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## COLUMBAN - A TRUE CELTIC PILGRIM

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*The year 1992 will commemorate the fourteen hundredth anniversary of St. Columban's missionary expedition to Luxeuil. This site grew into one of the most important monastic settlements in Europe. St. Columban was a shining light of sacred and secular learning who clearly showed that the "Dark Ages" were not completely bereft of culture and godliness. This was due in no small part to the work of Celtic missionaries such as St. Columban.*

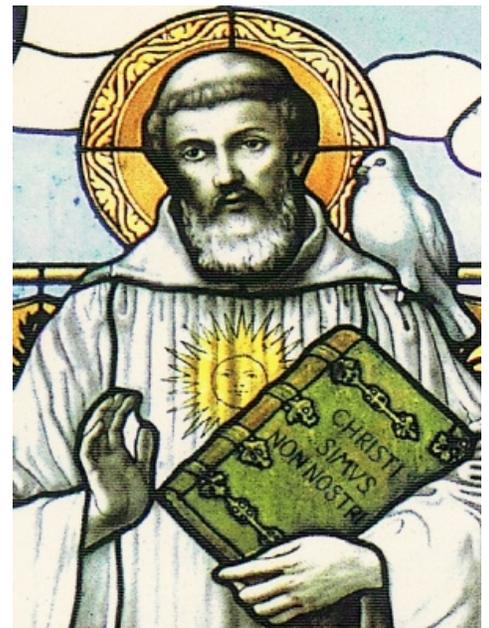


EW CHRISTIANS WOULD RECALL LUXEUIL AS AN IMPORTANT PLACE IN CHRISTIAN history, yet it was instrumental in the expansion of Irish monasticism in Europe and certainly the expansion of Christianity in the area now known as France. In fact this establishment has been called a "French Monte Cassino" and "the Holy Spirit of the West."<sup>1</sup> The leader of the monastery holds a more familiar name, Columbanus, or as he has many times been called, Columban. His influence on the growth of Christianity in France is of such significance that one would have to wait until the twelfth century, the era of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, before there existed a saint "exercising a comparable ascendancy in France."<sup>2</sup>

This upcoming year, 1992, marks the fourteen hundredth anniversary of Columban's monastic settlement at Luxeuil in 592.<sup>3</sup> Due to its significant role in Christian history yet unknown status among many Christians, it is beneficial to consider the importance of Luxeuil and the role Columban played in its development.

Columban was born in Ireland on the borders of the present counties of Carlow and Wexford about the year 543. He studied grammar, rhetoric, geometry and scripture in the Irish monastic schools. Not only was he a student, but he earned a name for his attractive appearance. His earliest biographer, a monk from the monastery of Bobbio named Jonas of Susa, referred to his "*formae elegantia*." He entered the monastery of Congall at Bangor. These monks followed the Rule of Bangor which was known for its stern measures. There at Bangor, Columban learned Latin and some Greek, read the pagan classical authors and became immersed in the scriptures.<sup>4</sup> He further possessed an interest in poetry which remained with him all of his life.<sup>5</sup>

Columban, in the spirit of Celtic pilgrims, had a desire to go abroad to perform missionary work but he was refused by his superior Congall. He was later able to convince this superior that this call to missionary work was from God. He set sail with twelve companions, their journey leading them to the shores of Gaul. After wandering through the countryside, they made a settle-



*St. Columban*

ment at Annegray. Eight miles west of Annegray lay the ruins of a Roman fort. There they established Luxeuil. A third foundation was made three miles north of Luxeuil, at Fontaine. Luxeuil became the most important of the three houses. Within a short time, the three monasteries together numbered two hundred monks.<sup>6</sup>

Such rapid growth necessitated a rule for establishing a way of life. Columban composed his own monastic rule, which consisted of two parts, the *Regula Monachorum* and the *Regula Coenobialis*. The *Regula Monachorum* described the way of life for the monks.<sup>7</sup> Obedience was the cornerstone of the system. Poverty and mortification were also fostered. The spirit of recollection was nurtured by silence. Regulations for the praying of the Divine Office specified designated times during the night and the day.<sup>8</sup> The *Regula Coenobialis* listed penalties for those who did not abide by the rule. These penalties included corporal punishment. Since Columban had been trained under the ascetical model of the Rule of Bangor, he believed that self-mortification and penance were the only ways of curing the corruption of morals among the Franks. Columban's *Rule* was actually his vision for obtaining perfection for it was more concerned with a growth in virtue than many of the practical elements of monastic life. Absent from Columban's *Rule* are such necessary procedures as the election of an abbot and the daily occupations of the monks.<sup>9</sup>

In regard to an educational program for the monks, Columban referred to daily manual labor, daily prayer and daily study. He set the example for the manual labor of farming. Columban looked upon manual labor as a social good, an economic necessity and a penitential exercise which led to self-control.<sup>10</sup> The daily prayer, in addition to the Divine Office, included instruction in the spiritual life. Columban's sermons reveal that he looked upon this life as "a brief moment" in preparation for eternity: "Consider not, poor man, what thou art, but what thou wilt be."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, one's loves should be directed toward the next world. He stated that the spiritually wise person does not love anything in the world because it is not lasting. He enumerated the vices one must eliminate to attain salvation. Columban also instructed them on a fraternal charity in the monastic life. He described the love of God as:

nothing but the renewal of His image.... Let us give back to our God, to our Father, His image undefiled; ... let Christ paint His image in us, the

image which he painted with the words: "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you."  
[John 14:27]<sup>12</sup>

He developed in his sermon the belief that peace comes about in community through the practice of charity.<sup>13</sup> Daily study for the monks was accomplished through the monastic school.

Columban's classical education served him well in the establishment of the monastery school in Luxeuil. The curriculum provided a study and appreciation of the ancient classics, the trivium of grammar, rhetoric and dialectics as well as the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. Special importance was attached to the study of music. Grammar was given the position of queen of the sciences. Latin was a necessary requisite for the study of the classics. A person ignorant of music was considered unfit for the monastic life, for the chanting of the divine office was an integral part of the life of Columban's monks.<sup>14</sup> The school soon earned a reputation for sound education. Some of its students were later to become bishops and abbots.<sup>15</sup>

Columban's Irish heritage manifested itself in his view of ecclesiastical authority. The Church in Gaul was under the jurisdiction of the local bishop. This jurisdiction included parishes as well as monasteries. Columban practically ignored the bishop in establishing the monasteries. The Irish missionary obtained a grant for monastic sites from the king, as his superior Congall had obtained a grant from the prince of the tribe in Ireland. He probably assumed that no other authorization was necessary.<sup>16</sup> Columban opened his monasteries, taught the Faith, dispensed the sacraments as if the bishops did not exist. In the Irish church, the same matters were handled by abbots of monasteries.<sup>17</sup> As a result, Columban did not endear himself to the bishops of Gaul.

The difference between the Celtic Church and that of Gaul was likewise seen in the observance of Easter. Columban taught his followers to observe the calendar established by the Irish Church which had a different date for the celebration of Easter.<sup>18</sup> His practice led to later controversy with the bishops which became the groundwork for his expulsion.

Columban also drew from the Irish Church the penitential system. Columban composed his own penitential for the clergy and people of Gaul. Columban's

penitential prescribed a particular remedy for each particular sin. This method he derived from earlier penitentials which he knew from his own training.<sup>19</sup> The sin, as well as the motives for sin, were considered. The penalties for sin were extremely rigorous but it must be born in mind that the Irish saw themselves as dealing with “rude, carnal-minded men, men with violent passions.”<sup>20</sup> The Irish system also included the concept of a “soul friend,” the Anamchara. This soul friend, the confessor, was seen as a devout and wise man who could lead one on to avoid sin in the future. Whereas the Irish penitential system called for private penance, the Church of Gaul still utilized the Roman system, that of public penance, which was prevalent on the continent of Europe. Columban quickly found that the people of Gaul came to his monastery to avail themselves of the Irish penitential system over that of the continent.<sup>21</sup>

In reviewing the practices which Columban is remembered for at Luxeuil, one may consider what was of enduring value. The penitential system which Columban introduced to the people of Gaul proved a success for a number of reasons. The mere number of participants showed that Christians found it spiritually beneficial. It must be pointed out that Columban worked with the bishops of Gaul in the introduction of this method. When conversions came about after his preaching, Columban sent the penitents to their bishops or priests to confess their sins and be reconciled with God. Some of these bishops chose Columban as their spiritual guide and fostered the system in their diocese. In later years, when the episcopates were occupied by men who had been trained at Luxeuil, this form of administering penance became more common in Gaul.<sup>22</sup> Within the next few centuries, the penitential books would be entirely eliminated. The penances would become less severe than those in the penitential books themselves but the private nature of the sacrament of Penance would endure.

The Rule of Columban was certainly an introduction to the Celtic disciplined life on the continent. In time, however, the Rule of St. Benedict proved to be a superior model and was adopted. The key to the success of the Benedictine rule was moderation. Benedict did but sparingly include corporal punishment. Furthermore, he allowed for the weakness of the sick and elderly. Benedict was also skilled in organization. His Rule thus maintained a more coherent monastic model, as it took into consideration the regulation of major aspects of monastic life. The administration within Columban’s

monasteries remained undeveloped. Rather than having written statutes which would provide for the practical needs of life, Columban became the monarch in the monastery. Thus, his personality and initiative supplied what was lacking in the documents. It is thought that Columban’s Rule was observed in Luxeuil and at Bobbio (a later Columban establishment in northern Italy) until 817. At the same time, there was some introduction of the Benedictine rule to supplement what Columban’s Rule lacked. The Council of Aix-la-Chapelle in 817 made the Benedictine Rule obligatory on all the monasteries in the Carolingian area.<sup>23</sup>



Controversy over the date for the celebration of Easter provided the seedbed for Columban’s expulsion from Luxeuil. The bishops of Gaul had decreed at the Fourth Synod of Orleans in 541 that there be a uniform date for the observance of Easter in that territory. This established practice was, of course, different from that among the Celts. In the year 600, Columban kept Easter in his monasteries on April 3 while the remainder of the inhabitants of Gaul observed it on April 10. The bishops were scandalized at Columban’s observance. Columban appealed to Pope Gregory.<sup>24</sup> While awaiting a reply from Gregory, Columban was called before a council of bishops, held at Chalon in 603.<sup>25</sup> Columban did not appear in person, fearing that he might offend charity in speech, and thus sent a letter. In his letter, the Irish missionary gave reason for the practice and then appealed for peace and harmony among all.<sup>26</sup> The bishops condemned Columban’s Easter practice, but did not force him to resign as head of his monasteries. Neither does history record that a sickly Pope Gregory, less than a year from his death, responded to Columban’s request.<sup>27</sup>

Columban was expelled from Luxeuil in 610, but the reason is not thought to lie wholly with the Easter controversy. The more immediate issue seems to be the immoral conduct of Theuderich, king of Burgundy. After King Childebert died in 595, his two sons became kings of Austrasia and Burgundy. Brunhilde, the grandmother of the kings, acted as regent as the boys were both children when they ascended the throne. Columban was called forth to recognize and bless the four illegitimate children of Theuderich, the king of Burgundy. The

Irish missionary refused. This led to friction between Columban and the Queen Mother. The people of Gaul were ordered to stay away from the Columban monasteries.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the monks were forbidden to have any contact with the people, even for obtaining food. Columban immediately went to see the king. Theuderich, wishing to avoid trouble with Columban, invited him in, but the Irishman would not enter. He was immediately brought food and drink to the door. Columban threw them down, stating that he did not accept gifts from the impious. The king withdrew the interdict.<sup>29</sup>

Brunhilde, however, was determined in her efforts against Columban. She looked for support against the missionary and found it among bishops, vassals and the king. Theuderich confronted Columban at the monastery in Luxeuil, demanding entry into all parts of the monastery. Columban replied that if the cloister were violated, the monastery would cease to exist. The king then sent Count Baudulfa, a feudal vassal, to force Columban into exile in Besancon. Columban's missionary work had not ceased for on his journey back to Ireland, Jonas, his biographer, recorded that Columban cured eighteen men of demonic possession. After sailing to Nantes, Columban wrote to his monks at Luxeuil, shared his resignation with them, blamed his plight on the devil and told them to avoid dissension and preserve unity.<sup>30</sup>

The Irish missionary was preparing to sail back to his homeland when his boat was stranded. He interpreted this action as a sign from God that he was meant to continue in his missionary pursuits.<sup>31</sup> He thus began his pilgrim journey again, this time to Germany, and finally northern Italy, where he established the celebrated monastery at Bobbio. There he died in the year 1615.<sup>32</sup>

The influence of Luxeuil did not end with Columban's departure nor with his death. During the administration of Eustace, one of Columban's successors, the monks traveled to neighboring German lands for missionary work. Eustace abandoned the Irish observance of celebrating Easter, and adapted the practice legislated by the bishops of Gaul. At this time, the monastic school grew in prominence as a "nursery of saints and missionaries."<sup>33</sup> During the administration of Waldebert, Eustace's successor, Luxeuil became the foremost monastery in Europe. The number of monks increased to over six hundred. Hence, branch institutions had to be established.<sup>34</sup> The celebrated monastery of Corbie, which played an important part in the transmission of

Latin classical and patristic texts, was founded from Luxeuil in 660.<sup>35</sup> At first, these branch institutions were under the supervision of the mother institution of Luxeuil. With the spread of the Benedictine Rule, by the end of the seventh century, all of these branch monasteries became independent.<sup>36</sup> The Benedictine rule placed emphasis on stability and diocesan supervision, which gave the houses a static and local character. This concept certainly exemplified a marked contrast to the Celtic notion of the pilgrim missionary exemplified in the person of Columban.<sup>37</sup> The successors of Columban at Luxeuil further continued his example of exempting the monastery from episcopal jurisdiction. Some bishops confirmed this exemption, others agreed after pressure from civil authorities, and others refused to give up their jurisdiction.<sup>38</sup>

In considering the achievements of Columban at Luxeuil, the Easter controversy stands out as one in which Columban seemed out of touch with the reality of the Church situation. Why did he so tenaciously cling to the Irish custom? There was certainly no matter of Faith involved. The answer, undoubtedly, can be found in the character of Columban:

Gentleness was paired with inflexibility; love of peace and solitude with keen delight in argument and controversy. He was profoundly humble, but impatient of contradiction when he believed that he was in the right. He was most respectfully attached to the papal authority, but ready to beard the person in whom it was vested, if he thought the interests of the Church demanded it. He left home and kindred to win souls for Christ, but his patriotism was so deeply rooted and so exclusive that he could not make the lighter sacrifice of giving up the customs of his native land when it would have been to the advantage of his mission to do so.<sup>39</sup>

Columban's limited vision was corrected by his successors. Experience likewise proved that the strict Irish rule had to be tempered by the somewhat more realistic Benedictine Rule.

In a certain sense, Columban may be seen as a bridge figure. He did provide the means for the incorporation of the richness of the Celtic Church upon the Continent. It is well worth noting that when Columban worked together with the bishops of Gaul in the transition to a private penitential system, this endeavor proved very fruitful. Likewise, Columban's educational

and Christianizing efforts actually provided leadership in Europe for generations afterwards.

Columban is also a consoling figure in that his vision of God's will was not always crystal clear, or entirely free of his preferences. In his great zeal to spread the faith, there were times when he appeared to be greater than human as seen in his stand against King Theuderich, yet his sometimes cloudy vision as seen in the Easter controversy makes one realize that he also struggled with human weakness. Columban manifested an awareness of his weaknesses when he refused to appear before the bishops at Chalon for fear that he would offend charity. The wisdom of the psalmist in speaking of a just man

is certainly applicable to Columban, "Though he fall, he does not lie prostrate, for the hand of the Lord sustains him" (Ps 37:24).

Columban, in the tradition of Celtic pilgrims, looked for no sanctuary here on earth. He sought the heavenly country. For him, like all Irish missionaries, pilgrimage was "*pro Dei amore, propter nomen Domini, ob amorem Christi, pro remedio animae, pro adipiscenda in caelis patria, pro aeterna patria.*"<sup>40</sup> In his wanderings, Columban professed his love of God in the conversion of men. With his vision of the heavenly home always before him, he moved on to different lands.



## NOTES

1Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Dark Ages*, 1, trans. Audrey Butler (New York: Image, 1962), 281.

2Ibid., 1:281.

3Hubert Jedin and John Dolan, *History of the Church*, 2 *The Imperial Church from Constantine to the Early Middle Ages* by Karl Baus, Hans-Georg Beck, Eugen Ewig and Hermann Josef Vogt, trans. Anselm Biggs (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 523.

4Tomas O'Fiaich, *Columbanus in His Own Words* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1974), 19-24.

5Jean Decarreaux, *Monks and Civilization: From the Barbarian Invasions to the Reign of Charlemagne*, trans. Charlotte Haldane (Garden City, NY, 1964), 192.

6O'Fiaich, op. cit., 25-32.

7George Metlake, *The Life and Writings of Saint Columban* (Philadelphia: Dolphin Press, 1914), 69.

8O'Fiaich, op. cit., 32-35.

9Metlake, op. cit., 76-84.

10Ibid., 97-99.

11Ibid., 101.

12Fourth Instruction of Columbanus as quoted in Metlake, op. cit., 104.

13Ibid., 104-05.

14Ibid., 92-96.

15Mrs. Thomas Concannon, *The Life of St. Columban* (St. Columbanus of Bobbio): A Study of Ancient Irish Monastic Life (St. Louis: Herder, 1915), 152.

16Ibid., 146.

17Decarreaux, op. cit., 197.

18Ibid.

19Concannon, op. cit., 147.

20Metlake, op. cit., 117.

21Concannon, op. cit., 147-51.

22Metlake, op. cit., 115-19.

23Ibid., 88-89.

24Ibid., 131-35.

25Decarreux, op. cit., 198.

26Copies of these letters to Pope Gregory and the French bishops may be found in O’Fiaich, op. cit., 82-87.

27Metlake, op. cit., 131-40.

28O’Fiaich, op. cit., 39-41.

29Decarreux, op. cit., 196.

30O’Fiaich, op. cit., 41-45.

31Metlake, op. cit., 164.

32Ibid., 249.

33Ibid., 229.

34Ibid., 230-31.

35*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1989 ed., s.v. “Corbie.”

36Metlake, op. cit., 231.

37G. S. M. Walker, “St. Columban: Monk or Missionary,” in *The Mission of the Church and the Propagation of the Faith: Papers Read at the Seventh Summer Meeting and the Eighth Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, G. J. Cuming, ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1970), 44.

38Metlake, op. cit., 236.

39Ibid., 142-43.

40S. Columbani Opera as cited by G. S. M. Walker in “St. Columban: Monk or Missionary,” op. cit., 43.

