



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

Elgin, Moray, Scotland IV30 8UA

New Series No 1 - July 1997

"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

Monastic Voices

"There was a man of venerable life and blessed memory, the father and founder of monasteries, whose name was Columba, meaning "dove". The dove is a simple and innocent bird, and it was fitting that a simple and innocent man should have this for his name, who through his dove-like life offered in himself a dwelling for the Holy Spirit. Saint Columba was born of a noble lineage. In the second year following the battle of Cul Drebene, when he was forty-one, he sailed away from Ireland to Britain, choosing to be a pilgrim for Christ. Since boyhood he had devoted himself to training in the Christian life, and to the study of wisdom; with God's help, he had kept his body chaste and his mind pure and shown himself, though placed on earth, fit for the life of heaven. He was an angel in demeanour, blameless in what he said, godly in what he did, brilliant in intellect and great in counsel. He spent thirty-four years as a soldier of Christ on the Island of Iona, and could not let even an hour pass without giving himself to praying or reading or writing or some other task. Fasts and vigils he performed night and day with tireless labour and no rest, to such a degree that the burden of even one seemed beyond human endurance. At the same time he was loving to all people, and his face showed a holy gladness because his heart was full of the joy of the Holy Spirit....

When the end of his years was at hand, the Saint gave his last commands to the brethren.

"I commend to you, my little children, these my last words: Love one another unfeignedly. Peace. If you keep this course according to the example of the holy fathers, God, who strengthens the good, will help you, and I dwelling with Him will intercede for you. He will supply not only enough for the needs of this present life, but also the eternal good things that are prepared as a reward for those who keep the Lord's commandments."

Now the Saint was silent as his happy final hour drew near. Then, as the bell rang out for the midnight office, he rose in haste and went to the Church, running in ahead of the others and knelt alone in prayer before the altar. In the same instant his servant Diarmait following behind saw from a distance the whole Church filled inside with angelic light around the Saint. He entered the Church, and sitting down at his side, he cradled the holy head on his bosom. Meanwhile the monks with their lamps had gathered, and they began to lament at the sight of their father dying. Some of those who were present have related how, before his soul left him, the Saint opened his eyes and began to look about him with a wonderful joy and gladness in his face, for he could see the angels coming to meet him. Diarmait held up the Saint's right hand to bless the choir of monks. The venerable father himself, insofar as he had the strength, moved his hand at the same time so that by that movement he should be seen to bless the brethren, though in the moment of his soul's passing he could not speak. Then at once he gave up the ghost.

From the Life of St. Columba (c.521- 597), 2nd Preface & Bk 3 ch 23, by St. Adomnan (679-704), 9th Abbot of Iona.

Dear Oblates and Friends,

Fr. Ambrose spoke in the last Oblate letter of the celebrations at Ramsgate and Canterbury for the 14th centenary of the arrival of St. Augustine, on his mission to convert the English. In Scotland, naturally, the centre of attention this year has rather been fixed on the 14th centenary of the death of St. Columba.

Unlike St. Augustine, St. Columba probably scarcely thought of himself as a missionary at all. He never became a Bishop. First and foremost he was a monk. His work of evangelisation was almost certainly indirect: through the influence of the great Monastery of Iona which he founded, and through the apostolic journeys and labours of his sons in monastic life. So while St. Columba is important for all Scottish (and British) Christians, surely monks and monastic Oblates are right to feel a special affinity with him.

St. Columba was not, of course, a Benedictine. He overlapped with St. Benedict (480-550) by some 29 years, but lived in a very different world. St. Benedict lived in Italy amid the dying gasps of the great Roman civilisation and Empire. The Ireland of St. Columba's birth had never been touched by the Roman Empire: it was a rural society, only comparatively recently evangelised; ruled over by petty kings, and lacking the cities, roads and laws of Rome. So the Celtic Church, perforce, differed in many respects from the Roman. Attempts are sometimes made these days to turn such differences into opposition. There is conjured up a monolithic, centralised and authoritarian Roman Church, (nasty), hungry to swallow up its much more politically-correct Celtic neighbour: independent, eco-friendly, caring, sensitive and nice. Such a picture, of course, is quite silly, and has almost nothing to do with the ecclesial and political realities of the late sixth century.

In this letter I want to emphasise how much SS. Benedict and Columba had in common. But first of all it is necessary to assert: St. Columba's Church was in communion with the Church of St. Benedict - of Rome - of mainstream European Christianity. The Celtic Christians were neither heretical nor schismatic. There were no doctrinal disagreements. The only language of the Bible and of the liturgy in the Celtic Church was Latin. Nor should even their geographical isolation be over-emphasised. All the wine needed for the celebration of Mass had to come from the continent, and there was plainly enough shipping traffic to make this routinely possible. Presumably books, news and ideas came by the same route.

What is true is that the Celtic Church generally preserved a more fiercely ascetic and penitential spirit than the Roman. It had, accordingly, a much stronger monastic emphasis. But the sources for this monastic tradition it shared with its Italian counterparts. St. Columba certainly knew and treasured the writings of SS. Basil and John Cassian, which St. Benedict praises in HR 73:5. As a monk, he garnered every shred of teaching from the holy fathers that he could get his hands on, but especially he looked East, and to the wisdom of the Egyptian desert.

Iona and Monte Cassino were both monasteries of Cenobites - monks living in community, under an Abbot. Both held services at regular times through the day and night. About the Columban liturgy, there is a pleasing note in Ian Bradley's generally recommendable *Columba: Pilgrim and Penitent* (Wild Goose Publ., Glasgow, 1996, p. 52), which I shan't resist quoting. We had this book in the Refectory recently:

"The daily Office on Iona revolved around the singing of psalms just as it does in the late twentieth-century Benedictine Abbey at Pluscarden, near Elgin, where the monks still chant in Latin, as Columba did, and work their way through all 150 psalms every week."

But there seems little doubt that the Columban monks would have sung many more psalms per week than the Pluscarden monks do. And we read in the 12th century *Irish Life* that Columba himself, over and above the measure of service performed daily by his community, went down to the sea each night, there to recite on his own the entire psalter (cf. HR 18:25).

In fact, I'm afraid that St. Columba would be rather shocked by modern Pluscarden, and by the moderation and humanity shown throughout the Holy Rule we strive to follow. St. Benedict certainly valued fasting, vigils and a penal discipline, but he seemed to put little value on extremes of bodily austerity, and positively to frown on monastic competitions in feats of endurance. Perhaps the difference between the Italian and the Irish temperaments has something to do with this.

St. Adomnan knew St. Gregory's (?) Dialogues (which include the Life of St. Benedict), and used them as one of his models for the Life of St. Columba. So both Lives begin with the words "Vir vitae venerabilis..." Both concentrate throughout on tales of the wonder-working powers of the man of God. Both end with the Saint's death, in Church, in an act of prayer, during the liturgy, surrounded and supported by his monks; and followed by signs of his heavenly exaltation. Both Lives were written to give contemporary monks and Christians confidence in the Divine approval bestowed on their founder and patron, and in his intercessory power.

In the extract from Adomnan given on page 1, there are many reminiscences also of the Holy Rule itself. May I give just a few references for you to look up? The Abbot devoted to the "study of wisdom": cf. HR 64:2; "with God's help": Prol 4, 1:13, 18:1, 73:8; "chaste body": 4:64, 64:9; "pure mind": 20:3, 49:2; "fit for the life of heaven": Prol 21, 44, 7:5, 73:8; "soldier of Christ": Prol 3,40; 1:2, 58:10, 61:10. "Praying, reading and writing, or some other task" - here we have the 3-fold structure of the Benedictine life: prayer, lectio divina and manual work. See HR 48:1, which also recalls the reason for St. Columba's "tireless labour". "The joy of the Holy Spirit": Prol 49, 7:69-70, 49:6; hastening to be first in Church: 22:6. "Love, peace and blessing": the Rule is full of references to all three; they are, as it were, its chief characteristics.

Dr. Johnson memorably described St. Columba's monastery as "the luminary of the Caledonian regions, whence savage Clans and roving Barbarians derived the benefits of knowledge, and the blessings of religion...That man", he said, "is little to be envied, whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of Iona". And it is true that the monastery there became a centre for Church life, for mission, for art, learning and culture. Many Kings of Ireland and Scotland wanted to be buried there. Before the Vikings smashed it all up, it was at the centre of a sort of Christian Golden Age. But St. Columba did not found it for any of these reasons. His only aim, all he wanted, was to give glory to God. No other justification for his life is needed. For him, God alone is worth it. Indeed, only God is worth it; only God suffices. This fundamental insight was common to Columba and Benedict; it is shared by the monks of the 6th and of the 20th centuries; it is what motivates lay Christians to associate themselves with monasteries as Oblates.

But sharing an insight is not quite enough: we need witnesses to its absolute, overriding primacy. That is why we need Saints - people who truly lived their lives for God alone - and we need monasteries, which exist for no other reason than to praise and worship God.

For St. Columba, leaving his homeland was a practical, concrete expression of his determination to prefer nothing whatever to Christ. And so in his 14th centenary year we honour him; we proudly claim him as our own; and we ask his prayers, that our own pagan society may be drawn back to Christ, through the sheer attractive power of the beauty of holiness. And may we all in our very different ways follow the example of Columba and Benedict, holding nothing dearer to ourselves than Christ. Then as we share by patience in His sufferings, may we deserve also to share, with them, in His Kingdom (cf. HR Prol 50).