

Irish saint shows roots from which 'our Europe can be reborn': Pope

Sunday, June 15th, 2008



Two days before Ireland went to vote on the now defeated Lisbon Treaty, Pope Benedict XVI spoke about an Irish saint, St Columban, describing him as a “European saint,” who showed the roots from which “our Europe can be reborn.”

During his talk on Wednesday, the pope said that Columban, “as monk, missionary and writer, worked in several countries of Western Europe”.

"Along with the Irishmen of his time, he was aware of the cultural unity of Europe."

Columban was born around the year 543, in Nobber, Co Meath. He was an attractive blond haired man, (Columbán = the fair Colum) who was tormented by temptations of the flesh, and sought the advice of a religious woman who had lived a hermit's life for years.

He saw in her answer a call to leave the world, going first to a monk on an island in Lough Erne, then to the great monastic seat of learning at Bangor, where he was ordained a priest.

After many years of seclusion and prayer, at the age of almost 50, he travelled to Gaul with 12 companion missionaries. They won wide respect for the rigour of their discipline, their preaching, and their commitment to charity and religious life in a time characterized by clerical slackness and civil strife.

He established three monasteries, including one built in Luxeuil which "became the centre for the expansion of monastic and missionary life of the Irish tradition on mainland Europe". Columban and his Irish monks were expelled in 610 and "condemned to definitive exile" after a row with King Theodric over the monarch's "adulterous relationships," the Pope explained. Unable to return to Ireland, they moved to Switzerland where they continued their work. The saint was an early advocate of European unity, at least in religious terms. The Church was split with schisms in northern Italy, prompting Columban to write "a letter to Pope Boniface IV to convince him to make certain decisive steps towards re-establishing unity".

Pope Benedict described Columban as one of the founding "Fathers of Europe".

"He spent all his energies to nourish the Christian roots of the nascent Europe," said Pope Benedict.

"With his spiritual strength, with his faith, with his love of God and neighbour, he became one of the Fathers of Europe, showing us today the way to those roots from which our continent may be reborn," he said.

Columban established his last monastery in Bobbio, in the valley of Trebbia, on a piece of land given to him by the Lombard king. He died there in 615.

"St. Columban's message is centered on a firm call to conversion and detachment from the goods of the earth in view of our eternal heritage," said Benedict XVI. "With his ascetic life and his conduct free from compromises in face of the corruption of the powerful, he evokes the severe figure of John the Baptist.

"His austerity, however, was never an end in itself, but was only the means to open himself freely to the love of God and correspond with his whole being to the gifts received from him, thus reconstructing in himself the image of God and at the same time cultivating the earth and renewing human society."

He concluded: "With his spiritual energy, with his faith, with his love for God and for his neighbour, he truly became one of the fathers of Europe: He shows us even today the roots from which our Europe can be reborn."

Picture shows stain glass window of St Columban from the Basilica of Bobbio.