

‘Juniors’ Challenge ‘Seniors’, Columban’s Prophetic Voice

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St. Columban travelled to Europe in 590 AD and set up monasteries in Eastern Gaul – Annegray, Luxeuil and Fontaine. He was expelled in 610 AD and brought under guard to Nantes. After boarding the ship a freak storm beached the boat, the captain felt that the reason for the storm was that he was transporting a saintly man back to Ireland against his will. Once freed Columban turned north, passing near modern day Paris and travelled east as far as the Rhine. He spent a short time in Bregenz in modern day Austria before crossing the Alps and travelling to Milan and Bobbio where he died on November 23rd 615. While he was living on the European continent he wrote three letters to Pope Gregory the Great and Pope Boniface IV.

Columban recognised that Rome was the *fons et origo* or the spring and source of Irish Christianity since Palladius had been sent as the first bishop to the Christians of Ireland by Pope Celestine in 431 AD. Because Ireland was perceived to be at the end of the earth, many Roman authors and even Christian authors such as Pope Honorius had a rather negative view of Ireland and the Irish. This contrasted with Columban’s view of Ireland and the Irish. The remoteness of Ireland and the fact that Irish and the call to evangelise the Irish came from Rome, was a sign for Columban of Rome’s claim of responsibility for all the churches. In Columban’s letter Pope Gregory the Great, Columban quotes John 4:14 to express his longing to visit Rome and drink from the living source which flows from heaven and springs towards everlasting life.

Despite this strong Roman orientation Columban, who considers himself a junior in the faith has no problem advising or even admonishing someone he considers superior to himself, namely Pope Boniface IV. As an abbot for more than twenty years Columban had a lot of experience of leadership as is clear from the letter which he wrote to Attala (his successor at Luxeuil) when he thought that he was going to be sent back to Ireland. According to Columban, the leader is called to exercise discernment. But despite the fact that one might possess a variety of

human virtues and enormous personal ability, a true Christian leader must acknowledge his total dependence on God's grace.

In his letters, especially the one to Pope Boniface IV (608- 615), Columban argues that there is a reciprocal relationship between 'seniors' or leaders and 'juniors' those whom they lead. The 'junior' must show deep respect for the authority of the 'senior.' The 'senior' for his part, must show good leadership and must not be afraid to ask for help when he is dealing with something with which he is not totally familiar. The 'senior' is judged to be deficient in his leadership if he refuses to accept legitimate criticism from a 'junior.'

The background to Columban's letter to Pope Boniface IV is the schism in the Church which followed the weak stand taken by Pope Vigilius (537 -555) during what is known as the Three Chapter controversy. The Emperor at the time in Constantinople was Justinian (527 -565), better known for his efforts at codifying Roman law in his *Corpus Juris Civilis* which is still the basis for civil law in many countries today. Justinian had reconquered territory which had been lost to the Roman Empire for almost 100 years. As a consummate politician Justinian knew that many from the eastern part of the empire found the teaching of the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) on the two-natures of Christ difficult to accept. Many of these bishops had supported the Monophysite position which, in theory, claimed that Jesus Christ who is the Son of God is one person and only one nature which is his divine nature. In order to help these Eastern bishops accept the teaching of Chalcedon, Justinian agreed to condemn the writings of three two-natures-of-Christ theologians, namely Theodore of Mopsuetia, Theodoret of Cyrrhus and Ibas of Edessa which is why the controversy is called the Three Chapters. Under enormous pressure from Justinian, Pope Vigilius gave his support to Justinian's theological and political manoeuvre by issuing a *ludicatum* condemning the Three Chapters in 548 AD. This led to Churches in northern Italy and Africa breaking off communion with Rome. The schism lasted from 553 to 698 AD.

Apologists for Pope Vigilius included Pope Gregory the Great who as a deacon is believed to have been the author of Pope Pelagius II (579 – 590 AD) letter to the bishops of Istria. In the letter Pope Pelagius II distances himself from the position taken by his predecessor Pope Vigilius. To soften the blow a little, Pope

Pelagius's letter claimed that, because Vigilius did not know Greek, he was not aware of the nuances involved in the condemnation of the three authors.

The controversy was still raging when Columban arrived in Lombardy. He was asked by King Agiluf who was himself an Arian to write to Pope Boniface IV requesting that he call a Council to address the Three Chapters controversy. As far as Columban was concerned this was the only way that Pope Boniface IV could show that he was not contaminated by Vigilius's error and that he professed the orthodox faith. For Columban, the fact that some one was a bishop or even a pope imposed greater obligations of them to live a full Christian life. He quotes a section from the prophet Ezekiel about the obligations of the watchman (Ez. 3:17-21). For Columban, the bishop is supposed to be the 'watchman' who has an obligation to warn people when they see that any danger is lurking. Like the watchman in Ezekiel the bishop who fails in his primary duty of care is responsible not only for his own delinquency, but also for the fate of all led astray through his negligence. If the watchman does raise the alarm and the people fail to respond, the people are responsible for their own downfall.

The other text which supported that argument that 'juniors' have both a right and an obligation to challenge 'seniors' is, of course, the one put forward by St. Paul in Galatians 2: 11 -14. St. Paul who had persecuted Christians felt that he had the right to challenge Peter even though it was accepted that Peter had an important leadership role in the early Church. In this text which is central to the theology of fraternal correction, Paul writes that, "when Cephas came to Antioch, however, I opposed him to his face, since he was manifestly in the wrong. His custom had been to eat with the pagans, but after certain friends of James arrived he stopped doing this and kept away from them altogether for fear of the group that insisted on circumcision. The other Jews joined him in this pretence, and even Barnabas felt himself obliged to copy their behaviour. When I saw that they were not respecting the true meaning of the Good News, I said to Cephas in front of everyone, 'In spite of being a Jew, you live like the pagans and not like the Jews, so you have no right to make pagans copy Jewish ways.'" (Gal 2: 11-14). A footnote in *The Jerusalem Bible* states that "Peter's conduct was not in itself blameworthy and in different circumstances Paul was to do the same – Acts 16:3, 21:26; I Cor. 8:13, Rom 14:21. But on this occasion such a policy suggested that the only true Christians were

converted Jews who observed the Law, and threatened to produce two separate communities that could not even meet to celebrate the Eucharist. Peter's behaviour should have advertised his real attitude but instead he disguised it." Columban used this text towards the end of his letter to Boniface IV.

Before he was expelled from eastern France, Columban was summoned to attend a Synod of the Gallic Church at Chalon-sur-Saône in 603 AD. Among the issues which the Gaulish clerics planned to discuss was Columban's own behaviour and practice particularly as regards the date of Easter in Columban monasteries. Columban, however, refused to attend. Instead he sent a letter to the bishops reminding them that as shepherds of their people they were required not just to preach the good news of Jesus, but to live it out in their daily lives. Columban referred to the example of the Good Shepherd in John's gospel chapter 10. Columban tells the bishops that the pastor cannot preach about Christ unless he imitates Christ in his own life. Columban had a poor view of many of the bishops because of the worldly life they lived. He accuses them of ordaining for money and of continuing to have sexual relations with their wives after becoming clerics.

In this letter and the one to Pope Boniface IV, Columban reiterates that 'seniors' must acknowledge the truth when it is presented to them by 'juniors' and that they must act accordingly. In this way they showed themselves to be true and brave leaders.