

## St. Columba

June 9<sup>th</sup>

Columba, also known as Colmcille, was an athlete, scribe, poet, mystic, 'statesman' and 'politician'. His strength of character, empowered by God's Spirit, enabled him to give expression to his variety of gifts and capabilities.

Columba was born into the O'Neill royal family, it is thought, on 7<sup>th</sup> Dec 521 in Gartan, Co Donegal. As a youth he was sent to Finnian in Moville, Co Down for Christian instruction. From these early days, he developed a great love for the Psalter, the Book of Psalms. At a later point he went to Clonard, Co Meath where he was tutored by another Finnian. In time he travelled around the country and founded many monasteries. Monastic communities associated with Columba in Ireland are Derry, Durrow, Kells, Swords, Lambay Island and Drumcliff. The illuminated Gospel Books, the Books of Durrow and Kells both came from Columban monasteries and are now housed in Trinity College, Dublin. They were written and illuminated many years after Columba's death. However, the Books of Durrow and Kells were a development of the work of Columba in the Cathach Psalter, which is preserved in the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin.

One of the best known stories about Columba is his secret copying of Finnian's Book of Psalms. When Finnian demanded the copy, claiming it as his, Columba refused. The matter was brought to the High King who ruled 'to every cow its calf, to every book its copy'. Tradition has it that Columba was enraged and incited his kinsfolk to battle. The Battle of Cúl Dremhne was fought in 561 and many thousands were killed. We are told that Columba was full of remorse and wanted to repent. 'White martyrdom' (the leaving of all for Christ) was popular at the time and it seems that was what motivated Columba to leave his family and homeland. In Adomnán's *Vita Columbae, Life of Columba* it is recorded that *two years after the Battle of Cúl Dremhne, Columba set forth as a pilgrim for Christ*. In 563, Columba and twelve companions sailed from Lough Foyle heading towards Scotland and on the eve of Pentecost landed in Iona. They set up a monastic community on the east side of the island which in time was to effect the development of Christianity in Scotland and North East England. When writing Columba's life story Adomnán was interested in portraying and illustrating the holiness of Columba and did so by dividing the *Vita Columbae* into Prophecies, Miracles and Visions. Columba and his companions continued to live their life of prayer, reading, writing and farming. It is said that the Books of Kells was mostly written and illuminated in Iona before being brought to Kells for safe-keeping after the Viking raids. Columba and other monks evangelised many areas of Scotland and later the monastery of Lindisfarne in North East England was founded from Iona. In 575, Columba attended a Convention at Druim Ceat, Limavady, Co Derry in which he was the Reconciler in a dispute between King Aed of Dalriada, Ireland and King Aidan of Dalriada, Scotland.

Columba died on the feast of Pentecost 9<sup>th</sup> June 597, in Iona, mourned deeply by his community while it is said that their white horse shed tears at his passing.

Today, devotion to Columba is alive and bearing much fruit. A very vibrant lay community called the Columba Community was founded by Fr Neal Carlin in Derry. This community has been working for peace and reconciliation and has achieved so much in this city which suffered extensively during 'The Troubles'. Their ministry is extensive and includes St Anthony's Retreat and Pilgrim Garden, Whiteoaks Rehabilitation Centre, an Organic Farm, Iosias Centre (Conference Centre) and Celtic Peace Garden, in Donegal as well as Columba House which includes a Blessed Sacrament Chapel and Youth Project, in Derry city.

Today, in Iona, the Abbey is restored and attracts millions of pilgrims and visitors. A programme of Retreats and Spirituality weeks are held there each year and pilgrimages are led throughout the island, stopping and reflecting at significant places in the life of Columba. These events are organised by the Iona Community which was founded by Rev George MacLeod in 1938 and has a world-wide membership with different levels of belonging.

There is a prophecy attributed to Columba which says *'Iona of my heart, Iona of my love, Instead of monks voices shall be the lowing of cattle; but ere the world come to an end, Iona shall be as it were'*.

By looking at the life of Columba we can see how much is possible when the Spirit of God is allowed to work in a person's life. Perhaps we might let Columba be a role model for us in our troubled world of today.

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