

Near St Malo on Brittany's Emerald Coast a cross rises high above the sandy beach. Beneath the cross a marble plaque reads: *This cross marks the spot where according to tradition St Columban first landed in order to evangelise this country.*

Such a tribute to Columban is common in Europe. Many churches, villages, and even mountains are named after him. St Coulomb, Colombin, or Colombier in France; San Colombano in Italy; and Kolumban in Germany and Switzerland. It is difficult to measure the impact that Columban had on Europe, and he is often referred to as one of the pioneers of European civilisation and monasticism.

This little book on our patron Saint Columban has been produced to mark the Millennium Year of Grace. For all those who help and support the missionary work undertaken with his patronage may Saint Columban obtain many graces and blessings this year. May we all be inspired by Columban's life and teaching, and helped by his prayers.

Fr Patrick Sayles,
Feast of St Columban, November 23, 1999.

First published 1999 by The Columban Fathers,
ISBN 1-902648-12-9

Photographs, design, editing and production
by Fr Pat Sayles © Copyright Patrick Sayles, 1999
Printing and binding GS Print, Bromsgrove T576000.



Mount Leinster, Ireland.

BEGINNINGS

Columban was born around 540AD. According to his earliest biographer, the monk Jonas, Columban's home was in the Province of Leinster, on the south-east side of Ireland.

The name Columban is a Latin one that means a dove, and he is often depicted with a dove, and with a dazzling sun.

Jonas records the story that before his birth Columban's mother dreamt she saw a great dazzling sun shine out from her to fill the world

with its light, and realised that her child would be special.

'As the sun adds splendour to the dawn, so the Church receives added lustre with each new saint.' Jonas

Columban is traditionally shown with dove and sun.



Against his mother's wishes as a young man Columban turned his steps northward to Fermanagh and magnificent Lough Erne. There he entered a monastery on Cleenish Island founded only a few years before by Sinell, who according to Jonas 'was famous for his holiness and for his learning in sacred things.'

Cleenish nestles in Upper Lough Erne. It's Irish name *Cluan-Inis* means Meadow Island, a name which reflects the nature of the island even today, where its 100 acres house numerous inlets and a profusion of reeds, home to abundant wildlife.

Cleenish, flanked by rolling hills and surrounded by distant mountains, was the setting where Columban studied Sacred scripture, and Latin. Sinell was impressed by the young student,



Lough Erne, Ireland's largest lake, boasts over 200 islands.



Remains of an ancient cross on what was probably the site of the original monastery.

Cleenish, where Columban studied.



'Such progress did he make in his studies that while yet a young man he wrote a finished work on the Psalms, and also some other works, both hymns and books of instructions.'

JONAS

Once he decided to become a monk he went to Bangor monastery on Belfast Lough. The Abbot, St Comgall, was the outstanding "Father of Monks" in Ireland, renowned for his insistence on study and discipline. Here Columban gave himself up to prayer and fasting.

COLUMBAN THE EXILE

Abbot Comgall's rule at Bangor was strict. Bread, water, and vegetables made up the daily ration. The monks wore long white tunics and an outer woollen garment with a hood, and sandals. They lived in huts of wood. Work, fasting, silence, prolonged periods of prayer, mortifications ~ these were the daily routine.

After a time Columban felt called to go into exile as a wanderer for Christ, in the spirit of Abraham: 'Go forth from your country and from your kindred, and come into the land which I will show you.' Comgall eventually allowed Columban and twelve others to set off from Bangor and sail away in a little boat into the unknown.

'When they reached the sea they asked God's blessing on their voyage, and embarked.' Jonas



Sunset over Ireland viewed on a boat sailing to Brittany.

6



COLUMBAN THE PREACHER

After an uneventful crossing they landed in Brittany. They stayed there long enough for others from Brittany to join them, and eventually they headed into Gaul.

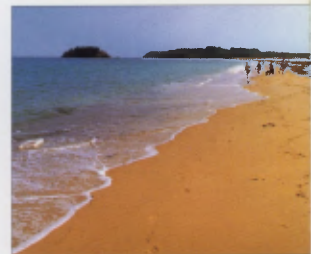
They found that religious practice had collapsed, so they began to preach everywhere. Their zeal, the humble lifestyle, and their love of the Lord, 'brought many back to God. Whatever home he stayed in Columban drew the family into the service of God.'

Right: The bay at St Coulomb

A cross marks the spot at St Coulomb where according to local tradition Columban landed in Brittany.

'Wherever he went Columban took care to preach the Gospel. The example of his life drew people to listen to him.'

Jonas



7



7th Century graves. All that remains at Annegray of the monastery, Columban's first known foundation in Europe.

COLUMBAN THE FOUNDER

Columban's zealous spirit characterised the little group of monks. Although their rule was strict, charity became their hallmark.

News of Columban and his companions reached king Sigebert. He begged them to stay in his kingdom, so they found a place in mountainous forests of the Vosges, and settled at an old, dilapidated Roman fort at Annegray. It was a desolate place overrun

'Crowds, especially the sick, began to throng to Annegray, where Columban prayed for them.' JONAS

with brushwood. They cleared part of the forest, using the timber to construct their cells. At first all they had to live on were herbs, roots, and the barks of trees. So began their life in the simplest of monasteries. Soon their fame spread, and crowds came to visit them.

A field of wheat in the forests near Annegray

A PRAYER

Lord God, cut down and root out whatever the Adversary plants in me.

With my sins cleared away may you sow good sense in my mind, and goodness in my heart, so that I can seek you and serve you completely in word and deed, and understand how to carry out Christ's will.

Grant thoughtfulness, grant love, grant purity, grant faith; give me all that you know will help my soul.

Lord, work good in me and provide me with what you know I need. Amen.

*Attributed to
Columban.*



COLUMBAN THE
EDUCATOR

Numbers grew, so Columban looked for another suitable place for a monastery. He found Luxeuil, just eight miles west, on the Breuchin river. Formerly a Roman fort with thermal springs, it had become a place where wolves and bears roamed at will.

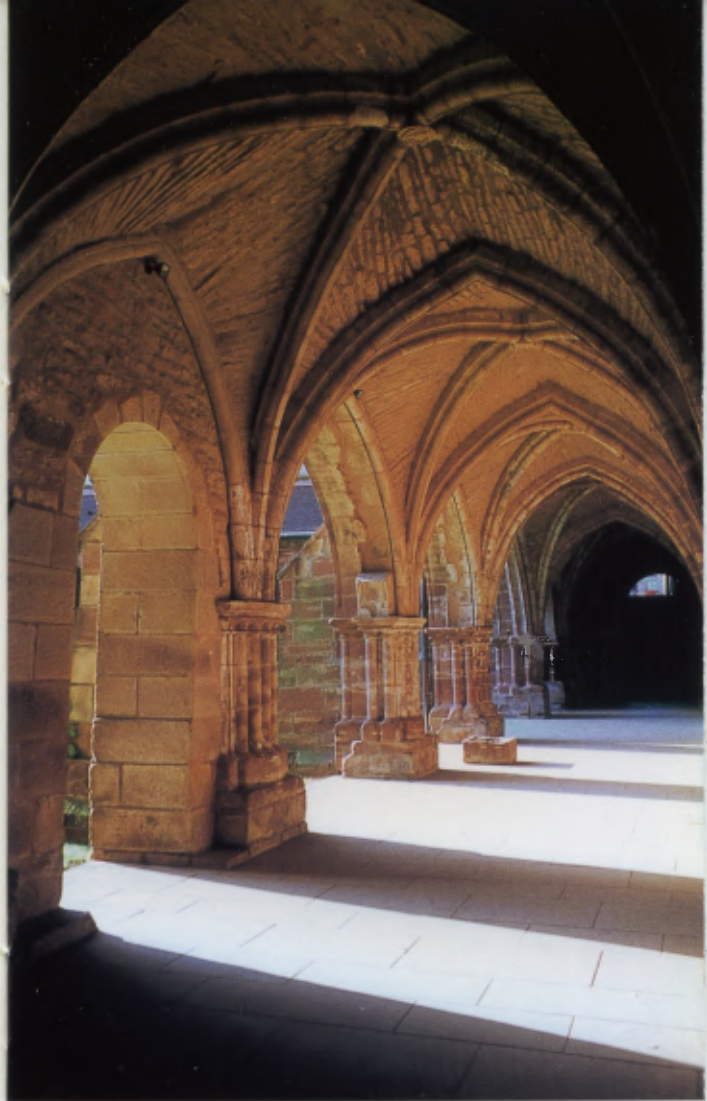
Here a monastery was established around 590 AD. Work, study, and

prayer, the unceasing toil of Columban and the others, began to bear fruit. Sons of the nobility came from all sides, and Luxeuil soon became known as the greatest school in Europe. Some abandoned the highest places in the land to become monks in its cloister. Over a span of 20 years it produced no less than 21 recognised saints. Luxeuil became the model of many new monastic foundations.

Montalembert wrote: 'Columban's greatness consists not so much in the establishment of any permanent organisation as in the fact that he enkindled a new spirit in monasticism in Europe, and in time this became the guiding influence in European civilisation.'

Luxeuil today is used as a seminary

10



The cloister, dating back to the 15th century, stands on the site of Columban's original foundation at Luxeuil.

11





12

Let us live for Christ,
who while dying restored our life. Let us die
to ourselves and live to Christ. Let us not be
proud, haughty, or undisciplined, but hum-
ble, kindly, and courteous, so that Christ may
reign in our hearts.

Let us be Christ's, and not our own,
for we are not our own, for we were bought at
a great price, a very great price, when the
Lord was given for a slave, a King for a ser-
vant, and God for humankind.

Let us fight against our faults,
that we may be crowned elsewhere, disdain
passing things, and seek what is to come,
seek life without end, and so exchange bless-
ing for misery, joy for sorrows, heaven for
earth.

May Christ our Lord deign to grant us this
who with the Father and the Holy Spirit is
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

St Columban, Sermon IX

*Left: The celebrated sculpture by Claude Granges
stands in the abbey square at Luxeuil. It depicts
Columban with tonsured hair and wearing an undyed
woollen tunic, his book-satchel over his shoulder, and
his short staff in his left hand.*

13