



14 December, 2015

HONORARY DOCTORATE CONFERRED ON COLUMBANS TO COMMEMORATE THE 1400TH ANNIVERSARY OF ST COLUMBAN'S DEATH.

ADDRESS GIVEN BY COLUMBAN FR KEVIN O'NEILL:

Monsignor Hugh Connolly, President of St Patrick's College, Maynooth; The Trustees of St Patrick's College and the Pontifical University; Bishops; faculty members of the college; fellow recipients of the award of Doctor of Philosophy, *Honoris Causa*, Bishop Gianni Ambrosio, Bishop of Piacenza - Bobbio and Dr Mauro Steffennini of San Colombano al Lambro in the Diocese of Lodi, President of the Association of the "Friends of St Columban for Europe" and "General Secretary of the European Association of The Columban Way"; distinguished guests; my fellow Columban missionaries and co-workers; friends from Italy and here in Ireland; on behalf of the Missionary Society of St Columban I wish to thank the Pontifical University St Patrick's College, Maynooth for conferring this award in commemoration of the 1400th anniversary of the death of St Columban and in recognition of the work of the *Missionary Society of St Columban* – formerly the *Maynooth Mission to China* from our foundation until the present day. This generous award honors the rich heritage and legacy which unites our work and mission.

This afternoon I would like to offer some reflections on how the work of Columban mission honors the memory of St Columban. I would first like to begin with the events which took place here in St Patrick's college, over 100 years ago, that helped bring about the *Maynooth Mission to China*.

Millions of Chinese to be won for Christ! That was the prize that enchanted a small group of Irish secular priests who were the prime movers in initiating what was initially named *The Maynooth Mission to China*, and later became the *Missionary Society of St Columban*. In June 1911, Canadian Fr. John Fraser, who later founded a Canadian Missionary Society, the *Scarboro Foreign Mission Society*, gave a talk here in St Patrick's College, about his life as a missionary in China. Fr. John Blowick, one of the two co-founders of the Missionary Society of St Columban, was a student here at the time, and was present at the talk. Three other students, who later also became Columbans, were also present.

Fr. Edward Galvin, former student at Maynooth, from County Cork, the other co-founder of the Columbans, and who later became Bishop of Hanyang Diocese in China, met Fr. Fraser in New York in 1912. At the time Fr. Galvin was a young Irish priest on loan to the Diocese of Brooklyn. It was after this encounter that Galvin decided to go to China. Four years later, desperate for help, and knowing that he had somehow to find a source of manpower and funds in Ireland to guarantee the future of the project in China, Galvin came back to Ireland. He was put in contact with Fr. John Blowick and others, with the idea of setting up a Missionary Society for China.

At that time Blowick held the Junior Chair of Dogmatic Theology here at St Patrick's College. It is intriguing to me this afternoon, to think that almost one hundred years ago, on the 9th October 1916, in a ground-floor room of the main college building, just down the corridor from here, the 28 year old Blowick had the nerve to face the Standing Committee of the Irish Bishops and to present his scheme for a new mission. After about half an hour's talk with the bishops, Cardinal Logue said that they were prepared to grant their approval for the two things Blowick requested, namely, the making of a collection in the country and the foundation of a mission college in Ireland.



The 'memorial', drawn up by a committee of prominent clerics was laid before the full body of the bishops on 10th October, 1916 informing them that: "...a vigorous movement, of which the heart is Maynooth College, has grown up among young Irish ecclesiastics to go forth and carry the light of the Gospel to the Chinese ... The bishops were rejoiced and thankful to God for this new and striking evidence of the continued life of the ancient Irish missionary spirit."

Monsignor James MacCaffrey, the Vice-President of Maynooth at the time Edward Galvin returned to Ireland in 1916, was one of Galvin's key supporters in setting up the '*Maynooth Mission to China*'. Shortly after the Irish Bishops' approval for the new Society, professors from Maynooth, together with priests from religious orders and almost every diocese in Ireland, helped in the nationwide appeals to raise funds for the new Society. Five of the ten priests in the 1914 Maynooth Dunboyne House post-graduate group joined the Society. On June 29th, 1918, two years after the Irish Bishops' approval, the *Maynooth Mission to China* was formally erected by Bishop O'Dea.

The foundation of the Society in the United States and in my home country of Australia, also had connections with Maynooth. Frs. Edward Galvin and Matthew Dolan, also a former student of Maynooth, started the Columbans in the United States. Frs. Edward Maguire and James Galvin, went to Australia at the invitation of Archbishop Daniel Mannix. Archbishop Mannix had been President of St. Patrick's at the time when some from among the first group of Columbans had been students in Maynooth.

These are some of the early connections the Columbans have with St Patrick's College, Maynooth. Furthermore, some Columbans, like Fr Maurice Hogan and the late Fr Sean Lavery, have, in the past, been members of the Maynooth faculty. Also, in the 1980s and 90s Columban students studied here in Maynooth.

This ancient Irish missionary spirit, referred to by the Bishops of Ireland when they approved the setting up of the new Society, has its roots in the great missionary monks of Ireland one of whom was Saint Columban, the Patron Saint of the *Missionary Society of St Columban*, the *Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of St Columban* and the *Columban Lay Missionaries*.

The Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of St Columban was established on September 29th, 1924. The founders of the Congregation were Fr. John Blowick and Lady Frances Moloney, who later became Mother Mary Patrick. Both the Society and the Congregation were founded for Mission in China. In 1954 Columban Fr Tim Connolly, another distinguished alumnus of Maynooth, who served as our Superior General from 1952 to 1962, spoke to the ordination classes in Maynooth about the Columban Priest Associate Programme. This programme, which continues up to the present time, welcomes diocesan priests to work on mission with Columbans. The Columban Lay Missionaries, who also work on mission in partnership with the Society, began in 1990. This year they celebrate their Silver Jubilee. Today, Columban missionaries, together with priest associates and co-workers, come from 12 different countries across the world. They participate in God's mission in 16 countries throughout Europe, Asia, the Pacific and the Americas.

The writings of the early Columbans reveal that they never had any doubts as to who would be the ideal patron saint of the new Missionary Society: there was one Irish monk who had left his native land and travelled far in the service of the Gospel. From Carlow to Cleenish, Cleenish to Bangor and from Bangor



crossing through Britain and on through modern-day France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Italy; 1,400 plus years ago this truly arduous series of journeys was undertaken by a remarkable man, Columbanus. Over recent decades, many experts in different fields have helped us gain a greater understanding of the man. You, Monsignor Connolly, have, I believe, done sterling work on Columban's Penitentials. The historian, Damian Bracken proclaims Columban to be 'a man of firsts in Irish history': the first Irish writer to leave a literary corpus; the first Irishman in the surviving literature to describe himself as Irish and to give an account of Irish identity; the first Irishman to be the subject of a biography. Bracken claims that Columban's impact has had a long afterlife, and was responsible, in great measure, for Ireland's reputation as the 'land of saints and scholars'.

But, Columban was not just Irish; Cardinal Tomas O'Fiach, another illustrious former President of Maynooth, calls him 'Ireland's first European'; Pope-Emeritus Benedict XVI pointed out that in Columban's letter to Pope Boniface 'we find for the first time the expression *totius Europae*' ('of all Europe') with reference to the presence of the Church on the Continent. Benedict goes on to say that with good reason Columban can be called a European saint and that he can be considered the spiritual father of Europe. The former French Foreign Minister, Robert Schumann, himself one of the chief architects of the European Union, said that Columban 'is the patron saint of those who seek to construct a united Europe'. The Redemptorist scholar, John J. O'Riordain describes him as 'saint, scholar and missionary extraordinaire'. From all of these, we get a sense of how significant Columban and his legacy have been down through 14 centuries.

To understand why his achievement is so remarkable, we need to reflect again on the context of the Europe Columban entered in approximately 590AD. By this stage the Roman Empire had collapsed, and with it the support that it had provided to Christian life since the Edict of Milan (313AD). This was followed by invasions of various peoples from the East and North who swarmed into the Empire leaving nothing but desolation and chaos in their wake, and in the process led to the undoing of earlier evangelisation. Europe was in tatters needing revitalizing of both civil and religious society; this task fell largely to Irish missionaries, led by Columban and the monastic tradition that he pioneered.

We have to conclude that it was the personality and the holiness of Columban himself, that drew crowds of young men to join his monasteries, so that in less than 20 years three foundations had been established in what is now modern-day France - at Annegray, Luxeuil and Fontaine – with estimates of up to 220 monks between them. Monasteries of women, founded on the Rule of St Columban, were also established. Bishop Noel Treanor explains that the monasteries of Columban were what could be described in modern-day language as 'centres of excellence' not just in the religious and spiritual fields, but also in many areas of human endeavour, disciplines and trades. Therefore, it was this monastic tradition, led by Columban, which brought about the social and religious revitalization of early medieval Europe.

For almost 100 years Columban missionaries, priests, sisters and lay missionaries, together with our co-workers, associates and supporters, have, through our own participation in God's mission, endeavored also to keep alive and to honor the memory of St Columban. He is our patron, our constant companion, our teacher of the missionary life.



According to his first biographer, Jonas of Susa, as a young student Columban, discerning what to do with his life, went to seek the advice of a holy woman who had dedicated her life to God. She challenged Columban: *"And you, though still under the fiery temptations of youth, you remain at home!"* Inspired by her words, Columban said good-bye to his companions, and set out. His mother, in great sorrow, begged him not to leave her. Columban asked her to let him go. But she wept and threw herself down on the ground and would not yield. He stepped over her and asked her not to grieve; he would never see his mother again in this world. After many years in the huge monastery in Bangor where he grew to become the equivalent of Dean of Studies, the desire to go into exile began to grow in him. He wished to preach the Gospel, but also to live the asceticism involved in 'being a pilgrim for Christ'. This involved a commitment never to return to his native land. Year's later, during his exile in Europe, in response to a Bishop in Germany who asked him who he was, Columban replied: *"I am a wayfarer"* : he saw himself as a 'wanderer for Christ', an 'exile for Christ'.

Like our Patron, Columban missionaries leave their homeland, crossing boundaries of country, language, culture and creed to proclaim the gospel through witness, ministry and dialogue, listening to and heeding the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. In our lives as missionaries we have learned the truth of Columban's words: *'A life unlike your own can be your teacher'*. The many people of different nationalities and cultures we have been blessed to serve and to live among have become our teachers. As missionaries we strive to live a way of life that is close to the poor and most vulnerable in society. We strive to build bridges between our own local churches and those in other countries seeing all local churches as loci for mission. Like all missionary disciples of Jesus we promote the message of Christ and not ourselves, remembering the motto of St Columban (*Christi simus non nostri*) 'Let us live for Christ and not for ourselves'.

As Columbans we enter into a given cultural context sharing life with the people among whom we live and serve. We deliberately choose to locate ourselves among those most in need and strive to live in solidarity with them. We encourage people, and walk with them on their faith journey, and in their struggle to change the unjust structures that keep them poor and on the margins of society. The source of our witness and actions is our faith in Jesus. We desire to mirror in our lives the pattern of Jesus' life, helping people of all faiths, or no faith, to gain their dignity as sons and daughters of God, loved by God.

The way we pastor those in our Christian communities and varied ministries is a witness that can be seen as a welcome and invitation for everyone, especially those who feel excluded. As Pope Francis reminded us in his opening address at the Synod on the Family: "we, the church are to - go out, encounter, and accompany."

When Columban stood against the powers that be, he spoke fearlessly, with great courage. As a result he alienated both civil and ecclesiastical leaders. He paid dearly for his stance. He had to endure the heartbreak of being expelled from his beloved companions and his earliest three monasteries in France. Only an act of Providence prevented him from being sent ignominiously back to Ireland. Later he would also have to flee from Bregenz. We, Columban missionaries, have shared something of his experience. All of our members were expelled from China in 1952; all had to leave Burma in 1978; individuals were expelled from Fiji, from Chile, from the Philippines and from Taiwan down through the years. Many were



interned during several wars and four survived years of solitary confinement in China. On the back wall of our chapel in Dalgan we have 24 portraits: they represent 23 priests and one Columban Sister who suffered violent deaths in mission lands. They paid the ultimate price.

Columban communed with nature. There are stories of him having encounters with bears and wolves who in turn showed gentleness in his presence. Columban could be said to have been both a theologian and ecologist. In his Second Sermon he gives the following advice to his monks who desired to enter into some understanding of the mystery of the Trinity, "*For those who wish to know the great deep must first review the natural world. For knowledge of the Trinity is properly likened to the depths of the sea ... If then a person wishes to know the deepest ocean of divine understanding, let him or her, if able, scan that visible sea ... For why, I ask, does a person ignorant of earthly things examine the heavenly?*". And, in his First Sermon Columban said, "*If you want to know the Creator you must first know his creation.*" In these two Sermons, Columban is saying that in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the mystery of God, and to come to a depth and fullness of prayer, one needs to contemplate nature.

For many decades now Columban missionaries have journeyed together with the people of God coming to a deeper awareness of humankind's relationship with creation. We have engaged in research and education on human-induced climate change caused by an increase in greenhouse gas emissions. The UN Climate Change Conference, known as COP21, commences today in Paris. We pray that needed decisions will be taken so as to protect Mother Earth, 'Our Common Home'.

The latest encyclical of Pope Francis *Laudato Si: On care for our common home* widens the Church's perspective to embrace not just humans, but all creation. Sean McDonagh, my brother Columban and eco-theologian, says, "Though previous popes have written about ecology, Pope Francis is the first to acknowledge the magnitude of the ecological crisis, the urgency with which it must be faced, and the irreversible nature of ecological damage". Towards the beginning of his encyclical Pope Francis writes, "It is my hope that this encyclical letter, which is now added to the body of the Church's social teaching, can help us to acknowledge the appeal, immensity and urgency of the challenge we face." (*Laudato Si* 15)

As Pope Francis speaks of Integral Ecology in *Laudato Si'*, Columban missionaries see the links between climate change and social concerns such as global migration, conflicts and war, economic poverty, and unsustainable development models. In response to the damaging impacts of climate change and interrelated concerns, our missionary commitments include: formation and advocacy for ongoing ecological conversion; inter-religious dialogue; community development; and socially-responsible investing. Columban missionaries, together with the local dioceses where we live and work, as well as with Church and civil-based organizations, such as the Global Catholic Climate Movement, are keeping alive the memory of St Columban and his communion with nature, through efforts at education on care for the environment and climate change. Just this past week-end the Columbans in Ireland organized a seminar in Dalgan on *Laudato Si*, ecology and COP21. A series of seminars on *Laudato Si* will be arranged for next year.

People of all faiths and good will are inspired by Pope Francis. There is an urgency about Pope Francis as there was about St Columban. We need to take up this moment in the history of the church and help Pope Francis.



In the Pontificate of Pope Francis the call to change, to transformation, to renewal, to reform has been reaffirmed as central to being Church. In *Evangelii Gadium* 'reform' is used 7 times; 'renewal' is used 10 times. The title of Chapter 1 is 'The church's missionary transformation'. The Good News for today is that the Church exists to effect change. The Church is called to change, and mission is the locus of change. It is precisely mission, going out, risking, experimenting, that is the locus of change. Pope Francis says 'it is not what we think but what we experience' that is important. Like St Columban, when we have an intuition, an aim, we are invited to throw ourselves into it and see what the experience is. We are lead by the message of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* when he says: 'Follow a path of pastoral and missionary conversion that cannot leave things as they are'. (EG.25)

This message of change, and mission as the locus of change, is for everybody, not just for missionaries. The Good News is, that Pope Francis has made the missionary agenda the agenda of the whole church. All the baptized are continually called by God to rediscover, relive the missionary spirit, in our lives as missionary disciples. If we are disciples we are missionary. If we are missionary we are disciples. This was at the heart of the life of St Columban and is at the heart of all the baptized, in our lives as missionary disciples of Jesus living the joy of the Gospel.

St Columban by his personal example of living with and engaging constructively with people of several different ethnic backgrounds, is an encouraging example for us today. Columban said, "whether we are Irish, British or Franks, it does not matter." Columban successfully attracted young people from different ethnic groups to become important members of his community.

As Europe today is experiencing one of the greatest movements of people from different ethnic backgrounds into Europe, it is faced with a huge challenge of how to live peacefully in a respectful manner with strangers and people from a large variety of different cultural backgrounds. St Columban inspires us to open our hearts to the stranger, to those fleeing war in search of a safe haven. For many decades now Columban missionaries have accompanied migrants and advocated for change in policies to protect the rights of migrants.

As contemplatives in action, Columban missionaries strive to live the balance between our apostolic zeal and our contemplative stance before God. Columban often retreated to a cave for times of meditation. In a busy world he provides an inspiring model for everyone to seek times of quiet mediation in their daily lives.

Columban prayed that Christ would set his heart afire with love. Let us all pray for that same passion, and in this way reflect the words of St Columban found in the Breviary reading for his feast: "let Christ paint his image in us". We celebrate in this the 1,400th Jubilee Year the memory of this great saint honored in the lives of Columban missionaries around the world and in the lives of all those who turn to him for inspiration, hope and joy in their lives as missionary disciples of Jesus. Thank you for your attention.

Fr Kevin O'Neill, Superior General, Missionary Society of St Columban.