

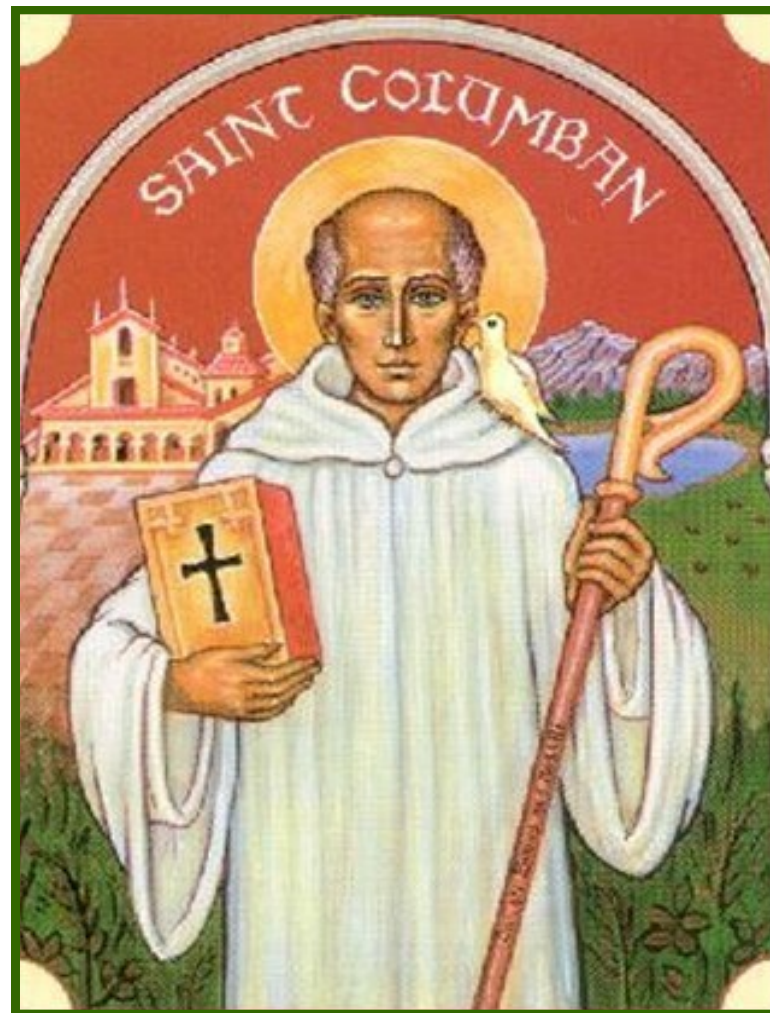


TOMB OF SAINT COLUMBAN
IN THE CRYPT OF SAINT COLUMBAN'S CHURCH
BOBBIO, ITALY
WHERE MANY MIRACLES HAVE TAKEN PLACE

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Saint Columban

Feast Day: November 23



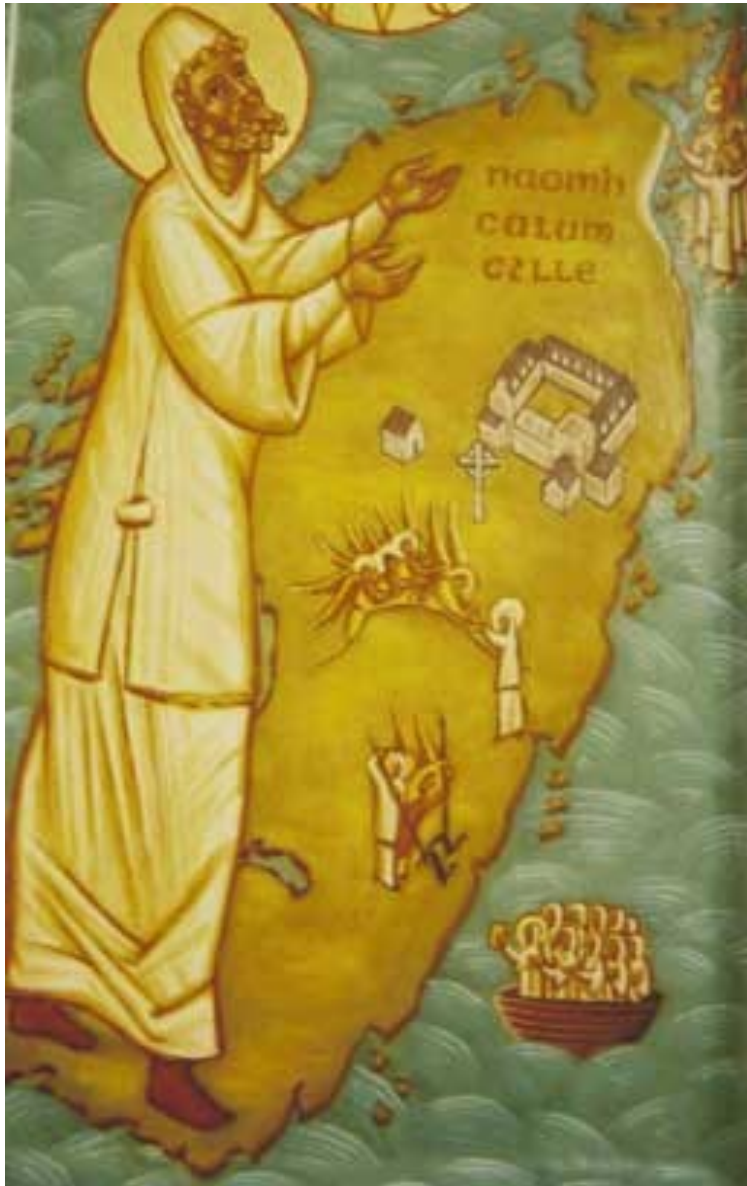
He preached the world of Christ fearlessly
and was not afraid of the anger of kings.
It is the kind of Christian courage we should have.

SAINT COLUMBAN

Columban was a native of Leinster, and seems to have been of a respectable family. Of the precise date of his birth we are not informed. According to some accounts it was about 559, but according to others it was several years earlier. He received a good classical education, and resolved early to embrace an ascetic life. But the good looks and winning ways of the Irish girls were a snare to him. He tried to forget their bright eyes by toiling (desudavit) at grammar, rhetoric, and geometry, but found that at least syntax and the problems of Euclid were a less attractive study than pretty faces, and that the dry rules of rhetoric failed altogether before the winsome prattle of light-hearted maidens. He consulted an old woman who lived as a recluse. She warned him that if he wished to maintain his purpose of self-conquest he must fly to a region where girls are less beautiful and seductive than Ireland. "Save thyself, young man, and fly!" His resolution was formed; he decided on going away.

His mother attempted to deter him, prostrating herself on the threshold of the door; he stepped over her, left the province of Leinster, and placed himself under the tuition of the venerable Sinell, son of Oenach, abbot of Cluaininis in Lough Erne. Sinell made Columban compose a commentary on the Psalms whilst under his tuition. After awhile, Columban went to Bangor, County Down, Northern Ireland (not the one in Wales), where he remained under the abbot Congall. But this first apprenticeship in the holy war was not enough. The adventurous temper of his race, the passion for pilgrimage and preaching, drew him beyond the seas. He heard incessantly the voice which had spoken to Abraham echoing in his ears, "Go out of thine own country, and from thy father's house, into a land that I shall show thee." The abbot in vain attempted to retain him. Columban, then thirty, left Bangor with twelve other monks, crossed Great Britain, and reached Gaul. He found the Catholic faith in existence there, but Christian virtue and ecclesiastical discipline ignored or outraged -- thanks to the fury of the wars and the negligence of the bishops. He devoted himself during several years to traversing the country, preaching the Gospel, and especially giving an example to all of the humility and charity which he taught. His little community accompanied him. If one of the members lapsed into vice, all the rest simultaneously, burning with charity, fell on him, and beat him back into the paths of virtue. Not a harsh word was uttered by one of them; they had all things in common.





St. Columban started monasteries across Europe

Arriving, in the course of his apostolic wanderings, in Burgundy, he was received there by King Gontram, of all the grandsons of Clovis the one whose life appears to have been least blamable, and who had most sympathy with the monks. His eloquence delighted the king and his lords. Fearing that he would leave them, Gontram offered him the ancient Roman castle of Annegray, now in the commune of Faucogney (Haute Saone). He lived there the simplest life with his companions, on the bark of trees, the wild herbs, the bilberries in the firwoods, and whatever the neighbors would give, out of charity. Often he separated himself from his companions to plunge alone into the forest. There, in his long and close communion with bare and savage nature, every living creature obeyed his voice. The birds came to receive his caresses, and the squirrels descended from the tree-tops to hide themselves in the folds of his cowl. He expelled a bear from the cavern which became his cell; he took from another bear a dead stag, whose skin he used for shoes for the brethren. One day, while he wandered in the depths of the wood, bearing a volume of Holy Scripture on his shoulder, and meditating whether the ferocity of beasts was not better than the rage of men, he saw a dozen wolves surround him. He remained motionless, repeating the words, "Deus in adiutorium." The wolves smelt his garments, and passed on their way without molesting him. He pursued his [way], and a few steps further on heard the voices of a band of Swabian robbers who wasted the country. He did not see them; but he thanked God for having preserved him from the maw of the wolf and the less merciful hand of man.

At the end of some years the increasing number of his disciples obliged him to seek another residence, and by the help of Agnoald, a minister of the Frank king, whose wife was a Burgundian of high family, he obtained from Gontram the site of another strong castle, named Luxeuil, where there had been Roman baths, magnificently ornamented. On the ruins of this seat of luxury the monks founded their ascetic colonists, these eschewing water, planted themselves in the ancient baths.

Luxeuil was situated on the confines of Austrasia and Burgundy, at the foot of the Vosges. Disciples collected abundantly round the Irish colonizer. He could soon count several hundreds of them in the three monasteries which he had built in succession, and which he himself governed. The noble Franks and Burgundians, overawed by the sight of these great creations of work and prayer, brought their sons to him, lavished gifts upon him, and often came to ask him to cut their long hair, the sign of nobility and freedom, and admit them into the ranks of his army. Labor and prayer attained here, under the strong arm of Columban, to proportions up to that time unheard of. The multitude became so great that he could organize that perpetual service, called "Laus perennis" which already existed at Agaunum, on the other side of the Jura and Lake Lemman, where, night and day, the voices of monks, "unwearied as those of angels," arose to celebrate the praises of God in unending song.

Rich and poor were equally bound to agricultural labor. The toil of the hands was the sovereign receipt for spiritual languor and bodily sickness. When he issued on one occasion from his cave in the depths of the forest, and came to Luxeuil, he found a large number of monks in bed with influenza colds. He made them get up and go to the barn and thrash out wheat. The violent exercise opened their pores and expelled the fever. A monk named Theudegisel cut his thumb whilst reaping, and wanted to knock off work. Columban removed the blood with a little saliva, convinced himself that the wound was not serious, and made the man finish the work.

An article of his rule ordained that the monk should go to rest so fatigued that he would be ready to fall asleep on his way to bed, and should rise before he had slept off his weariness. It was at the cost of this excessive and perpetual labor that the wilderness which had spread over the ruins of Roman civilization was restored to cultivation and life.

Twenty years passed thus, during which the reputation of Columban increased and extended afar. But his influence was not undisputed. He displeased one portion of the Gallo-Frank clergy by the intemperate zeal with which he attempted, in his epistles, to remind the bishops of their duties, ostensibly by his obstinate adherence to Celtic peculiarities of tonsure and costume, and of the observance of Easter.

At a period when the most trifling ecclesiastical peculiarities were ranked as heresies of magnitude, such a divergence from established custom could not fail to serve as the opportunity for his enemies, and to weaken and embarrass his success. The details of his struggle with the bishops of Gaul remain unknown; but the resolution he displayed may be understood by some passages of his letters to the council which met to examine his conduct with respect to the observance of Easter. This was the council, apparently, held at Sens in 601, attended by Betharius, bishop of Chartres. The council as summoned in consequence of letters written by Pope Gregory the Great to Brunehild, to Virgilius of Arles, and others, to urge the extirpation of simony. S. Columban was invited to it to explain his conduct, and abandon his eccentricities. He did not attend, but he wrote to the council a letter, in which he requested the bishops not only to consider the question of Easter, but also the canonical observances which they themselves were guilty of neglecting. "I am not the author of this difference; I have come into these parts a poor stranger, for the cause of the Savior Christ; I ask of your holinesses but a single favor, that you will permit me to live in silence in the depths of these forests, near the bones of seventeen brethren whom I have already seen die. I will pray of you with those who remain with me, as I have done these twelve years...If God guides you to expel me from the desert which I have sought, I will say with Jonah, 'Take me up and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm.' But before you throw me overboard, it is your duty to follow the example of sailors, and try first to reach the land; perhaps it may not be an excess of presumption if I suggest that many men follow the broad way, and that it is better to encourage those who follow the narrow way that leads to life than to throw stumbling blocks in their path."

Rome he acknowledges as the head of all churches, saving only the prerogatives of Jerusalem. He warns the Pope not by his perversity to lose his high privileges and dignity. For power was his only so long as exercised aright -- the keys were only his to lock and unlock justly. He tells Boniface that the Irish were orthodox believers, constantly adhering to the faith and apostolic tradition, which they had received from their forefathers, and that they never had among them heretics, Jews, or schismatics. "I confess that I lament over the bad reputation of the chair of S. Peter in this country. I speak to you not as a stranger, but as a disciple, as a friend, as a servant. I speak freely to our masters, to the pilots of the vessel of the Church, and I say to them, Watch! and despise not the humble advice of the stranger....Pardon me if swimming among the rocks, I have said words offensive to pious ears. The native liberty of my race has given me this boldness. With us it is not the person, it is the right, which prevails. The love of evangelical peace makes me say everything. We are bound to the chair of S. Peter; for, however great and glorious Rome may be, it is this chair which makes her great and glorious among us."

Agilulf bestowed on Columban the land of Bobbio, among the Apennines, between Genoa and Milan. Columban founded there a monastery. Despite his age, he shared in the builder's labor, and bent his old shoulders under beams of firwood, which he transported from the mountain slopes on which they were felled to the spot where his abbey rose. Bobbio was his last stage. Thierry died, Clothair II, who tortured to death the aged queen, and executed her two eldest grandsons, took his throne. Clothair, on becoming sole king of Austrasia, Burgundy, and Neustria, sent Eustace, abbot of Luxeuil, to Bobbio, to recall Columban to France. But the old abbot refused the call; he answered it in a letter full of advice.

He was now very aged. On the opposite bank of the Trebbia to his abbey of Bobbio, he had found a cavern in a rock. This he transformed into a chapel dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. There he passed the remainder of his days in prayer, visiting his monastery only on Sundays and festivals, and there he died on November 21, 615, when over seventy-two years old. He was buried at Bobbio, and many miracles it is asserted, were performed at his tomb.

From *The Lives of the Saints* by the Rev. S. Baring-Gould, M.A., published in 1914 in Edinburgh.

During his sojourn at Bregentz, Columban went to see King Theodebert, who was still at war with his brother the king of Burgundy. Knowing by his visit to Thierry that the power of the latter was sufficient to overwhelm the Austrasian kingdom, he counselled Theodebert to abandon the unequal contest and take refuge in the cloister. His advice provoked an outburst of laughter. "Such a hating is unheard of," said the courtiers, "that Frank king should become a monk of his own free will." "Well," said the saint, "if he will not be a monk voluntarily, he will be made one by force." So saying he returned to Bregentz. The battle of Tolbiac ruined the hopes of Theodebert, who was forced to assume the monastic habit, and was shortly after put to death.

The whole of Austrasia had fallen by the defeat and death of Theodebert into the hands of Brunehild and Thierry, and the banks of the Upper Rhine, where their victim had found a refuge, had passed under their sway. It was no longer safe for Columban to remain there, and accompanied by a single disciple, Attalus, he crossed the Alps and sought refuge with Agilulf, king of the Lombards.

He arrived at Milan in 612, after having spent but one year at Bregentz. While at Milan, Columban wrote against the Arian heresy with which the Lombards were infected. The schism of the Three Chapters was still distracting the North of Italy, although the chapters had been condemned by the Council of Constantinople in 553. The bishops of Istria and Africa refused to acknowledge this condemnation, because they thought it threw discredit on the Council of Chalcedon. The Lombards sided with the Istrian prelates, and were therefore involved in their schism. Gregory the Great wisely let the matter drop -- it was a tempest about trifle; but Boniface IV, was not disposed to allow the question to sleep and expire. He stirred it up again, and Agilulf and his queen, Theodelinda, engaged Columban to write to the Pope in defense of the Three Chapters. Evidently little acquainted in his own person with the point at issue, Columban rushed into the controversy with his usual impetuosity. Whilst appealing in a series of extravagant and obscure apostrophes, to the indulgence of the Pope for "a foolish Scot," charged to write on account of a Lombard, a king of the Gentiles, he acquaints the Pontiff with the imputations brought against him and the chair of S. Peter, as fautors of heresy, and urges him to prove his orthodoxy by excommunicating his detractors. Pope Vigilius, he says, prevaricated; he was the cause of the whole scandal.

Whatever was the result of this letter, or the decision of the council, S. Columban persevered in his paschal computation, and still annoyed the Gallican clergy by so doing. For the purpose of being protected from their attacks he had recourse to the then Pope, whether Sabinian or Boniface the third or fourth is uncertain, and sent him copies of his letters to Pope Gregory on the subject of Easter. He requested him to be allowed to follow the tradition of his forefathers, and said that he had no wish to disturb others in the observance of their customs.

A much more severe persecution awaited him, excited against him by the wicked queen-dowager Brunehild, the widow of Sigebert of Austrasia, and mother of Childebert, who became king of Burgundy and died in 596. Childebert left two sons, Theodebert, king of Austrasia, and Theodoric or Thierry, king of Burgundy, who succeeded him under the tutelage of their grandmother. Brunehild lived with Theodebert, until, at the request of the nobles of Austrasia, he banished her. Then she fled to Thierry, by whom she was kindly received. Gregory of Tours has praised the beauty, good manners, prudence, and affability of Brunehild, and Gregory the Great congratulated the Franks on having so good a queen. But Brunehild, in her thirst for rule, endeavored to divert her grandsons from political interests by leading them into the pursuit of sensual pleasures. From fear of having a rival in power and honor near the throne of Thierry, she opposed with all her might every attempt to replace the concubines she had given him by a legitimate queen, and when, finally, he determined on espousing a Visigothic princess, Brunehild, though herself the daughter of a Visigothic king, succeeded in disgusting her grandson with his bride, and made him repudiate her at the end of a year.

S. Desiderius, bishop of Vienne, who had advised the king to marry, was murdered by the ruffians whom Brunehild had laid in wait for him.

However, the young Thierry had religious instincts. He was rejoiced to possess in his kingdom so holy a man as Columban. He went often to visit him. Irish zeal took advantage of this to reprove him for his disorderly life, and to seek a lawful spouse, that the king might have a successor on his throne from an honorable queen, and not from a concubine. The young king promised amendment, but Brunehild easily turned him away from these good intentions. Columban having gone to visit her at Bourcheresse, she presented him the four sons of Thierry by his concubines. "What would these children with me?" he asked. "They are the sons of the king," answered the queen, "strengthen them with thy blessing." "No!" answered the abbot, "they shall not reign, for they are of bad origin." From that moment Brunehild swore war to the death against him. She despatched messengers with orders not to allow the monks to quit their monastery, and an injunction that others were not to give them hospitality, or offer them gifts. Columban went to Epoisses to see the king and appeal against this command. Thierry promised to remove the ban, and Columban returned to Luxeuil.

Theodoric continued his disorderly life, and Columban wrote him a severe letter, threatening to separate himself from communion with the king unless he set a better moral example. This highly incensed Thierry and Brunehild, and the bishops who were angry at the paschal usages of the saint fanned their wrath. Thierry went to Luxeuil, and reproached Columban for refusing to allow the queen-dowager to cross the threshold of the monastery. The abbot replied that he must defend the rule of his monastery. He threatened the king with divine vengeance if he interfered with him, and Thierry, as superstitious as he was licentious, was frightened and withdrew. Shortly after, Columban was taken to Besancon, and was required to remain there til he learned the king's pleasure. Columban, finding means of escape, returned to Luxeuil. Brunehild and Thierry, apprized of his return, sent soldiers to remove him. And this, his final departure, took place in the twentieth year from his arrival in the Vosges, A.D. 610. The king gave orders that the saint and the Irish monks who were banished with him should be sent back to their own land.

They were conducted across France to Nantes, where they were placed on board a vessel destined for Ireland. At the mouth of the river the ship encountered the bore, which carried it over the banks and left it astrand. The superstitious sailors attributed this misfortune to the presence of the monks in their vessel, and refused to put to sea with them as passengers. Columban and his disciples were therefore left behind, and they returned to Nantes, whence the abbot addressed a letter to his monks at Luxeuil, bidding them obey Attalus, the abbot appointed in his place, and should difficulties arise on account of the paschal question, to leave their monastery and come to him rather than accept the Roman computation. Columban then took refuge with Clothair II, son of Chilperic, king of Soissons and Neustria. This son of Fredegund, faithful to his mother's hatred for Brunehild and her family, gave a cordial reception to the victim of his enemy, and at his request provided him with an escort to Theodebert, king of Austrasia, through whose states he desired to pass on his way to Italy. On his road the Frank chiefs brought their children to receive his benediction. Theodebert, now at war with his brother Thierry, received Columban with great cordiality, and endeavored to persuade him to settle under his protection. But the saint would not be detained. He had spent sixty years of labor in the vain attempt to reform kings and nations who called themselves Christians, and now he resolved on turning to a new field of labor -- mission-work among the heathen. He accordingly embarked on the Rhine below Mainz, and ascending the Rhine and Lammat to the Lake of Zurich, remained for a while at Tuggen.

A strange tale is told of a huge vat of beer, offered to the God Woden, which burst at the mere breath of Columban. S. Gall, his companion, set the temples at Tuggen on fire, and threw the idols into the lake. The monks were compelled to fly; and Columban left the pagans of that district with a most unapostolic malediction, devoting their whole race to temporal misery and eternal perdition. They retreated to Arbon, on the Lake of Constance; there they heard of a ruined Roman city at the head of the lake, named Brigantium (Bregentz). At Bregentz Columban found a ruined church dedicated to S. Aurelia, which he rebuilt. But the chief objects of worship in the re-paganized land were three statues of gilded brass. S. Gall broke the idols and threw them into the water....The apostles found the Suevi and Allemanns worshippers of Woden, and stubborn in their opposition to the Gospel.