

# Columban and Ecology

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Today we celebrate the feast of St. Columban. In his book Fr. Aidan Larkin gives a thumbnail biographical sketch: “The child would grow to manhood and become first a monk, then a priest, a distinguished scripture teacher, a master of Latin prose style and rhetoric, a competent versifier, an abbot, a founder of monasteries and monastic lawgiver, notably in Annegray, Luxeuil and Fontaines, in Burgundy, France, from where he would be expelled, and then in Bregenz, Austria, and finally in Bobbio, northern Italy, where he would die in 615.<sup>1</sup>”

There are many aspects to Columban’s life and teaching which are relevant in our modern world. **Columban – Irish dimension – South and North.** Born in the South and educated in the North. From Cleenish Columban went to Bangor to become a monk and a priest. He spent more than 25 years at Bangor.

**European dimension. - Columban** - the Irish person who laboured in Europe and made such an impact in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe. According to the UCC historian, Dr. Damian Bracken, “shrines, towns and landmarks across Europe bear Columbanus’s name and testify to the widespread diffusion of devotion to the saint.<sup>2</sup>”

It will not come as a surprise if I look at Creation in Columban and two other guides. Like other early Irish saints finding God in creation came naturally to Columban. Many legends grew up around him in Luxeuil. Squirrels and

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<sup>1</sup> Aidan Larkin, *Bangor, Luxeuil, Bobbio*, manuscript. page 21

<sup>2</sup> Ibid page 7.

doves were pictured playing in the folds of his cowl. Birds also approached him and nestled in the palms of his hands. Even wild beasts obeyed his commands. His biographer Jonas heard many of these stories probably from monks in Luxeuil such as Chagnoald. He was the son of Chagneric who was instrumental in Columban getting the land for his monastery. Chagnoald has studied as a young boy at Luxeuil and then went on to become a monk. As a young monk he would have spent a lot of time with Columban and would have run errands for him. Eventually, he became bishop of Laon and that is where Jonas would have heard these stories.

Another of Chagnoald's stories recounts how Columban withdrew to the forest in order to fast and pray. The food ran out and all he and Chagnoald had to eat were crab apples. However, when Chagnoald went to collect the apples he found a hungry bear eating the apples. He returned to Columban for directions. Columban ordered him to go back to the orchard and to divide it in two halves, one for the bear and one for the monks. Once again, the bear was obedient.

Jonas recalls an occasion when Columban was walking and praying in the forest near Luxeuil. He was confronted by a pack of wolves. He remained completely still and prayed *Deus in adiutorium meum intende; Domine, ad adjuvandum me festina* (God come to my aid; O Lord make haste to help me). The wolves approached and touched his habit, but instead of harming him they wandered off among the trees and bushes.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Macmanus, 1962, *St. Columban*, Clonmore and Reynolds Ltd., Dublin , page 26.

On another occasion Columban was again walking in the forest when he saw a bear eating the carcass of a stag which had been killed by wolves. While the bear is enjoying his free meal, Columban has other ideas. As far as he is concerned the bear is welcome to the meat, but Columban wanted the hide which could be used to make shoes for his monks.

On another occasion when Columban was looking for a quiet place in which to pray near Annegray, he came on what he considered to be an ideal place. Unfortunately, it was a bear's den, but, far from being frightened by the experience, Columban ordered the bear to leave the place and never to return. The bear duly did so and found another den further away from Annegray.

Jonas's story about the raven also illustrates the fact that Columban is honoured and obeyed, not just by human beings, but by other creatures as well. One day at meal time Columban took off his working gloves and left them at the door of the refectory. While the monks were eating, a raven swooped down and carried off one of the gloves. Columban was a shrewd observer of nature and so he felt that the only bird that could have taken the glove was a raven. As Jonas tells the story he puts spin on the happening. Columban claimed that the thief had to be a raven since it was the bird which refused to return to Noah in the Ark. Jonas writes that Columban told the monks that he would not feed the chicks of the raven until he had returned the stolen glove. Immediately, as the monks watched the raven flew down with the glove in its beak and dropped it in front of Columban and the bird did not fly away until Columban gave it permission to do so.

Macmanus believes that stories about the relationship of Irish saints in Ireland and on the Continent of Europe were told during the early Middle Ages. He makes the point that the restoration of humans' dominion which was lost by the original sin of Adam has been restored in saints such as Columban.<sup>4</sup> He continues, "some commentators have professed to see in them the beginnings of that tender regard for animals, that spirit of fraternity, which the world was to remember as one of the golden gifts of St. Francis of Assisi."<sup>5</sup>

My reflections on finding God in creation will be guided by two quotations from St. Columban's Sermon "Concerning the Faith" but I will move beyond Columban in the company of Thomas of Aquinas and John Duns Scotus. I will begin with two foundational sentences which we find in Columban's sermon on grace, "*Seek no further concerning God; for those who wish to know the great dept (of God) most first learn about creation.*" Further on in the same sermon there is a sentence which could become the mantra for Creation Theology. "*Intellege, si vis scire Creatorem, creaturam – Understanding, if you wish to know God, learn about creatures.*"

The key text for the common understanding of the place of humans in creation popular Christianity is found in Gen.1:26. God said, '*Let us make man in our own image and in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all living beasts and all the reptiles what crawl on the Earth.*' From that we deduced that humans were special and had intrinsic value, while all other creatures were put on the earth to be of service to humankind.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid 44.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Macmanus, op. Cit., page 113

This was certainly the perspective that underpinned the Doctrine of Signatures which was so prevalent in the Middle Ages. According to this Doctrine, God placed clues in plants as to what human ailments they were intended to alleviate. An example of this is the beautiful flower Herb Robert (*Geranium robertianum*), one of the most common cranesbill. When grown in poor soil where the stem meets the leaves is often coloured red. This was taken as a sign that the plant would be useful in treating inflamed skin conditions.

If we had read Thomas Aquinas more carefully we would have developed a much greater appreciation of the intrinsic value of other creatures.

*Hence we must say that the distinction and multitude of things comes from the intention of the first agent, who is God. For He brought things into being in order that his goodness might be communicated to creatures and be represented by them; and because his goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, he produced many and diverse creature so that, what was wanting to one in the manifestation of the divine goodness, might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided, and hence **the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better, than any single creature whatsoever.** Summa, Part I, Question 47, article 1*

So other species also reveal God in ways that humans do not and cannot. My own experience of this came many years ago in Lake S'bu in the mountains of South Cotabato in the Philippines. One evening a group of fishermen brought a

Philippine Eagle over to my house. What had happened is that a flock of kalaw (horbills) had forced this young eagle down on to Lake S'bu and its talons' were caught in fishermen's nets. Because we had preached so much about protecting God's creation, the fishermen didn't kill the bird, instead, they brought it over to my place where we built a makeshift aviary. We sent for a vet to the Philippine Eagle Foundation in Davao city because we thought the bird had been injured.

For the next few days, hundreds of T'bolis came from all over the mountain to view this magnificent creature. It stood more than three feet tall and had a wing span of more than six feet. Everything about this creature was stunning – its eyes, its beak and its front plumage were stunning. After the bird was treated by the vet we released it back into the wild. I remember being struck by the power of its wings in flight. As a result of this experience the metaphor in chapter 19 of Exodus, “You yourselves have seen how I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself” took on a totally new meaning for me.

While marvelling at the beauty of the eagle, I experienced incredible sadness at the thought that I and those watching are the last generation of humans which will see the Philippine Eagle in the wild. We are living in the 6<sup>th</sup> largest extinction of life on earth since life began 3.8 billion years ago. We have comprehensive data on about 2 million species. There could be 10 million or even 100 million. We don't know because most are found in tropical countries, most of which do not have the scientists, to catalogue their biological riches. We could lose between one third to one half of the species of the planet – all of which mirror God in a particular way – within the next 50 years. Extinction is the sterilization of life on the planet and tragically the response from the religious world has been minimal. The Catholic

Church claims to be a pro-life organisation, but all the evidence points to the fact that this is not true. The Catholic Church is against human abortion, which is laudable, but it has not cherished the lives of other species of God's creation. In this large *Compendium of the Social Teachings of the Church* only one paragraph in No 466 is devoted to protecting biodiversity. I believe that if the Catholic Church was seen to be in the forefront of protecting biodiversity around the world, its position on abortion would be much better understood.

Our second guide Blessed John Duns Scotus, is not as well known as Thomas Aquinas. Nevertheless he is probably the most significant Celtic theologian in the 1,600 years of Christianity in these islands. He was a Franciscan who lived in the 13th and early 14th century (1266 – 1307). He was probably born in Scotland. Like many other medieval scholars he had an international career. He taught in Oxford and most probably in Cambridge.

Scotus had no time for neo-Platonism which had a rather jaundiced view of creation. Like Francis before him, Scotus's love for all reality is grounded in his belief in the Incarnation, that God took human form and became part of creation. For him there is a direct link between creation and the incarnation. He takes his cue from those passages in both St. Paul and St. John where it seems that creation is made for Christ. He is both the source and centre of everything. In the prologue of John's gospel we read, *In beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in t he beginning. **Through him all things came to be, not one thing had its being but through him. All that came to be had life in him and that life was the light of men, a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower.*** (Jn. 1: 1-5).

In Colossians we read, “*He is the image of the unseen God and the first born of all creation, for in him were created all things in heaven and on earth; everything visible and everything invisible, Thrones, Dominations, Sovereignities, Powers – all things were created through him and for him. Before anything was created, he existed and holds all things in unity.* (Eph. 1: 15-18).

When one takes the primacy of Christ in tandem with Scotus’s notion of ‘thisness’ or *haecceitas*, Jesus is seen as the model which God uses for every single dimension of creation. This includes the sun, the stars, oak trees, dolphins, a blade of grass and humans. Everything in creation becomes charged with Divine meaning in and of its own unique being.

Scotus’ view of creation transparent in Christ appealed enormously to the Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins who was deeply influenced by Duns Scotus as is clear from his poem, Duns Scotus’s Oxford:

*Yet ah! This air I gather and I release*

*He lived on; these weeds and water, these walls are what*

*He haunted who of all men most sways my spirit to peace;*

One of Hopkin’s poems, God’s Grandeur, begins with the line,

***THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.***

In the second verse Hopkins’ celebrates the role of the Holy Spirit in creation as the “Lord and giver of Life”

*Because the Holy Ghost over the bent*

*World broods with warm breast and with ah! Bright wings.*

In Scotus's vision, "each and every thing, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, is of infinite value because it images God in its own unique way." In such a scheme of things the more diversity there is in creation, the greater the glory of God.

This is far removed from an exclusively homocentric understanding of the *Imago Dei* which has informed, or should I say deformed, a lot of our God talk about creation and our own place in creation. Much of our articulation of our faith – in creedal statements or theological tomes took place at a time when we believed that the earth was the centre of the universe, that the universe was just over 6,000 and that everything that grew on the earth, or flew through the sky, or swam in the oceans was put there by God for man's benefit.

Modern science, on the other hand, describes how the universe emerged from the mysterious fireball 13.7 billion years ago. It tells how the elements were forged in the galactic cauldrons of the first generation of stars as they collapsed in the supernova explosions. It tells how these new elements seeded our solar system and gave rise to our sun, the planets and, especially, the Earth. The story goes on to tell how, over hundreds of millions of years, our Earth was formed in its physical dimensions.

Finally, it tells how life arrived on earth in the oceans, first as a tentative flicker, and later in great profusion and diversity, culminating in emergence of a reflectively, a self-conscious creature called *homo sapiens*. The contours of this story are available in all modern schools where science is taught.

This story helps us to discover our proper place in God's creation. It tells us that everything in Universe is linked and that we are literally cousins with every creature on the planet. It tells us that creation is there to give glory to God, not to be a quarry of humans to exploit. On your way out of the Church today look at the fossilized brachiopods in the polished limestone columns. They lived in the lower carboniferous period 300 million years ago. In their lives they gave glory to God. The story challenges previously held beliefs that there is an unbridgeable chasm between humans and the rest of creation. We are part of creation and because of our consciousness the universe knows and celebrates itself through us. This is not just science – it is the revelation of how God created our universe. In theological terms the findings of the sciences are God's old diaries. It amazed me that this perspective hardly got a mention at the recent Synod on Evangelization.

If we take Columban, Aquinas and Scotus as our guides we have a lot to learn from these old diaries. We are blessed in our time that we have the possibility to know multiple times more about the universe and life on earth than either Columban or Scotus. One of the instruments which has given us new eyes so that we can become more intimate with "small" world of creation is the microscope. With microscopes we can now see things that Columban or Scotus in their wildest dreams could not even imagine.

The focus here is experiencing God's presence in nature. The pioneering Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus put it well when he wrote in Latin – *Natura in Minimis Maxima Miranda* (Nature in its smallest is greatly to be admired). Admiration leads to wonder and praise – which is the beginning of prayer and contemplation.