who was closely connected with the Céli Dé movement, and who was presented as having much influence as a spiritual guide in her day. She is said to have

counselled a ‘certain teacher’ not to go on pilgrimage because ‘the kingdom of heaven can be reached from every land’ (O’Dwyer 1981: 57-58).

So the Céli Dé had an idealistic vision of attaining the Kingdom of heaven, but their understanding of the means of attaining it involved great ascetic effort and saying the maximum number of prayers. They were afraid that some purification would be necessary before the desired entry into the Kingdom of heaven could be achieved, whereas other texts from the same period did not seem to share this view. The inability of Brendan, the main protagonist in the roughly contemporaneous monastic text, the *Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis* (O’Meara 1991), to cross the river and enter fully into the Promised Land was not attributed to unworthiness or the need for purification (it was simply that his time had not yet come), and in contrast to the Céli Dé understanding, in this text even a manifestly sinful monk was ‘received by the angels of light’ (Selmer 1989: 7: 22, 23) immediately upon his death, again without any need for purification.

The view of the monks of Tallaght is shown in MáelRúain’s reply to Dublittir’s claim that the latter’s ale-drinking monks would be in the kingdom of God, along with MáelRúain’s stricter brethren:

*‘Ni fhuil a fhios sin agam’, ar Maol Ruain, ‘acht ata a fhios-so agam’, ar se, ‘gach duine dom mhuinntir eisdfios riom-sa 7 coimheudfas mo riaghail ni bhia riachdanas aca breitheamhnas do bhreith orra na teine bhratha da nglanadh, ar an adhbhar go mbeid siad glan chena. Ní mar sin dod mhuinntir-si; biaidh ni aca ghlanfus teine bhratha’. ‘I do not know about that,’ said MáelRúain, but this I know,’ said he, ‘every monk of mine that hearkens to me and keeps my Rule shall have no need of judgment to be passed on him, nor of the fire of doomsday to cleanse him, because they shall be clean already. Not so thy monks; they shall have somewhat that the fire of doomsday will cleanse’ (TM, n. 40).*

O’Dwyer comments on the reference in this passage to ‘the fire of doomsday’: ‘let us note the clear statement as to the existence of Purgatory’. (O’Dwyer 1981: 75). The expression used in the *Teaching of Máel Rúain*, which O’Dwyer translates ‘purgatory’ is ‘*na teine bhratha*’ (TM, n. 40). Gwynn translates this as ‘the fire of doomsday’. Although belief in some kind of purificatory process after death traces back to late Old Testament times (2 Maccabees 12: 39-45) the actual name ‘Purgatorium’ did not appear until around the twelfth century and the official teaching of the Church in ‘a place or state of temporal punishment, where those who have died in the grace of God expiate their unforgiven venial sins’ (Livingstone 1977: 423) did not find explicit definition until the Councils of Lyons (1274) and Florence (1439). However, the concept of a place, or rather state, of post-mortem *metanoia* can be seen to have existed from the earliest days of Christianity by the inscriptions in the catacombs and on tomb stones. It also man-

ifests in the Eucharistic Prayers of the Roman Missal. Tales of visionary experiences such as those of Fursa, as described by Bede (*HEGA*: 271-275) were extremely popular in the early Middle Ages (Hunter Blair 1976: 145-149). So for these monks, it seems that the most important element in their lives was attaining that degree of moral, spiritual and physical purity which would render purification after death before they could enter the kingdom of God unnecessary. This desire to live in a sinful and inhospitable world without being corrupted by it is at the root of many of the Céli Dé practices, and largely explains their negative attitude to life.

A pronounced and almost puritanical instance of their desire for moral purity can be seen in their exaggerated attitude to keeping Sunday holy:

*Nír ghnath leis na fír-chleirchibh lus do beantaio dia domnaigh no praiseach, da mbeanfuidhe, no aran, dá bhfuinfidhe ann, do chaitiomh fa mar do hoibrighead iad san domhnach.* ‘It was not the practice of the true churchmen to eat leeks or cabbage that were cut or bread that was baked on a Sunday, because labour was spent on them on a Sunday’ (*TM*, n. 62).

*Biadh do cuirfidhe a bfad do chom duine dia domnaigh nír ghnath aca an biadh sin do brigh go n-iomchairthi san domhnach e.* ‘It was against their usage to eat food which had been brought to any one from a distance on a Sunday, because it was carried on Sunday’ (*TM*, n. 82).

*Teclaim ubald dano dia domnaich no gluasacht oen ubuild díob de lar ní fogni leusom.* ‘Now gathering of apples on a Sunday or lifting a single apple from the ground is not allowed among them’ (*TM*, n. 49).

This desire for moral purity was so paramount to them that they refused to accept gifts from ‘worldly people’ in case they should be tainted by the supposed sin of the donors:

*Dob eaglach leo enní do ghlacadh o dhaoinibh saoghalta mar tidhacadh d’eagla go lui-ghfeadh ‘na choimhideacht sin peacadh na muinntie dobheuradh doibh e orra, acht amhain muna ghlacdaois uatha e a ngioll ar bheith ag guidhe orra.* ‘They were loath to accept anything as a gift from worldly people, lest the sin of those who gave it to them should accompany it and fall upon them: unless it were that they accepted it as a pledge that they would pray for the givers’ (*TM*, n. 30).

There is a reference to refusing gifts in the homily of the Cambrai fragment, but no reason is given. As this text is dated to ‘the second half of the seventh or the beginning of the eighth century’ (Kenney 1993: 283) it is too early to have originated in Céli Dé circles, but the idea is very similar.

Another practice which the monks of Tallaght held to be especially necessary was that of private confession of sins, a system that ‘took root on the

Continent in the eighth century (and) is generally accepted as having had its origin in the Celtic Insular churches. Probably in the beginning a monastic practice, it was brought to the Continent and popularized there by Columban and other monks, Irish and Anglo-Saxon' (Silke 2000: 781). For the Céli Dé in their earnest quest for spiritual perfection, confession of sins and guidance from a more experienced monk in *anamchairdeas* (spiritual friendship) had become a valuable tool and was seen as especially necessary. Their practice of frequent and detailed confession even of quite minor transgressions, was a manifestation of the wish for exaggerated spiritual purity, and MáelRúain was very strict that this confession be made immediately a fault was committed and should not be delayed until the following Sunday ('as some did'):

*Ní hail leis a ndeunaid drong ann do dheunamh dhá mhuinntir féin .i. gan a tteagmhann daibh do pheacadhaibh sologtha, ⁊ do sgrupul mar ata murmur, briathra diomhaoineacha ⁊ ithiomradh ⁊ fearg, ⁊ a leithéide oile ar feadh na seachtmhuine do chor a bhfaoisidin go domhnach, acht as eadh do ordaigh se dha mhuinntir comh luath ⁊ tuitfead siad ina leitheidibh sin a ccor a bhfaoisidin gan mhaill.* 'It was not his wish that his monks should do as some do, that is, defer until Sunday the confession of venial sins and slight offences like murmuring, idle words, backbiting, anger and such others as they might happen to commit in the course of the week, but he ordered his monks, as soon as any of them fell into such errors, to confess them without delay' (TM, n. 20).

So we see that confession of sins was seen as a very important and quite complex element of Céli Dé monastic life, but confession by itself had to be augmented: the prescribed penances had to be performed, and an improvement in the life of the penitent was expected:

*Ní mor antarbha leis faoiside mheinic ⁊ tuitim go meinic da heis isin pheacadh gan anbhreith aithrighe do choimlionadh mar as coir. As uime do chuir Elair an t-aos peanaide do ghlac se uaidhe aris mar nach ccoimhliondaois an ní adeirthi riu.* 'There is not much profit, he thinks, in making frequent confession and afterwards falling frequently into sin, without performing the prescribed penance as is right. This is why Hilary sent away the penitents he had accepted, as they did not perform what they were bidden to do' (TM, n. 22).

*As fearr leis duine do dheunamh faoisidne ge nach tiocfadh leis an breitheamhnas aithrighe budh choir do chur air fa na pheacadhaibh d'iomchar, acht go tigead leis ní eigin de d'iomchar, ina gan a deunamh ar chor ar bith. Oir o chuireas neach a pheacaidh a bhfaoisidin, ge nach coimhlionfadh an bhreitheamhnas aithrighe, coir, ata se ar slighe inar coir dho dochus do bheith aige a nDia go slaineochar é. Foghnaidh an faoisidin féin ar an modh sin do dhuine as nach beire se otrach na bpeacadh gan fhaoisidin ara choinsias do chombais.* 'He thinks it better for a man to make confession, even though he should be unable to bear the full penance which it would be right to impose for

his sins (provided he can bear a part), rather than not make any confession. For once anyone confesses his sins, even if he should not perform in full the penance due, he is on the road in which he may have hope in God that he will be saved. Confession, even of this kind, helps a man in that he does not bear the filth of his sins unconfessed on his conscience till death' (*TM*, n. 27).

However, the performance of the given penance was not always straightforward and the problems and difficulties associated with the confession of sins were also recognised:

*Adeireadh se gur peiriachlach cuis an anmchaidiosa, oir ma chuirionn duine an pheannaid dhlightheach ⁊ dothuill a pheacaid ar dhuine, as dócha a briseadh do ina a coimhlonadh. Muna ccuire se an pheannaid air, tuitfid fiacha an fhir sin air. 'Bid daoine agar lor leo do phennaoid faoiside amhain do dheunamh', ar se. As innill do dhuine féin comhairle a leasa do sheoladh doibh gan bhfaoisidin do ghabhail. 'He used to say that the office of confessor was full of dangers: for if one imposes on a man the due penance that his sins have deserved, he is more likely to break it than to perform it. If the confessor does not impose the penance on him, that man's debts will fall on him. 'There are people who think it penance enough for them merely to make confession,' said he. It is safer for a man's self to send them counsel as to what is best for them, without receiving their confessions' (*TM*, n. 74).*

In this regard, O'Dwyer comments with some justification, that 'the strictness and severity of the satisfaction were probably the cause of the sacrilegious confessions' (O'Dwyer 1981: 118).

There were certain rules of etiquette regarding confession and confessors. Both MáelRúain and Hilary, who were two much-sought after spiritual guides of the movement, were reluctant to receive anyone as a penitent if they thought that person already had a confessor (*TM*, n. 75, 76). MáelRúain made it clear to Máel Dithruib when the latter sought his guidance that he took his role as 'soul friend' very seriously and that this was not going to be an easy ride:

*Adubhairt Maol Ruain re Maol dithribh 'Bliadhain athglanta linne an cheud-bliadhain tig far n-anmchaidreas, ⁊ as eigeán duit beith trí cethracha lá ar aran ⁊ uisge, achd lom bainne d'fhaghail a ndomhnachaib ⁊ meadg bainne do chomasg ar an uisge isan samchorgas amháin'. Adubhairt Maol Ruain re Maol dithreibh 'Anuair cuirfeas tú thú fa breitheamhnus no fo smacht duine oile' (measaim gurb anmchara no athair sbioradalta adeir se annso) 'an teine as geire mheasfas tú dod losgadh, ionnsaigh í, id est, qui tibi minime pepercit'. 'Máel Rúain said to Máel Dithruib: 'The first year that a man comes under our guidance is treated by us as a year of purification, and you will have to spend three periods of forty days on bread and water, except for taking a drink of milk on Sundays and mixing the water with milk-whey in the summer-Lent only'. Máel Rúain said to Máel Dithruib: 'When you put yourself under the judgment or control of another' (I think he means here a confessor or spiritual*

father) ‘seek out the fire that you think will burn you the fiercest, (that is, him who will spare you the least)’ (*TM*, n. 77).

Their desire for moral as well as physical purity resulted in a very negative view of the body and natural functions: in their view ‘privies and urinals’ were the abode of evil spirits and a monk had to protect himself by the sign of the cross when entering these places, which were so potentially evil that his prayer within them could only be a minimal plea for divine protection.

*‘Fial-tige dino 7 fual-tige, it adbai do demnaib indsin. Senad do neoch na tige sin 7 a shé-nad féin in tan tiassair inntib, ocs ní dlegair irnaigthe inntib sin, sed Deus in adiutorium usque festina.’* ‘Privies and urinals are abodes for evil spirits. The sign of the cross should be made over these places, and a man should cross himself when he enters them, and it is not lawful to pray in them, except to repeat *Deus in adiutorium*, down to *festina*’ (*Rules*, n. 42).

In this connection, the Céili Dé monks had the view that was accepted by most of the early churches, and the Middle Ages generally: that menstruation and sexual relations were a source of ‘uncleanness’ and therefore communion should not be received:

*Galar mistai bis for ingenaib eclaise, saire a figle doib oiret bis foraib, maiten 7 fescor, 7 brochán do denam diob am theirt, secip aimser, fobith dlegar airmitiu in galair sin. Nis ti-agat dino do laim ind quia immundae sunt in illo tempore.* ‘During the monthly sickness of daughters of the Church they are excused from vigils, morning and evening, so long as it lasts, and gruel is to be made for them at Tierce, at whatever time this happens, because it is right that this sickness should have attention. They do not attend communion in such case, for they are unclean at these times’ (*Rules*, n. 50).

*An chuid d’aos na tuaithe tigeagh do ghabhail anmchairde, do hordaigthe dhó e féim do chongmail ona mhnaoi oidhchi dhardoim oidhche shathairn 7 oidhche dhomhnaigh, 7 da ndeunadh an ní ceudna oidhche luaín 7 an tan bios galar miosa ar an mnaoi do ba cóir e do réir anmchairdis Pheadair in libris Clementinis.* ‘Such of the laity as came to receive spiritual direction were ordered to keep apart from their wives on the nights of Wednesday, Friday and Saturday; and if they did the same on Sunday night and during their wives’ monthly periods, this would be right according to the ghostly counsel of Peter *in libris Clementinis*’ (*TM*, n. 63).

Hughes comments on the excessively severe standards set by the Céili Dé in sexual issues. She notes that the Old Irish *Penitential* ‘had allowed the reinstatement of priests after the prescribed period of penance following the sin of lust’ (Hughes 1966: 176-177) but quotes the *Teaching of Máel Rúain* to show that MáelRúain did not approve of this: ‘he parted company with his priest’s orders when he committed the sin, and he never recovers them,



even though he should do penance' (*TM*, n. 69). She notes the Céli Dé view that 'women, in particular, were an added source of danger... and were not to be trusted... in the later *Vita* of MáelRúain woman is spoken of as man's 'guardian devil' (Hughes 1966: 177).

Their means for struggling to maintain physical purity in these potentially sinful situations were those which had become standard in monasticism: fasting and castigation. The medieval attraction for the latter is explained by Leclercq: 'The discipline was another way of supplementing martyrdom—to beat oneself till one was worn out, or to be beaten till the blood flowed, was martyrdom willed: it was to imitate our Lord and the apostles who had been tortured by the scourge: it was to persecute oneself. (Leclercq 1982: 117-119). That this was the view of the Céli Dé we can see from various passages from their *Rules* (*TM*, n. 1, 2). O'Dwyer puts forward the argument:

It is interesting to note that castigation was not inflicted on a Sunday, but on a Saturday afternoon, so that no bad example might be given in the matter of the observance of the Sunday. Máel Dithruib said to Máel Rúain 'if the folk of these old churches all around us hear that we administer castigation on a Sunday there is no kind of work that they will not do on a Sunday'. One can easily sense the note of a reformer here. Other churches would take for granted that they were free to take liberties if the slightest sign of apparent laxity were shown by the reform monasteries' (O'Dwyer 1981: 110).

However, O'Dwyer appears to misunderstand the issue at stake here; the question was not the 'apparent laxity' but rather the opposite: taking the discipline was deemed to be hard work and if 'the folk of the old churches' got to hear of the monks performing this supposed 'labour' on a Sunday they would be able to claim this as a precedent for doing heavy manual labour on what was supposed to be a day of rest. We see Sabbath observance once again.

We can say that on the whole the Céli Dé attitude to life was cautious, even suspicious, and they saw this world as alien and dangerous. As we find them in their *Rules*, they preoccupied themselves with such questions as which was the most penitential way to drink a cup of water, or how many apples might break the fast. Their view of liturgical prayer is similarly scrupulous and can be summed up in their own words thus: 'Their practice was to say every prayer which would usually accompany the performance of a vigil, even though the vigil were excused' (*TM*, n. 96).

For the Céli Dé, their liturgical vision had been obscured by their devotion to the 'Three Fifties', and the Liturgy of the Hours seems to have been secondary to this in their priorities. Their preparation for the reception of Communion could be a lengthy seven-year process for the Céli Dé, and if

there were grave sins on the individual's conscience, he could even be denied the cup permanently. The *Teaching of Máel Rúain* in its earlier paragraphs presents detailed legislation regarding admission to Communion. (*TM*, n. 4, 5). From receiving the Eucharist in the form of bread only and that once a year, at 'midnight mass' in the first year (whether this is the first year of life as a monk is not made clear), the (presumably) novice increased by carefully regulated stages until, at the end of nine years, he came to receive the Eucharist every Sunday. Even then, the cup was not allowed 'to such as shed much blood and committed grievous sins' even though they had 'made expiation by penance' (*TM*, n. 5). This savours of an understanding of the Eucharist as 'a prize for good behaviour' rather than nourishment and healing for those struggling in their lives.

This same harsh attitude, quoting the authority of *na sean-aithri*, is found shown towards the reception of the Eucharist as Viaticum by 'people of imperfect life' even if they had renounced their sinful ways. (*TM*, n. 13, 14). The impossibility of knowing the motives for apparent repentance is given as a reason for refusing the sacrament, rather than for giving the dying person the 'benefit of the doubt'. The identical situation is presented in the previously mentioned text, the *Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis*, with exactly the opposite conclusion. The monk who was a thief threw away his ill-gotten goods and declared '*Peccavi, pater, ignosce. Ora pro anima mea, ne pereat*'. (Selmer 1989: 7: 8, 9). When all the brethren had prostrated and prayed for the erring brother's soul, Brendan, having admonished the 'devil' seen to be responsible for tempting him, addressed the monk: "*Sume corpus et sanguinem Domini, quia anima tua modo egredietur de corpore*"... *Itaque accepta eucharistia anima fratris egressa est de corpore, suscepta ab angelis lucis uidentibus fratribus*' (Selmer 1989: 7: 18, 19, 21-23). So not only did the erring monk receive both the eucharistic bread and the cup, but also 'before the eyes of the brothers he was received by the angels of light' (O'Meara 1991: 14), which was a very different attitude towards death bed repentance to that shown by the Céli Dé.

The harshness of the Céli Dé attitude is also shown in the incident involving the 'lay brother' and the 'son of life' (a Céli Dé monk). When the lay brother questioned the constant repetition of the *Beati*, which is taken by most editors and commentators to be Psalm 119, and the *Magnificat*, the son of life offered the explanation:

Just as one at the foot of the gallows, ready to be hanged, might utter before the king who was about to hang him praise and lamentation, imploring him for deliverance—such is the praise and lamentation that we utter in the *Beati* to the King of Heaven for our deliverance from the pains of Hell (*TM*, n. 32).

This articulates the Céli Dé attitude to prayer and their concept of God. God was seen to be an all-powerful King with the right of life and death over his subjects. These subjects lived in imminent danger of the death sentence, and went in fear of ‘the pains of hell’, and prayer was understood as ‘lamentation, imploring deliverance’ from this death sentence, and so it had become a desperate plea for help from a dangerous environment.

The great devotion of the Céli Dé to the ‘Three Fifties’ has been mentioned already. In this context of liturgical theology, it is significant that Máel Dithruib, a leading figure of the movement, and a particularly close disciple of MáelRúain, interspersed his chanting of the Three Fifties with the intercessions ‘*Sancte Michael ora pro nobis; Sancta Maria ora pro nobis*’, and also added an invocation to the saint whose feast fell on that particular day. (*TM*, n. 42). To insert these prayers between the psalms in this way shifts the liturgical emphasis from Christ as our one mediator before the Father, to the saints as intercessors on our behalf. There is a similar confusion of devotion to the saints with liturgical prayer in later paragraphs of the *Teaching of Máel Rúain* where various hymns and prayers to the saints are added to the recitation of the Three Fifties, already itself a paraliturgical devotion rather than genuinely part of the Liturgy of the Hours (*TM*, n. 86, 90-91, 95-101). This ‘piling up’ of devotions and adding them to liturgical prayer encouraged a process which reached its apogee in the overburdened offices of the High Middle Ages.

Another traditional penitential practice which was taken extremely seriously at Tallaght was that of fasting. In the *Céli Dé Rules* the consumption of food figures highly: it is the subject of thirty-nine different chapters (almost a third of the contents). It is not simply the quantity of food which is the point at issue, as this was reasonably generous at Tallaght in contrast with other monastic houses such as Iona. O’Dwyer cites a story which he himself describes as ‘somewhat grim’ whereby the abbot of Iona on noticing that ‘the recluses had a bad colour’ himself prepared their pottage, adding butter to the mixture, which improved their health. ‘So when their colour came back and they revived, he continued alternately to mortify and revive them from their dying state after this fashion’ (O’Dwyer 1981: 70). The point at issue here is the very precise minutiae of regulating the food allowance which indicates the relative importance of the details of fasting in the Céli Dé mind. O’Dwyer describes the day’s ration: ‘a half-loaf of bread, a quantity of butter and some drink (most frequently whey-water). To this were added incidentals such as cabbage, fish, cheese, apples, leeks or curds but there was only one meal in the day’ (O’Dwyer 1981: 80-81). The section in which O’Dwyer analyses the Céli Dé diet occupies thirteen pages (O’Dwyer 1981: 68-81) which gives some idea of the relative importance he gives to the subject. He notes that the regulations concerning the eating of meat

seem to be contradictory (O'Dwyer 1981: 71-73). We can conclude from the above that while the amount of food permitted by the rule at Tallaght was reasonably generous (and took into account such external factors as the threat of famine, liturgical feast days and the individual capacities of different monks), the attitude towards controlling the physical acts of eating and drinking and the obligations incurred by the religious practice of abstaining from food were scrupulous in the extreme and seem to reveal an unhealthy preoccupation with these issues.

However, although the above study gives a very negative view of the theology of the Céili Dé, there are some redeeming features. MáelRúain himself 'did not wish anyone to decrease any part of his (own) burden, however heavy he might feel it' (*TM*, n. 19), however, he did show mercy to others when they were overburdened: 'He used to lighten the burden of the priests whenever he saw it was a hindrance to them in saying mass' (*TM*, n. 19). In this and in other ways, such as allowing a slight relaxation in diet and in penance on feast days, he, as abbot, mirrored the mercy and compassion of Christ to his brethren.

However, in spite of these mitigating circumstances in the practices of MáelRúain himself, on the whole, the theological vision of the Céili Dé was negative and the evidence seems to present them as seeing God as a Judge to whom a strict account would have to be made. Instead of understanding Christ as their risen Redeemer who joined them to himself in his praise of the Father, he had become a distant figure whom they remembered, not in liturgical prayer, but as an historical figure by the constant reading and re-reading in the refectory of the Gospel accounts of his life (*TM*, n. 17, 80, 89). There seems to have been little realisation of the mercy and compassion of God, and for them, holiness was a matter of strenuous personal effort with little acknowledgment of the abundant gift of divine grace.

### **How Óengus Understood Holiness—the Mystic?**

We have a very different conception of what it meant to be holy in a text dating from Tallaght in the early ninth century. It is a poem composed to celebrate the feastdays of the saints and is called in Old Irish the *Félire Óengusso*. The Old Irish word '*Félire*' is traditionally translated as 'martyrology' but it would be more accurate to regard it as an embellished liturgical calendar, possibly indeed the calendar used by the community of monks at the monastery of Tallaght itself. Ó Riain comments:

The compilation of martyrologies, particularly those commemorating native Irish saints, was clearly an enterprise which excited and inspired medieval Irish ecclesiastics, and the surviving Irish martyrologies are a source of outstanding importance for the study of the early Irish church (Ó Riain 2002: vii).

The *Félire Óengusso* is so important because it is doubly unique: it is the earliest metrical martyrology we have, and it was written in Old Irish, which was the first vernacular tongue to produce its own version of the Church's official catalogue of the saints. So it is an important—indeed a unique—witness, to the Irish Church's understanding of devotion to the saints, both saints in general and Irish saints in particular; to the ability of Irish clerics to express that devotion along with many other aspects of insular scholarship in hagiographical works, liturgical calendars, hymns and homilies, and to the development of the local use of the vernacular. The scope of all this material is astonishing in the depth and breadth of its learning and in the important place it accords to the use of the vernacular tongue (Carey 2000: 13). It is unusual (though not unique) among early Irish texts in that we are told the name of the author and the place of composition. Its importance is attested to by the fact that there are more surviving copies of this text than of any other Irish martyrology.

Óengus himself claims that *Félire* will be recited 'daily' (*FO*, 272, lines 165, 166) (the function of a martyrology) in order to 'ascertain the feasts' (*FO*, 267, lines 79, 80) (the function of a calendar). It therefore combines the functions of both a calendar and a martyrology. It was intended to be recited right through on any given day as a devotion supplementing the liturgical observance of the feasts of individual saints.

The amount of annotation and commentary that Óengus' martyrology accumulated bears witness that it was in frequent use for centuries after its initial composition in the early-to-mid ninth century, and therefore very popular in the monastic circles which were responsible for its compilation and dissemination. The *Félire Óengusso* is a poem, with a very long prologue and an even longer epilogue, and Óengus makes clear in the Prologue that his liturgical year is divided into twelve months, and that he is going to set out the feasts in three hundred and sixty-five verses, one for each day of the year, as in any martyrology. He says:

*Láithe na míis ngréine  
nám-fóirsa a salland,  
diar lóid arnáp inmall,  
acht dá sé cáim calland.*

The days of the solar months,  
to sing them shall not delay me,  
except twice six fair calends,  
so that our lay may not be tedious.

*Ón challaind co alaili  
nám-fóirsa iar sétaib  
acht cóic caiptil uasail  
sescat ar trib cétaib.*

From one New Year's Day to another  
naught shall delay me along paths,  
save five and sixty  
and three hundred noble chapters.  
(*FÓ*, 30, lines 321-328).

These verses, and indeed the whole of the *Félire*, show the very great concern which the insular monks had, and which amounted almost to an obsession, to show clearly and with as much accuracy as their various still less-than-perfect systems allowed, the location of sacred events such as saints' feast days with a precise chronology. The various monastic *Annals* also show the concern to accommodate and harmonize different systems of dating, not only with regard to liturgical timekeeping, but also regarding that of secular affairs and world history. A notable example of this is the precision with which the birth of Christ was situated within the various elements of human time (as it was then understood) in the martyrology entry to be read as the solemn announcement of Christmas:

In the five thousand, one hundred and ninety-ninth year of the creation of the world; from the time when God in the beginning created the heaven and earth; the two thousand, nine hundred and fifty-seventh year after the flood; the two thousand and fifteenth year from the birth of Abraham; the one thousand, five hundred and tenth year from Moses, and the going forth of the people from Egypt; the one thousand and thirty-second year from the anointing of King David; in the sixty-fifth week according to the prophecy of Daniel; in the one hundred and ninety-fourth Olympiad; the seven hundred and fifty-second year from the foundation of the city of Rome; the forty-second year of the rule of Octavian Augustus; all the earth being at peace, Jesus Christ, the Eternal God, and the son of the Eternal Father, willing to consecrate the world by his most merciful coming, being conceived by the Holy Spirit, and nine months having passed since his conception, was born in Bethlehem of Judah of the Virgin Mary, having been made man; the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the flesh (*Martyrologium Romanum* 1584: 395, 396).

This passage announces, with the greatest possible solemnity, the Nativity of Christ according to its position in the various dating schemes then current in contemporary time-systems, thus showing its significance for the salvation of all the peoples of the then known world.

Various writers and scholars have sung the praises of the *Félire Óengusso*. Whitley Stokes himself commented at the beginning of the Preface in 1905:

An Irish metrical martyrology of such antiquity deserves the attention of all who are interested in religious history, liturgical books, Celtic philology, or poetic art (Whitley Stokes 1905: vii).

More than a hundred years later, in his monumental study of Irish saints, Pádraig Ó Ríain wrote of Óengus' 'hugely influential work', and noted as an expression of its importance that it 'survives in more copies than any other Irish martyrology' (Ó Riain 2011: [79]). John Carey said that 'the *Félire Óen-*

*gusso* is the most celebrated of the calendars of saints' days produced in medieval Ireland' (Carey 2000: 180).

So what was the specific role and function of the *Félire Óengusso*? What does it tell us about Óengus' theological understanding? And how does a reading of this text deepen our exploration into the spirituality of the Céli Dé monks and help us to clarify our definition of them as 'ascetics or mystics'?

Óengus in his *Félire* presents us with a very different theological vision of holiness from that which we have already encountered in Céli Dé texts. Although he was very closely connected with the Céli Dé movement, whether or not he was an actual member of a Céli Dé community, he seems to have a much more positive theological ideal than that portrayed in the Céli Dé *Rules* which ideal is analysed above. He saw holiness, in both its manifestations in this life and in the next, as a grace, a gift from God; his important vision is that one goes to heaven 'without striving'. This is the very antithesis of the Céli Dé model, which was that holiness was attained by intense personal effort and asceticism. Óengus even intended the recitation of his poem to be a 'commutation' of some of the harsher penances performed by the Céli Dé monks.

*Is arrae secht noiffrend  
mad nóeb arid-léga,  
is arrae trí cóecat  
don dilmain nod-géba.*

Tis a commutation of seven masses  
if he who recites it is holy:  
tis a commutation of the three fifties  
to the freeman who shall sing it.

(*FO*, 272, lines 177-180).

It was to be 'a veritable giving of confession... a commutation of three trid-uans (three fasts of three days each)... it a solace to believers... a requiem for the dead' (*FO*, 273, lines 185-192).

Óengus emerges from his work as a strong and vivid personality in his own right. He seems to have been very closely connected with the Céli Dé movement, and tradition has been proved to be right when it sees him as actually belonging to it, as we see from the closeness of his relationship with MáelRúain, his links with Tallaght and his familiarity with Céli Dé vocabulary and practices, but his theological, liturgical and spiritual views were very much his own and he had his own original agenda, which he proclaimed confidently, energetically and with the occasional touch of humour. And Óengus' religious vision was very different from that which we find in the Céli Dé *Rules* and anecdotal evidence of life in the Tallaght monastery under MáelRúain.

He also provides an alternative to the harsh asceticism of personal effort and striving practised by the Céli Dé monks which we have seen in their *Rules*. By doing this he opens a window into the monastic world of the ninth

century which until now has remained largely closed and complements the picture which emerges from the *Rules* of the Céli Dé. Óengus in his *Félire* gives us another dimension of Céli Dé piety and devotion. Whereas the spirituality of the *Rules* of the Céli Dé is not particularly attractive because of its harshness, that presented by Óengus in his *Félire* is of a very different type. Céli Dé piety as we find it in their *Rules* saw the life of the spirit as a constant struggle to earn God's grace by the ascetic efforts of the individual monk. However, Óengus shows throughout his writing that the saints share in the radiant glory of God through the mercy and graciousness of God himself. Their heavenly transformation is the gift of God's grace, not the result of their own efforts. It is very clear in many verses of his poem that Óengus understood the saints in heaven to be sharing in the radiant brightness of divine glory (cf. 1 Timothy 6:16). He speaks of and to Christ and the saints in terms of great intimacy and there is here a warmth, an intimacy and a tenderness which prefigure the language of the later medieval mystics. He uses phrases such as these: 'Great love for Mary's Son' (*FO*, 23, line 148); 'Ye have nothing that is dearer than the love of God, if ye can achieve it, adoration of the Cloudy King; 'tis thence ye will not be mournful' (25, lines 185-188); 'The fair King with piety, Jesus over a wave of flood—He was happily born of Mary—abides after them all' (27, lines 249-252); 'Let our will be firm, let us strive after what is dearer: since 'tis this that is nobler, let us all love Jesus!' (28, lines 261-264); 'but what is noblest has strengthened us, the high love of Jesus' cohort' (264, lines 11, 12); 'the angelic aid of the King, Jesukin fair (and) lustrous' (268, lines 91, 92); 'with the life of his soul by Christ the loveable, mighty Prince' (272, lines 169, 170); '*Miserere mihi*, O royal Prince, abundantly, O Jesus, I love Thee, O great God, I beseech Thee!' (278, lines 309-312).

### **Conclusion: Not 'either or' but 'both and'**

We see that Óengus is speaking from the ascetic strand of Céli Dé piety when he asks a reward of Jesus: 'the reward is that when he dies he may be conveyed or escorted to Heaven by the *céli* (*rígrad*) of Jesus' (Lambkin 1999: 135). The composition of the *Félire* is this service which Óengus performs in return for the assurance of heaven. For Óengus, very much associated with the thought and the theology of the Céli Dé, salvation is still a 'quasi-legal procedure based on the relationship between 'lord' and 'follower' (Lambkin 1999: 135). However, we see from these extracts from his *Félire* that there is also a personal warmth and devotion which go far beyond a mere legal contract. So from the monastic texts available to us, particularly when we compare the *Céli Dé Rules* with the *Félire* of Óengus, we see that within the one movement there were both ascetics and mystics, and even the same people—Óengus, for example—could be both—an ascetic at one time in his



understanding of salvation as a contract, and a mystic at another in his devotional prayer to Jesus and the saints who dwell in the radiant glory of God in heaven. It was Óengus' fervent wish to join them through the unmerited grace of God.

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**Note.** All the quotations from the *Félire Óengusso* in this work are taken from Stokes' edition and are referenced 'FO, [ ], lines [ ]' or, if referring to a specific day 'FO, [ ], [date].