

## **St Columbanus (Columban)**

### **Feast Day**

**November 23<sup>rd</sup>**

The Jubilee year commemorating St Columbanus began on 11<sup>th</sup> October 2014 and ended on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2015. It was 1,400 years since the life and death of this remarkable man. The year began with Mass in St John Lateran Basilica in Rome attended by 2000 people from all over Europe. Throughout the year pilgrims arrived at Luxeuil, Annegray and Fontaine in France, at Bregenz in Austria, and at Bobbio in Northern Italy, all places strongly associated with Columbanus. Former President of Ireland, Mary McAleese had her tracing the footsteps of St Columbanus documented in 'Mary McAleese and The Man Who Saved Europe'. She presented St Columbanus, an Irishman and European, as a unifying figure who promoted the ideal of working together. Columbanus lived the austere life of a monk, travelled through hundreds of kilometres of rough terrain and yet was able to negotiate with local leaders, kings and popes.

It is believed that Columbanus was born about the year 543 on the present day border between Carlow and Wexford. His early education was in Cleenish Island in Lough Derg. He felt called to live the monastic way of life. He returned home to tell his family that he would be leaving them. It was a time of heart break for his mother but Columbanus felt he had to make this hard decision. It was to Bangor in the modern Co Down that Columbanus went to pursue his monastic vocation. Comgall, who was the founder of Bangor, was one of the great monastic founders of 6<sup>th</sup> century Ireland. The monks lived in small cells made of wattle or wood. Near the living quarters of the monks were the community buildings, church, library, dining room, and guest house. Prayer, study and labour were the order of the day. Bangor was known for its austerity and creativity. One of the earliest Irish manuscripts, the Antiphony of Bangor was written there. After leading this form of life for many years Columbanus felt the inner call to be 'a pilgrim for Christ'. His Abbot was not happy to let him go from the monastery but in time realised that it was God who was calling Columbanus to go forth.

Columbanus set sail from Bangor with twelve companions. It would seem that they spent some time in southern Britain and in Brittany as there are townlands and holy wells named in honour of Columbanus in these places. However, it was in Eastern Gaul (France) that they settled and eventually formed three monastic communities, Annegray, Luxeuil and Fontaine. Columbanus spent about 20 years in Luxeuil. The locals were attracted to the prayerful and austere life-style of the monks as well as to scholarship. The monastic school at Luxeuil was widely known and pupils came from all over the Frankish and Burgundian kingdoms. (In July 1950 an International Congress was held in Luxeuil to commemorate 1,400 years of the birth of Columbanus. It was attended by 20,000 people including representatives of Church and State).

In the meantime, Columbanus had run into difficulties with the Authorities and the time had come to move on. After much travelling the community settled in Bregenz. However, for these 'pilgrims for Christ' the journey had not ended there. Columbanus desired to cross the Alps. Many of his companions were old and tired and could not make the journey so after sad farewells, especially to Gall, Columbanus and those brave enough to go with him set off on the treacherous journey across the Alps. Eventually they arrived at Milan where the King of the Lombards offered land to Columbanus at Bobbio. By now in his seventies, Columbanus set about the task of building the new monastery. Bobbio grew to be one of the most revered monasteries founded by the Irish monks. There Columbanus was to spend his last years. He died on the 23<sup>rd</sup> November 615.

We remember Columbanus for his gifts of leadership, his learning and piety. His Letters, Sermons, Rules and Poems show forth the strength of this man of God. In the year 2015, the Irish Government and the Vatican issued a stamp to commemorate the holiness and influence of Columbanus throughout Europe.

'Lord, grant me, I pray you, in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, my God, the love that does not fail, so that my lamp may be always lighted, never extinguished, and may burn for me and give light to others'. *Columbanus Sermon. X11.*

Helen Grealy

