

St. Columba

St. Columba, better known as Colmcille and sometimes referred to as Columba of Iona, or, in Old Irish, as Colum Cille (meaning "Dove of the church") was an outstanding figure among the Gaelic missionary monks who, some of his advocates claim, introduced Christianity to the Picts during the Early Medieval Period. He was one of the Twelve Apostles of Ireland.

He was born at Garten, County Donegal, Ireland, 7 December, 521. He belonged to the Clan O'Donnell, and was of royal descent. His father's name was Fedhlimdh and that of his mother Eithne. On his father's side he was great-great-grandson of Niall of the Nine Hostages, an Irish king of the fourth century. His baptismal name was Colum, which signifies a dove, hence the latinized form Columba. He was baptized at Tulach-Dubhglaise, now Temple-Douglas, by a priest named Cruithnechan, who afterwards became his tutor or foster-father. When sufficiently advanced in letters he entered the monastic school of Moville under St. Finnian who had studied at St. Ninian's "Magnum Monasterium" on the shores of Galloway. In the same place his sanctity first manifested itself by miracles. By his prayers, tradition says, he converted water into wine for the Holy Sacrament. Tradition asserts that, sometime around 560, he became involved in a quarrel with Saint Finnian of Moville over a psalter. Columba copied the manuscript at the scriptorium under Saint Finnian, intending to keep the copy. Saint Finnian disputed his right to keep the copy. The dispute eventually led to the pitched Battle of Cúl Dreimhne in 561, during which many men were killed. A synod of clerics and scholars threatened to excommunicate him for these deaths, but St. Brendan of Birr spoke on his behalf with the result that he was allowed to go into exile instead. Columba suggested that he would work as a missionary in Scotland to help convert as many people as had been killed in the battle. He exiled himself from Ireland, to return only once again, several years later.

Columba was in his forty-fourth year when he departed from Ireland. He and his twelve companions crossed the sea in a currach of wickerwork covered with hides. They landed at Iona on the eve of Pentecost, 12 May, 563. The island, according to Irish authorities, was granted to the monastic colonists by King Conall of Dalriada, Columba's kinsman. He and his brethren proceeded at once to erect their humble dwellings, consisting of a church, refectory, and cells, constructed of wattles and rough planks. After spending some years among the Scots, Columba began the great work of his life, the conversion of the Northern Picts. Together with St. Comgall and St. Canice (Kenneth) he visited King Brude in his royal residence near Inverness. Admittance was refused to the missionaries, and the gates were closed and bolted, but before the sign of the cross the bolts flew back, the doors stood open, and the monks entered the castle. Awe-struck by so evident a miracle, the king listened to Columba with reverence; and was baptized. The people soon followed the example set them, and thus was inaugurated a movement that extended itself to the whole of Caledonia. Opposition was not wanting, and it came chiefly from the Druids, who officially represented the paganism of the nation.

The thirty-two remaining years of Columba's life were mainly spent in preaching the Christian faith to the inhabitants of the glens and wooded straths of Northern Scotland. His steps can be followed not only through the Great Glen, but eastwards also, into Aberdeenshire. The preaching of the saint was confirmed by many miracles, and he provided for the instruction of his converts by the erection of numerous churches and monasteries. When not engaged in missionary journeys, he always resided at Iona. Numerous strangers sought him there, and they received help for soul and body. From Iona he governed those numerous communities in Ireland and Caledonia, which regarded him as their father and founder. This accounts for the unique position occupied by the successors of Columba, who governed the entire province of the Northern Picts although they had received priest's orders only. It was considered unbecoming that any successor in the office of Abbot of Iona should possess a dignity higher than that of the founder. The bishops were regarded as being of a superior order, but subject nevertheless to the jurisdiction of the abbot.

Columba is said never to have spent an hour without study, prayer, or similar occupations. When at home he was frequently engaged in transcribing. On the eve of his death he was engaged in the work of transcription. It is stated that he wrote 300 books with his own hand, two of which, "The Book of Durrow" and the psalter called "The Cathach", have been preserved to the present time. The psalter enclosed in a shrine, was originally carried into battle by the O'Donnells as a pledge of victory. Several of his compositions in Latin and Irish have come down to us, the best known being the poem "Altus Prosator."

In the spring of 597 he knew that his end was approaching. On Saturday, 8 June, he ascended the hill overlooking his monastery and blessed for the last time the home so dear to him. That afternoon he was present at Vespers, and later, when the bell summoned the community to the midnight service, he forestalled the others and entered the church without assistance. But he sank before the altar, and in that place breathed forth his soul to God, surrounded by his disciples. This happened a little after midnight between the 8th and 9th of June, 597. He was in the seventy-seventh year of his age. The monks buried him within the monastic enclosure. After the lapse of a century or more his bones were disinterred and placed within a suitable shrine. But as Norsemen and Danes more than once invaded the island, the relics of St. Columba were carried for purposes of safety into Ireland and deposited in the church of Downpatrick. Since the twelfth century history is silent regarding them. His books and garments were held in veneration at Iona. His feast is kept in Scotland and Ireland on the 9th of June. According to tradition St. Columba was tall and of dignified mien. His voice was strong, sweet, and sonorous capable at times of being heard at a great distance. He inherited the ardent temperament and strong passions of his race. He was generous and warm-hearted, tender and kind even to dumb creatures. He was ever ready to sympathize with the joys and sorrows of others. His fasts and vigils were carried to a great extent. The stone pillow on which he slept is said to be still preserved in Iona. His chastity of body and purity of mind are extolled by all his biographers. He was beloved by all, "for a holy joyousness that ever beamed from his countenance revealed the gladness with which the Holy Spirit filled his soul."