

## ST. COLUMBANUS

I am not suffering from an excess of enthusiasm when I speak in strong terms concerning St. Columbanus. Therefore I present to you the valuation made of him by that mighty man, Pius XI. Before he was Pope he had done much research work in the Ambrosian Library in Milan. It was there that he came into contact with the records of St. Columbanus. He became interested and went into the subject. Later he spoke as follows: "St. Columbanus is to be reckoned among those most distinguished and exceptional men whom Divine Providence is wont to raise up in the most difficult periods of human history to restore causes almost lost. This illustrious son of Ireland walked within no narrow confines. As scholarship throws an increasing light on the obscurity of the Middle Ages, the more clearly is it manifest that the renaissance of all Christian science and culture in many parts of France, Germany and Italy is due to the labours and zeal of Columbanus - a demonstration to the glory of the whole Church and more particularly of Catholic Ireland."

## TO RESTORE A LOST CAUSE

Few stronger statements have emanated from a responsible quarter. Above all men, Pius XI was no utterer of exaggerated phrases. "Raised up to restore a cause almost lost"! Observe that it is to Christianity itself that those words were applied. But they were justified. A study of the Saint proves his immensity. It is not too much to say that he did for Germany, France, Switzerland and Italy much what Patrick did for Ireland; Columbanus was a son of Patrick.

It was mainly from Ireland that issued the Christian deluge in those centuries after St. Patrick. Ireland was then the special force in evangelisation. But as such it went into decline when the days of our own great troubles came upon us. Then our place in the scheme of providence as the tidal wave of Christianity was taken by a succession of other nations. For a long time France has held that primacy. But of late we have tended to take over again. It is not usual for a nation to enjoy a second Spring like that. Nations have their day and a second day does not usually dawn for them.

## THE EUROPE COLUMBANUS FACED

Undoubtedly that pre-eminence of France sprang out of the labours of Columbanus, for France was the chief scene of them. He was the fountainhead of all the things that France has done for the world. Moreover, he faced an



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infinitely worse position in France than St. Patrick had faced in Ireland. France was almost a savage wilderness at the time. The German tribes had poured down over the southern parts of Europe and had crushed the great Roman Empire into the dust. But they had not been able to establish any united kingdom or rule of law in place of the Empire. Many kings and chieftains were warring among each other, killing and destroying, but leaving the devastation unrepaired. Europe was a gigantic forest at that time. Historians trying to present it to our modern imagination, say that to find something to compare it to, we would have to go to the immense American forest of 150 years ago.

Such was Europe. Those forests were full of wild beasts including some monstrous ones which are now extinct. Agriculture had been abandoned, because who would sow land when he did not know whether he would be alive himself in a month's time! How people contrived to exist in such circumstances defies imagination. Brigandage was universal. Ignorance, paganism and savagery were the order of the day. The world was a human zoo.

Into that chaos came Columbanus and his monks to teach the people religion, virtue, order, agriculture, arts and idealism. Such was his success in that programme that it could be said that at the cost of his labours one-third of Europe was restored to civilisation, cultivation and Christianity. Truly a fantastic achievement!

In the doing of that work he laid the foundation of a vast amount of legend. Much of it must be true. There is credited to him the working of miracles on a large scale, including the paralleling of a number of Our Lord's own miracles, such as the miraculous draft of fishes and the feeding of a great number of people on a few loaves and a little beer. The latter item is quaint pointing to a new system of living.

### A GLORIOUS EPIC

This glorious epic was part of the theme of the celebrated Count Montalembert. It was he who by his industry laid the foundation of our modern knowledge of the subject in his monumental work, "The Monks of the West." It is of interest to read that this noble personality at the age of twenty came to Ireland to meet Dan O'Connell for the purpose of offering himself as an aid in the struggle for emancipation. He was disappointed because on arrival he found that emancipation had just been passed. Deprived of that part of his ambition, he returned to France and set about his historical researches. Guided by Montalembert and other writers, let us look closely at the Saint and his origins.

St. Columbanus was born in western Leinster at a place which history does not condescend to name for us. The date was about 543. He is described as a miracle of eloquence, handsome, well-shaped, fair, blue-eyed and charming in all the



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relations of life. For a youth of his station at that time, there was a well-laid-out order of procedure. The Brehon Laws prescribed that he was to be taught archery, swimming, the use of the spear and the sword, and horsemanship. We may be sure that he was proficient in all these, because the youth of Ireland at that time were growing up in the lore of the ancient Fenians. The prowess of these semi or totally mystical figures was the thought of every young person, inciting them on to excel in every accomplishment. However, with this particular youth things did not follow the normal course. He was hard hit by something which devastated many others like him in those days, namely by religion.

Being so stirred, he determined to leave home and throw himself ardently into the discipline of mind and soul which would lead him on to the doing of something big for God. A sorrowful feature of his departure was the hurt it did to his mother's heart. She would appear to have been a most charming type of person. Her sorrow at losing the boy who was so dear to her was such that she could not overcome it. When he was about to go, it is recorded that she laid down on the threshold so that he had to step over her body. We may be certain that his agony was no less than hers.

### TO CLEENISH AND BANGOR

He went off to Cleenish in Lough Erne which at that time was a celebrated resorting place of the holy men of Ireland. It is said that the hundred islands of that Lough were covered by the homes of these solitaries. He studied there under Sinnell for five years. Then he was sent by that master to the Monastery at Bangor which was at the height of its fame. The Abbot at the time was that illustrious figure, Saint Comgall.

Columbanus breathed in the rule and the learning and the spirit of Bangor. Among the characterful population of that place he stood out. He became the head of the school of Bangor and the Spiritual Director of the Monastery. There the allurements of *Peregrinatio pro Christo* laid its grip upon him. That idea is worth studying because it is something peculiar to our own race. It is not found in the same form among any other body of people. It was not merely a name for evangelisation, the going out in search of souls. Its primary note would appear to have been self-renunciation, and the core of that sacrifice was the leaving of home. When we read the annals of those ancient figures we are struck by the fact that this leaving of Ireland seems to have represented the greatest possible sacrifice that they could make.

Then came as a secondary note the seeking of penance. In other words the labours, the hardships, the dangers that presented themselves to those travellers were things that they esteemed. They were not accounted as evils to be tolerated



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for a great end. No, they were things which were sought for in themselves. Then, of course, as an inevitable ingredient, there entered in a passionate love of souls which were to be sought out wherever they might be in order to give them the good tidings. Such was this extraordinary composite thing, the *Peregrinatio pro Christo* of our forefathers.

### A MISSION BEGINS

Columbanus got permission from Comgall to set out. Accompanied by twelve others, as was the ancient idea, he set off to shape history. They carried with them nothing but the satchels containing their books and the staves which they bore in their hands. There is a great deal of diversity of view about his age at that time. Some authorities put it as thirty-two and others at over fifty. I would be inclined to think that the age of thirty-two is too young, having regard to the amount he had got in up to that time - five years in Cleenish, then the long apprenticeship to his holy trade which was served in Bangor; and then the fulfilling of his responsible posts there. I think we must go much higher than this youthful age of thirty-two.

Vivid pictures are given to us of such travelling groups as his: "We are Irish" was their introduction of themselves, "living at the very ends of the earth. We are men who receive naught but the doctrine of the Apostles and the Evangelists." With that slogan on their lips, those incredible men set off, first for England and then for the Continent. Columbanus was destined not again to set foot on his native soil.

He crossed over to Gaul somewhere between 580 and 590. There he found faith in existence hanging on, but only hanging on, possessed of no virtue or discipline. First they went to King Sigebert of Metz who appreciated Columbanus and tried to induce him to remain. But the saint thought that the conditions were too easy. He wanted something harder, so he could not be held back. He headed south into that utter wilderness which I have previously depicted. They reached Burgundy. The King of Burgundy at that time was Gontran who received him well and gave him a site for a monastery at Annagray.

There Columbanus and his companions lived a solitary existence among the woods and the wild animals, a little after the style of St. John the Baptist himself. It is told of him that he had a strange power over the wild animals. The squirrel became a sort of emblem of him (just as the stork was of his almost name-sake, St. Columcille) because squirrels used to come down from the branches and perch on him. One story is that having come across an admirable cavern in which he wanted to live, he found a bear in residence. He stood before the entrance and addressed the animal as St. Francis of Assisi would have done. He explained that he required the accommodation for himself and he asked the bear



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to go away quietly and stay away; and the bear did so obediently.

### LIGHT IN DARKNESS

The excitement caused by this heroic form of life was considerable, so that many were attracted to him. Shortly he was able to establish his second monastery at Luxeuil not far away; then another at Fontaine. It is pathetic to read that those three monasteries flourished until the French Revolution in which crisis they perished.

The severity of the life which was practised in those houses was extreme, but it caught the imagination. The French youth thronged in, including many nobles. The foundation prospered exceedingly and became famous far and wide.

It was a light in darkness. It is said that Luxeuil had 600 monks and that every day some monks issued forth from it on evangelising missions and to found other monasteries, their places being immediately filled by the incoming ones. Luxeuil became the seed of all the French monasteries afterwards established. So great was the growth effected during the life of Columbanus himself that we learn that at one time there were one thousand Abbots obedient to him. The Saint impressed himself on all his sons in an indelible way. What he was, every one of them sought to be and succeeded nobly. No one who was brought in touch with him ever forgot him.

But troubles arose, and this seems to be a law of life wherever good work is being done. Perhaps Columbanus helped to create some of that trouble. Though of gentle, winning manners in the ordinary course of affairs, he had a fiery impetuous nature to which he gave free rein when he thought that principle was at stake. Then he would denounce the evil doer no matter how exalted the person. Kings, Queens and bishops fell under the lash of his tongue and they did not like it.

### CLASHES

Also he clashed with the local ecclesiastical system in regard to certain differences in religious customs. Mainly these concerned the time of keeping Easter, but also there were differences in the tonsure and in costume. The question of the time of Easter was a really vexed one in those ages. For instance, Columbanus and his monks would be found mourning at the time of Palm Sunday, when the ordinary Church nearby was celebrating the joys of Easter. To these usages Columbanus held on with rigid, angry zeal, claiming that he had the right procedure from St. Patrick and before St. Patrick from the great Saint Jerome himself.

It would indeed appear to be the case that those usages represented an older custom in Rome itself, existing there at least up to the year 312. But Rome had



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changed this method. St. Columbanus was not willing to change it and the remonstrances addressed to him were of no avail. He believed that in Jerome and Patrick he had such authorities as could not be borne down.

Lest an actual disobedience be ascribed to him, let it be remembered that it was not a time of ready communication. He was sure about St. Jerome and St. Patrick. He was not sure about the validity or finality of the Roman changes. In those days it was possible to be hundreds of years in arrears. It was neither unique nor incorrect to be different, as witness the diversity of the liturgies anciently in vogue.

### EXPULSION AND RETURN

But eventually things came to a head. The nobles, with the king in their midst, proceeded to expel him and all the Irish monks. With infinite sorrow St. Columbanus prepared to go. Apparently he suffered most from the thought that he had to return to Ireland, as if this amounted to a destruction of his vocation.

His party was brought under escort to Nevers, whence a boat brought them down the Loire to the sea. There was found an Irish ship about to set out for the homeland. On that ship the Saint and his companions engaged places. Then followed an astounding circumstance. As soon as the boat set out, it was lashed by a violent storm against which it could make no headway, and soon it was thrown on to a shore. At this stage its captain realised that he had a Jonah on board, and then the procedure of Jonah was almost followed out. Note the strange fact that the Saint's name in Hebrew is Jonah.

The captain requested his cargo to get off. Their poor belongings were deposited on the beach. Then, it is narrated, a great wave arose and floated the ship which was able to proceed to Ireland.

In this way it was made manifest to St. Columbanus that his path lay east and not west. He made his way carefully back to France avoiding places where he might get rearrested. He came to Switzerland, first to Lake Zurich and then to Bregenz. There he and his companions set themselves to their work of evangelisation. The people were pagans without tincture of Christianity, worshipping the old German gods. Columbanus applied himself to this situation in no hesitating fashion. His special aid was St. Gall, a man after his own heart. They stirred up a great deal of hostility against themselves by their strong methods, which took the form of breaking the idols, felling the holy trees, and breaking up the vats in which liquor was brewed for offering to the false gods. Which of these items irritated the people the most we cannot say, but we can guess. After three years of not very great success, St. Columbanus determined to leave. St. Gall remained behind and finally reaped the harvest to such good purpose that he ranks today as the apostle of Switzerland.



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### DREAM OF RUSSIA

When he determined to leave Switzerland, St. Columbanus' first thought was Italy. But suddenly he was seized with a wish to go to the Slavs, who represent one of the great divisions of the human race. They are the Russians and its kindred peoples. It is most intriguing to reflect on what might have happened if he had carried out that desire. He had to make his terrific impact on anything he touched. Unquestionably he would have gone far towards bringing them into the Church. As it was, those regions were only evangelised 200 years later by St. Cyril and Methodius. Columbanus might have changed the whole history of the world if he had gone there and speeded up the process of evangelisation to that extent.

But Columbanus was not to go to Russia. While he was thus reaching out in thought to the Slavs, he saw in a dream an angel who said to him: "The world is before thee. Take the right hand or the left, but turn not side from thy road if thou wouldst reap the fruit of thy labours." He interpreted that dream to mean that he should hold on to his first thought. So he put away that tempting vision of the Slavs and he set out for Italy.

### ACROSS THE ALPS

At that time that intrepid man was over 70 years of age - some say much older. He went across the Alps by the St. Gothard Pass and he addressed himself to the Lombards, who were one of the Germanic tribes which had taken the northern part of Italy. The King Agilulf welcomed him, and when thinking out a place that would be suitable, remembered an old ruined church at Bobbio dedicated to St. Peter, in the midst of a wild solitude in the Appenines. This he gave to Columanus. The monks cleared the forest, and legend is busy with the feats of herculean strength and endurance which St. Columbanus performed in this task.

When built, the Monastery reproduced for Italy what Luxeuil was doing for France. It became the centre of holiness and learning for all northern Italy. It was in Bobbio that Columbanus died in the year 615, only one year after the completion of the monastery. The general belief assigns him the age 73 at that time.

He had found a cavern in the mountains which he turned into a Chapel of the Blessed Virgin and in it he lived in almost complete solitude, only coming down to the Monastery on Sundays and feast-days. In that cavern he died. His bones are preserved in the crypt of the Abbey Church. A silver bust of him holds his relics. Pilgrims use for their eatables the very knife and cup which he used long ago.

### A RULE FOR GIANTS

No greater son ever left Ireland and he ever remained its son. He loved it with



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every fibre of him and he clung to its usages perhaps a little too firmly. He sang the songs of Bangor and he taught them to his French and Italian monks. His monastic rule was too heavy for any but the giants who went forth from Ireland in those days. As a result it yielded everywhere to the milder Benedictine Rule. His monasteries, one after another, became amalgamated with the Benedictine Abbeys.

It merits mention that the Benedictine Rule had not been doing too well up to that time. It could not be said to possess much fire, but it certainly gained that quality when the fusion took place. The Benedictine Order honours Columbanus as one of their own saints. Strange to say he was born in the very year in which St. Benedict himself died, as if to carry on the work which St. Benedict laid down in that year. I may add that the annals of the Church are full of that sort of apparent coincidence where God in the very year, and perhaps in the very day of a person's death brings into the world an infant who is destined to carry on that other person's work.

### A SALMON AMONG MINNOW

Now you can judge what a supreme character and influence was St. Columbanus. Yet he is not a saint of the universal Church. Alone among the Irish saints, St. Patrick is in that category. That St. Columbanus is absent from it is a complete anomaly. Because by comparison with the great majority of the saints on the universal Calendar, he is as a salmon among minnow. There is that mighty, pivotal providential figure who saved the Catholic Church when its fortunes seemed to be lost, as Pius XI could say. Nevertheless he is honoured only by the Benedictines and ourselves; by the Benedictines as a sort of adopted child, and by ourselves in a halfhearted way.

Quite a beautiful calendar which was put into my hands the other day, bore an effective picture of St. Patrick as a slave on its outer cover and contained the picture of an Irish saint for each month. St. Columbanus was not comprised, although with crowning inconsistency his disciple, St. Gall, was included.

St. Columbanus has been described as a frustrated and submerged personality. Bangor, the scene of so much of his early labours and distinguished holiness, enshrines the memory of St. Comgall rather than his. Luxeuil is better known by the name of St. Waldebert. Switzerland thinks in terms of St. Gall rather than of St. Columbanus. His monastic Rule was superseded by that of St. Benedict. Even the Catholic Church itself does not seem to do him justice, and allows him to fall into a sort of eclipse. What is the reason for all this? Is it the working out of some incomprehensible law of God where obscurity is given as a favour, or is it connected with that controversy over the Easter Rules?

Anyone who would think that Columbanus was lacking in love and loyalty to



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the Holy See would make a stupid, tragic mistake. That sentiment was the breath of his nostrils. One tremendous phrase of his would be typical of his whole mind: "We are bound to the Chair of Peter."