

# St. Columbkille

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Our parish patron saint, St. Columbkille, is not well known outside of Ireland and Scotland, yet he is one of the three great saints of Ireland and was the first missionary to Scotland. Born in 521 in Donegal, Ireland to a family connected to kings and princes, Columb was a man gifted with incredible talents. He wrote poetry and music, established churches and monasteries, preached the gospel and painted manuscripts. St. Adamnan, his biographer wrote of him: "He had the face of an angel; he was of an excellent nature, polished in speech, holy in deed, great in counsel . . . loving unto all." He is personally described as "A man well-formed, with powerful frame; his skin was white, his face broad and fair and radiant, lit up with large, gray, luminous eyes."



From an early age Columb seemed destined for the priesthood, his family sent him off to study under the future St. Finnian and at Clonard Abbey he surrendered his princely claims, became a monk and was ordained. He spent the next 15 years preaching and teaching in Ireland.

As was the custom in those days, he combined study and prayer with manual labor. By his own natural gifts as well as by the good fortune of his birth, he soon gained ascendancy as a monk of unusual distinction. By the time he was 25, he had founded no less than 27 Irish monasteries, including those at Derry, Durrow, and Kells, as well as some 40 churches. His work for the Church gained him the addition of "kille" to his name. Columb means "dove" in Gaelic and kille is "church", so he came to be known as the "church's dove". Columb lived, with every ounce of his energy, the commission of Jesus to "go and make disciples."



There is a famous tale about Columbkille that stands as one of the first copyright cases on record: Columbkille was so anxious to have a copy of Finnian's Psalter that he shut himself up at night in the church that contained it and secretly transcribed it by hand. He was discovered by a monk who watched him through the keyhole and reported it to his superior. Bibles and prayer books were so scarce in those days that Abbot Finnian claimed the copy,

refusing to allow it to leave the monastery. Columbkille refused to surrender it until he was obliged to do so, under protest, on Finnian's appeal to King Diarmaid, who said, "To every cow its calf," meaning to every book its copy.



While historically a bit unclear, an unfortunate period followed, during which, owing to Columbkille's protection of a refugee and his impassioned denunciation of an injustice by King Diarmaid, war broke out between the clans of Ireland, and Columbkille became an exile of his own accord. Filled with remorse on account of those who had been slain in battle and condemned by many of his own friends, he experienced a change of heart and an irresistible call to preach to those who had not heard the gospel. In 563, at the age of 42, he left Ireland with 12 companions and landed on an island now known as Iona. Here on this desolate rock, only three miles long and two miles wide, in the northern sea off the southwest corner of Mull, Scotland, he began his work; and, Iona became a center of Christian learning. It became the heart of Celtic Christianity and a potent factor in the conversion of the Picts, Scots, and Northern English. Monks from the monasteries established by Columbkille would later travel to mainland Europe and Christianize the Frank and Germanic tribes.

There are many miracles and incredible events recorded by St. Adamnan in his biography of St. Columbkille and they make for interesting reading. If you wish to believe it, he is one of the first people to encounter the Loch Ness monster. His memory remains a potent force in Celtic lands and his poetry and songs are still sung:

"Alone with none but Thee, my God,  
I journey on my way;  
what need I fear when Thou art near,  
O King of night and day?"

# *Life of St. Columb*

July 17, 2011

Dear Friends,

I recently began reading some ancient writings about the life of Columbkille. They were reprints of an 1800's addition of Adomnan's *Life of St. Columb* written around 690. The small book is filled with stories of the miracles that happened during Columb's life and other miracles that were attributed to him after his death. I bought the book in order to rewrite the brief history of St. Columbkille that appears on our website and in our printed material. The problem is going to be reducing the story down to something that will easily fit into those materials. I thought, over these next few summer Sundays, I would give you a sample of what I am learning about Columb.



Columb was the son of Feidlimid mac Fergus and his wife Aethnia. He was born about 521. His father was a close cousin of the rulers of Cenel Conaill of Donegal (the extreme northwest corner of Ireland), who were among the most powerful kings of sixth century Ireland. At the time, the country was controlled by a number of powerful dynasties divided between the north and south. Whichever king held sway over the dynasties at the moment would be called the king of Tara. Columb's family played an important role in the battles for control of Ireland, but it is uncertain whether Columb was involved in any of the battles. We do know that he left two years after the battle of Cul Drebene to live and work in Scotland; it was that battle which allowed the kings of the north to take control of the country – some would say thanks to Columb's prayers. Some say he left Ireland for Scotland because he was too emotionally involved in the politics and needed to leave so he could focus on the work of the Gospel.

Here is how Adomnan begins his story and tells about the name: "There was a man of reverend life and blessed memory, the father and founder of monasteries having the same name as Jonah the prophet; for though its sound is different in different languages, its significance is the same in all: what in Hebrew is Jonah, in the Latin is Columba (and in Gaelic is Colm or Columb and it means in all these languages, dove). This remarkable name was not given, it is believed, to the man of God, without a special providence. For according to the inspired record of the Gospel, the Holy Ghost is known to have descended on the only begotten Son of the Eternal Father, in the form of that little bird called the dove; and hence, very frequently in the sacred scriptures the dove is known to designate in a mystical sense the Holy Ghost. Hence, also our Savior, in his Gospel has ordered his disciples to preserve the simplicity of the dove, for the dove is a simple and innocent bird.



By that name therefore, it was meet that the simple and innocent man should be called, who gave the Holy Ghost a dwelling place in his dove-like affections...from his boyhood he had been instructed in the love of Christ, and by the grace of God, and his zeal for wisdom had so preserved the integrity of his body and purity of his soul, that though dwelling on earth, he lived like the saints in heaven. He could never spend even one hour without study or prayer or writing or other holy occupation."

So begins the story. Looking forward to the highlights.

Peace,

Fr. Damian

## ***Life of St. Columb—Books***

July 24, 2011

Dear Friends,

In the days before the printing press, the only way to get a book was to make a copy – by hand or to have another person make a copy for you. So, living in the 500's, the only way for St. Columbkille to have a book was to do the slow and meticulous work of copying the text. No Amazon or local bookstore handy. In Adomnan's life of Colum Cille, he says that Colum placed the copying of texts as important as reading and praying. I am thankful that I live in the age of computers. It was bad enough living in the age of typewriters and before copy machines, but I cannot imagine what it must have been like to create each book by hand. There are several stories from the life of Colum that are worth retelling and parents can probably relate to them as well:

One day Colum was sitting by the fire in the monastery when he saw a monk named Luigbe reading a book. "Take care, my son," he said, "take care. For I think that the book you are studying is going to fall into a vessel of water (sound familiar parents)." Colum's concern was well-founded for when the young man got up from reading, "he casually tucked the book under his arm and let it slip and fall into a bucket of water." Adomnan thinks this is evidence of the saint's ability to see the future, but I think it was evidence of how well he understood the monks in his community, just like parents can predict when milk will spill at the table! Of course, all the parents who can predict the spilling of milk may be saints too.

Another day, Colum was sitting in his writing hut when he heard a man shouting from the other side of the Sound of Iona, as was commonly done, to announce his arrival on the island. Colum says, "The man who is shouting across the sound is too careless to watch what he is doing. Today he will tip over my little horn and spill the ink." Colum's helper heard what he said and so stationed himself at the door to guard the ink and keep the man at a



distance, but he happened to be doing something else when the visitor arrived. "As he went forward to kiss the saint, he upset the horn with the edge of his garment and spilt the ink." Adomnan does not say if Columb got angry or yelled at the guy. Maybe Columb realized that it was the guy's excitement at meeting Columb that caused him to spill the ink. Parents, ever have your children's friends shouting outside the house and know that when that child gets inside they are sure to tip over something? Holiness or spiritual insight? Perhaps, a bit of both?

"One day Baithene came to Columb and said, "I need one of the brethren to help me go through the text of the psalter I have copied and correct any mistakes." The saint said to him, "Why do you bring this trouble on us when there is no need? For in your copy of the psalter there is no mistake – neither one letter too many nor one too few – except that in one place the letter "I" is missing." So it was. Having gone through the whole psalter, it was found to be exactly as the saint predicted." Apparently one of the gifts of St. Columb was the grace of an internal spell check. Of course parents may know that certain of their children rarely make a mistake and they could harbor a guess that all is well...

There are lots of other stories about his commitment to copying texts so that others could read them. Such was his commitment that even as an old man and on the night of his death he was copying texts. The last thing he copied was from Psalm 34, "those who seek the Lord lack no good thing." Then he laid down his pen and said, "Here at the end of the page I must stop. Let Baithene write what follows..."

Of course, St. Columbkille is the patron saint of...bookbinders.

Peace,

Fr. Damian



# ***Life of St. Columb—Poems***

July 31, 2011

Dear Friends,

We continue learning about our patron saint this summer. St. Columbkille was not only a scribe, a copier of ancient texts, but he was also a poet and writer of hymns. He is one of the first Irish poets; beginning a fine and long tradition in the land that has known many great writers. There are poems and prayers associated with Patrick, the more ancient and famous Irish saint, but most likely these were written by others and just attributed to Patrick. Columb, on the other hand, did write poems and hymns. Most likely he wrote them for his monks at Iona and the other monasteries he established for use in prayer in the mornings and evenings. He was described as possessing the gift of "second sight." This meant that he was able to see through the surface of things to the deeper, divine meanings inscribed there. Those who recorded his life shortly after he died say that he wrote over 300 books, but only a couple of them survived. Not much of his poetry remains and what does is written in a combination of the ancient Irish language and Latin. Some of his work is available today loosely translated and appearing in hymnals in Ireland and England.

Here are two of his more famous surviving poem/hymns:

## **In te Christe credentium**

Have mercy, Christ, have mercy  
On all that trust in thee,  
For thou art God in glory  
To all eternity.

O God, make speed to save us  
In life's abounding throes:  
O God, make haste to help us

## **Alone with none but thee, my God**

Alone with none but thee, my God,  
I journey on my way.  
What need I fear when thou art near,  
O King of night and day?  
More safe am I within thy hand than if a  
host should round me stand.

My destined time is known to thee,  
and death will keep his hour;



In all our weary woes.

O God, thou art the Father  
Of all that have believed:  
From whom all hosts of angels  
Have life and power received.

Christ is the world's redeemer,  
The lover of the pure,  
The font of heavenly wisdom,  
Our trust and hope secure.  
The armor of his soldiers,  
The Lord of earth and sky;  
Our health while we are living,  
Our life when we shall die.  
Alone With None but Thee

did warriors strong around me throng,  
they could not stay his power:  
no walls of stone can man defend when  
thou thy messenger dost send.

My life I yield to thy decree,  
and bow to thy control  
in peaceful calm, for from thine arm  
no power can wrest my soul.  
Could earthly omens e'er appal  
a man that heeds the heavenly call!

The child of God can fear no ill,  
his chosen dread no foe;  
we leave our fate with thee, and wait  
thy bidding when to go.  
'Tis not from chance our comfort springs.  
thou art our trust, O King of kings.

From these two poems you can get a sense of talent Columba possessed and some of the impact he had on the culture of his day. Amazingly, he could establish monasteries through Scotland and still have time to write songs and poetry. Truly, he was a gifted man of God. St. Columbkille is the patron saint of poets. saint of poets.

Peace,

Fr. Damian



# ***Life of St. Columb—Rules***

August 14, 2011

Dear Friends,

When St. Columb Cille was young, he tended to be demanding of a rigid standard of asceticism from himself and from his followers. In 563, he sailed away with 12 other monks, in a small wicker boat covered with leather, landing at Iona, a tiny island about 80 miles from Ireland. The island was given to him by King Conall of Dalriada, another relative, and he immediately began the foundation for his monastery, which was to become not only the center of Celtic evangelization, but also the burial place of all the Scottish kings until the 11th century and an example of monastic devotion.

From Iona he evangelized both the Scots and the Northern Picts. In his later years, Columb found the gift of gentleness, showing affection to others and even to animals. His monastic rule, based upon his experience of trying to live and teach others the way of Christ, was followed until the Rule of Saint Benedict, which was written about the same time, became the norm throughout most of Europe. Even though we are not monks, some of these “rules” could help us live our lives better.

## **The Rule of St. Columb Cille:**

- Be alone in a separate place near a chief city, if thy conscience is not prepared to be in common with the crowd.
- Be always naked in imitation of Christ and the Evangelists.
- Whatsoever little or much thou possesseth of anything, whether clothing, or food, or drink, let it be at the command of the senior and at his disposal, for it is not befitting a religious to have any distinction of property with his own free brother.
- Let a fast place, with one door, enclose thee.



- A few religious men to converse with thee of God and his Testament; to visit thee on days of solemnity; to strengthen thee in the Testaments of God, and the narratives of the Scriptures.
- A person too who would talk with thee in idle words, or of the world; or who murmurs at what he cannot remedy or prevent, but who would distress thee more should he be a tattler between friends and foes, thou shalt not admit him to thee, but at once give him thy benediction should he deserve it.
- Let thy servant be a discreet, religious, not tale-telling man, who is to attend continually on thee, with moderate labor of course, but always ready.
- Yield submission to every rule that is of devotion.
- A mind prepared for red martyrdom.
- A mind fortified and steadfast for white martyrdom.
- Forgiveness from the heart of every one.
- Constant prayers for those who trouble thee.
- Fervour in singing the office for the dead, as if every faithful dead was a particular friend of thine.
- Hymns for souls to be sung standing.
- Let thy vigils be constant from eve to eve, under the direction of another person.
- Three labors in the day: prayers, work, and reading.
- The work to be divided into three parts, thine own work, and the work of thy place, as regards its real wants; secondly, thy share of the brethen's [work]; lastly, to help the neighbours, by instruction or writing, or sewing garments, or whatever labour they may be in want. As the Lord says, "You shall not appear before me empty."

- Everything in its proper order; for no one is crowned except he who has striven lawfully.
- Follow alms-giving before all things.
- Take not of food till thou art hungry.
- Sleep not till thou feelest desire.
- Speak not except on business.
- Every increase which comes to thee in lawful meals, or in wearing apparel, give it for pity to the brethren that want it, or to the poor in like manner.
- The love of God with all thy heart and all thy strength; The love of thy neighbour as thyself
- Abide in the Testament of God throughout all times.
- Thy measure of prayer shall be until thy tears come;  
Or thy measure of work of labour till thy tears come;  
Or thy measure of thy work of labour, or of thy genuflexions,  
until thy perspiration often comes, if thy tears are not free.

Peace,

Fr. Damian

# ***Life of St. Columb—Pilgrim***

August 14, 2011

Dear Friends,

Our patron, Saint Columbkille, was a “man on the move.” Yes, he was a man of prayer, a man dedicated to copying the scriptures so that others could read them, a man who wrote poetry and songs, but he was also a man who was constantly moving on to establish other churches and monasteries. Like many of us, he was not necessarily thrilled to move on to a new place. In a poem he wrote when he left Ireland to begin his work in Scotland, he writes, “There is a grey eye that will not look back upon Ireland: it shall never see again the men of Ireland nor her women. I stretch my glance across the brine, from the firm oaken planks: many are the tears of my bright soft grey eye as I look back upon Erin.”

Sad though he was, Columbkille knew that for every pilgrim, God was their country of origin, their way and their ultimate destination. In the difficulties coming their way, the pilgrim simply joined his or her trials to those of Christ and, in doing so, brought the power of God's love to bear on the challenge at hand.

Columbkille wrote a prayer for his monks to say as they went on their pilgrim way:

*The path I walk, Christ walks it.  
May the land in which I am be without sorrow.  
May the Trinity protect me wherever I stay,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
Bright angels walk with me – dear presence –  
In every dealing  
May I arrive at every place, may I return home:  
May the way in which I spend be without loss.  
May every path before me be smooth,  
Man, woman, and child welcome me.*

*A truly good journey!  
Well does the fair Lord show us a course, a path.*

Can you sense in this very ancient prayer by Columbkille the popular Irish blessing, "May the road rise up to meet you"...? This prayer of Columbkille was said by his monks at the beginning and end of the day and before embarking on any journey no matter how long or short. It was a good reminder to them to have Christ as their companion on the road and that they should be as Christ to others when they meet them on the way.

Columbkille lived this sense of pilgrimage throughout his life so he could daily prepare for his final pilgrimage to see the face of God. His biographer, Adamnan, tells of a moment near the end of Columbkille's life, which expresses his desire for the final journey: "One day his holy face was suddenly lit up with marvelous blissful joy, and he raised his eyes to heaven as he was filled with incomparable gladness. But hardly a moment later that sweet rejoicing had turned to sadness. Two monks were with him and asked the reason for this quick change of mood.

Columbkille replied, "Today is the thirtieth anniversary since I came to live in pilgrimage in Britain. A long time ago, I earnestly asked the Lord that he would release me from this dwelling and call me straightaway to the heavenly kingdom. That is why I was glad...for I saw the angels sent from the throne on high to lead my soul from this body. But see, now they are suddenly delayed, and wait standing on a rock on the other side of the strait, most anxious to come near me and deliver me...though the Lord had granted what I desired with all my strength, that I might die on this day and go to him, none the less he has answered the prayers of the churches...because of their prayers, and against my ardent wish, God has been pleased to add four more years to my life. This sad delay was justly the cause of the grief you witnessed."

It is possible to be a pilgrim without ever having to do the physical journey. For the physical journey was simply an expression of the real interior journey. The purpose of the interior journey is not to know about God, but to know God, not to simply understand God, but to discover and enjoy God. St. Columbkille at an early age

came to know God, and this relationship gave him the courage and the joy to journey to other lands and invite others into the same experience of knowing God.

Peace,

Fr. Damian