

Reflections on St.Columban

Celebrating 1,400th anniversary of St. Columban's death



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Contents

I. Reflections on 1,400th anniversary

Context of Columban Jubilee Year

Why we should celebrate Saint Columban

II. Saint Columban

Who was Saint Columban?

What manner of man was Columban?

What ideal inspired him?

III. What we can learn from Saint Columban

Columban, a Pilgrim for Christ

Columban, in communion with all of God's Creation

Columban, in touch with solitude and silence

IV. Legends around St Columban

Columban's youth

Columban and the Bear

Columban and the raven

Columban and nature

These reflections by Columban missionaries present us with some insights into the life and mission of Saint Columban

We hope they will contribute in some small way to celebrate in 2015 the 1,400th anniversary of this great monk and missionary.

I. Reflections on 1,400th anniversary

Context of Columban Jubilee Year

The 1,400th celebration of Columban's death takes place in Ireland against the background of other commemorations. In 2012, we had the hundredth anniversary of the Ulster Covenant. During 2013, celebrations we marked the hundredth anniversary of the famous Dublin Lockout when thousands of workers went on strike for months on end. In 2014, the focus was on Europe and the carnage of the First World War. In 2016, we are back again in Dublin for the hundredth anniversary of the uprising. Sandwiched between these anniversaries of pain, carnage and death, we have the 1,400th anniversary of the death of Columban who according to the author Francis MacManus was "Trained to rebuild rather than to destroy."

In many ways Columban is considered to be the most important Irish person ever to have lived in mainland Europe and his memory is still very much alive in many places from Brittany in France to Bobbio in Italy. He is also the first Irish person from whom we have a substantial body of writings. Therefore he is the first Irish "man of letters".

Why we should celebrate Saint Columban

Many scholars, writers and historians have gone through manuscripts, documents, commentaries, while in the process of writing about Saint Columban. This year as we remember and celebrate his death 1,400 years ago, we have an opportunity to draw from the spiritual and historical wells of Columban's life and tradition. It is an invitation to log into his inspiration, and into the values we share with him as missionary disciples and followers of Christ.

It is not just a connection with one person, but with a period of Celtic monastic history that has influenced and laid the foundation of much that we celebrate and live today. We are proud to speak of Columban

and there are many things from his life and times that we cherish.

The Irish dimension of North and South.

Columban came from the south of Ireland and joined the monasteries in the North of Ireland. He was born in shadow of Mount Leinster, on the Carlow Wexford border and was educated in Northern Ireland by St. Sinell at his monastery at Cleenish on an Island in Lough Erne. From Cleenish, Columban went to Bangor to become a monk. He spent more than 25 years at Bangor during which time he was ordained and probably taught scripture to young monks. This All-Ireland dimension gives us an opportunity in both jurisdictions in Ireland to gather and celebrate together in an ecumenical spirit in marking the 1,400th anniversary of Columban's death. .

Columban was the first Irish person to articulate what it means to be Irish.

In Columban's letter to Pope Boniface in 613 A.D, he wrote "we Irish". The Irish were not held in high esteem in continental Europe during the Roman Empire and even after the collapse of the Empire. Columban and the monks who followed him to Europe in the 6th and 7th centuries changed that perception radically. Europeans accept that during the sixth and seventh centuries the light came, not from the East but from the West.

The fact that, within a generation after his death Jonas of Susa, a monk at Bobbio, was commissioned to write the Life of Columban is a testimony to the importance of Columban's legacy in Europe. The UCC historian Dr. Damian Bracken comments that "this is another first: Columbanus is the first Irishman to be the subject of a biography". He is also Ireland's "first man of letters" since he is the first Irish person from whom we have a written document.



Columban and the European dimension

He was the first Irish person who laboured in Europe and made such an impact in the 6th and 7th centuries in Europe. According to Dr. Damian Bracken, “Shrines, towns and landmarks across Europe bear Columbanus’s name and testify to the widespread devotion to the saint. In the middle of the 9th century, a biographer of St. Gall, a colleague of Columban, acknowledged the debt of his people to Ireland “Whence the splendour of such light came to us”. He goes on to say that the light of Christianity has shone westward to Ireland through missionaries such as St. Patrick. Between the 6th and 8th centuries this light shone in the opposite direction, as Irish monks Columban rekindled the faith in Europe. In that sense, this later tradition is a reflection of Columban’s belief that the conversion of his homeland on the edge of the world led to the spiritual and cultural enrichment of the West. Charles Montalembert, the 19th century French author who wrote on Columban believes that “It was at the cost of this unceasing toil (Columban and his monks) that half of our country and an ungrateful Europe were restored to civilisation and life.”

In the early 20th century Pope Pius XI wrote, “The more light that is shed by scholars on the period known as the Middle Ages, the clearer it becomes that it was thanks to the initiative and labour of Columban that the rebirth of Christian virtue and civilisation over a great part of Gaul, Germany and Italy took place”.

A statue of St. Columban was erected in the Abbey Square in Luxeuil, to commemorate the 1,300th anniversary of the death of St. Columban. The solemn blessing of the image, sculptured by Claude Granges, took place on 6th July 1947, at the end of the II World War. On that occasion Columban was presented as the “Father of Europe” and as “The Patriarch of a great revival and re-builder of Europe”. This image of Columban stands facing the townspeople as they pass up and down and speaks to them as he did some 1,400 years before. The folds of his robes are ruffled by the wind of adversity, but Columban stands upright before the precinct of the Abbey. His outstretched arms holds the Abbot’s

staff, his support on his journey along the highways of Europe. That is the *cambutta*, the symbol of authority and command. His right hand is raised, not to strike, but to command and to invoke counsel and strength from above. His countenance in its severity is eloquent of indignation at scandal given. His lips are opened to denounce all those who deny justice and freedom or break the moral law.

Columban can therefore be called “The Father of modern-day Europe”. Robert Schuman, one of the founding fathers of European unity, who in co-operation with Jean Monnet drew up the internationally renowned Schuman Plan in 1950, said Saint Columban “is the patron saint of those who seek to construct a United Europe”.

On December 14th 2012, in preparation to mark the 1,400th anniversary of the death of Columban, Cardinal Angelo Scola, Archbishop of Milan, in the Cathedral in Piacenza, formally petitioned Pope Benedict XVI to declare St. Columban as a patron saint of Europe. He would be joining the ranks of Benedict of Nursia, Cyril and Methodius, Bridget of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, Edith Stein (Teresa Benedicta of the Cross).

In June 2008, in a reflection on the life, work and travels of Saint Columban, Pope Benedict XVI said that there was good reason to call Columban a European Saint. The Pope drew attention to the fact that the expression “Totius Europae” of All Europe, first appeared in a letter which Columban wrote to Pope Gregory the Great in 600 A.D.



II. Saint Columban

Who was Saint Columban?

St Columban was born in the province of Leinster, probably on the Wexford/Carlow border, near to Mount Leinster. He may well have been an only child. His parents were of high social status though they did not belong to the nobility. His mother had a vision a few days before his birth: she saw the sun rise from her bosom and issue forth resplendent, furnishing great light to the world. She kept the child close to herself.

As a boy he exhibited many gifts. He would grow up to become first a monk, later a priest, a distinguished Scripture scholar, and a master of Latin prose. He studied first under Abbot Sinnell, in the monastery of Cleenish, near modern-day Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh, later under the famous Abbot Comgall of Bangor. This was a strict monastery but the monks loved it. “Good rule of Bangor, straight and divine. Holy, exact, exalted, just and admirable.”

In due course he became a teacher in the monastery school, and finally its headmaster. With the job went the title *sapiens* which meant ‘wise man’. A *sapiens* was an eminent man in early Christian Ireland. The death of such a man was always recorded in the Irish annals.

In 591, Columban was inspired to ask permission of Abbot Comgall to undertake a journey from Bangor to Gaul (modern France). His biographer, Jonas, tells us that it was his intention to visit the pagan peoples and to evangelise them. This was in fact a journey into exile. Columban did not intend to return to Ireland. Twelve monks accompanied him. This kind of undertaking was really the beginning of a new life. It came to be known as “exile for Christ”, in Latin *peregrinatio pro Christo*.

It was a double commitment: the living of the monastic life as exiles in a foreign land, and the evangelization of the inhabitants of the place where they settled, in this case Gaul. Columban and his companions

settled in Burgundy, in the Vosges Mountains, where they built the famous monasteries of Annegray, Luxeuil and Fontaine. They would live there for twenty years. Later, due to disagreements with the Frankish nobles and the local bishops, Columban was expelled from that area. Though condemned to be sent home to Ireland with his Irish companions, he managed to escape and make his way via the Rhine to Bregenz and then over the Alps to Milan to his final foundation in Bobbio, in the Appenines.

What manner of man was Columban?

First he was a learned man, skilled in the Sacred Sciences. He was a man who feared no one, except God, and feared no law except the Law of God. He stood up to kings and to bishops. He wrote freely to popes debating the problem of the Easter cycle in one breath, and in the next expressing congratulations to Pope St Gregory for his latest work, a book full of advice for bishops. Yet he was gentle, and Jonas presents him as visiting a friend's house and blessing his children. Yet, he also knew when children were being abused, as when the request to bless them was politically motivated. He was holy, but he was also street-wise.

What ideal inspired him?

Above all the monastic ideal. The monasticism I have in mind was Egyptian monasticism. Anthony is the father of monks, one of the greatest of the Desert Fathers. One noteworthy feature of their spirituality was to see the monastic life as a kind of martyrdom. This identification with the crucified Christ found strong resonance among Irish monks in the Early Middle Ages. "With Christ I am nailed to the cross".

I must also draw attention to Columban's preaching on the absolute sanctity of marriage which got him into hot water several times, but was absolutely necessary. The other feature was his devotion to the sacrament of Penance, which led to a renewal of faith and devotion among many, and replaced the old system of public penance. Finally I must mention his deeply personal love for Christ. "Let us belong to

Christ, not to ourselves” he wrote; words which no one can hear without being deeply affected.



III. What we can learn from Saint Columban

Columban, a Pilgrim for Christ

Our Christian life is wrapped up in pilgrimage as we move from birth to death and on to life eternal. Columban, was undoubtedly “a pilgrim for Christ”.

His initial encounter with the person of Christ was an interior journey to the depths of his own being. To accomplish this, Columban took his inspiration from the Desert Fathers, especially Saint Anthony the Abbot. He sought out places of solitude. There, leaving what was familiar and comfortable, he faced his own spirit, his demons, and embarked on a life of conversion that would lead him to the authentic truth, to the person of Christ.

The aspect of pilgrimage as a penitential journey was strongly present in monasteries of the medieval period. The Celtic monks embraced it as the consequence of the sin of the world. Columban took upon himself the sins of others and gave his life to saving people from the wrath of sin, and leading them to Christ. His life was focused on Christ and his pilgrimage was a journey to eternal life. He saw the penitential way as a means of reaching that destination.

Columban's vocation to the contemplative life was accompanied by a great desire to share the riches of the gospel with those who had not yet converted to Christ and his Kingdom. Living out this commitment led him to cross oceans, navigate rivers, hike over mountains and negotiate difficult terrain to meet peoples and kings in order to celebrate the presence of the risen Christ in their midst. He did not compromise on the Gospel message nor did he try to accommodate the teachings of Jesus to the likes and dislikes of his listeners. This often brought him into conflict with local kings and bishops and eventual led to his expulsion from the Burgundy region then known as Austrasia. Columban had respect for the terrain on which he journeyed. The pathways were sacred ground. He was walking in the footsteps of Christ,

whose presence was there long before him. He came to encounter Christ in the solitude of the forest, the sound of lapping water, the music of the wind, and the roar of the bear and the song of the birds. Tradition has it that it was a bear that brought him wood, and was, in turn, rewarded with wheaten cakes. He sang the psalms to the humming of the birds and gave comfort to the animals in wintertime. The power of the Creator was carved on the rocks and crevices of the caves where he found refuge to pray and be alone. God's presence in creation was always a living reality for him.

An essential aspect of pilgrimage for Columban was community. Though he spent many hours in solitude, he lived in community. He founded monastic communities and invited people to come, stay and live under the Rule. The Gaelic term for monastery, *mainistear*, is cognate to *muintear* meaning household, family or community. For Columban to be disciple of Christ was to live in community. Eucharist was at the heart of that community. This did not mean that the Eucharist was celebrated daily in Columban monasteries, but rather that the centre and source of communion for Christian people, and therefore for every monastic community, is the person of Christ present in the Eucharistic Bread and viaticum (food for the journey). Not only is the wanderer nourished by wheat and rice, but with the Bread of Life, the Bread of the Word, the Eucharistic Bread. Columban could spend many days fasting from bodily food, but never went without celebrating his communion with the Lord and with his brothers.

Following the footsteps of Saint Columban in the 21st century took us through towns and cities, shopping malls, farmer's markets, social housing schemes, built-up wealthy residential areas, dangerous highways, roads congested with traffic, open spaces, deserted hills and ancient pathways. Amid the crowd and noise of our surroundings we, like Columban, experienced moments of the sacred that gave us renewed energy to go back to our habitual place of work and mission, to continue on life's journey and pilgrimage.

Columban, in communion with all of God's Creation

Anybody who visits the sites of Columban's monasteries cannot but be struck by the beauty of their natural setting. Like other early Irish saints finding God in creation came naturally to Columban. Many legends grew up around him in Luxeuil. Squirrels and 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 relates how Columban once withdrew to the forest in order to fast and pray. The food ran out and all he and the young monk Chagnoald had to eat were crab apples. However, when Chagnoald went to collect the apples he found a hungry bear eating them. 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.

Jonas recalls another 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.

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.

On another 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. Jonas writes that Columban told the monks that he would not feed the chicks of the raven until the latter 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.

Columban and his monks clearly found God in the created world around them. In Columban's sermon on grace we find, "Seek no further concerning God; for those who wish to know the great depth (of God) must first learn about creation." Further on in the same sermon there is a sentence which could become the mantra for Creation Theology, *Intellige, si vis scire Creatorem, creaturam* (If you wish to know the Creator, learn about creatures.)

Centuries later St Thomas Aquinas wrote, "God 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 creatures so that, what was wanting to one in the manifestation of the divine goodness, might be supplied by another, ... and hence the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better, than any single creature whatsoever". (Summa, Part 1, 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. A flock of kalaw (hornbills) had forced this young eagle down on to Lake S'bu and its talons became entangled in the 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 the bird was stunning – its eyes, its beak and its front plumage. After the bird had been treated

by the vet, we released it back into the wild. I remember being struck by the power of its wings in flight.

While marvelling at the beauty of the eagle, I experienced incredible sadness at the thought that I and those watching were the last generation of humans which would see the Philippine eagle in the wild. We are living in the 6th largest extinction of life on earth since life began 3.8 billion years ago.

We have comprehensive data on about two million species, but there could be ten or even one hundred other species that we do not know. We could lose up to a third of or half the species on the planet - all of which mirror God in a particular way - over the next fifty years. May the memory of Columban cause us to prevent any further loss of God's wondrous creatures.



Columban, in touch with solitude and silence

A strong desire for union with God was the driving force of the life of St Columban. He believed that the risen Christ was present in him and in the world around him: and that Christ was the source of all the gifts he needed in life.

St Columban was heavily influenced by the spirituality of the Desert Fathers. They were determined not to succumb to the seductions of the secular world around them and committed themselves to the search for their true selves in the deserts of the Middle East. In Ireland we do not have deserts but we do have plenty of quiet lonely places which the Irish monks sought out. There are over 200 places in Ireland named Dysart (desert) which gives some indication of how widespread was the practice among early Irish monks of seeking out quiet places of solitude.

Solitude and silence were the prerequisites for this inner search which was driven by the belief that God dwelt at the deep core of their real selves. The Lives of St Anthony of Egypt and St Martin of Tours were well known in the Irish monasteries of the 5th and 6th centuries. The writings of St John Cassian were also standard documents in Irish monastic libraries. These books contained the wisdom of the Abbots from the desert which outlined the strict ascetic practices and prayer methods to be followed by those who sought the way to union with God in the heart of their true selves. The “Cave” is a strong motif running through the life of St Columban: from his early foundation in Eastern France to his final foundation in Bobbio we find that he regularly left his monastic community to spend time at prayer in caves some distance from his monastery.

He was a man dedicated to long periods of private and communal prayer. This commitment to periods of silent solitary meditation is reminiscent of Jesus’s own prayer pattern which was rigorously practiced by the desert monks. Here in the silence of his own heart Columban came in contact with the presence of God deep within him. The results of these times of deep communion with God are evident in

his writings: in particular his Sermon 12 and 13 are among some of the most mystical writings we have of any European monk. In Sermon 13 he writes: “how lovely is the fountain of living water, whose water fails not, springing up to eternal life. O Lord, you yourself are that Fountain ever and again to be desired, though ever and again to be imbibed. Ever give us, Lord Christ, this water, that it may be in us too a Fountain of water that lives and springs up to eternal life.”

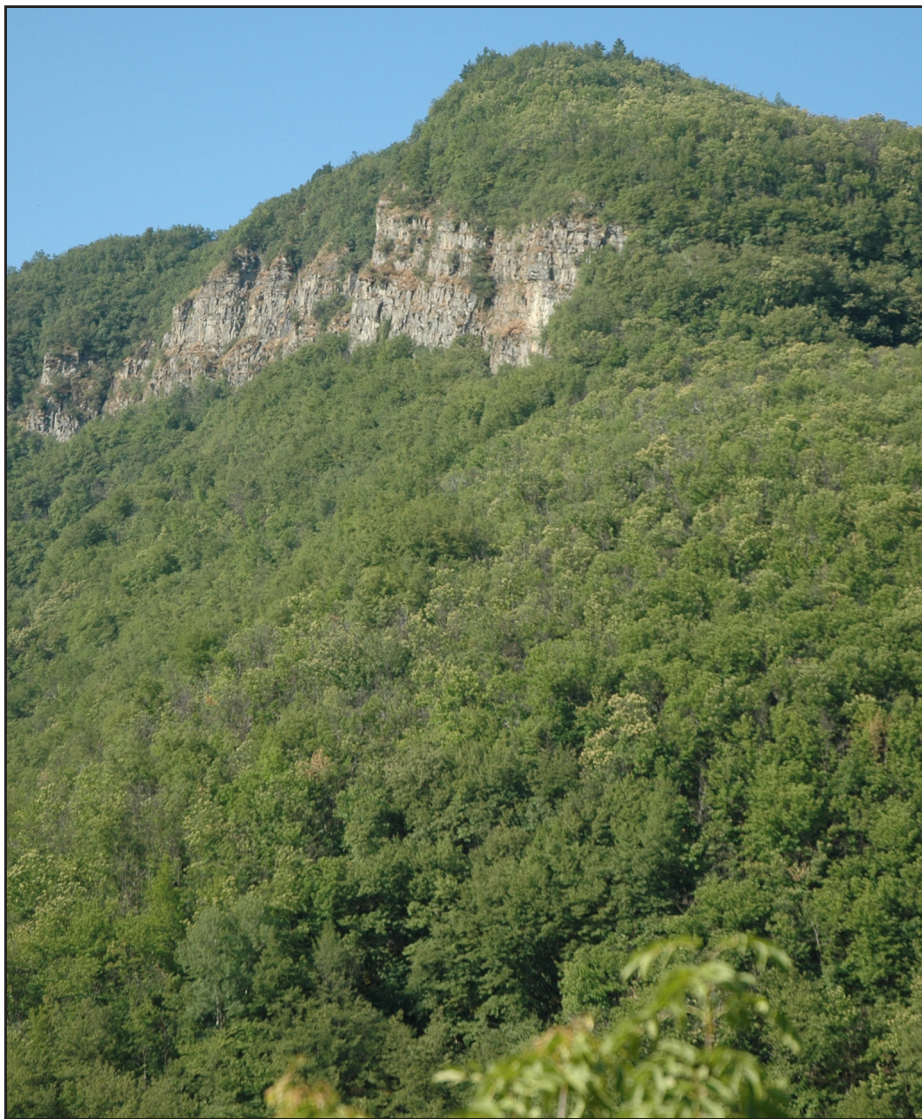
How to keep alive the awareness of their close relationship with Christ was the major priority of their spiritual life: the carrying of the sacred host in a pyx hung around the neck of each monk was a sign of this ongoing close connection with the risen Christ. The regular cycle of prayer, work and study ensured that their focus on their friendship with God was never far from their minds.

St Columban saw nature as his teacher about God. He encouraged his monks to look at the magnificent works of creation all round them in order to understand the nature of God. This link between his appreciation of the awesomeness of nature and his strong belief in God comes out strongly in his early sermons.

There was a pastoral and caring side to Columban which contrasts with the harsh and overly ascetic image that initially comes across from his writings. His Fourth Letter written to the members of his Luxeuil Community as he awaited deportation back to Ireland at the port of Nantes, offers us a rare but sincere insight into his caring attitude for his fellow monks. It also offers us a glimpse into the personal angst he endured as he exercised leadership in the same community. His pastoral sensitivity is evident in his rules for clergy and laity living outside the monastery. At that time in Western Christianity his introduction of private confession and penance was a welcome relief to many Christians in several parts of Europe.

His whole life was inspired by his belief that only God alone could answer the deep thirst in his heart. In Sermon 12 we glimpse something of this fundamental stance where he writes: “Lord grant me I pray in the

name of Jesus Christ your Son, my God, that Love which knows no fall, so that my lamp may feel the kindling touch and know no quenching, may burn for me and for others give light. Grant us Christ, to kindle our lamps that they may shine continually and receive perpetual light from You, The perpetual light, so that our darkness may be enlightened, and the world's darkness may be driven from us.”



IV. Legends around St Columban

Columban's youth

It has been conjectured that Columban was born about 543 on the borders of the modern counties of Carlow and Wexford. Jonas heard how the child's mother had dreamt before he was born that brilliant sun arose from her breast and illuminated the whole world. In his youth he must have sat at the feet of a learned teacher, for Jonas records that he studied grammar, rhetoric, geometry and the Sacred Scriptures, all of which formed part of the curriculum of the Irish monastic schools.

As he grew to manhood he was good-looking and girls were attracted to him. His *formae elegantia*, as Jonas calls it, appealed particularly to one young woman who tried to ensnare him. Columban fought the temptation with the gospel as his shield and sought the advice of an anchoress who lived in a nearby cell.

Columban then returned home for the last time, frightened but determined. He must break with the family circle for ever and dedicate himself completely to preparation for the life of self-sacrifice that lay ahead. He told his mother he was leaving home. She pleaded with him, burst into tears and threw herself across the threshold to block his exit. He asked her not to grieve, and in the first of several decisions, which to our way of thinking seem so hard and unrelenting, decisions which often appear cruel and hurtful to his friends, he stepped across her prostrate body and set off for the north, knowing they would never meet again. (*Tomas O Fiaich, Columbanus in his own words.*)

Columban and the Bear

One day in the solitude of the woods Columban was reading the scriptures and meditating on whether it would be better for the hermit to be attacked by wild beasts or to fall into the hands of brigands. Suddenly he was surrounded by twelve wolves but he still reflected that

wild beasts were preferable as they were without sin. He calmly recited the verse from the psalm: 'Come to my aid, O God, O Lord, make haste to help me,' and the wolves turned and wandered off. Next came a party of Suabian brigands but they too left him unhurt.

Finally, he found, four hundred feet above the valley of the Breuchin, the hermitage that would be his carcair. It was a cave scooped out of the rock. In it a bear had his den. 'Leave this place, never to return,' he ordered the bear, and with absolute docility the animal obeyed. Here Columban used to retire on the eves of Sundays and feast days to pray without interruption. His minister Domoal sometimes accompanied him to bring messages to and from the community. On one such occasion he complained about having to carry up water from the spring below in the valley. 'Son,' said Columban, 'make a hollow in the rock. Remember that the Lord drew water from the rock for the people of Israel ...' Columban prayed and Domoal struck the rock and water gushed forth, which, as Jonas records, 'usque in hodiernum diem manet ...' It is now St Columban's holy well on the hill above Annegray. (Tomas O Fiaich, *Columbanus in his own words*)

Columban and the raven

Of Columban's power over nature itself and the living creatures who heard his words, his monks were many a time the astonished witnesses. One evening as he was entering the refectory, the abbot had put down on a stone the working gloves which the priests wore out of respect for their anointed hands. At the end of the meal he perceived that one glove had disappeared and the monks murmured among themselves to know who had taken it. "Do not be disturbed," said the master, "the guilty one is the brother of that bird which left the Ark at the command of Noah and did not return. But I warn him that he will not find a single grain of corn to feed his brood unless within the hour he restores what he has stolen." Straightaway, with a swoop of its wings, a crow came down carrying the glove in its beak. It laid down its booty and waited to be forgiven before it would fly away.

Another day while walking in the forest of Fredemongiac Columban came upon the remains of a deer which a bear was beginning to devour. "Do not touch this body," cried the saint. "Its hide will make good footwear for us." Beast and birds of prey gave heed to his order and left the carcass untouched until it was removed and the deer-skin tanned to make excellent sandals. (Marguerite Marie Dubois , *Saint Columban*)

Columban and nature

'In the forest which encircled his home, the boy Columban read nature's lessons. He could tell the time by the sun; he could give the names of the winds and the colour of each wind too, for he knew that the north wind is black and the east wind purple. He watched closely the ways and habits of the animals he encountered. He tamed little foxes, and birds caught in the thickets, and even lizards from the walls. Resourceful and independent, he knew how to use the means nature laid to his hand. He could kindle a fire, hollow an earth-oven and roast wild apples between hot stones. He knew unerringly the berries which were edible and he was skilled to divine where water could be found trickling from the rocks. To slake his thirst, he would compound a drink made from berries, or drawing her milk from a trusting hind, drink it in a bark-covered cuac or bowl fashioned on the spot from a small log.

The boy returned from these long expeditions spent with a healthy fatigue, his appetite sharpened by the hunt. How he did justice then to the Irish cooking of that distant age, with its beaver and kid's meat, smoked salmon, goose eggs, vegetables and herbs of all kinds, porridge of oats or barley, and above all the bairghin, the oat-cake seasoned with honey!' (Marguerite Marie Dubois, *Saint Columban*)



