

ST COLCUMBAN



Columban Missionaries Ireland

ST COLUMBAN

Near St Malo on Brittany's Emerald Coast a cross rises high above the sandy beach. Beneath the cross a marble plaque reads:

This cross marks the spot where according to tradition St Columban first landed in order to evangelise this country.

Such a tribute to Columban is common in Europe. Many churches, villages and even mountains are named after him. St Coulomb, Colombin, or Colombier in France; San Colombano in Italy; and Kolumban in Germany and Switzerland. It is difficult to measure the impact that Columban had on Europe, and he is often referred to as one of the pioneers of European civilisation and monasticism.

Pope Benedict referred to St Columban as "the best-known Irishman of the early Middle Ages. Since he worked as a monk, missionary and writer in various countries in Western Europe with good reason he can be called a 'European' saint. A man of great culture... he proved rich in gifts of grace. With his spiritual energy, with his faith, with his love for God and neighbour, he truly became one of the Fathers of Europe."

Benedict XVI, General Audience, June 2008.



First published 1999 by Fr Pat Sayles SSC.

Cover Photo: The face of St Columban from the statue in Luxeuil, France (Friends of St Columban). The Ponte Gobbo bridge crossing the River Trebbia in Bobbio (Friends of St Columban). A plaque celebrating the passage of St Columbanus and his monks at the Septimer Pass in the Swiss Alps (Friends of St Columban)

Back Cover Photo: Stained Glass Window, St Columban's, Navan.

Other images used in the booklet: ColumbanMissionImages, Shutterstock, Sarah Mac Donald.

BEGINNINGS

Columban was born around 540AD. According to his earliest biographer, the monk Jonas, Columban's home was in the Province of Leinster, on the south-east side of Ireland.

The name Columban is a Latin one that means dove, and he is often depicted with a dove, and with a dazzling sun.

Jonas records the story that before his birth Columban's mother dreamt she saw a great dazzling sun shine out from her to fill the world with its light and realised that her child would be special.

“As the sun adds splendour to the dawn, so the Church receives added lustre with each new saint.”

Jonas





COLUMBAN THE SCHOLAR

Against his mother's wishes as a young man Columban turned his steps northwards to Fermanagh and magnificent Lough Erne. There he entered a monastery on Cleenish Island founded only a few years before by Sinell, who according to Jonas "was famous for his holiness and for his learning in sacred things".

Cleenish nestles in Upper Lough Erne. Its Irish name *Chuan-Inis* means Meadow Island. It's a name which reflects the nature of the island which even today is home to abundant wildlife, a profusion of reeds as well as numerous inlets dotted around its 100 acres. Cleenish, flanked by rolling hills and surrounded by distant mountains, was the setting where Columban studied sacred scripture and Latin. Sinell was impressed by the young student.

“Such progress did he make in his studies that while yet a young man he wrote a finished work on the Psalms, and also some other works, both hymns and books of instructions.”

Jonas

Once he decided to become a monk he went to Bangor monastery on Belfast Lough. The Abbot, St Comgall, was the outstanding “Father of Monks” in Ireland, renowned for his insistence on study and discipline. Here Columban gave himself up to prayer and fasting.

COLUMBAN THE EXILE

Abbot Comgall's rule at Bangor was strict. Bread, water and vegetables made up the daily ration. The monks wore long white tunics and an outer woollen garment with a hood and sandals. They lived in huts of wood. Work, fasting, silence, prolonged periods of prayer, mortifications – these were the daily routine.

After a time Columban felt called to go into exile as a Wanderer for Christ, in the spirit of Abraham: “Go forth from your country and from your kindred, and come into the land which I will show you.” Comgall eventually allowed Columban and twelve others to set off from Bangor and sail away in a little boat into the unknown.

“When they reached the sea they asked God's blessing on their voyage and embarked.”

Jonas

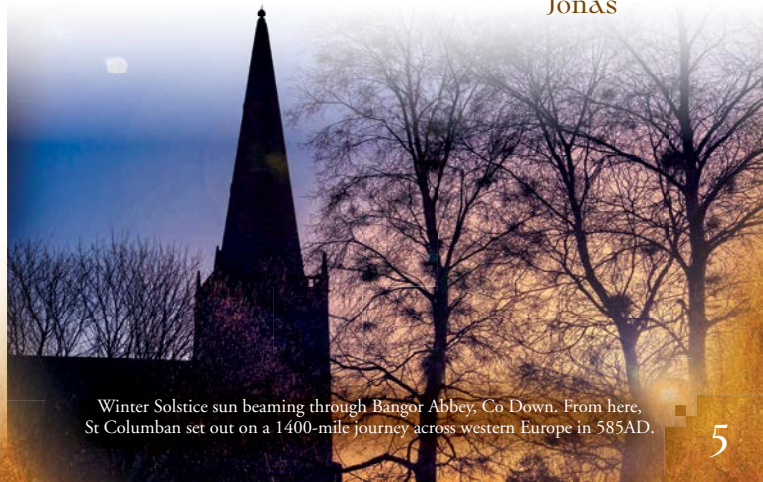
COLUMBAN THE PREACHER

After an uneventful crossing they landed in Brittany. They stayed there long enough for others from Brittany to join them, and eventually they headed into Gaul.

They found that religious practice had collapsed, so they began to preach everywhere. Their zeal, the humble lifestyle, and their love of the Lord, “brought many back to God. Whatever home he stayed in Columban drew the family into the service of God.”

“Wherever he went Columban took care to preach the Gospel. The example of his life drew people to listen to him.”

Jonas



COLUMBAN THE FOUNDER

Columban's zealous spirit characterised the little group of monks. Although their rule was strict, charity became their hallmark.

News of Columban and his companions reached King Sigebert. He begged them to stay in his kingdom, so they found a place in mountainous forests of the Vosges and settled at an old, dilapidated Roman fort at Annegray. It was a desolate place overrun with brushwood. They cleared part of the forest, using the timber to construct their cells. At first all they had to live on were herbs, roots and the barks of trees. So began their life in the simplest of monasteries. Soon their fame spread, and crowds came to visit them.

“Crowds, especially the sick, began to throng to Annegray, where Columban prayed for them.”

Jonas

A PRAYER

Lord God, cut down
and root out whatever
the Adversary plants in me.
With my sins cleared
away may you sow
good sense in my
mind, and goodness
in my heart, so that I
can seek you and
serve you completely
in word and deed, and
understand how to
carry out Christ's will.
Grant thoughtfulness,
grant love, grant purity,
grant faith; give me
all that you know will
help my soul.
Lord, work good in
me and provide me
with what you know I
need. Amen.

[Attributed to Columban]



Chapel of St Columban and the cave where St Columban sought solitude in Sainte-Marie-en-Chanois away from the monastery in Annegray.

COLUMBAN THE EDUCATOR

Numbers grew, so Columban looked for another suitable place for a monastery. He found Luxeuil, just eight miles west, on the Breuchin river. Formerly a Roman fort with thermal springs, it had become a place where wolves and bears roamed at will.

Here a monastery was established around 590AD. Work, study and prayer, the unceasing toil of Columban and the others, began to bear fruit. Sons of the nobility came from all sides and Luxeuil soon became known as the greatest school in Europe. Some abandoned the highest places in the land to become monks in its cloister. Over a span of 20 years, it produced no less than 21 recognised saints. Luxeuil became the model of many new monastic foundations.

Montalembert wrote: “Columban's greatness consists not so much in the establishment of any permanent organisation as in the fact that he enkindled a new spirit in monasticism in Europe, and in time this became the guiding influence in European civilisation.”



Pilgrims gather on Guesclin Bay, Saint Coulomb, where St Columban is reputed to have come on shore from Ireland.



Let us live for Christ,
who while dying restored our life.
Let us die for ourselves and live to
Christ. Let us not be proud, haughty,
or undisciplined, but humble, kindly,
and courteous, so that Christ may
reign in our hearts.

Let us be Christ's, and not our own,
for we are not our own, for we were
bought at a great price, a very great
price, when the Lord was given for a
slave, a King for a servant, and God
for humankind.

Let us fight against our faults,
that we may be crowned elsewhere,
disdain passing things, and seek what
is to come, seek life without end, and
so exchange blessing for misery, joy
for sorrows, heaven for earth.

May Christ our Lord deign
to grant us this
who with the Father and the Holy
Spirit is one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

St Columban, Sermon IX

COLUMBAN THE HERMIT

This old bear cave is where according to tradition Columban used to pray in solitude. It lies, even today, in remote woods above the Breuchin valley. A nearby spring is known as Columban's holy well. Wherever he went Columban sought out a cave where he could pray alone. Prayer was at the heart of his ministry.

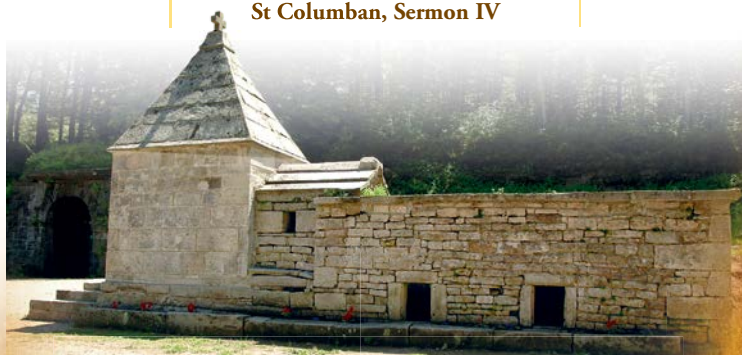
“It became the custom with Columban to retire alone to this cave on Sundays and before the feast of saints, to give himself to uninterrupted prayer. All he had to eat were a few herbs, and the small apples that grew in the forest. His drink was water.”

Jonas

Love is no trouble,
love is healing.
It is through love
that we pass
from death to life.
Nothing is dearer to God
than love!

With that love
which fulfils the law
may the Just one
be generous to fill us
in abundance,
Our Lord and Saviour
Jesus Christ, who freely
offered himself
as the Author of Peace
and God of Love,
to whom be the glory
for ever and ever.
Amen.

St Columban, Sermon IV



The hermitage of Saint Valbert just a few kilometres from Luxeuil which was cleaned up by Columban students from Dalgan Park in the 1960s.



Pilgrims pause as they walk the Columban Way from Arbon to St Gallen, Switzerland.

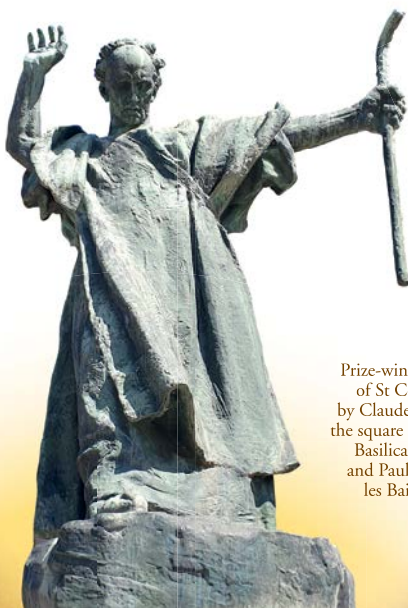
COLUMBAN AND RENEWAL

The private Penitential introduced on the Continent from Ireland by Columban proved one of the major contributions of the era to the renewal of the Church.

Columban made the Irish system of private penance available to laity wherever he went. The Penitential consisted of a list of sins, together with an appropriate penance. Although the penances appear harsh today, they were lenient in comparison to the severe public excommunications which prevailed at the time. So the people had the chance to return to a practice of the faith hitherto denied them.

Here is one excerpt from the Penitential used by Columban:

“If any person steals an ox or a horse or a sheep from his neighbour, he must first restore it to his neighbour and then do penance on bread and water for 120 days.”



Prize-winning statue of St Columbanus by Claude Grange in the square outside the Basilica of Ss Peter and Paul in Luxeuil les Bains, France.

COLUMBAN'S WAY OF SORROWS

Columban denounced the king, Theodoric, and openly reproached the nobles for their immoral ways.

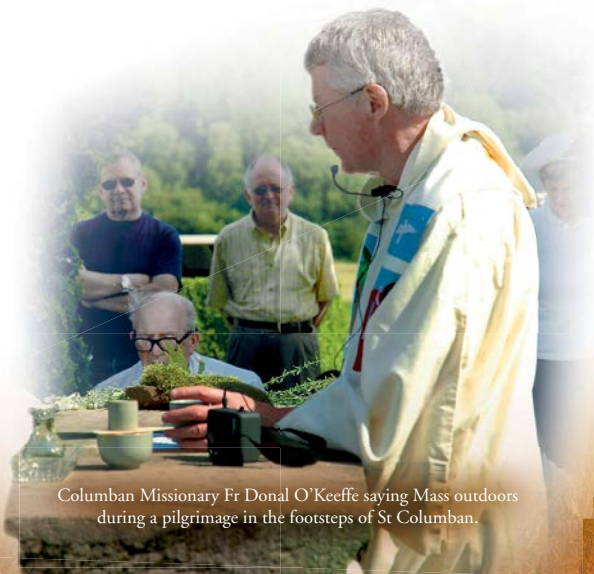
The court finally banished him, along with the other monks from Ireland. They were taken to the prison at Besançon.

Finally they began their journey of exile down the River Loire to the port of Nantes. At every place they stopped crowds flocked to greet them. Columban was heartbroken to leave the monasteries where he had laboured as abbot for twenty years.

At Orleans they had to sleep by the river and beg for food. At Tours Columban spent the night in vigil.

Lord, kindle our lamps,
Saviour most dear to us,
that we may ever shine
in your presence,
and always receive light
from you,
the Light Perpetual,
so that our own
personal darkness
may be overcome,
and the world's
darkness
driven from us.
Amen.

St Columban, Sermon IX



Columban Missionary Fr Donal O'Keeffe saying Mass outdoors during a pilgrimage in the footsteps of St Columban.



St Columbanus and his group travelled up the Rhine to Lake Constance. A settlement was formed in Bregenz, before they moved on to found what is now St Gallen in Switzerland.

“**T**o all his monks Columban the sinner sends greeting in Christ. I confess that I am broken, for while I wished to help everyone, they fought against me without cause; and while I trusted against everyone, they have me driven almost mad. I wanted to write you a cheerful letter, but my grief is shut up within. The tears flow, but it is better to check the fountain, for it is unbecoming for a brave soldier to lament in battle. This is the truth of the gospel: that the true disciples of Christ crucified should follow him with a cross. Blessed is the one who shares in this passion and shame, for the foolishness of God is wiser than men. Therefore, let us patiently bear all adversities for truth's sake, that we may be sharers in the Lord's passion, since none are worthy of mercy. Except those who confess their unworthiness. It is through affliction of the flesh, contrition of the heart, through Christ's grace that we enter the city of the living God. Now the ship is ready...”

Columban, Letter IV
written as he waited to sail to Ireland.

At Nantes they were put on board a vessel that was to sail to Ireland, but a storm broke out, and the captain was afraid to sail with Columban on board.

As the soldiers had returned to Burgundy, they were free. Columban decided to head down the river Moselle into modern day Germany, and up the Rhine to Switzerland and Austria. St Gall, one of his companions from Ireland, remained in Switzerland. He is now that country's patron saint. Columban pushed on over the Alps into Italy.

When Columban had seen that Theuderic had defeated Theudebert he decided to head into Italy. He remained some time in Milan where he attacked the Arians and wrote a short, learned work against them. The king of the Lombards granted Columban permission to build a monastery, so he came to where the Bobbio and Trebbia rivers meet in the Apennine mountains, which had an abundance of fish.

Here, after three years of wandering, he built his final foundation.

He died on the 23 November in 615AD. According to tradition he died in one of the two caves where he was accustomed to retire for prayer.

The great abbey of Bobbio lasted down to the French Revolution. Its library, now shared between the Vatican and others, was one of the most valuable in Europe.

“Having spent one year in the monastery in Bobbio, the blessed Columban rendered his soul to God.”

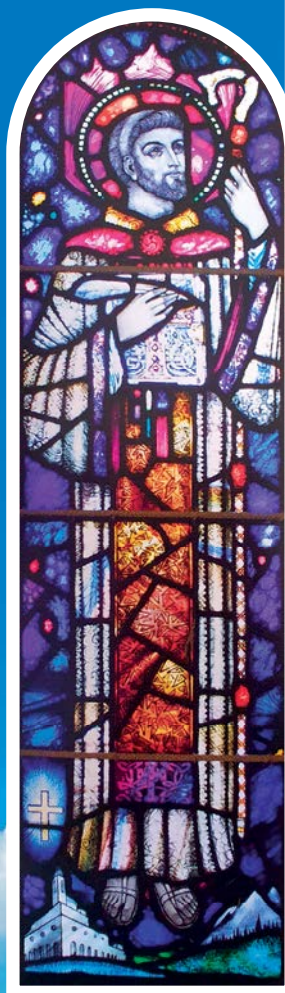
Jonas



The remains of St Columbanus are preserved in the crypt at Bobbio Abbey, Italy, where he died in 615AD.

Let the mind press onward,
even as life presses onward,
and let maturity of mind increase
with the fullness of old age.
And as our span of life grows shorter
so let the number of our faults grow less,
that we may leave the world to its own
ways, as we go to the Lord.
May this be so by the help of our
Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

St Columban, Sermon VI



May no trial,
no trouble,
no oppression,
no hunger,
no poverty,
no death,
nothing sad,
nothing joyful,
nothing just
or unjust
separate us
from Christ
so that He
may dwell
within us here,
and we may
abide with him
for ever
and ever.
Amen.

St Columban,
Sermon IV

Since we pass
through this world
merely as pilgrims
let us keep our sights fixed
on the end of the road,
where our real home lies.

Spurning all wrongdoing,
throwing off our half-heartedness,
let us strive to please Him
who is everywhere present,
so that with a clear conscience
we can happily pass
along the road

to the home of our heavenly Father,
from sorrow to joy,
from passing things
to permanent,
from earthly to heavenly,
from death's domain to life,
where we shall see
heavenly things
face to face, the Ruler of rulers,
Our Lord Jesus Christ,
to whom be glory
for ever and ever.
Amen.

St Columban, Sermon VIII



SOME SAYINGS OF COLUMBAN

- ✻ Allow Christ to paint his image in you.
- ✻ Christ was reviled and unjustly treated, and do you think only of security on earth?
- ✻ Don't prefer your possessions to your own self! For what is really your own apart from your soul?
- ✻ Conquer yourself and you are conqueror of all!
- ✻ God's favour is on those who trust in his mercy.
- ✻ Where does the Lord dwell? In the hearts of the truly humble.
- ✻ Trust in God's gentleness.

PRAYER FOR COLUMBAN'S INTERCESSION

O Blessed Columban,
Who in your zeal to follow Christ
Left your homeland as a wanderer
And spent your life in suffering and exile,
Help and protect, we humbly ask you,
The missionaries of our day
Who have devoted their lives
To preaching the Gospel
Throughout the world.
Obtain for them, we ask you,
that same wisdom and fortitude
by which you overcame the dangers
which beset your path,
and that firm faith and ardent love
which enabled you to endure gladly
the privations of this life
for the love of Christ.
Assist and protect us, also,
dear Saint Columban,
so to live for God's glory
that when our pilgrimage
through this life is over,
we may share with you
in the joy of our heavenly home,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.



The Columban Missionaries
are an international group of
men and women, ordained and lay,
working in 15 countries around
the world.

Reaching out to the poor and
marginalised.

Sharing the Good News of the
Gospel.

Building communities with people
of different cultures.



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