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“RUDE AND RELIGIOUS IRISH”: THE CULT OF WANDERING SAINTS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Dermot Quinn



IN 1183 A WELSHMAN CALLED GERALD GIRALDUS CAMBRENSIS TRAVELED TO Ireland. A scholar in a family of soldiers, he came to see for himself “the primitive origin” of the Irish race; to investigate “the popular rumors of the land” so that he might understand a strange and irrational people. Giraldus’s mission was not disinterested. He came to vindicate the Anglo-Norman invasion that had occurred fourteen years before; to show that Irish wretchedness needed English reform. His findings justified the journey. The people were indeed backward. They had “little use for the money-making of towns.” They were lazy: “the greatest pleasure is not to work and the greatest wealth is to enjoy liberty.” As for religion, they seemed incorrigibly attached to aboriginal forms. Consider their saints. If objects of devotion merely objectify the desires of the devout, then Irish holy men and women were like the Irish themselves: sour, bad-tempered, vindictive and crude:

It appears to me very remarkable, [Giraldus wrote] and deserving of notice, that as in the present life of the people of this nation are beyond all others irascible and prompt to revenge, so also in the life that is after death, the saints of this country, exalted by their merits above those of other lands, appear to be of a vindictive temper. There appears to me to be no other way of accounting for this circumstance but this: As the Irish people possessed no castles, while the country is full of marauders who live by plunder, the people, and more especially the ecclesiastics, made it their practice to have recourse to the churches, instead of fortified places, as refuges for themselves and their property; and, by divine Providence and permission, there was frequent need that the church should visit her enemies with the severest chastisements; this being the only mode by which evil-doers and impious men could be deterred from breaking the peace of ecclesiastical societies, and for securing even to a servile submission the reverence due to the very churches themselves, from a rude and religious people.¹

Those who wish to construct the history of Ireland as “otherness” in conflict with authority could do worse than begin with Gerald of Wales.

I

Eight hundred years on, Giraldus Cambrensis does double-duty. He is, of course, a useful source for Ireland on the eve of the Anglo-Norman invasion. On the other hand, he is also a source for the attitudes of the invader. Perplexed by the other hand, he is also a source for the attitudes of the invader. Perplexed by primitiveness, he re-

veals himself as self-consciously modern; his brother-soldiers, as agents of advancement. Most liberators make similar claims. For the ecclesiastical historian, however, Giraldus sounds important themes often overlooked. Manifest bias notwithstanding, he adumbrates important truths about the making of saints and the functions they fulfill. The first is that sanctity is never without social context. The saint, like Giraldus himself, may do double or multiple duty. He becomes representative of processes beyond the pious. If this causes cracks in the plaster-cast, the faithful should not be alarmed. Sanctity may not be without social context but social context is not without sanctity. The icon reveals the iconographer, to be sure: but this does not mean that the icon has therefore no value of its own. Reductionists and historicists forever make that simple error; indeed, their entire enterprise depends on it. Sanctity was not a pious construct, a useful fiction, an instrument of social control. It existed as a thing in itself. Even Giraldus conceded as much. Ireland's saints may have been objectifications of an intemperate race, but they were also "commendable for piety ... continence, and great regularity of prayer" and "many laudable qualities besides"² -hardly the vindictive ogres of his earlier insight. The last truth is the most engaging: that in matters of faith the Irish were *strange*. Giraldus was sharp enough to see how religion could serve non-religious purposes, and subtle enough to intuit that religious purposes could themselves be multi-layered. But in pointing to Irish strangeness, to the sheer *oddity* of a land of saints and scholars, his purpose was not crudely polemical. Rather he wrote the simple truth. Christian yet Celtic, pious yet primitive, Roman yet un-Romanized: no wonder the Irish seemed "a rude and religious people." The contradistinction reveals as much as the conjunction. Giraldus the chronicler merely reported what he saw.

One oddity, unremarked by Giraldus, is the ancientness of Irish Christianity. Another is the national addiction to exile. First a word about the age of the Christian faith. From earliest times the Irish have been Christian: how early is open to debate. Piety often seeks authenticity by wrapping itself in antiquity. Occasionally

the results are comic. No one now believes, for example, that an Irishman called Altus was present on Calvary, or that the king of Ulster, one Conor MacNessa, died of a broken heart when told of the crucifixion. My countrymen were probably not Christian before Christ himself. On the other hand, a plausible case can be made that they were followers of Patrick before Patrick; that is, that there was Christianity in Ireland before the coming of the national apostle in 432. Literary evidence, spiced with



St. Palladius

conjecture, suggests as much. The first bishop to the Irish was not Patrick but Palladius, sent by Pope Celestine in 431. Palladius is a dim figure, probably a deacon of Auxerre and an anti-Pelagian. There remains a vestigial cult of a St. Paldy in Leinster, particularly Wicklow; otherwise, he is lost to us. Patrick himself speaks of travelling to places in Ireland "where no one else had ever penetrated, in order to baptize, or to ordain clergy, or to confirm the people," as if there were places which had been evangelized before him. Palladius and Patrick may have been one and the same, or to be precise the cult of the latter may incorporate missionary work in places evangelized by the former. That view the "two Patrick theory" has fallen out of favor since it was adumbrated, with considerable panache, by T.F. O'Rahilly in 1942.³ A radical variation of it holds that the man we know as St. Patrick did not exist at all. That seems one revisionism too many.

Even if there were "two Patricks," or "no Patrick," the Christian gospel was probably heard in Ireland before 432. Some of the pre-patrician saints have names Declan of Ardmore, Meltioc of Kinsale, Ciaran of Saiger ("the first begotten of the saints of Ireland"⁴)-but otherwise little history. Whoever they were, they labored in a country with strong links to Gaul and Roman Britain, and through connections of trade, commerce and cultural exchange, Christianity may well have arrived some time before Patrick. Patrick himself came to Ireland first as a slave captured in Britain, one of thousands, among whom were Christians and possibly priests. Besides these involuntary Christians were Christians who came more or less willingly. As the Roman world collapsed, many believers fled barbarian Europe for supposedly gentler Ireland. "All the learned

men on this side of the sea took flight,” records the *Leiden Glossary*, citing a sixth-century document, “and in transmarine parts, namely in Ireland and wherever they betook themselves, brought about a very great increase of learning to the inhabitants of those regions.”⁵⁵ The continent’s loss was Ireland’s gain, but it was a debt splendidly repaid. None of this, of course, is to dislodge the achievement of Patrick as the major Irish evangelist. That remains incontestable. Nor, once again, should the faithful feel alarmed by a revisionism which seems to undermine cherished beliefs. The historical Patrick anguished, semi-literate, painfully humble, “the most wretched of sinners”—is more authentically a saint than the Patrick of legend, an imperious and rather unattractive thaumaturge, bizarrely preoccupied with snakes and shamrocks: precisely the kind of saint, in fact, that Giraldus Cambrensis later deplored. Patrick’s *Confession* and his *Letter to Coroticus*, tortured in Latin but luminous in spirituality, are products of a profound and admirable soul.

What we know of Patrick we know best from his own words: that he came to the Irish *ut Christiani ita et Romani sitis*: “that they might be Christian and at the same time Roman.” One reason for Patrick’s humility was consciousness of his inadequacy as bishop, an office for which he had almost inarticulate awe. Yet if he succeeded in one endeavor he seemed to fail in the other. Within a century of his mission the Irish were not Roman but Celtic in their Christianity: abbots, not bishops, held ecclesiastical sway. Monasticism more than any other movement shows the strangeness of Irish sanctity, its eccentricity in an world of Roman ecclesial norms. Originating in Egypt, moving to France then to Britain, it swept Ireland with astonishing speed and force in the sixth century. As in so many things, Ireland was divided north and south in its monasticism. To the north were foundations owing existence to Ninian’s great establishment at Whithorn or Candida Casa on the coast of Galloway. Most of the northern abbots were trained there: Enda of Aran, Eugene of Ardstraw, Finnian of Moville, Coipre of Coleraine. To the south were monasteries whose chief inspiration seems to have been the Welsh monks Gildas and David. Gildas in particular advocated the excellence of life in religious community, at the same time urging that no particular rule be followed, thereby allowing the Irish to develop distinct and diverse cenobitical practices. Most of the southern abbots could trace their training to Welsh headquarters: Finnian of Clonard, Senan of Scattery Island, Brendan of Clonfert.



The speed with which monasticism took hold in Ireland is a subject for a different time. A few observations are nevertheless in order. Faced with the phenomenon, some historians are reduced to bafflement or blarney. It is indeed a puzzle; but to summon “the imagination and mysticism of the Celt”⁵⁶ as the reason for the spread of the religious life, or “the sheer attraction of its charms”⁵⁷ is to invite the derision due to an explanation which explains nothing. Two quite separate questions are ignored in such ahistorical accounts: the decline of episcopacy and the rise of monasticism. The former was not the inevitable consequence of the latter. Certainly it is remarkable that an institution so revered by Patrick should wither within a century of his death; all the more so as the Catalogue of the Saints of Ireland reveals an emphatically episcopal church until AD 544. “The first order of Catholic saints,” says the Catalogus, “was in the time of Patrick: and then they were all bishops, distinguished and holy, and full of the Holy Ghost, 350 in number, founders of churches. They had one head, Christ, and one chief, Patrick.”⁵⁸ There were possibly external factors in the decline of the diocesan organization. The plague of the 540s wrought terrible damage. The diocesan churches were closely connected with France, the place hardest hit by plague, and this may well have hastened their demise.⁹ As for the subsequent growth of perfection-seeking religious communities, a better explanation than zeal alone - a necessary but hardly sufficient factor - is the remarkable “fit” between monasticism and Irish social and family structure. In the first place, despite the apparent firmness of episcopal organization, Ireland, on the farthest reaches of Europe, was historically non-Roman. Dioceses had developed on the back of the Roman imperial administration; lacking that administration, Ireland was always more likely to form distinct ecclesial structures. Moreover, the Irish social system, “with its emphasis on kinship and personal rule,” was perfect seed-ground for “the concept of the monastic family and its abbot.”¹⁰ Notice, for example, how many abbots were of noble birth and how they inspired fierce loyalty in their disciples. Crucial here is the notion of *paruchia* or extended monastic family. The followers of a particular abbot founded monasteries in his name, so that there arose a set of territorially overlapping monastic confed-

erations, religious analogues of existing kinship arrangements. There was a “striking parallel between the monastic paruchia and secular overlordship.”¹¹ Irish monasticism waxed and Irish episcopacy waned precisely because one was natural to the country and the other was not.

II

But notions of strangeness come back to haunt us. Giraldus was right to notice that the Irish experience of religion, as of other things, was eccentric. Consider the unusual features of Irish monasticism - itself, of course, a highly unusual practice. One was scholarship - a striking dissimilarity from the original Egyptian model, where the chief desire was solitude. Another was the wandering instinct. Christianity came to a restless and rootless people, and monasticism took on that deracinated quality. “Wandering,” said Walafrid Strabo, ninth-century biographer of St. Gall, was “second nature to the Irish race.” It was the “Irish fashion” to go away.¹² St Jerome, knowing his national types, complained of Pelagius that he was *prae-gravatus Scotorum pulitibus* as full of heresy as he was of Irish porridge. For Columbanus, the pilgrim urge suggested an obvious homiletic theme:

What then are you, human life? You are the road of mortals and not their life.... You are the road to life, not life itself.

You are a real road but not a level one, long for some, short for others, broad for some, narrow for others, joyful for some, sad for others, for all alike fleeting and irrevocable. A road is what you are, a road.¹³

Notions of departure and arrival provide the standard tropes of Irish hagiography. “He sailed away wishing to be an exile for Christ,” wrote Adamnan of St. Colmcille,¹⁴ who, thinking he would never return, was overcome by sentimentality. “There is a grey eye/That looks back upon Erin/It shall not see during life/The men of Erin or their wives.”¹⁵ Hundreds like him sought “a solitude in the pathless sea,” as Adamnan beautifully puts it.¹⁶ Some were less homesick and more foolhardy, such as the three who made shore on Cornwall in 891 after a week on the

open sea with a week’s supply of food. “They had stolen away,” records the *AngloSaxon Chronicle*, “because they wished for the love of God to be on pilgrimage, they cared not where.”¹⁷ Others seemed in a frenzy for Christ, such as the wandering scholar who told St. Brigid, “Nun, I have no leisure [to stay with you], for the gates of heaven are open now, and I fear they may be shut against me.”¹⁸ Likewise St. Fridolin the Traveller, seventh-century Abbot of Sackingen in Switzerland: “Oh my dearest friends, is it unknown to you that no pride of worldly life can prevent me from setting out for that exile which Heaven has indicated? Why should you seek to prevent what the whole world is unable to resist?”¹⁹ Even when life was ebbing away, the urge to depart remained strong. In 926, Abbot Celedabhail of Bangor sought final exile before death:

It is time for me to pass from the shelter of a habitation,
To journey as a pilgrim over the waves of the bold
and splendid sea,
Time to deliberate how I may find the great Son
of Mary ... Time to rest, after we have reached the
place wherein we may
shed our tears ...
Only a part of one year is wanting of my three
score, It is time to remain under holy rule in one
place.²⁰

Wishing to see Rome, he died there in September of that year.



St. Colmcille

Best known of the *peregrini pro Christo*, as adventurer if not evangelist, is St. Brendan, founder of monasteries at Ardfert and Clonfert before the call of the sea became too much. The story of his travels, the *Navigatio Brendani*, became “a medieval best-seller, translated into all the European languages.”²¹ Its fame was deserved, and has lasted. (There is still a lively cult of Brendan in Brittany and parts of Germany.) The *Navigatio* is a classic example of “immrama,” or voyage literature, full of incident, adventure, and moral exhortation, dressed in the language of saga and heroic myth. Prompted by his foster-mother St. Ita, Brendan sailed for the “Land of Promise” around 545, leaving from

Brandon Head in Kerry with three companions, one of them St. Malo, hermit and evangelist of the Orkney Islands. “Trusting to the direction of Providence” the author of the *Navigatio* reports “they cared not from what quarter the wind blew, and were even ignorant of the course their vessel took.”²³ Providence took them to Iceland, the Faroes, possibly Newfoundland, possibly farther down the eastern seaboard of America a remarkable voyage. The usual criticism of the *immrama* that the historical Brendan loses out to a mythic one misses the point. Indeed such criticism is itself unhistorical, requiring of the genre a quite anachronistic exactitude and scruple for fact. The task of the historian is not to prove that miracle narratives are false; it is to understand what they mean.

One curiosity of voyage literature, for instance, is its combination of fantastic embellishment and precise detail, the latter adding a kind of historical verisimilitude to a tale otherwise unbelievable. Thus we read that Brendan, seeking *terra firrma* for Easter Mass, made for a small island. When the island began to move the sailors realized they were standing on a whale. Notice, however, the hagiographer’s taste for detail: the whale, he tells us, was called *Jasconius*. The naming of the whale is delightful, almost comic. It gives, as it would seem to us, a sort of mock historicity to the episode, absurdity corroborating absurdity as perverse proof that the story is in deed true. But the author had no modern desire to know “what actually happened,” still less a post-modern one to show that all history is radically illusory. Rather, he invites us to engage with some paradoxes. To have a name is to have an identity; to have an identity is to have a place in the scheme of things. The God who creates knows all his creation by name, and the God who loves desires each to live in harmony with the rest. Thus “*Jasconius*” makes all the difference. The sheltering earth is also transient. The Christian hero is admirable for his abandonment to providence, not for any merit of his own. The naming of the whale is an assurance of that providence.

Brendan was a formidable monk-mariner, but he was by no means the only one to undertake that north-

erly journey. Cormac, a disciple of Colmcille, ventured in a *curach* (a small hide-covered boat) to find a “desert in the ocean,” *desertum in pelago*, as did another Columban follower, a certain Baitan. The ocean desert may have been Iceland, though the word also connotes hermitage, which would mean, in this case, simply a remote and barren island. Little is known of their success. We do, however, know of a successful voyage of Irish monks to Iceland in 795, of Irish settlements on the Faroes from roughly 700 to 800, and of scattered hermitages in Iceland until the coming of the Norse towards the end of the ninth century. Scandanavian sources speak of priests (*papar*) taking flight from the Vikings, abandoning “Irish books, bells and crosiers.” Their presence is reflected in

the early placenames of south-east Iceland Papey, Papos, Papafell, Papavick-spots of stunning loneliness and austerity, where it was said “no heathen man might dwell.”²⁴ Their names are lost to us now; of their Irish books, bells and croziers there is no trace. But they sought the very ends of the earth to bring a gospel, and live a gospel, and be alone with their God. If not their names

then with humility we should remember their lives.

Enough has been said by now to show the wanderlust of the early Irish. It seems to have taken three forms. First was a desire to be utterly alone, to find a *desertum* wherein to repair the soul. Many Irish place-names today reflect that search for solitude: Desertmartin (“the hermitage of St Martin”), Desertegney (“the hermitage of St Egney”). The desire was not confined to men. A great many pious women also sought solitude at least 119 of them, according to the Martyrology of Tallaght.²⁵ Columbanus’s mentor as a youth was an anchoress who had lived as a solitary for fifteen years: “Were it not for the feebleness of my sex [she told him] I would have crossed the sea and found a more suitable place of pilgrimage in some foreign land.”²⁶ If isolation was one motive for pilgrimage, then evangelism was another, often felt (oddly enough) by the same pilgrims who wanted to be alone. No sooner had Colmcille reached Iona than he began “to preach the word of God to the men of Alba and to the



St. Brendan and the Whale

Britons and the Saxons.”²⁷ Adamnan has him sailing away “wishing to be an exile for Christ,” but Bede has him coming “to Britain to preach the word of God to the kingdoms of the northern Picts.”²⁸ No sooner had Columbanus reached Gaul than he founded a monastery “to preach to the peoples of the surrounding districts.”²⁹ The restlessness which made them leave made them preach. Like St. Martin they were constantly asking “with groans why such a multitude should know nothing of Our Lord and Saviour.”³⁰ The final reason for pilgrimage is more recognizably modern: the wish (like that of Abbot Celedabhaill in 926) to see Rome or a shrine or the Holy Places. The development is worth noting. By the time Celedabhaill reached Rome, Europe had become a safer place. There is a world of difference between tenth century Rome and seventh century Gaul; between the Eternal City and Ultima Thule “where no heathen may dwell.” Pilgrimage had not become tourism, but something of its elementality, its urgency, its danger, its utter abandonment to the will of God, had gone.

Who were those saints? The names of many are familiar: Colmcille of Iona, Apostle of Scotland, one of the great statesmen-ecclesiastics of the sixth century; Aidan of Lindisfarne, “locus cunctis in Britannia venerabilior,” as Alcuin called it, the holiest place in all England; Fursey and Fiacre of north-east France; Foillan of Belgium; Gall of Switzerland; Kilian of Wurtzburg and his martyred companions Colman and Totman; Fergal or Virgilius of Salzburg; Erhard of Ratisbon; Cathaldus of Taranto in southern Italy; Columbanus himself, greatest of missionaries, unafraid of popes or kings and every bit their equal. There are hundreds more, some known to history, some lost, some known only by name or local cult. The great flourishing of missionary activity from the seventh to the twelfth centuries produced 250 monks and bishops still venerated in continental Europe. There are about 100 of them in central Europe alone, “chiefly patrons of local chapels or churches [and sometimes] coupled with non-Irish saints.”³¹ In unexpected places Italy, Sicily, Malta Irish names adorn baptismal certificates and Irish churches abound. When the Franciscan Canice Mooney visited Taranto a number of years ago, the greeting was everywhere the same. “Ma lei e concittadino di nostro San Cataldo!”-“But you are a fellow citizen of our own St. Cathaldus!”³² The story of early medieval Europe is the story of exiled Ireland.

To be sure, some of the saints are legendary, some dubiously Irish, some uncanonical. Any young

Bollandist, eager for tenure, must lick his lips when he thinks of them. But he should think harder. Why are we so moved by local cult, even when its extravagance seems to suggest fragile foundations? The poet Tom Paulin once wrote, in another context, of discovering historical personages who spoke to him down the ages. They were, he said, “sweet yams buried deep.” So are these men. Their cult suggests a truth sometimes missed by scholarship: that attachment to the patronal saint is not localism but a connection to the universal church itself. Italian devotion to Cathaldus, German to Kilian, Scottish to Cohncille, English to Aidan, speaks to us of the spiritual unity of Europe. As Columbanus memorably wrote, “we are members of one body, whether Gauls or Britons or Irish or whatever our race.”³³ But more than that, to recall these buried lives is to recognize that the communion of saints is not simply abstraction or dogma but tangible reality, a truth of time, place, and eternity in which we participate now and, we hope, forever. The historical imagination is at root spiritual. That is how it ought to be in any incarnational understanding of the world.

The greatest of the *peregrini* was undoubtedly Columbanus. He was born in Leinster in 543 and died in Bobbio, in the monastery of his own foundation, in 615. Part of the achievement, and one reason for its permanence, was literary. Columbanus was an indefatigable writer of letters, sermons, exhortations, poems, monastic rules and penitential manuals. Most pilgrims speak to us through the prose of others; Columbanus comes in his own words by turns stern, affectionate, clever, impatient, adventurous, insufferable, yet endlessly zealous for Christ. The *Lives* of other saints are exercises in thaumaturgy Brendan saying mass on a whale, Brigid performing miracles with effortless ease, Patrick banishing snakes. They offer the Christian as hero: edifying but largely unbelievable. Columbanus was the real thing: not only valiant for Christ in the heroic mold but manifestly a human being as well. His biographer Jonas, a good one, offers the bombast which the genre demanded, but he provides plenty of historical ballast, too. Yet even without layers of cult and myth, Columbanus was impressive. No invented miracles were needed to make him formidable.

The surviving details of Columbanus’s early life record one fact which, for Ireland, is remarkable, perhaps unique: his mother did *not* want him to become a priest. She pleaded with him to stay at home-this sounds more like the mythic Irish mother and threw herself across

the door to bar his exit. With cool certainty he stepped over the outstretched body. Jonas turns the story into an epiphany, one of those biblically-modeled revelations which feature in all good hagiography. But literary device cannot disguise human anguish. The words Jonas puts in his mouth taken from St. Jerome are plausibly Columbanian in stubbornness and self-confidence:

The enemy holds the sword over me to strike me down; so what should I care for a mother's tears.... The true piety here is to be cruel.³⁴

It is hardly a valediction forbidding mourning.

Delivered from domesticity another set theme of the literature Columbanus sought instruction from a monastic mentor. His first guide was Abbot Sinell of Cleenish in Lough Erne, under whom he wrote a commentary on the Psalms and began to compose poetry. Having thus served his apprenticeship, he moved to Bangor in County Down. Bangor was like Columbanus himself: it combined scholarship and austerity in equal parts. The words of the seventh-century scribe, often quoted, capture a monastery but also an ideal:

The good Rule of Bangor, Upright,
divine,
Diligent, holy and strict, Wonderful, just and
sublime ...

Bangor, under the demanding abbot Comgall, much appealed to him. He lived there until he was nearly forty, and when he left contradictorily to establish a hermitage and to preach the gospel, Comgall did not wish him to go. This second leaving was as fraught as the first. Comgall at first commanded him to stay. Why? One reason suggests itself. The desire for a *desertum* was a serious problem in Irish monasteries. Columbanus himself later wrote to Pope Gregory complaining that solitude-seeking was dangerously on the rise.³⁵ There were two considerations. On the one hand, remoteness was romanticized by precisely those monks whose mettle had not been tested by it. In some cases there was spiritual immaturity in the wish to be alone—mock mysticism, not the genuine article. Even Columbanus was prone to it. Occasionally he longed for “the silence of [the] woods,”³⁶ as if hoping for solace not solitude. An element of escapism entered the equation. On the other hand, as more and more monks sought perfection in loneliness, abbatial authority was undermined and community discipline broke down.

Some would-be hermits, when denied permission, simply abandoned the monastery altogether. With Columbanus, however, the problem was strictly practical. He was one of few ordained men in a monastery composed mainly of lay religious.³⁷ This was the real reason Comgall was reluctant to let him go. Only after entreaties and assurances was he allowed to embark on his exile. The year was 591 and he brought with him twelve companions.



Their precise itinerary Britain or Brittany³⁸ need not detain us. Nor need we dwell on the complex politics of Gaul, where the descendants of Clovis, all too loyal to the memory of Caesar, not only divided the country in three but, whenever possible, sundered their opponents as well. The savagery of the Merovingians, recorded with brilliant but stomach-churning detail in Gregory's *History of the Franks*, is an historical commonplace. Gaul was a land of “spiritual desolation,”³⁹ a place where “so frightful was the butchery that the corpses of the slain had no room to fall but remained standing among the living fighters.”⁴⁰ Austrasia, Neustria and Burgundy—nominally Christian kingdoms—mocked the gospel they claimed to uphold. Yet it was one of these nominal Christian kings Sigebert of Burgundy who gave Columbanus his start, urging him to remain in the kingdom so that, as he put it, “you will increase your own reward and give us the chance of salvation.”⁴¹ With this permission the Irishmen began to explore the forests of the Vosges and established their first foundation, Annegray, on the site of an ancient Temple of Diana. It was an immediate success. The monastery soon outgrew itself and another was required. Eight miles to the west, on the banks of the river Breuchin, Columbanus came upon the ruins of the Roman fortress Luxovium. There he built his second monastery, Luxeuil, which seemed, for a while, a Bangor-on-the-Breuchin, famed for scholarship, strictness, and solidarity with the poor. It became in fact “the most brilliant centre of learning and virtue in the Middle Ages.”⁴² Luxeuil, too, quickly outgrew demand. Another sister house was built, Fontaines, three miles to the north. That was how things happened in Ireland. “The larger monasteries were continually throwing off new swarms,” as Charles Plummer delightfully puts it, “which settled at a greater or less distance from the parent hive.”⁴³ With the

suddenness of a curtain rising on a play, Columbanus revealed to decadent Gaul a more admirable form of Christian life.

These foundations were Irish in another sense. When the Latin *monaster-iuni* was incorporated into Irish it became *muintir*, a word which survives in the language today meaning “people.” A monastery was not understood as a building or a place but as a community or extended family. The Irish brought to Europe, in short, the notion of monastic *paruchia* which reflected their own kinship arrangements and which had allowed religious communities to spread so quickly in Ireland itself. This was clearly the case with Annegray, Luxueil and Fontaines. These were not the massive foundations of a later age, with cathedral-chapels, great libraries, and roomy refectories. Luxueil was a replica Bangor, not a prototype Cluny. Simplicity and austerity prevailed: small cells, modestly built, housed perhaps no more than two hundred monks in the three monasteries combined.⁴⁴

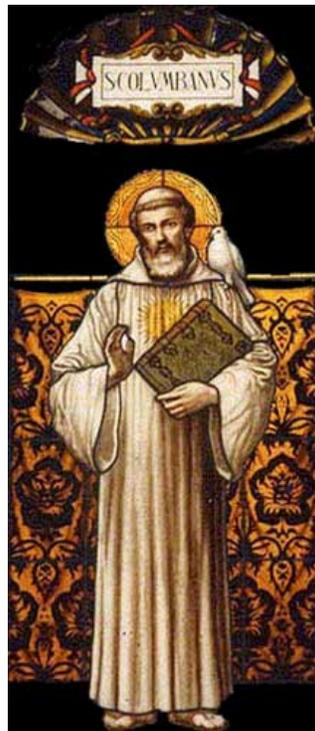
The Columbanian foundations were Irish in a third sense. Ancient Irish texts speak of three forms of martyrdom: white, green and red. White martyrdom meant renunciation of the world for the sake of Christ, an embrace of fast and penance to establish the kingdom. Green martyrdom the term is virtually untranslatable meant mortification and self-denial to extirpate fleshly desires. Red martyrdom meant persecution and death. Columbanus’s monasteries regarded white and green martyrdom as first stages in the path of perfection. In Gaul, of course, it was always possible that red martyrdom might provide the final stage. Columbanus speaks of the “felicity of martyrdom,” meaning the green martyrdom which was for St. Caesarius of Arles the “heroic contempt for the body” which makes it “harmless for evil.”⁴⁵

Quite apart from founding monasteries, Columbanus had the task of keeping them going. For this a rule was necessary—several rules, in fact: one for clergy, the other for laity whose sole spiritual sustenance was the monastery. To read the *Regula Monachorum* and the *Regula Coenobialis*, the rules and punishments of the collective life, is to realize how great was the transformation wrought in Gaul by these wandering monks. Fasting and prayer, the essential

features of white and green martyrdom, were at the heart of the common life. The regime was not for the faint-hearted: one modest meal per day; Divine Office throughout the year at nightfall, midnight, 9 A.M., noon and 3 P.M.; during the dark months from November to February an additional visit to the chapel at three in the morning to sing the entire psalm-cycle. It was probably Columbanus who began the *Laus Perennis*, the service of perpetual praise with choir following choir throughout the course of the day.⁴⁶ The contrast with the savagery of surrounding Gaul is too obvious to require further commentary.

The purpose of it all was perfection. But perfection was not granted to the “people” of Columbanus, his *muintir*, any more than to Columbanus himself. Discipline was necessary. So was punishment. Wandering monks who wandered, as it were, too far, were generally brought into line with slaps on the hand delivered with a leather strap. The modern mind sees strictness, but the messy, sometimes comic, humanity of the monastery also shines through:

- For coughing at the beginning of a psalm and spoiling the singing, six slaps ...
- For celebrating Mass with untrimmed nails, six slaps ...
- For biting the cup of salvation, six slaps ...
- For smiling at the synaxis, that is the office of prayers, six slaps;
- for laughing out loud, a grave penance unless it happens excusably ...
- For forgetting to say the prayer before or after work, twelve slaps ...
- For receiving the blessed bread with unclean hands, twelve slaps ...
- For forgetting the Blessed Sacrament when hurrying out to work, twenty-five slaps ...
- For dropping it in a field, fifty slaps ...
- For striking the altar, fifty slaps ...⁴⁷



The discipline was severe but never questioned. Columbanus’s own authority had been hard won. As a youth he had known the usual temptations and sought advice. “Do you think you can go freely in the company of women?” the aged anchoress had asked him. “Go away young man from the destruction which has ruined so many, turn away from the road that leads

to the gates of Hell.”⁴⁸ Besides, severity of discipline was tempered by mercy. “Austere in his tenderness,” Columbanus was also, “tender in his austerity,” as Jonas put it. That spiritual depth was at heart theological. To read the *Regula Coenobialis* is to be reminded of a central truth not only of monasticism but of all Christian life: that sanctification means not the abolition of human nature but its transfiguration. Columbanus knew all too well the nature which required sanctification.

With these rules we approach the heart of the Columbanian achievement, and indeed that of Irish monks on continental Europe. They brought from Ireland not only the gospel but a particular form of it which seems to balance finely between paradox and incoherence. It was ascetic and exuberant, personal and collective, restless and forever seeking rest. That we celebrate it for paradox not incoherence that we see it, in other words, as authentically Christian and not a syncretistic mess owes much to the distinctive contribution of these *peregrini* to the western church. That contribution was their penitential literature. Columbanus was one of several abbots who regulated spiritual life by precise tabulation of wrong-doings and their remedies. Penitentials survive from St. Finnian⁴⁹ and St. Cummean, as well as from several Welsh sources, chiefly *The Preface of Gildas*, *Oil Penance*, *The Synods of North Britain*, *The Synod of the Grove of Victory*, and *The Excerpts of the Book of David*. These Welsh sources are sketchy: the “penitentials proper are Irish”⁵⁰ -Finnian, Columbanus, Cummean (all written in Latin) and a later work, the *Old Irish Penitential*, written in Goidelic. The penitentials were manuals for confessors, to be memorized by men training for the priesthood and used over and over when they came to exercise pastoral authority. They are unvarying in form—a sin followed by a sanction—and this rigidity has suggested to some that forgiveness was reduced to formula. The literature is more subtle than that. If there is a formulaic quality, it is because “medicine for souls” (as penance was called) required precise dosage. The sanctions were not so much punishments as cures. Moreover, they were tailored to the particular penitent and could be varied according to circumstance. Thus the standard penance of fasting, recitation of the psalms or corporal punishment could be commuted to almsgiving for those who were infirm. Likewise lengthy punishment could become shorter though more severe. Commutation was standard practice in Ireland and, although novel, soon became standard in Europe. More important than these variations were the two animating principles of the entire enterprise. First

was that the confessor was to be *anam-chara* or “soul-friend” to the penitent; not a judge but a guide. Second was the idea of *contraria contrariis curare*, “by contraries let us make haste to cure contraries.”⁵¹ This notion, advocated early by the fifth-century monk Cassian, was thoroughly developed in the penitentials. It might almost be their motto. The cure for greed was generosity; for sottishness, sobriety; for lust, continence; for jealousy, largeness of soul. Nora Chadwick has condemned the manuals as “webs spun in .., the monkish brain . . . of suppositious crimes and unnatural sins.”⁵² On the contrary, they were psychologically sound and careful cures for the illnesses of seventh-century souls.

What were those illnesses? They were of every sort. Witness Columbanus:

If any layman commits theft, that is steals an ox or a horse or a sheep or any beast of his neighbour’s, if he has done it once or twice, he must first restore to his neighbour the loss which he has caused, and let him do penance for a hundred and twenty days on bread and water. But if he has made a practice of stealing often, and is unable to make restitution, let him do penance for a year and a hundred and twenty days, and let him further promise not to do it again. *He may go to Communion at Easter of the second year*, that is after two years, on condition that, out of his own labour, he first gives alms to the poor and a feast to the priest who adjudged his penance[!]. Thus is the guilt of his bad habit to be removed.

If a layman commits perjury, if he does it through greed, he is to sell all his goods and give to the poor ...

If any of the laity sheds blood in a squabble, or wounds or maims his neighbour, he [must] make good the damage he has done. If he has not the wherewith to pay, let him first carry on his neighbour’s work, as long as the latter is sick, and send for the doctor. After the man’s recovery, let him do penance for forty days on bread and water.

If any layman becomes drunk, or eats or drinks to the point of vomiting, let him do penance for a week on bread and water.⁵³

The compendiousness and apodictic precision seem at first jarring and casuistical. In fact they reveal primarily a pastoral concern that the sinner be healed, not punished. And as the soul is healed, so too the community. The confessor reconciles husband to wife, child

to parent, neighbor to friend, novice to abbot, all to God. With the larger family, Cassian's dictum remained good. To insist on the legalism of the penitentials is to miss their necessity, humanity, and basic common sense.

Much has been written too much about the apparent preoccupation of these manuals with sex. There is, to be sure, a hint of absurdity in the exquisite calibration of the monastic libido:

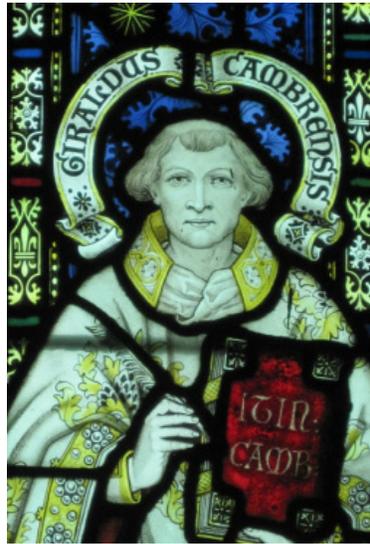
[If a monk] loves any woman but is unaware of any evil beyond a few conversations, [he] shall do penance for forty days. But if he has kissed and embraced her, one year.... He who loves her in mind only, seven days. But if he has spoken [*his* love] but has not been accepted by her, forty days.⁵⁴

The absurdity, however, is not greater than that of commentators in whose minds Finnian, Cummean and Columbanus seek release from an arid celibacy in lurid adventures of the mind. Charles Plummer finds it "hard to see how anyone could busy himself with such literature and not be the worse for it"; Ludwig Bieler sees "little relation, if any, to reality" in the treatment of some sexual sins; Nora Chadwick complains of perversities "thought up in the cloister by the tortuous intellect of the clerical scribe."⁵⁵ This seems a clear case of penitential envy. The complaints are overdone. They also betray a *faux naïf* quality. Peter Brown has suggested that the penitentials "bruise a modern sensibility"⁵⁶: that is only because modernity has bruised itself into insensibility, exculpating evil, or explaining it, or denying its existence entirely. As a recent historian, also a priest, puts it, "a confessional is not a vicarage tea-party."⁵⁷ Besides, the penitentials counseled perfection in a manifestly imperfect world. To notice severity inside the monastery while missing the moral chaos without is to lose perspective and a sense of historical context. Columbanus was *miles Christi*, a soldier of Christ, and the gospel was his weapon and his shield.⁵⁸ The penitentials were thus "part of the war machine"⁵⁹ by which a broken humanity would be made whole. Critics seem to agonize over monastic scrupulosity largely because it does not accord with scruples of their own. Frequent confession certainly once a day, perhaps twice or three times does not indicate addictive self-abasement. Rather, its purpose was to bring to perfection lives which had ever before them the perfection

of heaven.

Such was the life of a Columbanian foundation. He had built for himself another Bangor - a place "diligent, holy and strict, wonderful, just and sublime." For twenty-four years he worked in France, Austria, Switzerland and Italy; and for years after his disciples and other Irishmen built their own Bangors: Gall in Switzerland, Sigisbert at Dissentis, Fridolin at Sackingen, Wandelin at Trier, Kilian at Wurzburg, Cathaldus at Tarantum. These men remade Europe and re-made the Church. To the Church they gave their Irish ways auricular confession, private penance, the integrity of life in religious community, renewed respect for the sacredness of the body. To Europe they gave treasures

of learning and literature, and the great treasure of faith itself. Fr. John Ryan's conclusion seems reasonable: "From Inverness to the Serbian border, from the North Sea to the Adriatic, the voice of . . . Irish missionaries resounded. What Scotland, England, Holland, Belgium, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, owe to their unselfish labours will not be known until the Judgement Day."⁶⁰



III

And so we end where we began-considering cult as a guide to national style. Was Giraldo Cambrensis right to think that hagiography says more about history than holiness? As literature and devotional device, hagiography relies heavily on episode, vignette, epiphany. The life must become a *Life*, and for this history is bowlderized or, if you prefer, Bulterized. Consider the Irish saints. What we think we know of them seems pictorial, almost like a scene from a play: Patrick banishing snakes, Colmcille taking farewell of Derry, Columbanus stepping over his prostrate mother, Brendan offering Mass on a whale, Brigid converting a dying chieftain with her rush-plaited cross, Fursey being granted visions- of heaven and hell. There is a painterly quality, a sense of significance entrained and, thereafter, viewed from a distance. All hagiography has such moments of disclosure and enclosure. What is disclosed is the moral the life as parable. What is enclosed, or set aside, is history the messy complexity of the life itself. Yet this dichotomy may be pushed too far. The usual criticism of hagiography is that it encrusts

a life, adding legend to the “history”: the truth is that it pares the life down, discarding context in order to reveal essence. Of course the genre has its occasions of baroque, indeed rococo, when the *mise-en-scene* can seem implausible even for the most pious audience. But very few of the legends are entirely legendary in the modern, dismissive sense. A gritty truth lies beneath most of them. Besides, the hagiographer should not be too defensive in the face of supposedly objective history. If the charge of historians is that histories of holiness actually provide examples of it, who is being unhistorical in condemning that fact?

None of this is to speak directly to national style. In that matter, Giraldus was right. Many of the Irish saints were “rude and religious.” Bad-tempered banishments seem to have been their stock-in-trade. For this reason their holiness had to be shown in different ways; and here the contrast between Celtic and Roman Christianity is most marked. One difference was asceticism. Irish austerity became a by-word on the continent. Why? The reason may be that, lacking experience of Roman occupation, Ireland lacked martyrs. The Celtic Church had need therefore to invent martyrs of its own. The elaborate calibrations of white, green and red martyrdom, which represent asceticism in search of an aesthetic, offered the possibility of heroism before the grave, not after it. That aesthetic found fullest expression in penitentials and in cultic myths attached to particular saints. Kevin of Glendalough, for instance, is said to have remained immobile in prayer, arms outstretched in the form of the cross, for seven years, eyes unblinking by day and night, so still that birds made their nests in his hands. The truth of the story is less important than the fact that it was a model of prayerful Christian fortitude. Nor were penitentials mere slaps for sins. Tougher sanctions were available and often imposed. Irish monks were well known for plunging into streams of near frozen water, remaining there for long periods reciting the psalms. The practice later became institutionalized in the form of the “penitential bath.”⁶¹ Sometimes self-denial became so sweet that it turned into self-indulgence: precisely the reason Columbanus wrote his penitential in the first place. Despite efforts at limitation, severity remained the style. To the uninitiated it indicated Celtic strangeness at its strangest.

But there were other unorthodoxies. The difference between Irish saints and their continental counterparts was that those on the continent had to die before they were awarded sanctity whereas Ireland’s holy men and women were venerated during their lifetimes. As Brendan Bradshaw has pointed out, the contrast between Celtic ascetics and Latin martyrs is “in effect, between a cult of living saints and one of dead saints.”⁶² This is the chief reason why Ireland has so many saints and Europe

by comparison so few. In Europe, with sanctity an “entirely posthumous” affair, sainthood was limited to those who had died for the faith, whose relics could be venerated, whose miracles recalled. The cult of local saints was diminished in favor of the elite martyred few. The Irish story could hardly be more different. Ireland became a land of saints and scholars precisely because local cult prevailed. John O’Hanlon’s *Lives of the Irish Saints*, for instance, comprises twelve massive volumes a splendid compilation of myth, legend, history, folklore and pious exhortation.

Most of those saints are unknown to the wider church. But they are not legendary, simply local. Their hermitages became places of pilgrimage; their monasteries grew in fame; they baptized, perhaps, at a holy well. For whatever reason, there were hundreds of them, and they did not have to die violently to be venerated by the faithful.

Local saints curiously transform a landscape. They seem to impose on it the contours of another world, making the mundane suddenly sacred and sacramental. So it is with Ireland today. So too with Irish hagiography: heaven is tangibly present, piercing the veil of the ordinary to reveal itself with extraordinary glory. The lives of saints were lives of epiphanies never more so than at the end of life. Death seems an appropriate point at which to close, not least because the literature makes much of the deathbed scene. Here was the last vision on earth of a kingdom soon to be entered everlastingly. When St. Ciaran of Clonmacnois was dying, he:

[C]ommanded that he should be carried outside ... and looking up into heaven he said: “Hard is this way, and this needs must be.” To him the brethren said: “We know that nothing is difficult for thee,


“The difference between Irish saints and their continental counterparts was that those on the continent had to die before they were awarded sanctity whereas Ireland’s holy men and women were venerated during their lifetimes.”


father; but we unhappy men must greatly fear this hour.” And being carried back into the house, he raised his hand and blessed his people and clergy; and having received Holy Communion, he gave up the ghost. And lo! Angels filled the way between heaven and earth to meet St: Ciaran.⁶³

More memorable yet was the death of Colmcille, the most elaborate leave-taking in Irish hagiography. In the hands of Adamnan it assumes an almost symphonic complexity, with theme, variation, recapitulation: a life concluded and a life anticipated, both captured in the closing bars. The weary saint, head resting on the bare rock which was his pillow, gathered the brethren to his cell for a final blessing:

The saint, his soul not yet departing, with open eyes upturned, looked round about on either side with wonderful cheerfulness and joy of countenance on seeing the holy Angels coming to meet him.... And after signifying his holy benediction, he immediately breathed forth his spirit. And it having left the tabernacle of the body and wonderfully gladdened by the vision of the Angels that it seemed not to be that of one dead, but of one living and sleeping... [And at the very moment of death a saint in Ireland, Fergno by name, was granted a vision] “I saw in spirit the island of Iona,

to which I have never been in the body, all resplendent with the brightness of Angels, and the whole space of the sky, up to the heaven of heavens, illumined by the splendour of the same. Angels were sent from heaven, and came down in troops to bear upward his holy body. High-sounding hymns also, and exceeding sweet canticles of the Angelic Hosts, did I hear in the same moment that his holy soul departed.”⁶⁴

Colmcille died 1400 years ago. As we remember Patrick, so also we remember those like him who felt impelled to leave a native place to bring good news to troubled lands. They brought with them Christian practices which were peculiarly their own; but it was their genius-Kilian and Virgilius, Columban and Cathaldus, Fursey and Fiacre, and the many hidden others-to make those practices the way of a wider church. The achievement was remarkable and yet in another sense it should not surprise us. Whatever of national style, the gospel they brought was not local: it was the message of universal salvation. To the historian these evangelists are indeed “sweet yams buried deep.” To the person of faith, however, they are something more. Like the great Columba, they are surely men “wonderfully gladdened by the vision of the Angels and illumined by the splendour of the same.”



NOTES

1 Thomas Wright, *The Historical Works of Giraldus Cambrensis*, quoted in Brian Bonner, *Derry: An Outline History of the Diocese* (Derry, n.d.), 80.

2 Ibid., 41.

3 T.F.O’Rahilly, *The Two Patricks* (Dublin, 1942).

4 Eoin Neeson, *The Book of Irish Saints* (Dublin, 1967), 53.

5 Quoted in J.R. Walsh and Thomas Bradley, *A History of the Irish Church 400-700* (Dublin: Columba Press, 1991), 5.

6 Brian Bonner, *Derry*, 35.

7 J.J. Auclnnty, “Ireland and the Celtic Peoples in Toynbee’s Study of History,” *Hermathena* 70 (1947).

8 *Catalogue of the Saints of Ireland*, quoted in John Ryan, *Irish Monasticism* (Dublin, 1931), 97.

9 The idea is from Liam de Paor. See Walsh and Bradley, *History of the Irish*, 54.

10 Maire and Liam de Paor, *Early Christian Ireland* (New York, 1964), 50.

11 Walsh and Bradley, *History of the Irish*, 55.

12 Quoted in Helen Waddell, *The Wandering Scholars* (London, 1938), 32.

13 St. Columbanus, Sermon 5, “On Human Life,” in Tomas O’Fiaich, *Columbanus in His Own Words* (Dublin, 1990), 89-90.

- 14 Tomás O’Fiaich, “Saint Colmcille in Ireland and Scotland,” in *Irish Monks in the Golden Age*, ed. John Ryan (Dublin, 1963), 19.
- 15 Colmcille’s “Song of Farewell,” quoted in *Adamnan’s Life of Saint Columba*, ed. Wentworth Huysse (London, 1939), xxiii.
- 16 *Adamnan’s Life of Colmcille*, quoted in Maire and Liam de Paor, *Early Christian Ireland* (New York, 1964), 52.
- 17 Quoted in G.J. Marcus, “Early Irish Navigation” in *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* 81 (1954), 98. See also Kathleen Hughes, “The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage,” in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 11(1960), 143.
- 18 Quoted in Hughes, “Theory and Practice,” 143.
- 19 J O’Hanlon, *Lives of the Irish Saints*, Vol. 3 (Dublin, 1899), 160.
- 20 Quoted in Hughes, “Theory and Practice,” 150.
- 21 Eoin Neeson, *The Book of Irish Saints*, 98.
- 22 See, for example, R.P. Millet, “Irishmen in peril on the Sea,” in H. Daniel-Rops, *The Miracle of Ireland* (Baltimore, 1959), 50. “About [St. Brendan] not long since they still told stories of an evening in the cottages of Brittany... The Church at Gustrow (Mecklenburg- Schwerin) has frescoes telling of various episodes in the legendary life of St. Brendan.”
- 23 Quoted in J. O’Hanlon, *Lives of the Irish Saints*, Vol. 5 (Dublin and New York, 1899), 415.
- 24 For this paragraph, see G.J. Marcus, “Irish Pioneers in Ocean Navigation of the Middle Ages,” in *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* 76 (1951), 473.
- 25 See Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 234. “At least 119 Irish women saints or groups of women are mentioned in the Martyrology of Tallaght. Yet we have Lives of only four women saints. ... This enormous discrepancy between the minute number of women’s houses and the very large number of pious women must be due to the Irish law of inheritance [whereby] a woman could not acquire more than a life interest in the land she inherited.... The pious women who appear in the martyrologies probably supported a few like-minded friends during their lives, but their households must have broken up with their deaths.”
- 26 Jonas, *Vita Columbani* 1.3, quoted in J. Ryan, *Irish Monasticism* (Dublin, 1931), 214.
- 27 *The Old Irish Life of Colmcille*, quoted *ibid.*, 20.
- 28 Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, eds., *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History* (Oxford, 1969), iii, 4, 223.
- 29 John Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, 263.
- 30 Sulpicius Severus, quoted in Ryan, *ibid.*
- 31 John Hennig, “Irish Saints in the Liturgical and Artistic Tradition of Central Europe,” in *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* 61 (1943), 181.
- 32 Canice Mooney, O.F.M., “Saint Cathaldus of Taranto,” in *Irish Monks in the Golden Age*, ed. John Ryan (Dublin, 1963), 87. The contemporary devotion to Cathaldus is brilliantly conveyed in Fr. Mooney’s piece.
- 33 Quoted O’Fiaich, “Saint Columcille,” 30.
- 34 Quoted T. O’Fiaich, *Columbanus in His Own Words* (Dublin, 1990), 14.
- 35 See John Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, 261.
- 36 “Second Letter,” quoted in T. O’Fiaich, *Columbanus*, 20.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 46. The reference is to the battle of Tolbiac, 612.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 42 Marguerite-Marie Dubois, “Saint Columbanus,” in *Irish Monks in the Golden Age*, ed. John Ryan, 47.
- 43 *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Plummer, cxi, n.4, quoted in John Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, 291.
- 44 John Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, 291.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 198, 199.
- 46 Montalembert, *Monks of the West*, Volume 2 (London: John C. Nimmo, 1896), 405.
- 47 T. O’Fiaich, *Columbanus*, 27-28; 68-69.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 49 Columbanus drew most heavily from this source.

50 J. R. Walsh, T. Bradley, *History of the Irish Church*, 114.

51 *The Penitential of St. Finian*, Canon 29.

52 Nora Chadwick, quoted in John R. Walsh and Thomas Bradley, *A History of the Irish Church 400-700*, 119.

53 Canon 2.2, quoted in T. O’Fiaich, *Columbanus*, 70-71 (emphasis added). The penitential authors, aware of healing souls as their first duty, recognized that undue severity could be counter-productive. Cummean, for instance, makes provision for a priest who has confessed to fornication. He is to do penance for seven years but may go to Communion after eighteen months “lest his soul perish utterly through lacking so long the celestial medicine.”

54 Quoted in Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 159.

55 All quoted in J.R. Walsh and T. Bradley, *History of the Irish Church*, 119.

56 Peter Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, 159.

57 J.R. Walsh and T. Bradley, *History of the Irish Church*, 119.

58 This was “one of the commonest concepts in monastic literature.” J. Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, 196.

59 J. R. Walsh and T. Bradley, *History of the Irish Church*, 124.

60 John Ryan, *Irish Monks in the Golden Age*, 113.

61 Fulbert Cayre, “Irish Spirituality in Antiquity,” in *The Miracle of Ireland*, ed. Daniel-Rops (Maryland, 1959), 109.

62 Brendan Bradshaw, “The Wild and Woolly West: Early Irish Christianity and Latin Orthodoxy,” in *The Churches, Ireland and the Irish*, ed. W.J. Shiels and Diana Wood (Oxford, 1989), 15. My debt to Bradshaw is clear in this and in the previous paragraph.

63 *Vita Sanctorum Hiberniae*, quoted in Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, 402.

64 St. Adamnan, *The Life of St. Columba*, 229-231.