

## **I - THE IRELAND WHICH GAVE BIRTH TO COLUMBAN**

In the fifth century, around the year 410, the Western Roman Empire, which for several hundred years had ruled Britain and the provinces located around the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, was no longer able to withstand the pressure of the invading tribes on her borders and the empire began to collapse. A few years earlier, in 407, the Roman legions had been withdrawn from Britain in order to defend Gaul (modern day France), never to return.

### **Ireland in the period before St. Patrick**

During the fifth century there was much trade between Ireland and the Roman provinces of Britain and Gaul, including trade in slaves. As well as ordinary merchandise, some British merchants probably brought the Christian faith to Ireland. There were Irish communities in Britain which may have been Christian and they may have communicated the faith to their relatives in Ireland.

### **Palladius**

The Chronicle of Prosper of Aquitaine tells us that in the year 431AD , Palladius was ordained by Pope Celestine (422 to 432) and was sent to the Irish who believed in Christ as their first bishop.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, little more is known about Palladius and the fate of his mission. Nevertheless, this papal initiative was not lost on St Columbanus. In a surviving letter to Pope Boniface IV (reigned 608AD-615AD), he refers to preservation by the Irish 'of the Catholic

---

<sup>1</sup> Kenney, James F. *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland*), Dublin, 1979, pp 164-5. See in Index for entries on Prosper of Aquitaine, The word *Scotti*, used here, does not mean 'Scots' in the modern sense, but 'Irish'.

faith as it was delivered to us by you first, the successors of the holy apostles.’<sup>2</sup> Columbanus was devoted to the Holy Apostles, Peter and Paul. Both were martyred at Rome and today their tombs are places of pilgrimage in the Basilicas of St Peter in the Vatican, and St Paul Outside-the-Walls, respectively

We know therefore that there were communities of Christians already in existence in Ireland before the mission of St Patrick. Speaking of Patrick’s missionary work in Ireland, Tomás Ó Fiaich says,<sup>3</sup> ‘Without going beyond the saint’s own words we can learn many details: he “baptised thousands,” “ordained clerics everywhere,” “gave presents to the kings,” “was put in irons,” “lived in daily expectation of murder, treachery or captivity,” “journeyed everywhere in many dangers, even to the farthest regions beyond which there lived nobody,” and “rejoiced to see the flock of the Lord in Ireland grow splendidly with the greatest care and the sons and daughters of kings becoming monks and virgins of Christ.”’<sup>4</sup>

### **Monasticism in Ireland**

The beginning of monasticism was already present in the ministry of Patrick. Charles-Edwards claims that the “appearance of the monastic life among his converts was the culmination of his (Patrick’s) mission.”<sup>5</sup>

The sixth century in Ireland was the spiritual springtime of a people who had recently received the Christian faith. Jonas of Susa, (Columban’s biographer and an Italian monk who entered Bobbio a few years after Columban died) says that Columbanus, ‘was born amid the beginnings of the Irish race’s faith, in order that the religion, which that race cherished uncompromisingly, might be

---

<sup>2</sup> Walker G.S.M., *Op. Cit.*, Letter V, 3,29.

<sup>3</sup> Moody, T.W. and Martin, F.X., (ed)., *The Course of Irish History*, chapter 4, Tomás ó Fiaich, ‘The Beginnings of Christianity, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Centuries’, p. 43, Dublin, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Aidan Larkin, *Saint Columbanus*, Pilgrim for Christ, Cumann Seanchais Ard Mhacha, page 11 and 12

<sup>5</sup> T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, page 223.

increased by his own fruitful toil and the protective care of his associates.’<sup>6</sup> During the sixth century, the Irish Church was organizing herself and probably from the second half of the century on, many monasteries were being founded. Soon their schools would flourish.<sup>7</sup>

Irish monasticism owes much to the monastic tradition in Egypt going right back to St. Anthony (250- 336). The connections with Egypt continued up to the sixth century as is clear from the *Faddan More Psalter* which was discovered in 1996, near Birr, Co Offaly. As experts were rehabilitating the text, they discovered fragments of papyrus in the binding. Papyrus grass is only found in Egypt.

Monasticism spread to Ireland from Gaul via Britain. Leading figures in the promotion of monasticism in Gaul were St. Martin of Tours, (316 – 397) founder of the famous monastery of Marmoutier and John Cassian (360 – 435) who, filled with enthusiasm for the wisdom of the Desert Fathers, came to France and founded the famous monastery of St Victor, in Marseilles.

The monastic vocation was often seen in terms of martyrdom. With the Edict of Milan, in the year 313, Christianity was henceforth tolerated throughout the Roman Empire, and the era of the great persecutions was over. Very soon after that Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

In this new context the notion of martyrdom was gradually expanded. Martyrdom, *militia Christi* (warfare for Christ), now also meant the never-

---

<sup>6</sup> Jonas, *Vita*, para 6.

<sup>77</sup> Larkin, *op.cit.*, page 31.

ending warfare which Christians, especially monks, would engage in for the advancement of the kingdom of Christ against the kingdom of darkness.

### **The Birth and early life of Columban**

We have few enough details from Columban's biographer Jonas of Susa about Columban's birth and early years. Scholars think that he was born in the area of the Carlow-Wexford border in Leinster. Authors such as Larkin warn us that Jonas is not writing a modern biography of Columban. Rather the literary form he uses is hagiography. This sets out to present Columban as a special 'holy' person. So we can expect what Larkin calls "stock themes" in his presentation of Columban. For example, he tells us that one night while she (his mother) was pregnant with Columban, she saw the sun rise from her bosom lighting up the world around her. For Christians this obviously recalls what happened to Elizabeth when she was pregnant with John the Baptist. Though Columban may not have been from royal stock, many authors believe that he came from prosperous farmers, mainly because he never shows any undue deference in his dealing with them to kings, princes, bishops or popes.

Columban's mother tongue was Old Irish. However, he had an excellent education, probably first at home and later in Cleenish (island monastery on Lough Erne) under Sinnell. Larkin thinks that the account of his leaving home is more hagiography than history. Jonas tells us that his hero, Columban is good looking and very attractive to women. Columban consults a wise, holy woman who advises him to flee home and devote himself to God. Unfortunately, his mother has other ideas and pleaded with him to stay. Jonas has him walking over his mother's (body?) as she stretched herself across the doorway, in a final effort to stop him leaving.

In Cleenish, he would already have learned Latin, which he would have used both for reading the scriptures and some classical literature. He would also have studied rhetoric to help him to present ideas in an attractive and logical way. Larkin claims that Columban had an excellent training in Latin and it has also been shown that he had direct knowledge of an influential work of Cicero on rhetoric.<sup>8</sup>

He would also have learned astronomy and mathematics, often referred to as *computus*. Later, when he is arguing about the proper date for Easter with Pope Gregory and the bishops of Gaul, he relies heavily on what he learned in Ireland. When one reflects that more than 4,000 years before Columban, the builders of New Grange had such accurate data on the winter solstice, you can understand why Columban was justifiably proud of Irish achievements in the area of maths and astronomy.

During the fifth century there were probably refugees in Ireland from Gaul and Britain as the Roman government of these provinces gradually collapsed. St Patrick in his *Confession* refers to 'lordly rhetoricians'<sup>9</sup>. These may have been among the refugees. There may also have been people who, like Patrick himself, were enslaved in Ireland as a result of an Irish pirate raid in Britain or Gaul. Some may have been Christians and may have evangelized their masters or other people whom they encountered in Ireland.

Having finished his education at Cleenish, Columban went to Bangor, County Down and asked to become a monk there. The abbot of Bangor was the famed Comgall (517 – 602) who was born in Dalriada which included both part of Northern Ireland and Scotland. He studied under Fintan of Clonenagh in

---

<sup>8</sup> Larkin, op. cit, page 39.

<sup>9</sup> Duffy, J., *Op. Cit.*, 13 '*dominicati rethorici*', Dublin, 2000, p. 100.

modern County Laois. Fintan had studied under Columcille whose monastic regime was quite severe. Columban thrived in this environment.

After a number of years at Bangor, Columban was ordained a priest. In early Irish monasteries the majority of monks were not priests. Later Columban became a confidant of Comgall and acted as the resident theologian in Bangor. As a young monk at Bangor, Columban would have studied the Bible extensively. He developed such an expertise in interpreting the Bible that he wrote a commentary on the Psalms in excellent Latin. Unfortunately, this text has been lost.

Monastic life in Bangor and other early Irish monasteries revolved around prayer, work and reading. Prayer meant chanting the Canonical hours during the day and the night. Over the years the majority of the monks would have learned the Psalter off by heart. On Sunday's and great feasts, the Eucharist was celebrated and there was also much time for personal prayer – often in a 'desert' or wilderness area. The monasteries had land, often donated by a patron. The monks worked these lands and provided their own food and drink and often had a surplus which was sold in Ireland or exported to Britain and Europe. Work also included the (mental) labour of those who worked in the scriptorium – where the illustrated manuscripts of the Scriptures were copied. Reading included the scriptures, some of the Fathers of the Church such as St. Jerome but also some of the Latin classics, such as Cicero. The historian Dáibhí Ó Cróinín of the National University of Ireland, Galway, has summed up the extensive education which Columban would have received. "Columban was clearly a product of an intensive schooling, a system which had mastered the techniques of language teaching from elementary to an advanced level. If he is typical ... then sixth century Ireland had every reason for the pride and self-confidence that are mirrored in his correspondence."<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Dáithí Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland 400-1,200*, London, 1995, page 177/178.