

Spirituality of Saint Columban

A strong desire for union with God was the driving force in the life of St Columban. He believed that the risen Christ was present in him and the world around him: and that Christ was the source of all the gifts he needed in life. St Columban was heavily influenced by the spirituality of the Desert Fathers. They were determined not to succumb to the seductions of the secular world around them and committed themselves to the search for their true selves in the deserts of the Middle East. In Ireland we do not have deserts but we do have plenty of quiet lonely places which the Irish monks sought out. There are over 200 places in Ireland named Dysart (desert) which gives some indication of how widespread was the practice among early Irish monks of seeking out quiet places of solitude. Solitude and silence were the prerequisites for this inner search which was driven by the belief that God dwelt at the deep core of their real selves. The Lives of St Anthony of Egypt and St Martin of Tours were well known in the Irish monasteries of the 5th and 6th centuries. The writings of St John Cassian were also standard documents in Irish monastic libraries. These books contained the wisdom of the Abbots from the desert which outlined the strict ascetic practices and prayer methods to be followed by those who sought the way to union with God in the heart of their true selves. The 'Cave' is a strong motif running through the life of St Columban: from his early foundation in Eastern France to his final foundation in Bobbio we find that he regularly left his monastic community to spend time at prayer in caves some distance from his monastery. He was a man dedicated to long periods of private and communal prayer. This commitment to periods of silent



solitary meditation is reminiscent of Jesus's own prayer pattern which was rigorously practiced by the desert monks. Here in the silence of his own heart Columban came in contact with the presence of God deep within him. The results of these times of deep communion with God are evident in his writings: in particular his Sermon 12 and 13 are among some of the most mystical writings we have of any European monk. In Sermon 13 he writes: 'how lovely is the fountain of living water, whose water fails not, springing up to eternal life. O Lord, you yourself are that Fountain ever and again to be desired, though ever and again to be imbibed. Ever give us, Lord Christ, this water, that it may be in us too a Fountain of water that lives and springs up to eternal life.'

How to keep alive the awareness of their close relationship with Christ was the major priority of their spiritual life: the carrying of the sacred host in a Pyx hung around the neck of each monk was a sign of this ongoing close connection with the risen Christ. The regular cycle of prayer, work and study ensured that their focus on their friendship with God was never far from their minds.

Saint Columban saw nature as his teacher about God. He encouraged

his monks to look at the magnificent works of creation all round them in order to understand the nature of God. This link between his appreciation of the awesomeness of nature and his strong belief in God comes out strongly in his early sermons.

There was a pastoral and caring side to Columban which contrasts with the harsh and overly ascetic image that initially comes across from his writings. His Fourth Letter written to the members of his Luxeuil Community as he awaited deportation back to Ireland at the port of Nantes, offers us a rare but sincere

insight into his caring attitude for his fellow monks. It also offers us a glimpse into the personal angst he endured as he exercised leadership in the same community. His pastoral sensitivity is evident in his rules for clergy and laity living outside the monastery. At that time in Western Christianity his introduction of private confession and penance was a welcome relief to many Christians in several parts of Europe.

His whole life was inspired by his belief that only God alone could answer the deep thirst in his heart. In Sermon 12 we glimpse something of this fundamental stance where he writes: 'Lord grant me I pray in the name of Jesus Christ your Son, my God that Love which knows no fall, so that my lamp may feel the kindling touch and know no quenching, may burn for me and for others give light. Grant us Christ, to kindle our lamps ... that they may shine continually... and receive perpetual light from You, The perpetual light, so that our darkness may be enlightened, and the world's darkness may be driven from us.'

Fr Tommy Murphy SSC

National Celebration of 1400th anniversary of death of St Columban



Step 5. No one is excluded from the table of the Lord

Step 6. Here we are called to mission

Step 7. How awesome is this place!

Step 8. This is a holy land

Step 9. We are Pilgrims for Christ.



Suggested activity for Saturday, 20 June

Nine step Pilgrim Walk in 'The Way of St Columban'

Parishes and communities around the country are invited to mark the occasion with a local pilgrim walk, 'The Way of St Columban' to commemorate the 1400th anniversary of the death of St Columban.

Here is how to go about it:

- Get a group of interested people together to organise the pilgrim walk.
- Download the text for the 'Way of St Columban' nine step pilgrim walk from the website: www.columbanus.com or send an email to columbanusjubileeyear@gmail.com for printed copies of the text.
- Select a route that is feasible for walking that takes in some significant places in the area that have a connection with our religious, Celtic, historical and monastic heritage sites.
- Mark out nine stops along the selected route.
- Set a time for starting the Pilgrim walk and inform the Gardaí of the selected route.
- Inform and invite local church and civil leaders to participate in the event.

- Promote the event through the parish newsletter and local media.

Summary of The Way of St Columban ... nine steps

The Way of St Columban is an ecumenical pilgrimage experience with nine steps along a selected route. Each step consists of:

- A biblical reading
- The words of St Columban
- A brief reflection,
- The Our Father.

The nine steps conclude with a litany, prayers of intercession, the prayer to Saint Columban and a shared Blessing. Pilgrims may also choose sharing reflections on local sites, songs, prayers and invocations that they consider appropriate throughout the route.

These nine steps are a synthesis of what concerns us as a Christian pilgrim people. They are an integral part of every pilgrimage, whether it be to historic sites or in one's own locality, community or parish.

- Step 1. We are on a pilgrim journey
- Step 2. We are disciples of Jesus
- Step 3. We are brothers and sisters on the road of life
- Step 4. Your Word gives me life.

Getting to know all the places around the country dedicated to St Columban

As part of our national celebration to mark 1400th anniversary of the death of St Columban, we are inviting our readership to identify churches, hospitals, community centres and historical places that bear the name of St Columban (often known as St Columbanus or Naomh Columbán). We would appreciate you sending this information to columbanusjubileeyear@gmail.com. You will be sent a copy of Liam Lawton's CD with a song he composed especially to mark the 1400th anniversary.

Who was Saint Columban and why he is important today?

Fr Seán McDonagh SSC presents some facts about the life of Saint Columban



1 *Columban – Irish dimension – North and South.* He was born in Leinster, on the Carlow/Wexford border and educated in Northern Ireland by St Sinell at his monastery at Cleenish on an Island in Lough Erne. From Cleenish, Columban went to Bangor to become a monk. He spent more than 25 years at Bangor during which time he was ordained and probably taught scripture to young monks. Columban has an All-Ireland dimension. There are opportunities for both jurisdictions in Ireland to coordinate in the celebration around the person of Columban.

2 Columban is the first Irish person to articulate a sense of *what it means to be Irish*. In the letter which he wrote to Pope Boniface in 613 AD, he wrote ‘we Irish.’ The Irish were not held in high esteem in continental Europe during the Roman Empire and even after the

collapse of the Empire. Columban and the monks who followed him to Europe in the 6th and 7th centuries changed that perception radically. Europeans accept that during the sixth and seventh centuries the light came, not from the East but from the West.

The fact that, within a generation after his death, Jonas of Susa, a monk at Bobbio, wrote the *Life of Columbanus* is a testimony to the importance of Columban’s legacy in Europe. The UCC historian Dr Damian Bracken comments that ‘This is another first: Columbanus is the first Irishman to be the subject of a biography.’

He is also Ireland’s first ‘man of letters’ since he is the first Irish person from whom we have a written document.

3 *European dimension – Columban – the Irish person who laboured in Europe and made such*

an impact in the 6th and 7th centuries in Europe. According to Dr Damian Bracken, ‘shrines, towns and landmarks across Europe bear Columbanus’ name and testify to the widespread diffusion of devotion to the saint. In the middle of the 9th century, a biographer of St Gall, a colleague of Columban, acknowledged the debt of his people to Ireland whence the splendour of such light came to us.’ He goes on to say that the light of Christianity has shone westward to Ireland through missionaries such as St Patrick. Between the 6th and 8th centuries this light shone in the opposite direction, as Irish monks Columbanus rekindled the faith in Europe. In that sense, this later tradition is a reflection of Columbanus’ belief that the conversion of his homeland on the edge of the world led to the spiritual and cultural enrichment of the West. Charles Montalembert, the 19th

century French author who wrote on Columban believes that ‘it was at the cost of this unceasing toil (Columban and his monks) that half of our country and an ungrateful Europe were restored to civilisation and life.’ In the early 20th century Pope Pius XI wrote, ‘The more light that is shed by scholars on the period known as the Middle Ages, the clearer it becomes that it was thanks to the initiative and labour of Columban that the rebirth of Christian virtue and civilisation over a great part of Gaul, Germany and Italy took place.’

On 14 December 2012, Cardinal Angelo Scola, Archbishop of Milan, in the Cathedral in Piacenza, formally petitioned Pope Benedict XVI to declare St Columban as a patron saint of Europe. He would be joining the ranks of Benedict of Nursia, Cyril and Methodius, Bridget of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, Edith Stein (Teresa Benedicta of the Cross).

In June 2008, in a reflection on the life, work and travels of St Columban, Pope Benedict XVI said that there was good reason to call

Columban a European Saint. The Pope drew attention to the fact that the expression ‘*totius Europae* – of All Europe’ first appeared in a letter which Columban wrote to Pope Gregory the Great in 600 AD.

4 *Columban – the Monk.* A man of deep faith and courage. Irish monks and monasteries founded by Irish monks made a huge impact in 7th and 8th century Europe. He is still remembered in more than 300 communities across Europe from Bangor in County Down to Bobbio in northern Italy.

5 *Columban the Scholar* who was well-versed in the Classics and wrote excellent Latin. Columban monasteries in the 6th and 7th century played an important role in reviving education in Europe. Many of the manuscripts which were produced by Irish monks are now located in libraries across Europe such as San Gallen in Switzerland and the Ambrosian Library in Milan where the Bangor Antiphony is found.

6 *Social Justice dimension* – Columban was fearless when he encountered things which were

untrue or not in accordance with his understanding of the Christian message. He was willing to speak out against Kings, Bishops and even Popes when he thought it was the right thing to do. He paid a heavy price for such fortitude when he was expelled from Burgundy in France after challenging King Theuderic, Queen Brunhilda and the Bishops of the area. Today Christians working for peace and a more just social order can draw strength from the example of Columban. Dr Damian Bracken is convinced that, ‘the causes of poor leadership – especially – poor spiritual leadership that he diagnosed in his letters and sermons are as relevant now as when he wrote almost one-and-a-half millennia ago’.

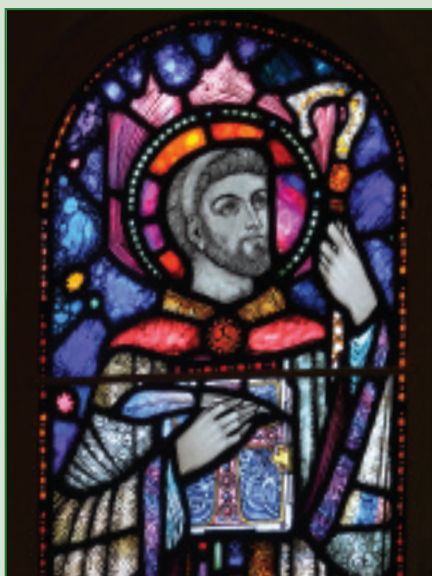
7 *Ecological dimension* – Like many other early Irish monks, Columban was very close to the natural world. At a time when our local and global environment is under enormous stress, Columban has much to teach us about how we can find God in the natural world and how to learn to live in a sustainable way.

Events for Columban 1400

The weekend of Saturday, 20 and Sunday, 21 June will see a National celebration of Saint Columban in Ireland. Celebrations will take place in Bangor and Armagh and there will be pilgrim walks and gatherings in many parishes and communities to honour Saint Columban. Local parishes are encouraged to organise a Pilgrim walk by using the nine step Way of St Columban (page 9) to mark the occasion and celebrate our communion with one another throughout the country in paying tribute to this great Irish saint.

Groups of 100 people from Bobbio and Piacenza, 30 from San Colombano al Lambro, and 6 from Pavia including the Diocesan Bishop are travelling to Ireland to take part in the celebrations.

The activities will be centred in Bangor on Saturday, 20 June. They will begin with an ecumenical Morning Prayer (time to be



confirmed) in Bangor Abbey followed by a Civic reception in the Town Hall at 11.30 am for all the European Mayors and representations.

There will also be a Columba Trail (5K and 3K) starting from the Parish Centre. A group called the ‘Friends

of St Columban’ are acting as the guides for the trail. The day will conclude with a musical celebration.

The celebrations in Armagh take place on Sunday, 21 June. Mass for Saint Columban will be celebrated in Saint Patrick’s Cathedral by Archbishop Eamon Martin at 11.00 am. Invitations have already been extended to Bishops from France, Austria and Italy. Everyone is invited to attend this celebration of the Eucharist. An ecumenical evensong will take place in Saint Patrick’s Church of Ireland Cathedral in Armagh at 3.15 pm.

More information and resources to help your parish or community celebrate Saint Columban can be found by visiting <http://www.columbans.eu/index.php/columban-1400>. More information and resources will be added to www.catholicbishops.ie/tag/intercom and will be flagged on Facebook and Twitter. Please feel free to let us know what is happening in your parish and we will spread the word.