

THE CELTIC WAY OF EVANGELISM

How Christianity Can Reach the West Again

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PENTECOST STUDY 2010

Animated by Canon Jim Irvine

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A GRACE COMMISSION



Jesus said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and *you will be my witnesses* in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”
Acts 1:7f. NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION

THE CELTIC WAY OF EVANGELISM

There are two ways (at least) in which these unusual communities produced an unusual approach to the living out of Christianity, compared to the Roman form.

First, the monastic communities produced a less individualistic and more community-oriented approach to the Christian life. This affected the way in which—in parish churches, communities, tribes, and families—the people supported each other, pulled together, prayed for each other, worked out their salvation together, and lived out the Christian life together. Every person had multiple role models for living as a Christian and, in a more profound and pervasive sense than on the continent, Irish Christians knew what it meant to be a Christian family or tribe.

Second, Celtic Christianity addressed a “zone” of human concern that Western Christianity, and other world religions, have generally ignored. Paul Heibert, in a classic article called “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,” shows how the earth’s peoples explain life, live life, and face the future at three levels. The bottom level deals with the factors in life that our senses can apprehend; this is the “empirical” world that the “sciences” deal with. At this level, people learn to plant a crop, to clean a fish, to fix a water pump, to build a house, and a thousand other things. The top level deals with the ultimate issues in life that are beyond what our senses can perceive; this is a “transcendent” or “sacred” realm that Christianity and the other world religions define, and then address. Heibert reports that “religion as a system of explanation deals with the ultimate questions of the origin, purpose, and destiny of an individual, a society, and the universe.”

Western society and the Western churches, especially since the Enlightenment, have tended to exclude from their view of reality a middle level that is nevertheless quite real to people in most societies (and increasingly real to postmodern people in the West).

What are the “middle-level” issues of life? Here one finds the questions of the uncertainty of the near future, the crises of present life, and the unknowns of the past. Despite knowledge of facts such as that seeds once planted will grow and bear fruit, or that travel down this river on a boat will bring one to the neighboring village, the future is not totally predictable. Accidents, misfortunes, the intervention of other persons, and other unknown events can frustrate human planning. P.30f

The problem of Western Christianity usually ignores this middle level that drives most people’s lives most of the time, as do the other world religions. Western Christian leaders usually focus on the “ultimate” issues, as they define them, to the exclusion of the lesser issues; indeed, they often consider middle issues “beneath” them! When Christianity ignores, or does not help people cope with, these middle issues, we often observe “Split-Level Christianity” in which people go to church so they can go to heaven, but they also visit, say, the shaman or the astrologer for help with the pressing problems that dominate their daily lives.

Celtic Christians had no need to seek out a shaman. Their Christian faith and community addressed life as a whole and may have addressed the middle level more

specifically, comprehensively, and powerfully than any other Christian movement ever has. A folk Christianity of, by, and for the people developed. It helped common people to live and cope as Christians day by day in the face of poverty, enemies, evil forces, nature's uncertainties, and frequent threats from many quarters.
P. 32

Ray Simpson, in *Exploring Celtic Spirituality*, explains that contemplative prayer contrasts with the more usual approach of praying at a specific time or meeting, and it contrasts with the more usual petitionary approach that "requests God to do specific things." Indeed, it is "the opposite of controlling prayer." Contemplative prayer is the way we fulfill St. Paul's counsel to "pray without ceasing." It is an ongoing, or very frequent, opening of the heart to the Triune God, often while engaging in each of the many experiences that fill a day.

The *Carmina Gadelica* tradition gave people brief *daily rituals*, which they learned by heart, with suggested affirmations or prayers for directing their hearts, moment by moment, setting by setting. The Celtic Christians learned prayers to accompany getting up in the morning, for dressing, for starting the morning fire, for bathing *or* washing clothes or dishes, for "smoothing" the fire at days end, and for going to bed at night. One for starting the morning fire begins...

*I will kindle my fire this morning
In presence of the holy angles of heaven,
God, kindle Thou in my heart within
A flame of love to my neighbor,*

*To my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all,
To the brave, to the knave, to the thrall*
P. 32f.

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Understanding the target populations was indispensable, that the people were more responsive when they knew they were understood and that, when seekers were welcomed into the fellowship, the faith was “more caught than taught.” P. 56.

Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, which was published more than three centuries before Christ, observed effective (and ineffective) speakers in various settings and wrote the earliest comprehensive volume of rhetorical theory. He defined rhetoric as “an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion.” Essentially, Aristotle theorized that persuasion takes place in an interplay between the *speaker*, the *message*, and the *audience*, within a (cultural and historical) *context*. (More specifically, he taught that persuasion occurs from the interaction of the *ethos* of the speaker, the *logos* of the message, and the *pathos* of the audience.)

Ethos (speaker) *Logos (message)* *Pathos (audience)*

While writers since Aristotle have often used other terms for the speaker (such as the “communicator” or “source”) and for the audience (such as the “receiver” or “receptor”), Aristotle’s essential model has served as the prevailing model of the communication process for twenty-three centuries.

Much of the unusual communicative power of the Celtic Christian movement was attributable to the *ethos* of its

communicators and its communities. Aristotle believed that when auditors hear an advocate speaking, they are asking (perhaps subconsciously) whether the speaker can be trusted and believed. Aristotle observed that, in complex matters—like statecraft and religion—in which even the community of specialists cannot agree on what is true, the nonspecialist public accepts “probability.” The public accepts the idea, case, or cause that seems most probably true, and their judgment of the idea is influenced by their judgment of the speaker; the advocate they perceive as most trustworthy and believable is probably communicating truth. Aristotle’s chief point is memorably expressed in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson defined eloquence as “the art of speaking what you mean and are,” and he suggested that “the reason why anyone refuses his assent to your opinion, or his aid to your benevolent design, is in you. He refuses to accept you as a bringer of truth, because, though you think you have it, he feels that you have it not. You have not given him the authentic sign.” P. 56f.

What is involved in “the authentic sign” for which audiences are attuned? What, specifically, are people looking for? Aristotle identified three principles in the communicator’s ethos: *intelligence*, *character*, and *good will*.

To be believed, the speaker must be perceived to be informed, knowledgeable, and competent in the subject matter, with a capacity for valid reasoning, good judgment, and wisdom.

To be trusted, the speaker must be perceived as a person of honesty, virtue, and integrity.

To be believed and trusted, the speaker needs to be perceived as “for” the audience, on their side, more concerned for the audience’s welfare than for self gain.

The communicator’s *ethos* is so crucial that Aristotle claimed it is “almost ... the controlling factor in persuasion.” P. 58f.

My interview research with secular people has confirmed the prominence of the "credibility" theme in secular people's inquiries about Christianity, and their inquiries often take one of three specific forms.

First, some people wonder whether we really believe what we say we believe.

Second, some people do not doubt that we believe it; they wonder whether we live by it.

Third, some people do not doubt that we believe it or live by it; they wonder whether it makes much difference! P. 60.

At its heart however, identification refers to a closeness that the audience experiences between themselves and the communicator. If, in the Good Will dimension, auditors ask “Is the communicator *for* us?” then in the Identification dimension they ask “Is the communicator *with* us?” P. 60.

Kierkegaard, the eighteenth-century Danish existentialist philosopher and theologian, also believed that

identification is the means through which advocates influence people. He specifically addressed the “Christendom” problem—in which many people who live in a “Christian country” believe in Christianity but do not live by it and do not see the contradiction, and they live with the “illusion” that they are Christians! A “direct” approach to such people, Kierkegaard observed, arouses defensiveness and is counterproductive. So he recommended “indirect” communication approaches that engage people’s imaginations, such as through narrative, that “wound from behind” and help people to “discover” truth. P. 61

No man is the son of knowledge if he is not also the son of poetry.

No man loves poetry without loving the light,
Nor the light without loving the truth,
Nor the truth without loving justice,
Nor justice without loving God.

The Celtic communication of Christian truth was known to combine genres, like analogy and poetry, as in this early Irish verse:

Three folds of the cloth, yet only one napkin is there,
Three joints in the finger, but still only one finger fair;
Three leaves of the shamrock, yet no more than one
shamrock to wear,
Frost, snow-flakes and ice, all in water their origin
share,
Three Persons in God; to one God alone we make prayer.
P. 72f.

DAISY

He loves me...

He loves me still...

He loves me yet...

And He always will.

Celtic Christian advocates especially engaged barbarian imaginations through *storytelling* and *poetry*. The several, Celtic peoples revered their oral traditions; their bards told stories and their poets recited poems that communicated the people's beliefs, history, and folk wisdom through entertainment. Their "poets constituted the intellectual aristocracy of Celtic society ... The Celts regarded poets as ... intermediaries between this world and the next," and their storytelling bards were also greatly esteemed. "To a considerable extent, ... Christian monks and scholars took over the role of the old Druidic bards and *filid*." Many of them became prodigious storytellers. They communicated much of the biblical message by telling its stories, and many of their more original stories, and the stories of the saints, were passed to many generations through the oral tradition. P. 73.

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The doctrine of the Trinity became the foundational paradigm for Celtic Christianity. The doctrine informed the people's piety as well as the theologians' theories. The understanding of God as a unity of three persons, bound together in love, became the Celtic model for the Christian community; the understanding of God as a family of three persons defined the Christian family. Celtic Christians lived their daily lives, from waking up to cleaning up, from working to retiring, aware of the presence, protection, and guidance of all three persons of the Trinity.

Their understanding of the doctrine was like the Roman understanding, with two exceptions:

1. The Romans emphasized the oneness, or unity, of the Trinity more than the Celts.
2. The Roman Christians emphasized the "transcendence" of the Triune God (later expressed visibly in their Gothic cathedrals), and they seem to have experienced God as distant, if not remote, except for Christ's "real presence" in the sacraments.

The Celtic Christians emphasized the "immanence" of the Triune God as Companion in this life and the next; in their experience, the "veil" between earth and heaven was "thin"—if you viewed creation as sacramental. Many centuries after Patrick and Columba, Celtic Christians in the Hebrides Islands prepared for evening prayer with this affirmation:

*I lie down this night with God,
And God will lie down with me;*

*I lie down this night with Christ,
And Christ will lie down with me;
I lie down this night with the Spirit,
And the Spirit will lie down with me;
God and Christ and the Spirit
Be lying down with me.*

The second example focuses on a contextually appropriate way to interpret the death of Christ. Thomas Cahill tells us that the Irish were still practicing human sacrifice when Patrick returned. They sacrificed some prisoners of war to appease the war gods, and some of their own newborns to appease the harvest gods, and occasionally a prince would offer himself as a sacrifice to some god whose help was needed.

Three principles drove this sacrificial tradition.

1. There were always devoted religious people who were willing to give up their lives to the gods for the people.
2. There were always “basely religious” people who were willing to sacrifice other people to the gods!
3. “It would be an understatement to assert that the Irish gods were not the friendliest of figures.” Their gods were capricious; they prepared traps for people; and they would only bless people in response to flattery, liturgical manipulation, and sacrifice.

That religious worldview produced a precarious sense of life; no Irishman was unfamiliar with the experience of cosmic terror.

Patrick proclaimed the good news of a different kind of God. Christianity's God is not hostile, capricious, or self-seeking; He is for us, he loves people (and his other creatures), and he wills their deliverance from sin and terror into new life. Patrick, drawing from the Philippian Hymn, proclaimed that this God *does not want people to feed him* through human sacrifices; this God has sacrificed his only Son for us and *wants to feed us* through the blessed sacrament. No human being needs to be sacrificed ever again. This High God calls us not to die for him, but to live for him and each other.

This point is not easy to communicate, but I recall the memorable way that Ted Runyon, of Emory University's Candler School of Theology, once clarified it: "The psalmist did *not* say 'The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork.' The psalmist said 'The heavens declare the glory of *Yahweh* and the firmament showeth *His* handiwork.'" Celtic Christianity believed that the natural world was created good and, though the Fall introduced sin and evil into the natural order, it was still essentially God's good creation. Celtic Christians also believed that the "veil" between the natural and the supernatural, and between earth and heaven, was much "thinner"—especially at "holy places"—than the Roman wing believed. Consequently, nature figures prominently in their visual Christian symbols.

It is important to acknowledge the roots of Celtic Christianity's optimism about human nature. Genesis sees

people created in God's image, and Psalm 8 could still affirm that humans are only a little lower than the angels and are crowned with glory and honor. The Druids had believed in free will and the possibility of willing to live a good life—and succeeding. The Greek Fathers of the Eastern Church had believed that sin had not obliterated the image of God in people nor destroyed their capacity to want, and enjoy, fellowship with God. Origen in Egypt and Irenaeus in Gall held similar views. From these influences, and their own reflections from Scripture and mission experience, Ian Bradley tells us that Celtic Christianity viewed “human nature not as being radically tainted by sin and evil, intrinsically corrupt and degenerate, but as imprinted with the image of God, full of potential and opportunity, longing for completion and perfection.”

The Roman Church, however, especially under the sway of St. Augustine, had a significantly different view of human nature. St. Augustine, Christianity's greatest and most profound theological giant, had reflected his way into the view that Original Sin had so corrupted human nature, and twisted it into such pride and selfishness, that people were no longer free to will what God wills. Consequently, everything involved in the salvation of people is by the “irresistible” Grace of the Sovereign God; people do not have enough goodness left within them to even cooperate in their salvation nor, once saved, to live a good life without more Grace.

This difference between Roman and Celtic Christianity is very important for evangelization, because the two

views lead to quite contrasting understandings of what is essentially involved in Salvation.

For Augustine, Jesus Christ saves us by rescuing us from sin and the consequences of the Fall.

For the Celtic apostles, Jesus Christ also comes to complete his good creation.

While we are in no position to “settle” the most enduring problem in a theology of human nature, several observations are warranted.

1. Celtic Christianity’s theological optimism about human nature cannot adequately account for the Holocaust and the other cases of genocide in the twentieth century; Augustine’s doctrine of human nature does account for large scale depravity and for much else that has gone terribly wrong in God’s human experiment.
2. It is possible to observe, in most people, both sin and goodness.
3. My interviews with converts indicate that, for many people, becoming a Christian involves experiences of being rescued and experiences of being completed.
4. The Celtic Christian movement suggests that it is often more effective to begin with people at the point of their goodness, however latent, than to initially engage people as sinners.
5. The Celtic doctrine of human nature enabled Celtic Christians to perceive God’s possibilities in the “barbarians,” and they engaged in mission to these peoples for five centuries. The Roman doctrine,

combined with their expectation that a people be sufficiently “civilized” to be reachable, energized much less mission in these same centuries.

We can see this policy visually in the evolution of the tall Celtic stone crosses. When Patrick returned to Ireland, the Irish Celts already worshiped around tall “standing stones.” The pillars stood as a symbol of the people's desire to reach up to the heavens and the High God; they stood as a symbolic link between heaven and earth. Once, when the people were more nomadic, a tall tree might serve as such a symbol; when they gathered into settlements, the standing stone became the favored symbol. When a people turned to the Christian faith, the people often “Christianized” their standing stone by carving or painting a cross, the sign of the fish, *or* the Chi-Rho symbol on the stone, and it became a place made sacred for Christian worship. In time, this practice led to the sculpting, from tall stones, of tall standing Celtic crosses with the circle intersecting the cross. In time, biblical scenes and / or nature scenes were carved onto some crosses.

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Three suggestions should establish the relevance of the Celtic Christian story to much of what Western Christianity faces in the twenty-first century.

1. A host of New Barbarians substantially populate the Western world once again; indeed, they are all around us. Many of them are “secular”; that is, they have never been substantially influenced by the Christian religion; they have no Christian memory and no church to “return” to. Many have never acquired a “church etiquette” (they would not know when to stand, or where to find Second Corinthians, or what to say to the pastor after the service), and they are not “civilized” or “refined” enough to fit and feel comfortable in the church down the street. Often, they are thought to lack “class.” They may have unshined shoes or body odor or grease under their finger nails; in conversation, they might split an infinitive or utter an expletive. Many New Barbarians are addicted, and their lives are at least sometimes out of control around some substance, such as alcohol or cocaine, or some process, such as sex or gambling. Many Western cities appear, at least at times, to be taken over by the New Barbarians.
2. These populations are increasingly similar to the populations that the movements of Patrick, Columba, and Aidan reached as the New Barbarians become increasingly postmodern. For over two centuries, the ideology of the Enlightenment shaped the climate of “Modernity” that profoundly shaped people’s consciousness in the West. It scripted

people to believe that they were essentially good and rational creatures; that they could build morality and society on reason alone; that science and education would deliver humanity from its remaining problems; that progress was “inevitable”; and that the universe functions like a machine – a closed system leaving no need for the supernatural and little room for spirituality.

3. Most churches assume (though this is seldom verbalized) that the postmodern New Barbarians are unreachable, because they are not “civilized” enough to become “real” Christians. Remarkably, most churches assume this in a time when the New Barbarians are often the most receptive people in our communities; many are searching “in all the wrong places” for the kind of life they yearn for. The typical church ignores two populations, year after year: the people who aren’t “refined” enough to feel comfortable with us, and the people who are too “out of control” for us to feel comfortable with them! Several years ago, while consulting with a church, I did some laundry at the local laundromat and visited with eight people. Seven were unchurched; six had never been involved in any church; five would be interested, however, if a church was interested in them. I took their names and addresses to the church leader group and heard this response: “The people who frequent that laundromat aren’t even nice.” P. 97f.

Peter Berger’s *The Social Construction of Reality* features

three major insights that especially validate the Celtic way: (1) A person's view of Reality is largely shaped, and maintained, within the community into which one has been *socialized*. (2) In a pluralistic society, the possibility of conversion, that is, changing the way one perceives essential Reality, is opened up through *conversations* with people who live with a contrasting view of Reality, and (3) one adopts and internalizes the new world-view through *resocialization* into a community sharing that new worldview. P. 99f.

Church people glibly explain addiction as "Sin"; then, as they assume that the power of Sin is greater than "the One who is in us," they shun, withdraw from, or even excommunicate people hijacked by addiction. Meanwhile, the academic study of addiction, in fields like genetics, psychology and cultural anthropology, has experienced enormous progress in understanding addiction. ... Meri Whitaker observes that most church people are like Jonah; they assume that the "Ninevites" do not deserve God's love. Serenity Church, however, wants the people who wouldn't "fit" in most churches. P. 100f.

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John Smith, like the ancient Celtic apostles, believes that affirmation and paradox, understanding and mystery, are all important in theology. He believes that some Truth is better expressed metaphorically and artistically than through theological propositions. He believes that we should “do church” in ways that are “ancient and liturgical, and also postmodern, spontaneous, and a bit profane.” He believes that “sensuality and spirituality should be friends.” In outreach, Smith reflects on the movement’s adoption of hippie shirts, tattoos, etc., but comments that “you can’t ape it or ‘go native.’ Your heart has to be in it, and really identifying with the people so much that you have common cause with the indigenous people,” as in their love for nature, or their quest for justice. “They became our people. We joined in common cause with them.” He especially believes in involving seekers in the community’s fellowship and celebration. “Often,” he reports, “we didn’t know when evangelism ended and mutual celebration began.” P. 113

The Alpha movement has raised up staff and laity to reach many New Barbarians for Alpha experiences. For instance, Bob Byrne lived a life of addiction, crime, and violence before a Christian woman explained the “fish” symbol on her lapel, invited him to follow Christ and to learn how through an Alpha course. Today, he is a theology graduate, an Anglican priest in Kent, and he leads Alpha courses for people who “society says are no good.”

1. I see people from all walks of life who don't know God and I know that is the most precious thing that they could possibly find.
 2. I like working with people nobody else wants to work with—people with drug problems, people who society says are no good. I do a lot of work in schools.
 3. My favorite kids are always the worst kids, because everyone else says they can't do anything with them. They are right: they can't, but God can.
 4. That's why I love Alpha so much. The beautiful thing about Alpha is that it digs and builds a foundation.
- P. 115

Some parachurch Christian communities, like the L'abri fellowships, have given it serious attention, but most local churches have not. The typical hospitality ritual in a church goes no deeper than inviting guest worshipers to sign the registration pad so someone from the church can visit them later, and maybe put a ribbon or a “guest” badge on their lapel in case someone wants to greet them.

I have learned, through interview research, that most pre-Christian visitors to a church feel anxious and vulnerable as they visit “foreign turf” but, often, something is going on in their life that they think a church might help with. Most church leaders, however, have never taken seriously the nonverbal communication that a visiting seeker is sending out. Their visit is the most misperceived signal in local churches today, and the church's most neglected

opportunity. Often, following their visit, visitors feel ignored, or judged, or misunderstood, or unwanted, and they may conclude that God doesn't understand or want them either. What would a serious ministry of Christian Hospitality look like in your church today? P. 117f.

Perhaps five to ten percent of America's churches are trying culturally relevant "contemporary" worship—with some adaptation to the pre-Christian population's style, language, aesthetics, and music, but few churches are even considering the kind of identification with people practiced by the Celtic Christian movement and reflected in this ancient Chinese poem:

Go to the people.

Live among them.

Learn from them.

Love them.

Start with what they know.

Build on what they have. P. 120

Aidan's conversational approach to people to make it useful to any Christian reaching out. You engage people with a question like: "Are you a Christian?" or "Where do you stand with regard to the Christian faith?" If they say they are Christians you ask, "How could you be a better one?" If they say they are not you ask, "May I tell you something about it?" – and that begins a conversation. P. 121

Finally, not man, churches are yet following Christ to reach the receptive New Barbarians who are all around us. That is tragic because, deep down, most of these people want to experience God's forgiveness and acceptance; they would like a second chance and a new life. The Church has what they are looking for, but it is not offering it to them! Nevertheless, the Celtic Christian movement that won the West for a second time has shown us many ways for reaching the West for a third time—if we have the eyes to see, and if we can rediscover that lost people matter to God. P. 121



Salad 'n' Study 2010

Barbara Brown Taylor's
A Geography of Faith

An Altar in the World

Animated by Canon Jim Irvine

Five **Wednesdays**, beginning at 6:00 P.M. with a shared salad supper followed by a study on patio's and decks taking advantage of Daylight Saving Time.

Bring a salad – enough for yourself and to share. Over the series we could sample forty different culinary delights!

July 28 – on the patio at 263 Saunders Street, Fredericton (*bug spray will be provided*)

August 4 – August 11 – August 18 – August 25 – venue t.b.a.

*Communion under
Special Circumstances*

**THE
CELESTIAL
WAY OF
EVANGELISM**

Brothers and sisters in Christ,
God calls us to faithful service
by the proclamation of the word,
and sustains us with the sacrament
of the body and blood of Christ.
[*Hear now God's word, and*] receive
this holy food from the Lord's table.

Most merciful God,
**we confess that we have sinned
against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our
whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbours
as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly
repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus
Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us,
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your name. Amen.**

The priest shall say...
Almighty God have mercy upon you,
pardon and deliver you from all your
sins,

confirm and strengthen you in all
goodness,
and keep you in eternal life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Before Communion...
As our Saviour taught us, let us pray,
**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against
us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.**

The gifts of God for the People of God.
Thanks be to God.

After Communion...
Glory to God,
**whose power, working in us,
can do infinitely more
than we can ask or imagine.
Glory to God from generation to
generation,
in the Church and in Christ Jesus,
for ever and ever. Amen.**

Dismissal...
Let us bless the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

