

Peregrinatio Pro Christo (Columban, A Pilgrim for Christ).

Leaving home and undertaking a journey at the behest of God has deep roots in the Bible. God called Abram to “leave your country and your father’s house and go to the land that I will show you and I will make you a great nation and I will bless you.” (Gen. 12: 1-2).

Aidan Larkin argues that the notion of *Peregrinatio* (pilgrim or wanderer) in Ireland goes right back to Saint Patrick himself. He writes, “By returning freely to Ireland Patrick undertook *peregrinatio perennis* exile in perpetuity. He intended to stay in Ireland and die there... in his (Patrick’s) letter to Coroticus, ‘I have not laboured for nor has my exile (*peregrinatio*) been to no purpose.’”¹ For Patrick and those who came after him such as Colmcille and Columban exile forever from one’s country is considered to be ‘white martyrdom.’ In the world of the time it was a major decision to take because technically a *peregrinus* had no rights. In fact, he could be killed with impunity. *Peregrinatio perennis* (Exile for ever) was seen as a death sentence.

The example of Saint Colmcille (521 – 597) who was the teacher of Comgall the Abbot of Bangor, had a profound impact on the life of Columban. He left Ireland as a *peregrinato pro Christi nomine* (a pilgrim for the name of Christ) and founded a monastery on the island of Iona on the west coast of Scotland. Monks from Iona converted the people of Southern Scotland to Christianity. The impact of Iona, eventually reached modern Britain through the ministry of Aidan of Lindisfarne.

As we have seen, the idea of *peregrinatio* is rooted in the Scriptures, but Larkin claims that “for these Irishmen (Colmcille, Columban etc) it derived much power from being a form of ascetical renunciation of particular social and political structures

¹ Aidan Larkin, Saint Columbanus, Pilgrim for Christ, Cumann Seanchais Árd Mhacha, 2012, page 13-14.

of Irish society, in which the position and the legal protection of the individual were closely linked to the family group (*fine*) and the local community.

The option for *peregrinatio* meant the voluntary renunciation of one's legal and social position. Renunciation of the secular world was the central aim of *peregrinatio*. *Peregrinatio* was naturally not a new concept, or a practice peculiar to Ireland, but it got much of its strength from the features of Irish civil society in which honour and social position were completely bound up with belonging to an extended family (*fine*/kinship group) and the local community.”²

Jonas tells us that a holy woman who originally encouraged Columban to leave his home expressed to Columban her own regret that she did not opt for *portior peregrinatio* (a more intense exile).

Presumably this advice remained with Columban as he lived his adult life at Comgall's monastery in Bangor. Jonas tells us that after many years in Bangor, Columban “began to long for exile.” Jonas points out that, at first, Comgall refused permission, presumably because of the many important roles that Columban fulfilled in Bangor. Then in either 590 or 591, Comgall relented and gave Columban permission to leave.

The Oxford historian of early Christian Ireland, T.M. Charles-Edwards claims that Columban is “the greatest of the *perigrini* who left Ireland for continental Europe.”³

Peregrinatio for Irish monks was not a choice for solitude. Colmcille and later Columban brought a community with them. In Columban's case the group was

² Ibid page 69 references from here on have gone to double digits

³ T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, 2,000, page 344-345.

composed of twelve monks with Columban as the abbot – patterned on Jesus and the twelve apostles.

Furthermore in Letter IV which Columban wrote from Nantes before he thought he would be deported back to Ireland, we learn that there is an added, missionary dimension to Columban's *peregrinatio* "It was my wish to visit the pagan people and to have the Gospel preached to them by us."⁴ Larkin argues persuasively that *peregrinatio* is intertwined with *mission* or preaching the Good News of the Gospel.

Dr Marie Thérèse Flanagan of Queen's University, Belfast, points out how successful Columban and his companions were. When Columban arrived in Gaul in 590 AD the rural areas had only absorbed Christianity superficially. She claims that the situation changed dramatically with the arrival of the 'holy men from Ireland,' endowed with spiritual gifts, willing to travel, to run risks and prepared to face up to the paganism of the country people in their own rural dwelling places. They succeeded in creating the conditions for conversions through a conscious choice of the Christian way of life. The arrival of the Irish *peregrini* initiated a movement of spiritual renewal in Gaul which also showed itself in a wave of new monastic foundations, as in Ireland, not directly subject to the bishops. Around the year 600 AD, Dr Flanagan asserts, there were about two hundred monasteries in Gaul, but with the Irish influence, in the course of the seventh century, around three hundred and twenty more were added, the majority of them in northern Gaul, an area which Pierre Riché has defined as a 'barbarous zone.'⁵ Larkin thinks the figure is high, but agrees that the impact of Columban and his monks was remarkable.⁶

⁴ Ibid page 74.

⁵ Riché Pierre, *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West*, Columbia, 1976.

The figure given here strikes me as being on the high side. I have seen the figure sixty given elsewhere.

⁶ Larkin, op.cit., page 83