

SHEETS

Saint Colomanus, a European saint *Biography of the Irish monk and missionary who founded Bobbio Abbey*



Talk by Pope Benedict XVI (GENERAL AUDIENCE 11 JUNE 2008, ROME)

Saint Colomanus the abbot is the best-known Irishman of the early Middle Ages. Since he worked as a monk, missionary and writer in various counties of Western Europe, with good reason he can be called a "European" saint. With the Irish of his time, he had a sense of Europe's cultural unity. The expression «**totius Europae**», of all Europe, with reference to the Church's presence on the Continent, is found for the first time in one of his letters, written around the year 600, addressed to Pope Gregory the Great (cf. *Epistula* I,1).

Colomanus was born around the year 543 in the province of Leinster, in south-east Ireland. He was educated at home by excellent tutors who introduced him to the study of liberal arts. He later went to study with the Abbott Sinell of the community of Cluain-Inis, in the north of Ireland, to increase his knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. At about twenty years of age he entered the monastery of Bangor, in the north-east of the island, under the Abbott Comgall, a monk well known for his virtue and ascetic rigour. In full agreement with his abbot, Colomanus zealously practised the severe discipline of the monastery, leading a life of prayer, asceticism and study. While there, he was also ordained a priest. His life at Bangor and the abbot's example influenced the conception of monasticism that Colomanus developed over time, and then spread during his lifetime. When he was about fifty, following the characteristically ascetic Irish ideal of the "peregrinatio pro Christo", namely making oneself a pilgrim for the sake of Christ, Colomanus left the island with twelve companions to engage in missionary work on the European Continent. We should bear in mind that the migration of peoples from the North and the East had caused whole areas, previously Christianised, to revert to paganism.

Around the year 590, this small group of missionaries landed on the Breton coast. They were warmly welcomed by the king of the ranks of Austrasia (present-day France) and asked only for a piece of uncultivated land. They were given the ancient Roman fortress of Annegray, totally ruined and abandoned and covered by forest. The monks were accustomed to a life of extreme hardship and in just a few months managed to build their first hermitage in the ruins. Their work of re-evangelization thus began first of all through the example of their life. With the new cultivation of the land, they also began a new cultivation of souls. The fame of these foreign religious men who, living in prayer and in great austerity, built houses and



worked the land, spread rapidly, attracting pilgrims and penitents. In particular, many young men asked to be accepted by the monastic community in order to live, like them, that exemplary life that renewed the cultivation of the land and of souls. It soon became necessary to found a second monastery.

It was built a few kilometres away, on the ruins of an ancient spa, Luxeuil. This monastery was to become the centre of the traditional Irish monastic and missionary outreach on the European Continent.

A third monastery was built at Fontaine, an hour's walk farther north. Columbanus lived at Luxeuil for almost twenty years. There the saint wrote for his followers the *Regula monachorum* - for a while more widespread in Europe than the rule of Saint Benedict - which portrayed the ideal image of the monk. It is the only ancient Irish monastic rule in our possession today. To integrate it he wrote the *Regula coenobialis*, a sort of penal code for the offences committed by monks, with punishments that are somewhat surprising to our modern sensibility, and can only be explained by the mentality and environment of that time. With another famous work entitled *De poenitentiarum misura taxanda*, also written at Luxeuil, Columbanus introduced confession and private and frequent penitence on the continent. It was known as "tariffed" penance because of the proportion established between the gravity of the sin and the type of penance imposed by the confessor.

These innovations roused the suspicion of local Bishops, a suspicion that became hostile when Columbanus had the courage to rebuke them openly for the practices of some of them. The controversy over the date of Easter was an opportunity to demonstrate their opposition: Ireland, in fact, followed the Eastern rather than the Roman tradition. The Irish monk was summoned in 603 to account to a Synod at Chalon-sur-Saône for his practices regarding penance and Easter. Instead of presenting himself before the Synod, he sent a letter in which he minimized the issue, inviting the Synod Fathers not only to discuss the problem of the date of Easter, in his opinion a negligible problem, "but also the necessary canonical norms that - something more serious - are disregarded by many" (cf. Epistula II,1).

At the same time he wrote to Pope Boniface IV - just as several years earlier he had turned to Pope Gregory the Great (cf. Epistula I) - to defend the Irish tradition (cf. Epistula III).

Intransigent as he was in every moral matter, Columbanus then came into conflict with the royal house for having harshly reprimanded King Theodoric for his adulterous relations. This created a whole network of personal, religious and political intrigues and manoeuvres which, in 610, culminated in a decree of expulsion banishing Columbanus and all the monks of Irish origin from Luxeuil and condemning them to definitive exile. They were escorted to the sea and, at the expense of the court, boarded a ship bound for Ireland. However, not far from shore the ship ran aground, and the captain, who saw this as a sign from Heaven, abandoned the voyage and, for fear of being cursed by God, brought the monks back to dry land.

Instead of returning to Luxeuil, they decided to begin a new work of evangelization. They embarked on the Rhine and sailed up the river. After a first stop in Tuggen, near Lake Zurich, they went to the region or Bregenz, near Lake Constance, to evangelize the Alemanni.

However, soon afterwards, because of political events unfavourable to his work, Columbanus decided to cross the Alps with the majority of his disciples. Only one monk, whose name was Gallus, stayed behind; it was from his hermitage that the famous Abbey of Saint Gall in Switzerland subsequently developed.

Saint Columbanus, Theodelinda and Agilulf

Having arrived in Italy, Columbanus met with a warm welcome at the Longobard Royal Court, but was immediately faced with considerable difficulties: the life of the Church was torn apart by the Arian heresy, still prevalent among the Longobards, and by a schism which had detached most of the Church in Northern Italy from communion with the Bishop of Rome.

Columbanus entered authoritatively into this context, writing a satirical pamphlet against Arianism and a letter to Boniface IV to convince him to take some decisive steps with a view to re-establishing unity (cfr. Epistula V).

When, in 612 or 613, the King of the Longobards allocated to him a plot of land in Bobbio, in the Trebbia Valley, Columbanus founded a new monastery there, which was later to become a cultural centre on a par with the famous monastery of Montecassino. Here he came to the end of his days: he died on 23 November 615 and to this day is commemorated on this date in the Roman rite.

The message of Saint Columbanus is concentrated in a firm appeal to conversion and detachment from earthly goods. With his ascetic life and conduct free from compromises when he faced the corruption of the powerful, he is reminiscent of the severe figure of Saint John the Baptist. His austerity, however, was never an end in itself



but merely the means with which to open himself freely to God's love and to correspond with his whole being to the gifts received from him, thereby restoring in himself the image of God, while at the same time cultivating the earth and renewing human society.

BOBBIO ABBEY

I quote from his *Instructiones*: "If a man makes the correct use of those faculties that God has conceded to his soul, he will be likened to God. Let us remember that we must restore to him all those gifts which he has deposited in us when we were in our original condition. He has taught us the way with his Commandments. The first of them tells us to love the Lord with all our heart, because he loved us first, from the beginning of time, even before we came into the light of this world" (cf. Instr. XI).

The Irish saint truly incarnated these words in his own life. A man of great culture - he also wrote poetry in Latin and a grammar book - he proved rich in gifts of grace. He was a tireless builder of monasteries as well as an

intransigent penitential preacher who spent every ounce of his energy on nurturing the Christian roots of Europe, which was coming into existence. With his spiritual energy, with his faith, with his love for God and neighbour, he truly became one of the Fathers of Europe. He shows us even today the roots from which our Europe can be reborn.