

Christi simus non-nostri – (Let us Be for Christ and not for ourselves). Christ was at the Centre of Columban’s life.

No lasting city

Columban learned from both the Bible and from some of the Latin classical works that we have not here a lasting city and that the beauty of men withers in old age. For Columban and many monks of his generation the “radiance of Christ’s face is to be more desired than the brittle flower of the flesh – *flor carnis fragilis*.¹

The love of Christ is central to the Rule of Comgall at Bangor. “love of Christ, hate wealth, pity in you towards the King of the Sun, and smoothness towards men.... If the monk loved Christ, then everything else followed”.²

Everything the monk did from prayer to fasting to study of the Old and New Testament was always directed towards that converse towards the Lord.³

Even *peregrinatio pro Christo* or Exile for Christ itself emerged from Columban’s love of Christ. Francis MacManus writes, “There is yet more ways in which one could mortify and sacrifice the self, and these, the last and more permanent and crucifying and most terrible was exile: departure from all one knew, from place, monks relations; utter exile”.⁴

As a reward for more intense fasting and prayer with outstretched hands, the monk might often get a glimpse of the Divine and experience an intimacy with

¹ Francis Mac Manus, 1961, *Saint Columban*, Clonmore and Reynolds, Dublin page 8

² Ibid page 10

³ Ibid page 12.

⁴ Ibid page 14

God. “ I should love to have the Christ, Son of God, visiting me, my Creator and King, and that my mind should resort to Him in the Kingdom in which He dwells”.⁵

Even Columban’s radical poverty was primarily Christological rather than ascetical. He chose poverty so that in all things he could imitate Christ’s emptying of himself. According to MacManus one discovers with excitement that the Rule of Columban is about and for ordinary men, the old, the young, veteran monks and mere boys, who wish to be unmade in the image of fallen Adam and remade in the image of Christ, and who will unmake and remake themselves in humility and charity, through absolute obedience; through the silence that will account every word spoken by its effectiveness in making good men better and in keeping peace; through a sparing use of food.....through a disdain for propertythrough chastity that goes to the depths of the spirit; through a routine of communal and private prayer that divides out the hours of darkness and daylight.⁶

People who write about the controversy concerning the proper dating for Easter often forget that, for people such as Columban, Easter was crucial. “ Christ, risen from the dead, delivered His people from the bondage of hell. It was the time of Pasch and fulfilment.”⁷ Getting the date of Easter right was important.

In his letter to the Gallic Bishops we get a glimpse of Columban’s Christology. MacManus writes “ Quoting from St, Paul and the Evangelists, Matthew, Luke and John, he affirms that he who believes in Christ ought also himself to walk as Christ walked. The voice of the shepherds must be exemplified in his own

⁵ *Ibid* Page 25.

⁶ *Ibid* Page 33.

⁷ *Ibid* Page 55

practice. Therefore, let all together, clergy and monks, live according to the true and unique rules of our Lord Jesus Christ and therefore, with pride seek to record a unanimous verdict on the rest.⁸

Taking up the cross

In his letter from Nantes to the monks at Luxeuil before boarding the boat that was supposed to carry him back to Ireland, he writes about the sufferings of Christ. “For this is the truth of the Gospel that the true disciples of Christ crucified should follow him with the cross. A great example has been shown, a great mystery has been declared: the Son of God willingly ... mounted the cross as a criminal, leaving to us an example, that we should follow his footsteps... for the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”⁹

O Christ, deign to kindle our lamp

In Sermon X preached at Milan he talked about commitment to Christ in the context of Judgement Day. “Let us be willing to lay down our lives (martyrdom for Christ) so that we may live for Christ. Let us seek life with Jesus, that we may keep his dying in us first; and may Christ our God deign to grant us this.”¹⁰

The second half of Sermon XII is a beautiful prayer addressed to the Father.

Lord grant me, I pray thee, in the name of Jesus Christ Thy Son, my God, that love which knows no fall, so that my lamp may feel the kindling touch and know no quenching, may burn for me and for others may give

⁸ Ibid Page 66

⁹ Aidan J. Larkin, 2012, *Saint Columbanus, Pilgrim for Christ*,, Missionary Society of Saint Columban, Cumann Seanchais Ard Mhaca, page 130

¹⁰ Ibid 147

light. Do Thou, O Christ, deign to kindle our lamps, our Saviour most sweet to us, that they may shine continually in Thy temple and receive perpetual light from Thee, the Light perpetual, so that our darkness may be enlightened, and yet the world's darkness may be driven from us. Do thou enrich my lantern with Thy light, I pray.

So enrich my lantern with Your light, I pray of You, my Jesus, that by its light there may be disclosed to me those holy places of the holy, which hold You the eternal Priest of the eternal things, entering there in the pillars of that great temple of Yours, that constantly I may see, observe, desire You only, and loving You only may behold, and before You my lamp may ever shine and burn. Be it Yours I beg, most loving Saviour, to reveal Yourself to us who beseech You, so that knowing You, we may love You only, love You alone, desire You alone, contemplate You alone by day and night, and ever hold You in our thoughts; and do You deign so far to inspire us with Thy love, as it befits You to be loved and cherished as our God; that Thy charity may possess all our inward parts, and Your love may own us all, and Your affection may fill all our senses, so that we may know no other love apart from You Who are eternal; that such affection may be in us impossible of quenching by the many waters of this air and land and sea, according to that saying, 'And many waters are not able to quench love;' (*Song of Songs*. 8. 7) which in us also can be fulfilled even in part, by the gift of You our Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom is the glory unto ages of ages. Amen."¹¹

Divine physician

The theme of Jesus as the divine physician is very dear to Columban and according to Larkin resonates with the theology which underpins the Luxeuil Penitential.

Would that You would deign to admit me there to that Fountain, merciful God, righteous Lord, so that there I too with your thirsty ones might drink the living stream of the living Fount of living water, gladdened by whose overflowing loveliness I might ever cleave to Him on high and say, "How

¹¹ Ibid page 148 and 149.

lovely is the Fountain of living water, Whose water fails not, springing up to life eternal (*Jn 4:14*). O Lord, you are that Fountain ever and again to be desired, though ever and again to be imbibed. Ever give us, Lord Christ, this water, (*Jn. 4:15*), that it may be in us to, a Fountain of water that lives and springs up to eternal life.” (*Jn. 4:14*). I ask great gifts indeed, who knows it not? But You, the King of glory, know how to give greatly, and You have promised great things; nothing is greater than You and you have given yourself to us, you give yourself for us. Wherefore we beseech You that we may know the thing we love, since we pray for nothing other than Yourself to be given to us; for you are our all, our life, our light, our salvation, our food, our drink, our God. Inspire our hearts, I beg you, O our Jesus, with that breath of your Spirit, and wound our souls with your love, that the soul of each one of us may be able to say in truth, Show me Him Whom my soul has loved, (*Song 1: 6*) for by love am I wounded. I desire that those wounds may be in me, O Lord. Blessed is such a soul, which is thus wounded by love; such seeks the Fountain, such drinks, though it ever thirst in drinking, ever quaff in longing, and it ever drinks in thirsting; for thus in loving it ever seeks while it is healed in being wounded; and with this healing wound may our God and Lord Jesus Christ, that Physician of righteousness and health, deign to wound the inward parts of our soul, Who with the Father and the Holy Spirit is one forever and ever. Amen.”

Jesus and divine charioteer

In Letter V, Columban applies to Christ the title Divine Charioteer. The use of the image charioteer has both classical and biblical roots. In Plato (*Phaedrus*), the soul is compared to a winged charioteer and his team of horses. The image appears in *Timmaeus* where the body is seen as the vehicle of the soul. In the *Second Book of Kings* (2:11), the prophet Elijah is taken up to heaven in a firey chariot. In ancient Christian art the Christ is sometimes depicted as the ‘Sun of Justice’ driving the chariot of the sun across the sky. Clement of Alexandria describes Christ as the charioteer who brings eternal life with the dawn as He begins His ascent though the heavens in the chariot of the Sun. “He who rides

over all creation is the “Sun of Righteousness whowho has changed sunset in sunrise, and crucified death into life...”¹²

Columban and Eucharist

Sermon XIII: ‘Come to the waters’, ‘Eat this bread’ is devoted to the Eucharist which was very important in Columban’s life. The theme of the sermon is obviously inspired by the Fourth Gospel.

He who thirsts, let him come unto me and drink. With you is the Fountain of living water. Let him that hungers eat the living Bread. Christ is the living Bread and the Fountain of Living Water.

Observe whence that Fountain flows; for it flows from that place whence also the Bread came down; since He is the same who is Bread, and Fountain, the only Son, our God Christ the Lord, for Whom we should ever hunger. For though we eat Him in loving, though we feast on Him in desiring, let us still as hungering desire Him. Likewise as the Fountain, let us ever drink of Him with overflow of love, let us ever drink of Him with fullness of longing, and let us be gladdened by some pleasure of His loveliness. For the Lord is lovely and pleasant; though we eat and drink of Him, yet let us ever hunger and thirst, since our food and drink can never be consumed and drained entire; for though He is eaten He is not consumed, though He is drunk He is not lessened, since our Bread is eternal, and our Fountain is perennial, our Fountain is sweet. Wherefore the Prophet says, Go you who thirst to the Fountain; (*Isaiah. 55:1*) for that is the Fountain of the thirsting, not of the surfeiting, and thus He calls to Himself the hungry and the thirsty, whom He blessed elsewhere, who have never enough of drinking, but the more they quaff, so much the more they thirst. Justly, my brethren, the Fountain of wisdom, the Word of God on high, (*Eccles 1. 5*) is to be desired by us, sought after and ever loved, in Whom are hid, according to the Apostle's saying, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, (*Col. 2.3*) which He calls them that thirst to quaff. If you thirst, drink the Fountain of life; if you hunger, eat the Bread of life. Blessed are they who hunger for this Bread and thirst for this Fountain; for ever eating and drinking, they still long to eat and drink. For that is lovely to excess which is ever eaten and drunk, and ever hungered and thirsted after, ever tasted and ever desired; wherefore the

¹² Ibid 161

Prophet-King says, Taste and see how lovely, how pleasant is the Lord.(Ps. 33.8). Therefore, my brethren, let us follow this calling, with which we are called to the fountain of life by the Life Who is the Fountain, not only the Fountain of living water, but also of eternal life, the Fountain of light, yes, and the Fount of glory; for from Him come all these things, wisdom and life, and light eternal. The Author of life is the Fountain of life, the Creator of light, the Fount of glory; and thus, spurning the things that are seen, making a passage through the world, in the loftier regions of the heavens let us seek the Fount of glory, the Fountain of life, the Fountain of living water, like intelligent and most wise fish,¹³ that there we may drink the living water which springs up to eternal life.” (Jn. 4:14).¹⁴

The importance of the Eucharist in the early Irish Church can be gleaned from antiphons which have been copied into the Antiphonary of Bangor now in the *Biblioteca Ambrosiana* in Milan. “We have received the Body of the Lord and have drunk His Blood; we fear no evil because the Lord is with us. Or again, Restored by the Body and Blood of Christ, O Lord, let us say, Alleluia.”¹⁵

The Arian and Monophysite controversies

Towards the end of his life, Columban was confronted by two very different teaching which contradicted and diminished the Catholic Church’s teaching about the person of Christ. The first is called Arianism after a priest of Alexandria in Egypt called Arius (c 315) who taught that Jesus, as Logos, was subordinate to the Father. A council of Bishops meeting in Nicaea in 325, rejected Arius’s view and taught that Jesus was of the same being with the Father. The bishops at Nicaea and at Ephesus, just over a century later (431) taught that Jesus was true God and true man. To further reinforce this belief of

¹³ See Tertullian: *On Baptism*

¹⁴ Ibid page 149 and 150

¹⁵ Ibid page 55

the true humanity and divinity of Jesus, the Fathers at Ephesus bestowed on Mary, who is the mother of the World Incarnate, the title *Theotókos*.. This means that she is the mother of God. The Council of Chalcedon taught that Christ is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, whose human and divine nature are united, yet are also distinct.

The council Fathers both at Niceae, Ephesus and later Chalcedon were not just concerned with the proper identity of Christ. They realised that if one accepted the position of Arius, it would undermine the Church's teaching on salvation. Unless, Jesus was true God and true man, his dying on the cross would not have liberated or saved humankind from sin and its consequences.

While the above Councils were shaping and defining orthodox doctrine, the situation on the ground was quite different. Columban would probably have known that, while the Franks had remained faithful to orthodox Christology, many of the Germanic tribes, including the Lombards in Northern Italy professed Arianism.

Columban finally settled in Lombardy in hilly country at the confluence of the river Trebbia and the small stream Bobbio. The king of the Lombards was called Agilulf, invited Columban to settle down in his realm, even though he was a believer in Arianism. Agilulf's queen called Theudelinda was a Catholic and was eager that her husband and the Lombards would abandon Arianism and acknowledge that Jesus was true God and true man.

Arians and Monophysites

While Arians denied the divinity of Christ, Monophysites denied the humanity of Christ. Many Christians in the East, who were under the influence of Constantinople accepted the monophysite doctrine. Church people judge Arianism and Monophysitism from a theological perspective. The Council of Chalcedon condemned Monophysitism in 451. However, kings and rulers such as Agilulf and the Emperor Justinian (482- 536), looked at these conflicts primarily from a political perspective. Having various Christian factions arguing and even fighting among themselves, could lead to political instability, which rulers naturally fear.

In 543 the Emperor in Constantinople came up with an idea which would make it easier for the monophysites, who would now have to live under the Chalcedonian doctrine, to accept the orthodox teaching.¹⁶ The Emperor's advisors singled out for condemnation the writings of three theologians, long since dead, but who during their lives had been supporters of the two-natures Christology, and as such were special targets of monophysite loathing. These writings came to be known as 'The Three Chapters.' The three authors included Theodore, bishop of Mopsuetia, Theodoret of Cyrrhus and Ibas, bishop of Edessa. This ploy provided Justinian with a way of distancing himself and his regime from Chalcedon, without actually repudiating the formal teaching of the Council. The Emperor's action was accepted with reluctance by the bishops in the East, but rejected in the West.

The Pope at that time was Vigilius (reigned 537-555AD). At first he did not sign the imperial condemnation of the Three Chapters but when the Emperor had him arrested he changed his mind, claiming that the condemnation in no way impugned the authority of the Council of Chalcedon. Professor Eamon

¹⁶ See Duffy, Eamon, *Saints and Sinners, A History of the Popes*, Yale University Press, 199, p. 55.

Duffy describes the reaction in the West as ‘volcanic.’¹⁷ He was universally denounced as a traitor to Roman orthodoxy. The African bishops solemnly excommunicated him, many of his own entourage repudiated him. In the face of intense hostility he withdrew the papal decree. In 551AD, the Emperor, having first secured a secret promise from Vigilius that he, at the opportune moment, would do the same, renewed his condemnation of the Three Chapters. Vigilius, however, resisted the imperial decree, fled the city, and excommunicated the Patriarch of Constantinople together with all the bishops present in the city. This was the stuff of heroism, but later on he made an agreement with the Emperor.

A Council of Constantinople was convened by the Emperor in May 553AD. Vigilius boycotted the Council. Then the Emperor released the text of his secret correspondence with the Pope. He was completely discredited. The Emperor broke off communion with him, rejecting, ‘not the see but the occupant,’ (*non sedem sed sedentem*). Other humiliations followed. He was permitted to leave Constantinople in 555 to return to Rome, but died at Syracuse on the journey.

The débacle dealt a shattering blow to the Papacy. Vigilius’s successor Pelagius (556-571AD) capitulated to the Emperor on the issue of the Three Chapters. This left papal prestige in the West in ruins, especially in northern Italy and the Adriatic provinces. The sees of Milan and Aquileia and all the bishops of Istria broke off communion with Rome. In Gaul too there was a feeling of let-down and a distancing from Rome on the part of the local bishops.¹⁸

It is against this background that we must read Columban’s letter to Pope Boniface IV. Columban challenges the Pope to take on board the

¹⁷ Duffy, E., *Op. Cit.*, Ch. 2, ‘Between Two Empires,’ p. 56.

¹⁸ Larkin, *op.cit.*, page 153 and 154

responsibilities of his office as bishop of Rome to work for the unity of the Church. “So Columbanus tells Boniface that some people revile the Popes and call them ‘partisans of heretics’ (*receptores hereticorum*). He urges him to take action. ‘Fulfil your pastoral duty with all vigilance, standing on your guard day and night, that you may see that almond staff which afterwards you may deserve to see in the shape of a crook at the time of the gathering of the true fruits. In *Jeremiah* 1:11 the prophet is asked by God, “What do you see, Jeremiah?” and answers, ‘I see a branch of the Watchful Tree.’ The commentaries explain that the word ‘watchful’ (*sheqed*) is the Hebrew name for the almond tree, watching for the Spring so as to be the first to blossom, ‘as though it had not slept’; here it suggests the ‘Vigilant One’ (*shoqed* means God ever-wakeful)¹⁹. ‘Therefore,’ he continues, ‘that you may not lack apostolic honour, maintain the apostolic faith, establish it by testimony, strengthen it by writing, defend it by a Synod, that none may lawfully resist you.’²⁰

Columban urges him to be vigilant, punning on the words ‘vigilance’ and ‘Vigilius’, the name of the Pope who was not ‘vigilant’. The office of the Pope is to be a watchman, like the good shepherd who is constantly on the lookout in order to see the approach of danger (mainly from wolves) and defend his sheep (*Jn.* 10:11-15). He prays that God may place the Pope ‘on the watchtower of true contemplation,’ like the watchman in *Isaiah* 40:9, to remain awake, on the lookout (*vigilare*), not sleeping. Chapter 40 of *Isaiah* is the beginning of the *Book of Consolation*. The people of God are soon to be delivered from their captivity in Babylon. The watchman is on the alert for the coming of the Lord who will set his people free.

¹⁹ See, *The New Jerusalem Bible*, *Jeremiah*, footnote 1 d, and *Catholic Study Bible (New American Bible)* note 1,11.

²⁰ *Ut ergo honore apostolico non careas, conserva fidem apostolicam, confirma testimonio, robora scripto, muni sínodo, ut nullus tibi iure resistat.*

Ever since the *débauche* of Pope Vigilius's reign the Papacy had been forced to live in a kind of Babylonian captivity. Now according to Columban, the Pope must be on the lookout. 'Go up onto a high mountain, Zion, herald of good news! Cry out at the top of your voice. Jerusalem, herald of good news! Fear not to cry out, and say to the cities of Judah: here is your God! Here comes with power the Lord God.' (*Isaiah*, 40:9 -10). In *Ezekiel* also, at 3:16-21, and 33:7-9, the prophet is appointed watchman for the house of Israel, to warn and to call the sinner away from his sin. Failure to fulfil this sacred duty merits punishment for the neglectful watchman, in this case the Pope. The arguments which Columban uses presupposed a real acquaintance with *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah* and *Ezekiel* on the part of readers. It would pass over their heads unless they (are) were prepared to look up the references, reading the relevant texts and the commentaries ancient and modern. Columbanus was a scripture scholar who made no concessions to his readers.²¹

Columban challenges Pope Boniface not to imitate his predecessors who failed as Pope to uphold the truth of who Jesus really is. As an Irish person Columban is committed to the Pope. He reminds him that the Irish received their faith from Rome, through the ministry of Palladius who was sent by Pope Celestine to convert the Irish. For him the office of the Bishop of Rome is about restoring unity and communion within the Church which is the central element in his letter. He urged the pope to call a Council where the pope and all who attended would renew their faith in humanity and divinity of Christ.

However, I am sure that the distortion of who Jesus is as presented by both the Arians and the Monophysites must have troubled Columban deeply, given his total commitment to the person of Christ, which I have outlined in the first part of this essay.

²¹ Larkin, *op. cit.*, pages 158 and 159.