



From Bangor to
Bobbio...



ST COLUMBANUS

renowned leader in the spread of
Christianity across Europe

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Born around the year 543 south of Dublin in the province of Leinster, Columbanus (the Latinised form of Columban, meaning the white dove) decided to devote his life to the service of Christ. As a young man he went north to Cleenish island in Lough Erne, County Fermanagh, where under Abbot Sinell he began his training. Columbanus travelled on to Bangor where Comgall had founded a monastic community with an austere lifestyle around 558. During this time, Bangor was one of the foremost monastic centres of study and learning in medieval Ireland. In Bangor, Columbanus served as a priest and master of the school and remained there until around 591. At the end of the 6th century, Columbanus, who felt called to pilgrimage for Christ, with the reluctant permission of Abbot Comgall, travelled to continental Europe with a group of 12 followers, including Gall. These men would go on to establish some of Europe's most influential Christian centres in present day France, Austria and Italy.

They travelled to Brittany in France and were received with favour by King Gunthram of Burgundy. They established a monastery at Annegray in the Vosges mountains. It grew in popularity and soon became overcrowded. Consequently, two new foundations were set up at Luxeuil-les-Bains and Fontaines both near Annegray. These monastic communities remained under Columbanus' authority.

Their austere rule of life reflected the Irish monastic tradition in which Columbanus had been formed. The disciplinary code for the monks was very harsh by modern standards.

Acting as an Abbot, Columbanus had established his monasteries without the authority of the French bishops and he clashed with the court on this and other issues. In 610 Columbanus was forced into exile and escorted across France to Nantes by an armed guard to ensure he left the country. Columbanus embarked on a ship but never reached Ireland. The master of the ship carrying him interpreted the continuous bad weather he met with at the mouth of the river Loire as a divine sign that Columbanus was not to leave France. Columbanus was determined to continue his Christian mission in Europe and travelled to Austria where he established a monastery at Bregenz on Lake Constance.

Columbanus and Gall, a fellow monk, had a disagreement when Gall refused to follow Columbanus on his mission south of the Alps into Italy. Afterwards Gall travelled on to Switzerland and as a result of his disobedience lived as a hermit for several years by the River Steinach. The town of St Gallen was established in the area after his death. Columbanus left to walk over the Alps to Italy, having been instructed to go there in a dream. He stayed in Milan where he was kindly welcomed by King Agilulf and Queen Theodelinda. He preached and wrote significant work in Milan.

He was granted lands by the king for another secluded monastery, which grew into the most famous of his foundations at Bobbio. By this time he was about 70 years old. According to tradition, Columbanus died in a cave near Bobbio choosing seclusion from the world to the end of his life. He died on 23rd November 615. His 'life' was written by the monk Jonas who entered Bobbio monastery a few years after the saint's death.

Apart from Jonas' life of Columbanus, he also left a body of writings still extant and relevant to modern life in the 21st century.

Selected writings of Columbanus

We all belong to a community, we respect distance of those who walk the road too

All of us are on the same path, to live in love

On the journey we engage with all and care for all

If you want to know the Creator look at creation

Many manuscripts were produced in Bangor, the most well-known being the Bangor Antiphonary or service book, written around 690. It contains a poem of praise for the good rule of Bangor, a rule that inspired all of Columbanus' work. Today it is housed in the Ambrosian Library, Milan.

Compiled by members of the Friends of Columbanus Bangor, 2022

ALL OF US ARE ON THE SAME PATH...

The ministry of ST COLUMBANUS



FRIENDS OF COLUMBANUS

Friends of Columbanus Bangor is a voluntary association that commemorates the life and legacy of Columbanus. The members organise the annual Columbanus Festival, which is held in November, and plan lectures, walks and trips about Columbanus and his disciple Gall. The association is also involved in contributing to the development of the Columban Way, a European pilgrim route that traces the footsteps of Columbanus from Mount Leinster in Ireland where he was born in 543 through eight European countries to Bobbio in Italy where he died in 615. It maintains constructive relations with similar organisations throughout Europe. New members are always welcome.

To join, email -

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