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BRITTANY'S CELTIC PAST

Russian pilgrims following the Tro Breizh route speak with Fr. Maxime Le Diraison, Breton historian and pastor of the Church of St. Anna in Lannion, Brittany.

RTE: Father Maxime, can you orient us to Brittany?

FR. MAXIME: Yes. Today we commonly use the term Great Britain, but not many people realize that its counterpart across the Channel, Little Britain or Brittany, was more culturally tied to Cornwall, Wales, and Ireland than to Gaul (France). Christianity came here very early. In Little Brittany, also called Amoric, the very first missionaries were two 3rd-century martyrs, Rogasian and Donasian.

Igor: Didn't Christianity take root earlier in France?

FR. MAXIME: Yes, it did. When the Church was first established in France, there was no France as we know it now; it was called *Gallia* (Gaul). Brittany, where I am from, and which is now a part of northern France, was then another region, a Celtic culture. But in the Roman, Latin region of Gaul there were great early saints – not apostles, but certainly disciples of the apostles, the second and third generation. St. Irenaeus of Lyon was a disciple of St. Polycarp of Smyrna, who in turn was a disciple of St. John the Theologian.

Later, there were great saints like Martin of Tours, Hilary of Poitiers, and Germain of Auxerre, the first bishop of western Europe. Great Britain was converted to Christianity by people who were trained in Gaul from the third to the fifth century. They were particularly trained to teach against the Pelagian heresy that had arisen in Great Britain. St. Patrick probably studied in Lerins in the south of France. We are sure that he knew Lerins monastery and that his disciples went to Lerins. Many of our early saints are well known and thousands of others were venerated locally for centuries.

French tradition even says that St. Mary Magdalene came to Gaul and that she settled in the south of France near Marseilles.



Fr. Maxime

RTE: Yes. The ancient tomb of St. Maximan is near Marseilles, and the inscription on his tomb describes him as a disciple of St. Mary Magdalene. Although her Greek life doesn't mention this, do you believe that she traveled to the south of France?

FR. MAXIME: There are several traditions about her, but I believe it was quite possible because in southern Gaul near the Mediterranean, there was a very strong Greek influence and much river trade between Marseilles and Lyons.

RTE: In what century were Celtic traditions and life strongest in Brittany?

FR. MAXIME: The sixth to the ninth centuries. The eighth century was the height of Celtic Christian culture.

IGOR: And the Breton saints?

FR. MAXIME: When we speak about the Breton saints we are speaking mostly about the area of Cornwall, Brittany, and Wales. All of our Breton saints, especially the founding saints of Brittany that you will venerate on the Tro Breizh – St. Samson, St. Patern, St. Corentin, St. Guenole, St. Pol, St. Tugdual, St. Briec and St. Malo – were venerated in Wales until it became Protestant. Even now there are many place names, wells, and holy sites called St. Tugdual or St. Corentin or St. Guenole. There are places with the same name on both sides of the Channel, such as Treguir.

Many Celtic Christians were monks, and society was organized around monasteries. During the first five centuries the Christian tradition was closely tied to the eastern Christian traditions and these ties lasted into the twelfth century. There are many common points between the Brittanic Celtic monks and the monks in Syria, Egypt, and the Thebaid, but modern historians do not explain where these common points originated.

Throughout the first millennium there were Bretons who went to the eastern churches: to Jerusalem, to Egypt, to Syria to visit St. Simeon the Stylite, to the monastic centers of Byzantium. The withdrawal of the Roman Empire at the end of the fifth century and the invasions of the Anglo-Saxons, Jutes, and the Vikings most of all, isolated the Celtic Christians and destroyed much of the society and church life, both here in Brittany and in Great Britain.

The Bretons were part of the Celtic tradition, and within that tradition you had the Gaelic Celts and the British Celts. These areas were very connected through cultural and economic exchange. Many Irish settled in Brittany and Breton monks were sent to Ireland to visit the highest spiritual fathers. The monasteries were like those of Egypt, where each monk had his own life, his own cell, and they became monastic towns with up to three thousand monks in one monastery. They were very ascetic, and often used the typicon of St. Columba, before St. Benedict's became commonplace.

The Celts had their own traditions of tonsure, of the church calendar, and of monastic life. Celtic monasteries remained isolated; they were cultural and artistic centers, but they were not located in large cities, as was often the case under the Romans. Many of the monks lived on islands. They were not tied to kings and rulers, although kings and queens would often become monks or nuns. Three of the kings of Brittany went to the monastery. People say that now it is only in Tibet that you can see such a monastic society, but at least this gives us a feel for what life must have been like. Many people, of course, were not monks, but the whole society was permeated with monasticism.

It was people who came to live around the monastery who eventually grew into a town like here in Dol. During the invasions, the towns around the monasteries also grew as refugees moved southward. The bishop was always the head of the monastery and the economic life of the town was closely tied to that of the monastery. All of the major Breton towns like Dol, St. Briec, Treguir, St. Pol, St. Malo, were first monasteries.

These monks were great ascetics and one of their asceticisms was voluntary exile, where they would leave their monastery or country and set out on foot, or sometimes in a small boat with no oars, landing where the will of God led them. They founded monasteries as far away as Switzerland, St. Gall, and throughout France. When they arrived somewhere the people came to Christianity through their examples of asceticism. They knew that being ascetic was not the main goal, but it was a witness to other people that they desired to be close to God. The most important thing to these early monks was charity. Historians think that they were often in the same leadership position as the old pagan chiefs. They were close to kings and gave them advice, they could speak with animals, they converted people. Some believe that Celtic monks arrived in America even before the Vikings, as it says in St. Brendan's Life.

They were very forceful. They were aristocrats, they were warriors and they believed the Lord's words that "the kingdom of God will be taken by

force.” They fought against paganism, against ungodly political power, and it is said that they were always victorious.

Eventually, these Celtic Christians reestablished contact with Rome, who discouraged some of their monastic traditions in an attempt to make their practice more uniform with other parts of western Christendom. Later it was Rome that changed; first in theology, then in practice, beginning with the disciples of Blessed Augustine of Hippo and their new way of viewing grace and freedom. The Celtic Christians remained more Orthodox. They believed there was a synergy, a balance, between human freedom and defined grace. Rome at one time called the Greeks Pelagians, and they said the same to the Celts. They said the same to St. John Cassian and the Lerins monks, near Cannes. St. John Cassian is not considered a saint among the Catholics: he gave too strong of a role to human freedom.

At the same period Rome was moving away from the eastern churches and initiating closer ties with the German Saxons and Franks. The Celtic churches were finally united under its authority.

The last Breton link with Celtic tradition was the monastery of Landevennec, where you will go. In the tenth century, under the pressure of the kings of France, Landevennec was finally forced to give up the Celtic tradition. After that time we cannot speak of Celtic monasteries in Brittany. There is no longer a living Celtic tradition, but we can still find some little points in the spirituality of Brittany and Ireland that were called forth from it.

RTE: What are those points?

FR. MAXIME: The Celtic countries are now very de-Christianized, but in the time of my grandmother, for example, this deep interaction with nature, the feeling of an otherworldly connection with the wells and springs, trees, and even stones was still very strong. You can see it if you look at songs or poetry from the last century, or even from the first half of the twentieth century. There also remains the tradition of strong asceticism, like walking the Tro Breizh pilgrimage. Even the conscious experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit, like Motovilov had with St. Seraphim of Sarov, which you can still find in the eastern Christian countries, but not generally now in the western world, could have been found here in Brittany in the spiritual life of the 18th or 19th century. There was great devotion.

Opposite page: 19th- and early 20th-century Bretons.



Brittany strongly resisted the French Revolution in the 18th century, and there was a bloody and terrible civil war here after the revolution had succeeded in the rest of France. Many relics and church treasures were destroyed by the French, but many things were also hidden. After it was over, the churches were rebuilt and the things that had been saved were returned. Much was lost, but some things we still have.



ILIA (A RUSSIAN PILGRIM): In my town, Rostov-on-Don, there is a city festival for St. Patrick, an Irish Orthodox saint, on his feast-day. But why? Not one Russian saint has such a secular festival sponsored by the city.

FR. MAXIME: Yes, it's interesting. Bishop Joseph, the Romanian archbishop of western and central Europe, says that the Russian, Romanian and other eastern Churches bring much to western Orthodoxy, but the western Orthodox also have much to give to the East. The spirit is always new and renewing, and although the Word is always the Word, it is new every day. We need to be traditional Orthodox Christians, but to speak in a new way.

You Russians who have come here feel these things because your hearts and minds are open to them. You see the traditions because you live them in your country and you can feel their roots in other places.

I remember a humorous story from Paris. You know, we have many Orthodox children and grandchildren of White Russians in France who are sometimes more Russian than the Russians. Sometimes they are not so free, while the modern Russians I've met are absolutely open-minded and interested in Christianity in the West. Once, when one of the White Russians was talking about Orthodoxy in a proprietary way, someone answered, "When your people were worshipping a raven's head on the top of the Elbas Mountains, St. Genevieve was delivering Paris from Atilla the Hun." The contemporary Russians I've met are all very open to our historical experience.

RTE: What is the history of the Tro Breizh pilgrimage? Did it begin right after the death of the seven saints of Brittany or was it much later?

FR. MAXIME: No one knows when it began. But when Brittany became an independent kingdom in the ninth century, the rulers encouraged the pilgrimage to the relics of the seven founding saints of Brittany and it unified the country. This was when the Frankish clergy were sent away and Breton rulers encouraged the glorification of native Breton saints in order to revive the Breton church.

After the Viking invasions in the eleventh century, the Celtic society of Brittany was completely dismantled. The monks and relics went to France, as did the aristocracy, and they began to lose their Celtic language and usages. Celtic Christianity never stood up again after the Viking invasions. They could no longer be self-governing and the English and French moved in to protect (and control) the area. However, after the Vikings the pilgrimage revived. We know that in the Middle Ages, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it was walked by tens of thousands of pilgrims and has only been relatively forgotten for a few decades in our own time.

ANNA: Have you walked the Tro Breizh?

FR. MAXIME: Yes, in 1989.

ANNA: How many kilometers is it?

FR. MAXIME: Twelve hundred.

RTE: And you walked all the way?

FR. MAXIME: Yes, I went the full route on foot – seven weeks. Almost no one remembered it then, the tradition was lost, forgotten, but after my pilgrimage I heard of others who had begun walking it as well. Brittany was awakening; it was a prophetic time. Now many people have heard of Tro Breizh and there is a revival of the pilgrimage among the local Catholics.

RTE: Father Maxime, you are a native Breton, aren't you? How did you become Orthodox?

FR. MAXIME: Yes, I am Breton. My family wasn't Christian, but I became Orthodox in 1986 after I stayed in a Russian monastery in Ein Karem in



Jerusalem for ten months. I had not been baptized as a child because my parents were Communists. I was looking for God and I had many friends in the Catholic Church, but I wanted to look further, so I decided that Jerusalem would be a good place to start. At Christmas, I went to the all-night vigil at the Holy Sepulchre, where I felt, “everything is here, the Trinity, everything.”

When I came back to Brittany, I was naturally interested in the Orthodox roots of my own people. It was not something intellectual, but a need of my soul to find out, to reclaim the saints. I felt that this land was deeply Orthodox, but I found myself very lonely, as the only Orthodox people I met were immigrants who didn't seem to care; they were too busy establishing a new life. The native Bretons thought I had done something a little crazy in being baptized Orthodox because Orthodoxy was only for eastern Europeans.

I prayed and tried to get to know the serious Orthodox I could reach, and suddenly this year, when I was about to be ordained, I found a letter in my mailbox from your group, that you wanted to come to venerate my saints, the saints of Brittany.

RTE: You were ordained this year?

FR. MAXIME: Yes. I became a priest two weeks ago. I was a deacon for two and a half years before that. We Orthodox are not many and are quite alone,



so when your group wrote from Russia it was as if two steams had come together. For me, it was a gift that I wasn't looking for.

RTE: How many other Orthodox priests are there in Brittany?

FR. MAXIME: Now, we are four altogether. In a few days you will meet Father Philippe Cales, who is also native Breton and serves at the Church of the Life-Giving Cross in Brest. The other two are in Vannes and Nants.

ANNA: When we drove into Dol today I thought, “A land that has once been Orthodox always feels Orthodox.” You can feel the Christian roots here.

FR. MAXIME: Yes. There are many, many Breton saints, most of them before the 11th century. Brittany was christened and even achieved nationhood through the saints. They not only brought the Church, but created the nation. It is still alive, and when you pray to the saints and turn your heart to them they bring the Lord's blessing and the sense of their presence, they give you signs. The very fact that you have come here from Moscow is for me an answer from the Lord and His saints.

RTE: Many educated, believing Russians are interested in saints in the West, particularly Celtic saints, and I think this is the first of many pilgrimages.

FR. MAXIME: I'm not surprised. People here have lost a lot, like in Russia.



Like many Russians, my generation is looking for its spiritual roots and I think the generation after me will be searching as well. You had communism, we've had all the exotic foreign spiritualities, and now we are both looking for our roots.

RTE: Do you see any Bretons becoming Orthodox?

FR. MAXIME: Yes. Here in Brittany, like the rest of Europe, people who have lost their faith are coming back to Christianity. Perhaps every month someone in Brittany becomes Orthodox.

Becoming Orthodox is easy in that first moment, but to become truly Orthodox takes a whole lifetime. The Catholic Church here is so diverse that you can find every possible theological view and people now simply don't know what to believe. We are not here to take believers from the Catholic Church, but if they come to us we will not turn them away. The way is narrow in church relations. We have to be simple like the *colombe* [dove] and cautious and wise like the serpent.

We believe that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world, and that only the Church can save the world. Now, not only the western world, but all of civilization has become sick, and more and more dark. We are not Orthodox for ourselves. We are Orthodox for all people and we can't keep our precious traditions hidden. One doesn't put a light under the bed.



RTE: How do you speak to people involved in the New Age, who are trying to create a Celtic Christianity of their own?

FR. MAXIME: I know many of them. It is very difficult to talk to them because the great problem of many western people is pride. They do and think as they wish. It is difficult to talk to someone who believes he knows when he doesn't. He imagines he is rich, when actually he is poor. We all are poor in comparison to the true riches, but when you believe you are rich you cannot take in anything more. They are often sincere people, but they have no spiritual root, no spiritual education. If they could see real Orthodoxy they could change, but we have no monasteries and no experienced spiritual fathers. I need that too, very much.

Orthodoxy is necessary to save the West, and not only the West but the world as a whole. But this is something that many in the ethnic Orthodox churches don't want to accept yet. The task is too heavy and they are not ready for it, but I believe that the Lord wants this. What do you see?

RTE: I agree. Even in China and Africa, people are being drawn to Christianity.

FR. MAXIME: Yes. Whether we are Orthodox here, in Russia, or in Greece, we don't have a choice. If we are Christian, we are not Christian just for our-



selves. Of course, we have to save our souls, but the best way to save our souls is to go to work.

MAXIM (A PILGRIM FROM KIEV): What do you think of the *Eglise Catholique-Orthodoxe de France*, which is now on the fringe of Orthodoxy but whose founding was influenced by St. John Maximovitch when he lived here?

FR. MAXIME: I think the original impetus, the intuition, was prophetic, but it was too early and although in the beginning it followed the right path, afterwards it went off course. They were first connected to the Russian Church in Exile and the Romanian Church, but then they left to find someone in the Orthodox world who would give them legitimacy while allowing them to be autonomous. However, when there is no obedience, delusion is not far away. I think they fell into mistaken thinking because they wanted to direct themselves according to their own wishes and that led to their demise. Nevertheless, many things in their initial impulse were prophetic and are now being realized in canonical Orthodoxy. They discovered many roots of western Orthodox history.

But the Church is not something you can build. It is like a tree and it grows new branches from the trunk. One can be a genius and a prophet but



it doesn't lead anywhere if there is no root, if it isn't connected to the trunk. As I said, they were in too much of a hurry, but God knows their intent and Church time is not man's time. I don't think the movement was bad – it was useful in a way because many western people, intellectual or otherwise, came to Orthodoxy through it, although those who started it ended up rootless themselves.

MAXIM (FROM KIEV): Do you have any thoughts on the restoration of the Gallic liturgy that was used in early France?

FR. MAXIME: The Gallic liturgy has been accepted, but still one has to be very careful because its revival is founded more on archeology than tradition. Tradition has to be living in order to be used. Of course, there were many liturgies in early Christian times: the Mozar'abic liturgy in Spain, the Celtic liturgy, the Ambrosian, the Roman, and more than one Syrian liturgy, but these are not used now except in a few isolated places – such as the Church of St. Ambrose in Milan, which still serves the Ambrosian liturgy. There simply wasn't a continuing tradition. We live in a time when there is an intellectual desire to revive what existed earlier, but Church tradition is not like this. What is alive is alive.

I am not enthusiastic about these revivals. The Gallic liturgy was not bad but there are things wrong in other parts of Matins and Vespers. The Liturgies of St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil were inspired by the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit caused them to become the liturgies of the universal Church – so to me it is a bit of vanity to try to use something more local. It is not my way, at least. I am not eager to recreate a pseudo-Britannic Christianity. One has to be careful. This is a very western notion.

In the western world, many people are sincere in their desire to practice what they think is early Christianity, but we are in danger of confusing the psychic and the spiritual, and most of us are easily confused between sincerity and truth. Sincerity is not necessarily truth; we can be sincerely in illusion. In the western world we are infected by both the psychic and sentimentality.

There are many people in Europe now calling themselves Orthodox, but they are not. Although they may be sincere, they don't know what Orthodoxy is because they have no root. They didn't "come and see," they didn't drink from the well of living water. I'm thinking especially of the many western pseudo-Celtic Orthodox groups. Their spiritual leaders may not be bad, but they are proud. They have an intuition, a "prophetic view," but St. John Chrysostom said, "It is nothing to see light, but to have humility and to cry over one's sins, this is greater." This is the tradition.

RTE: What about the western-rite liturgy that is served in a few places in the U.S.? Those who use it are from canonical jurisdictions and they justify it as a way to bring people to Orthodoxy.

FR. MAXIME: I've heard of this and it is quite interesting, but I can only relate my own experience. All of the people in the western world where I saw real spiritual life – like Fr. Sophrony of Essex who is now reposed, Fr. Philippe Cales (also of Brittany), and many young monks of my own generation – were very sensitive to the western roots of Christianity but still they follow in obedience to the historic Eastern churches because something remains in the tradition that wasn't cut, which you can't find here. You can be interested in the traditions of the past, you can study them, but to live Orthodoxy one needs to be in this river of the Holy Spirit. It is plain, that this is the norm. In western churches many people are truly Christian and filled with love for God, but the traditional river doesn't flow any longer.

RTE: Is there a remnant of that older Celtic Christianity in the Breton language?

FR. MAXIME: Yes. It's dying out, but people in Brittany hope for a revival. There are only about half a million people who still speak Breton as their first language. My wife and I speak Breton to our children at home.

RTE: What language do you serve in?

FR. MAXIME: Usually French, but also in Breton. I love the Breton language. I like to pray in Breton and do so myself and with my family, but at this point the French is better for services because one has to bring the tradition to everyone, and the language is not important. It is wrong to idolize a language, even if this language is a holy language. All languages which have been prayed in and taught in by saints are holy in a way. Breton is the language of St. Tugdual and St. Samson and it is a holy language for me. But the main thing for me is to make the gospel understood. I feel the same about the Celtic tradition. It is important, but more important is to live in Christ in any tradition. I am very sensitive to my national tradition, but I don't want to idolize it. It is not the chief thing. The chief thing is to help the people of this country find their way back to the truth.

ILIA: How often do you serve?

FR. MAXIME: I serve at different times in several Orthodox churches or chapels in Brittany, but in my own parish, the Church of St. Anna in Lannion, only every two weeks and on feasts. Vespers, matins and liturgy. This is nothing compared to a Russian priest.

RTE: Yes, but you've only been ordained for two weeks. Let's see what happens in ten years when Orthodoxy begins to take hold.

FR. MAXIME: We will pray for it. I would like to be very busy. ✚