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The Altar and the Knot: Lessons from the Past for an Ecumenical Future

1. Introduction – Why a “New Ecumenism”?

- **Historical fracture** – Over fifteen centuries the historic liturgical families (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Anglican, etc.) have drifted apart through language, politics, and divergent juridical structures.
- **Shared core** – Despite these divisions, they still profess the same creedal confession, the same sacraments, and the same apostolic lineage.
- **Thesis** – A genuine ecumenical renewal must **synthesize** two complementary resources:
 1. **Patristic theology** – the first-millennium Fathers’ Christ-centered doctrinal framework (the “altar”).
 2. **Celtic missiology** – the missionary, relational, and hospitality-driven spirituality of the Celtic saints (the “knot”).
- The resulting “New Ecumenism” is not a compromise of doctrine but an **intensified “Unity of the Heart”** that lives out the shared mystery of the Eucharist.

2. Patristic Lens - Three Non-Negotiable Pillars

Pillar	Patristic source	Core claim	Contemporary relevance
Catholicity	Ignatius of Antioch (Letter to the Smyrnaeans)	The Church is “the whole” under one bishop, yet connected to the universal body.	Provides a theological basis for recognizing the legitimacy of episcopal structures across traditions while insisting on communion with the whole.
Recapitulation	Irenaeus of Lyons (Adversus Haereses)	All salvation is gathered again in Christ; doctrinal diversity is a variation within one salvific narrative.	Allows diverse liturgical expressions to be seen as legitimate “dialects” of the same faith.
Liturgical Unity	John Chrysostom (Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians)	The sacraments, especially the Eucharist, are the concrete arena where the whole Church meets.	Makes the Eucharist the “ontological source” of unity, shifting focus from institutional diplomacy to shared worship.

These pillars are **non-negotiable**: any ecumenical effort that discards them risks losing the theological anchor that kept the undivided Church together.

3. Historic Liturgical Churches – Common Ground

1. **Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed** – Accepted verbatim by the historic churches, it serves as a pre-schism doctrinal baseline. Hilary of Poitiers calls it a “shield of faith” that protects believers across continents.
2. **Central Sacraments (Baptism & Eucharist)** –
 - **Baptism**: Trinitarian formula, water, and sign of the cross are identical, creating a shared “new birth.”
 - **Eucharist**: Chrysostom’s description of the bread as the “Body of Christ” and the communicants as “the Body of Christ” underscores a **sacramental DNA** that transcends theological semantics (e.g., transubstantiation vs. mystery).
3. **Pastoral Cooperation in Diaspora** – In migrant contexts, an Anglican priest and an Orthodox priest often share a single parish building, jointly celebrating the sacraments because they recognize the same apostolic succession. This practical ecumenism demonstrates how **shared sacramental life forces theological convergence**.

4. Celtic Saints – A Methodology of Missionary Unity

Saint	Region	Ecumenical Insight
St Patrick	Ireland	Integrated local customs (e.g., seasonal festivals) into orthodox confession, proving cultural expression can coexist with doctrinal fidelity .

St Columba	Iona & Scotland	Founded monastic “living bridges” that welcomed both Celtic and Anglo-Saxon believers, modeling hospitality as a bridge .
St Brigid	Leinster	Emphasized radical hospitality (“Christ in the guest”), showing relational communion outweighs juridical boundaries.
St Aidan	Lindisfarne	Developed a simple, inclusive liturgy that accommodated divergent rites, illustrating unity without uniformity .
St Cuthbert	Northumbria	Became a pilgrimage focal point for multiple traditions, embodying the “ <i>peregrinatio</i> ”—a shared journey that precedes doctrinal agreement.

Key Celtic Concepts

- **Relational vs. Jurisdictional Unity** – Unity is forged in shared mission (“peace over race or tribe”) rather than in legal uniformity.

- **Peregrinatio (Pilgrimage)** – The wandering missionary life created “Ecumenism of Life”: churches collaborate on service and advocacy before settling doctrinal disputes.
- **Living Bridges** – Monasteries acted as neutral third spaces where different peoples could meet, pray, and learn together. Modern equivalents are ecumenical retreat centers, theological institutes, or digital platforms.

5. The New Ecumenical Synthesis - “Unity of the Heart”

1. **From Mechanics to Encounter** – Move past debates on the *mechanics* of the Eucharist (e.g., transubstantiation) toward the *reality* of the encounter: the Eucharist as the “Sacrament of Unity.” The Antiphonary of Bangor’s common hymn illustrates how a single chant can bind disparate traditions.
2. **Totus Christus (The Whole Christ)** – Augustine’s Sermon 272 (“Receive what you are”) frames the Eucharist as the cement that **ontologically links** believers across jurisdictions.
3. **Joint Guardianship** – Drawing on Cyprian of Carthage, the episcopate is a single office exercised by many shepherds. In the modern world this translates into **coordinated moral voices** against secular violence and persecution.
4. **Modern Martyrdom as Peregrinatio** – Tertullian’s notion that the blood of Christians is seed, combined with Pope Francis’s “Ecumenism of Blood,” shows that **shared suffering** dissolves juridical labels; all baptized Christians become witnesses together.
5. **Practical Solidarity** – The Law of Adomnán (697 AD) united Celtic bishops to protect non-combatants. Its spirit can inspire contemporary joint statements on climate justice, refugee aid, or human-rights advocacy.

6. Conclusion – The Celtic Knotwork Model

- **Metaphor:** Celtic knotwork intertwines strands that retain individuality yet form an unbreakable pattern.

- **Altar + Knot:** The **altar** supplies the shared sacramental centre; the **knot** supplies relational, missional weave. Together they produce a “**reconciled diversity**” – a communion where differences are intentional threads in a single tapestry.

Implications for the 21st-century Church

1. **Ecumenical Spaces** – Create neutral “living bridges” (shared monasteries, ecumenical study centres, online forums) where the “knot” can be tied around the “altar.”
2. **Liturgical Collaboration** – Joint Eucharistic celebrations, shared feast-day liturgies, and mutual recognition of baptism can become routine, not exceptional.
3. **Joint Moral Witness** – Bishops and lay leaders from Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican traditions can issue coordinated statements on global issues, embodying Cyprian’s joint guardianship.

By **anchoring** the dialogue in the three Patristic pillars (Catholicity, Recapitulation, Liturgical Unity) and **weaving** it through the Celtic ethos of hospitality, pilgrimage, and relational unity, the proposed “New Ecumenism” offers a concrete, lived pathway toward the “Unity of the Heart” that the paper envisions.

