

TRUTH TRIUMPHANT: CHAPTER 13

Columbanus and the Church In Europe

Columbanus proved to be the great avant-courier of the rebirth of civilization in Europe. During the five hundred years that followed there was hardly a generation that did not see the vineyards crowded with Irish laborers, that did not hear the voice of some authoritative personality of the Gael ringing in the ears of princes and peoples.¹

AS THE tide of Celtic missionary work rolled on, it brought forth a leader who did more for the reconversion of Europe than anyone who followed him. Columbanus (some write his name Columban) was the apostle to Europe submerged by the influence of Clovis and the northern pagans. Patrick took the ancient pagan civilization of Ireland and forged it into a crusading Christianity; Columba through his college at Iona lifted Scotland from darkness to a leadership of light; but Columbanus was to impress the teachings of Christ on France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy.

The Holy Spirit bestowed upon Columbanus many spiritual gifts as he surrendered his heart to the Savior. With his training came an inescapable burden to carry the gospel which he learned to the Continent in its then chaotic condition.

The environment into which Columbanus (A.D. 543-615) was born was the finest there was anywhere in the West. The overflowing of the Teutonic invasions which had torn down the structure of Roman civilizations in Europe had left Ireland and Scotland untouched. There the best in Celtic, Roman, and Christian culture had been preserved, organized, and nurtured by Patrick, Columba, and a generation of enthusiastic scholars. Columbanus breathed this atmosphere, and by masterly self-discipline was, like Moses in the court of Pharaoh or Paul in the seminaries of the Pharisees, "learned in all the wisdom"(Acts 7:22.) of his day. He was tall, sinewy, and handsome. "His fine figure and his splendid color," says his biographer Jonas, "aroused against him the lust of lascivious maidens."²

Columbanus spent several years in study in the halls of learning at Bangor. Here he devotedly studied the Scriptures. The music of sacred song charmed his soul, and he perfected his gift of writing poetry. From Bangor he could look across the waters of the Irish Channel to England which was still in the grip of the pagan Anglo-Saxons. Northward he could behold the marvelous transformations wrought in Scotland by Columba. Farther to the east lay France in wretched moral condition. The apostolic spirit burned within Columbanus as he heard the stories of the miserable state of Gaul, and he decided to go forth to evangelize France in the missionary spirit of Celtic Christianity.

Missionary Endeavors in France

The arrival of Columbanus in Gaul brought the dawn of a new day for Europe. In the many centers of civilization which he and his followers created, he implanted the spirit of Christianity in the hearts of the people.³ The power of the gospel continued for centuries in spite of papal supremacy.⁴ In fact, the Church of Rome, in order to save its prestige, was compelled to assail the Columban order and Rule, and to favor the Benedictine. The best in European civilization still owes its rebuilding to Columbanus, his companions, and his followers; other European evangelicals co-operated.⁵

For years before the coming of Columbanus there had been savage, fratricidal warfare among the descendants of Clovis. As for the populace, they had a form of religion but no conception of true piety; and with no solid guiding principles, they were like the heathen. Immorality and degradation abounded. Columbanus and his associates reckoned not on political might, but on the power of the love of God in their hearts to convince the population. They relied upon the Holy Spirit in noble lives to cause the masses to hunger and thirst after righteousness.

The learning of Columbanus had won him high favor with the reigning descendants of Clovis. King Guntram hailed his arrival with joy. Clarence W. Bispham says: "Here are Irish missionaries in new surroundings. Before this they were in strife with the heathen. Now they begin to battle against a corrupt and debased Christianity."⁶ Or, as Jonas, the biographer of Columbanus who learned from his associates the facts of his life, wrote: "The creed alone remained. But the remedy of repentance and the love of mortifying the lusts of the flesh were to be found only in a few."⁷ So King Guntram besought him to settle in his realm, saying: "If you wish to take the cross of Christ and follow Him, seek the quiet of a retreat. Only be careful, for the increase of your own reward and our spiritual good, to remain in our kingdom and not to go to neighboring peoples." The missionaries accepted the offer of an old, half-mined fort at Anagrates (the present Anegray), which dated from Roman days, as the site for their first mission.

The First Three Centers in France

The beginnings at Anagrates in the wilderness of the Vosges were difficult. While the buildings were being erected and before the first fruits of the ground could appear, the Irish missionaries knew what suffering meant. Food at times was so scarce that they lived on berries, on the bark of trees, and on whatever they could find on the ground. On one occasion King Guntram, hearing of their distress, commanded food to be brought to them. Yet they stood faithfully at their post of duty. All they asked was an opportunity for manual labor and the solitude in which to study the Scriptures. These tall, powerful men dressed in their long, coarse gowns, their books slung over their shoulders in leather satchels, and carrying staves in their hands, must have made a deep impression on the native population. Of their exemplary life and saving example, Jonas again writes:

Modesty and sobriety, gentleness and mildness shone forth in them all. The evils of sloth and of unruly tempers were expelled. Pride and haughtiness were expiated by severe punishments. Scorn and envy were driven out by faithful diligence. So great was the strength of their patience, love, and mildness that no one could doubt that the God of mercy dwelt among them.⁸

At times Columbanus would retire apart and live for days by himself. He had no companion but the Bible which he no doubt had transcribed by his own hand at Bangor. He trusted God for food and for care against the elements. He was looked upon as a prince over the wild beasts. From these retreats he came forth like the prophets of old, strengthened and refreshed for his labors.

Wide-spreading influence quickly came to the new mission. The youth of the land, many of whom were from noble families, flocked to the young training center. It was not now necessary to travel abroad to attend the colleges of the Emerald Isle. Here was a faculty of thirteen Irish teachers in their own land, bringing the sanctity, the learning, and the manual skill of their famous Celtic seminaries. A hundred years earlier Clovis had made a political union with the Papacy in order to gain the support of the eastern emperor; but this had turned out to be a detriment, not a stimulant. And no wonder, for in the

days of Columbanus the pope of Rome was Gregory I, called Gregory the Great, well known as an enemy of classical learning.⁹ Many authorities upbraid this pontiff because he drove the mathematicians out of Rome, proscribed Greek, and denounced learning.¹⁰

Anagrates soon became too small. The number of candidates for admission into the new settlement increased greatly. The influence of Columbanus became widespread. The sincerity and consecration of the Irish camp was so superior to anything of that nature on the Continent that it was like introducing a new religion. The inhabitants of storm-swept Europe turned their eyes to the place whence came inspiring reports, and doors of opportunity were opened to the evangelists. This determined Columbanus to open another center for the spread of the gospel.

He met with the hearty co-operation of King Guntram. The ruler of Burgundy gladly granted them a site at Luxeuil, situated at the foot of the Vosges mountains, where the forests of the mountains had invaded the plain. Here were the ruins of old Roman villas, overgrown by the tangled underbrush. The wilderness abounded in bears, wolves, foxes, and other wild life. But under the sturdy blows of these missionaries of the Church in the Wilderness all this changed. The forest was felled and the land was cleared. The plowshares broke up the fallow ground, and soon fields of waving grain were seen. As accommodations were provided, the noble youth of the land flocked to Columbanus as postulants in the new brotherhood. Luxeuil was destined to become the mother of numerous centers of civilization in Europe.¹¹ As these missionaries worked, they would reply to questions: "We be Irish, dwelling at the very ends of the earth. We be men, who receive naught but the doctrine of the apostles and evangelists."

Again there were rapid growth and crowded conditions at Luxeuil as there had been at Anagrates. Columbanus founded a third training center at Fontaines, so named by him because of the warm medicinal springs issuing from the ground. Located within a radius of about twenty miles, these three settlements formed the evangelical center of the work of the Church of the Wilderness in France. Everywhere the people rallied around them. Fresh ideas of truth triumphant spread as if on the wings of the wind. There developed other leaders who trained recruits who would repeat their exploits. Also from Ireland came a continual stream of trained leaders and teachers to augment the first evangelists.¹² Thus the word of God grew mightily. Soon, however, danger of a deadly nature raised its head to threaten the growth of the church.

The Struggle With the Bishops of Rome

In Scotland and England the Irish missionaries were grappling with stark heathenism. On the Continent they were facing a more difficult situation. The gulf between the Celtic Church and the Church of Rome was greater than that between Irish Christianity and paganism. In fact, this gulf was far greater than that between Protestantism and Romanism in the days of Luther. Paganism did not have access to the culture and truth which the Papacy claimed. It was not supported, as was the Papacy, by the military machine of the Roman Empire of the East, created by Belisarius, the greatest fighting genius of the age. The union of a Christian church with the state is always more dangerous to liberty than the union of paganism with the state. The opposition of the bishops of Rome to the work of Columbanus, therefore, meant a straggle between liberty and despotism.

The condition of the Papacy in this region has thus been described by a modern historian:

The church among the Franks and Germans was in a wretched condition. Many of the church lands were in the hands of laymen. There was little or no discipline, and no control exercised over the clergy. Each priest did what was right in his own eyes. There were, at this time, many vagabond priests and monks wandering about over the country, obtaining a precarious living by imposing upon the people.¹³

Concerning the church in the era of Justinian, the same historians of the medieval period declare: "The Christianity of that day was utterly degraded, and the Christians differed very little from the other peoples about them. Mohammedanism was in part a revolt against this degradation."¹⁴

The priests were jealous of the influence and growth of the Celtic missions. Back of it all, however, lay their resentment at the rebuke given by Columbanus to their questionable lives. Therefore, they summoned the Irish leader in 602 to answer before a synod of Gaulish bishops. He refused to appear, but for his defense he sent an epistle begging them to refrain from interfering. The Roman Catholic historian John Healy, writes thus of the affair:

Remonstrance was useless; they adhered tenaciously to their country's usages. Nothing could convince them that what St. Patrick and the saints of Ireland had handed down to them could by any possibility be wrong. They only wanted to be let alone. They did not desire to impose their usages on others. Why should others impose their usages on them? They had a right to be allowed to live in peace in their wilderness, for they injured no man, and they prayed for all.

Thus it was that Columbanus reasoned, or rather remonstrated with a synod of French bishops that objected to his practices. His letters to them and to Pope Gregory the Great on the subject of this paschal question are still extant, but he cannot be justified in some of the expressions which he uses. He tells the bishops in effect in one place that they would be better employed in enforcing canonical discipline amongst their own clergy, than in discussing the paschal question with him and his monks. Yet here and there he speaks not only with force and freedom, but also with true humility and genuine eloquence. He implores the prelates in the most solemn language to let him and his brethren live in peace and charity in the heart of their silent woods, beside the bones of their seventeen brothers who were dead.¹⁵

Here is an incident by which one may contrast the spirit of the two churches. One needs only to compare the letter of Columbanus with the haughty treatment of Dinooth of Celtic Wales by Augustine. On this point Clarence W. Bispham writes:

Columban's answer is in splendid contrast to Augustine's unfortunate utterance, through which he has been prophetically responsible for certain deeds of blood. In conclusion, we must recognize that the Bangor Rule of Life, though most severe, produced a meekness of character in the fiery Keltic nature that is amazing, and is in wonderful contrast to the more moderate Benedictine Rule which produced the arrogance of St. Augustine.¹⁶

Columbanus and Queen Brunhilda

If there ever was another Jezebel, it was Brunhilda, wife of King Sigebert of Austrasia, brother of Guntram and persecutor of Columbanus. After murdering her husband in 575, she charmed the son of his brother, Chilperic, king of Neustria. Through infatuation the lad married her. Later she led her grandson, Theuderich II, king of Burgundy, into profligate life. Theuderich had great respect for

Columbanus, and for some years protected and defended him even while the Irish missionary was remonstrating with him and his dissolute grandmother for their evil ways. For fear that Theuderich would espouse a queen who would displace her, Brunhilda plotted to keep him in a life of vice.

When the Celtic apostle rebuked her for the iniquitous life of the court, she turned on him in fury; and from that time began continued persecution of the evangelical colleges founded by Columbanus. About ten years previous to this, Augustine, the monk sent to convert England, had brought a letter of Introduction to Brunhilda from the pope.¹⁷ Of Brunhilda's affiliations with the religious enemies of the Celtic Church, historians write: "Brunhilda seems to have been, according to the ideas of her time, a religious woman. She built churches, monasteries, and hospitals, and was a friend of some of the leading churchmen of her day."¹⁸ Since the queen-dowager and the Roman Catholic bishops were hostile to Columbanus, she urged them to attack the Celtic faith and to abolish his system of education.

Columbanus in Exile

By this time the fame of Columbanus had greatly increased in all the cities and provinces of France and Germany, so much so that he was highly venerated and celebrated. Even the soldiers of the king on various occasions either hesitated to execute the royal order for his banishment, or executed it so loosely that Columbanus could escape back to Luxeuil. Because he feared vengeance on his associates, the old scholar decided to depart. He first made his way with certain companions to the Loire River, which it seems he followed, intending to set sail from the port of Nantes for Ireland.

The story of his movements reads not like a departure in exile, but like a march of conquest. He did not sail from Nantes, however, but went to Soissons, the capital of Clotaire II, king of Neustria. There his position was similar to prime minister, if not one of royal power. Clotaire consulted him on all important questions of state and followed his advice, but Columbanus had a yet greater work to do. He hoped to plant new centers in Germany, Switzerland, and Italy.

As Columbanus had been honored by Clotaire II, king of Neustria, which country later expanded and became France, so was he royally treated by Theodebert, king of that Austrasia, which country later would take in portions of the territory that is now Germany. While on his way to Theodebert, he stopped at Meaux, where he was entertained by a prominent citizen, a friend of Theodebert. His godly life influenced the daughter of his host to dedicate her life to the Columbanian missions. These beginnings of Celtic Christianity were multiplied when the learned associates of Columbanus declined to proceed further east into the wilderness, and began immediately to found new settlements starting with Metz as the center.

King Theodebert was happy over the arrival of Columbanus at his court. He besought him to remain in his kingdom permanently and to carry on his work. The scholar, however, wished to do more for Europe which was in a state of barbarism.¹⁹ As Benedict Fitzpatrick says, "The Irish were the first missionaries in Germany, and Germany had in the main been made a Christian land by them when Boniface, who has been called the Apostle of Germany, first arrived there."²⁰

It might be well at this point to protest against crediting the Benedictine monks with the work that was done by the Irish missionaries. Fitzpatrick says, "The general belief that the Benedictines, who were the only 'rivals' of the Irish monks in the period under review, were learned men is totally erroneous. No

branch of the Benedictines making learned studies their aim existed till the establishment of the Maurists in the seventeenth century."²¹

For several years Columbanus labored in Germany and Switzerland, leaving a string of missions to carry on the work he had started. However, a pagan conspiracy against him forced him to again remove to other lands. Leaving the center of Bregenz, in what is now Austria, in charge of one of his historical associates, Gallus (generally known as St. Gall),²² Columbanus, although past seventy years of age, made his way over the towering Alps to the court of Agilulf, king of the Lombards. In this region the primitive Christian teachings of Jovinianus of the fourth century, and of Claude of the ninth century, were still persisting.²³ Here Columbanus was joyfully received. Now, we might say, the Celts and the Waldenses were joining hands in spreading the gospel. The Lombards and the descendants of the Goths had followed the simpler and more Biblical Christianity of the Church of the East and never had walked in the ways of the Papacy.²⁴ The mighty Lombard king was glad to have this powerful spiritual leader from Ireland in his realm. In the medieval centuries these valleys were extremely populous.

Refusing to stay at the court, however, Columbanus besought the king for a place wherein to plant a new center. Agilulf was reminded of the locality of Bobbio where there was a mined church. The Lombards at this time, because they were not affiliated with the Papacy, were branded as Arians. As the Papacy, supported by the armed forces of the Eastern Roman Empire, had assumed a threatening attitude toward both Celtic Christianity and to those communions it chose to call Arians, there was naturally the fellowship of misery between Columbanus and King Agilulf.

John Healy writes that Bobbio "was near the Trebbia, almost at the very spot where Hannibal first felt the rigors of that fierce winter in the snows of the Apennines."²⁵ One is astonished at the marvelous work in clearing the forests, in arranging the buildings, in tilling the lands and producing the crops, performed anew at Bobbio. Columbanus seems to have had unusual ability in directing farm operations, in acting as physician for his associates, and in using the hides of bears to make sandals. He was specially skilled in domesticating wild animals. While he excelled in directing such labors as building highways, digging wells, constructing churches and training schools, he did not neglect learning. One scholar writes, "The Irish foundations of Germany and north Italy became the chief book-producing center on the Continent."²⁶ When later scholars began their search for Irish written manuscripts, St. Gall and Bobbio were found to be valuable storehouses.

Of Bobbio it is written: "Here the nucleus of what was to be the most celebrated library in Italy was formed by the manuscripts which Columban had brought from Ireland and the treatises of which he himself was the author." "The fame of Bobbio reached the shores of Ireland, and the memory of Columban was dear to the hearts of his countrymen." "A tenth-century catalogue, published by Muratori, shows that at that period every branch of knowledge, divine and human, was represented in this library."²⁷ Bobbio became such an evangelical training center that later the Roman Catholic Church followed the same procedure with Columbanus as she did with Patrick and Columba; she finally claimed him as one of her own.

Death of Columbanus

Columbanus did not live much more than a year after he had finished his work at Bobbio. Though there was widespread grief at his impending death, there were no regrets in his own heart. He could look back on his more than thirty years of arduous labors and recognize that he had made an indelible

impress upon the Franks, Germans, Suevi, Swabians, Swiss, and Lombards. He willingly laid down the work for which God had appointed him. He finished his work in 615, being at that time some seventy-two years of age. His body was buried beneath the altar of the church, and to this day his remains are kept in the crypt of the church at Bobbio. About twenty-five extant manuscripts are purported to be his writings.

Reasons for the Opposition of the Papal Bishops

There are certain writers who seek to minimize the differences between the Celtic Church and the Roman Catholic Church. Probably this is wishful thinking on their part, because they like to believe that the divine messages of the Celtic Church have passed into the rival communion, never to reappear. This viewpoint is contrary not only to the thorough examination made by a host of authorities, but also to conclusions reached by a simple consideration of the differences of life and doctrine of the two systems. George T. Stokes, speaking of the final willingness of the Celtic leaders to go along on the question of Easter, says:

But though the Celtic Church by the beginning of the eighth century had thus consented to the universal practice of the church both east and west alike, this consent involved no submission upon other matters to the supremacy of Rome. Nay, rather, we shall see hereafter that down to the twelfth century the Celtic Church differed from Rome on very important questions, which indeed formed a pretext for the conquest of this country by the Normans.²⁸

What were these important questions upon which the Celtic Church for centuries differed from the Roman? It was on such vital questions as the supreme authority of the Scriptures, the supremacy of the pope, the celibacy of the clergy, auricular confession, transubstantiation, the Trinity, and the binding claims of the moral law. Many other differences might be mentioned. Considering the unrelenting hostility of the Papacy to the Celtic Church, it is clear that one or the other of the two communions must either die or surrender.

The absence of learning in the papal church and its abundant presence in the Celtic Church in the days after the fall of imperial Rome, is proved in the following words of Benedict Fitzpatrick: "In the lands, formerly included in the Western Roman Empire, where Latin was the medium of Christianity and education, there hardly existed a school in the full meaning of the term, save such as had already been established, directly or indirectly, by Irish hands."²⁹ This Roman Catholic author further says: "Pope Eugenius II for the first time in history issued in A.D. 826 bulls enjoining throughout Gaul and the rest of Christendom schools of the kind that had then been in existence in Ireland for centuries."³⁰

Columbanus and Dinooth of Wales had expressed Christian courtesy to the Catholic leaders, but they had refused to be brought into subjection.³¹ They sought, without any surrender of their own historic past which reached back to the apostles, to cultivate a fraternal atmosphere as far as possible.

As was noted in the controversy between Roman Catholic Queen Margaret of Scotland and the successors of the great Columba, one serious difference between the Celtic Church and the Roman Catholic Church was the observance of Saturday as the sacred day of rest. Pope Gregory I, who in the days of Columbanus opposed classical learning, was so incensed because many Christians in the city of Rome observed Saturday as the Sabbath that in 602 he issued a bull declaring that when antichrist should come, he would keep Saturday for the Sabbath. This act is a matter of common record.³² Was the severe opposition of many popes to the wonderful work of the Irish missions in Europe due in large

measure to the fact that it was the practice of the Celtic Church to observe Saturday as the day of rest and worship?

Denouncing the Celtic Church on the Continent as heretical in many aspects, particularly because of the seventh-day Sabbath observance, Rome charged it with Judaizing. Thus, Epistle 45 of Pope Gregory III to the bishops of German Bavaria exhorts them to cling to Rome's doctrines and beware of Britons coming among them with false and heretical priests.³³ Those missionaries who labored without papal authority were denounced by Boniface, the pope's legate, as seducers of the people, idolaters, and (because they were married) adulterers. In all of this the Roman Catholic Church took good care that only vague and indefinite accounts of all the points at issue remain to the present day.

As to the charge that certain churches were Judaizing, the minutes of the synod at Liftinae (the modern Estinnes), Belgium, 743, give more particular information. Dr. Karl J. von Hefele writes: "The third allocution of this council warns against the observance of the sabbath, referring to the decree of the Council of Laodicea."³⁴ As early as the council of Laodicea, held about the close of the fourth century, it was decreed that all who would rest from their labors on Saturday were Judaizers, and should be excommunicated.

Luxeuil, St. Gaul, and Bobbio

Among the multiplied centers which were created by Columbanus and his associates, it has been observed that Luxeuil was the leading center in France, St. Gaul the leading center in Germany and Switzerland, while Bobbio held the position for Italy. There were, however, a multitude of other centers. Of Luxeuil, Benedict Fitzpatrick writes: "Luxeuil proved to be the greatest and most influential of the monasteries and schools established by Columbanus. It became the recognized spiritual capital of all the countries under Frankish government.... In the seventh century Luxeuil was the most celebrated school in Christendom outside of Ireland."³⁵ Of St. Gaul and Bobbio, he writes: "St. Gaul itself became known as 'the intellectual center of the German world,' as Bobbio, founded by Columbanus, was long 'the light of northern Italy.'"³⁶

Any attempt to evaluate the work of Columbanus must be feeble indeed. It is not within the power of man to give adequate praise to that which God hath wrought in making His truth triumphant. This pioneer built his spiritual foundations upon the ruins of the Roman Empire. His missionary centers became the nursery of civilization, the campus and pulpit of evangelism. The noble character of this man, his multiplied talents, his high executive ability, and above all his entire surrender to God make him a type of the amazing work done by the Celtic Church.