

# Europe and the Irish Monks

By Enzo Farinella

We knew that the Celts founded the first Europe, but very few are aware that Irish monks had a very important role in Medieval Europe, which they transformed culturally and spiritually. Britain, Scotland, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Austria, Italy, Slovakia, Russia, Iceland, Greenland, America... are in many ways linked to them.

Bobbio, Fiesole, Lucca, Taranto, Lumièges, Auxerre, Laon, Luxeuil, Liège, Trier, Wurzburg, Regensburg, Rheinau, Reichenau, Salzburg, Vienna, St. Gallen... are all European towns founded or linked to an Irish monks. Many dioceses in France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Holland, Italy have an Irish Saint as their Patron. So we find in the 7<sup>th</sup> century *Columbanus* from Leinster, in France and later in Bobbio; *Cathaldus* from Canthy, in Taranto; Finnbar or *Fredrian* in Lucca; *Killian*, from Mullagh in Co. Cavan, in Wuerzburg; *Fergal* or *Vergil*, the surveyor and satirist, from Kilkenny, & *Colman*, as Patrons of Salzburg and the province of Lower Austria respectively; *Wendel* in Saarland, one of the 16 regions of Germany; *Willibrod* in Luxembourg; *Columcille* or *Columba* from Derry, prince of Tirconell, went to Lindsfarne, Northumbria, to Iona in Scotland and then to Iceland; *Fursa*, the Visionary, travelled from Ireland to East Anglia, then to Lagny, just east of Paris, and Peronne, which would be known in time as *Peronna Scottorum*, Peronne of the Irish and City of Fursey; *Caidoc* and *Fricor* advanced on Picardy; *Rufus* in Val d'Aosta; *Gall*, Columbanus best friend, founded St. Gallen in Switzerland; the scholar Donatus, *scottorum sanguine creatus*, was bishop of Fiesole from 826 to 877; *Fiachra* or Fiacre left Kilkenny and could claim to have opened the first Irish-run B&B in France when he established a priory and a guest house in the village of Brueil (now St. Fiacre), about 50 km east of Paris. He became famous as a healer; today he is known as the patron saint of gardners and his statue – a spade in one hand and a book in the other – can be found in churches across France; *Brendan*, the Navigator, reached Greenland and North America, to mention but a few. All of them had a profound influence on the history of Europe for centuries.

In 870 Heiric of Auxerre wrote in his **Life of St. Germanus**: *Almost all of Ireland, despising the sea, is migrating to our shores with so many philosophers. This is The Irish Miracle*, as Daniel Rops stated. *The Irish Miracle is the second setting out of Christianity, from a country which had just been baptized, and which was immediately dreaming of giving Christ back to the world.* According to Arthur Kingsley Porter, Yale professor, *the success of the Celtic Church was a religious and political event of the first magnitude.* Also the French writer Montalembert wrote: *It has been said and cannot be sufficiently repeated, Ireland was then regarded by all Christian Europe as the principal centre of knowledge and piety – superior to anything that could be seen in any other country of Europe.* We have to agree with Card. Tòmàs O'Fiaich, writing: *Even after allowing that a number were doubtfully Irish, the achievement of the remainder, culturally as well religiously, borders on the incredible. It both challenges us & fills us with pride.*

Irish monasticism is an important moment of history, equal to the one of Greece, centuries before, civilizing Rome, the conqueror, or to the later one of the Italian Renaissance.

To know, to meet and to dialogue with the various cultures is, today, necessary for the Europe of peoples and for the action of Christians in an always more globalized world, especially in this moment of crisis that the EU is experimenting.

In the meeting of these cultures we find the Culture as foundation of all values and then of the person with his/her freedom and supreme dignity in a world of justice, solidarity and peace, all equal as human beings, united by the deep-rooted sense of belonging to a common intellectual and spiritual tradition, respecting diversity.

The Irish monks, true missionaries, like St. Columbanus or St. Cathaldus, had an important task in promoting the reality of this Culture and in developing it during the snoozing of Middle Ages. To them we owe a lot, as an essential part of our DNA. Infact, immediately after the fall of the Roman Empire, in 476 A.D., in an Europe, devastated by the lack of moral values, barbaric invasions and famine, a wave of re-evangelization and moral and cultural renewal, true work of spiritual and civic re-unification of the whole of Europe, starts from Ireland. They brought an Irish style of Christianity to Europe and had an important role in preserving their indigenous cultural heritage. So while the Roman Empire was fading, literary culture was blooming in Ireland in places such as Armagh, Inis More, Kildare, Clonard, Clonmacnoise, Bangor, Clonfert, Durrow, Derry, Glendalough, Lismore... that made Ireland, the land of "Saints and Scholars".

The secret of their work came from a small church at the centre of their monastery, "where, over the white Gospel page, the Gospel candles shined".

The **White learning**, which made the Irish monks famous, was the learning and teaching based on the Bible. Meditation and concentration on the Word of God, studying and teaching it, assimilating and communicating it, became the soul of this White learning. The words of the Gospel: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed me, to bring glad tidings to the poor. He sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blinds, to let the oppressed go free* were St. Patrick's and later the Irish monks message.

The **monastery** became in this way a place for faith and of meeting people, *scriptorium* where to gather epic poems, love stories elegies of everyday life, passed on generation to generation, and the Irish **monastic centres** developed, from the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards, into villages, hostels for pilgrims, hospitals for the sick, university citadels, work places or cultural centres for all, true oasis of peace and prayer, meditation and contemplation, learning and teaching. Students from every part of Ireland and Europe attended them and under their guidance, European people began again to work the land, to read and write. From here Irish monks, answering to a special call, spread everywhere throughout the world. . To leave Ireland for Christ became a must for the new converts, who gave origin to the famous movement: **Peregrinatio pro Christo**. St. Bernard wrote of *throngs of Irish Saints who flooded Europe*. Many of them went as pilgrims to the Holy Land, others to Rome, but as missionaries or pilgrims, in both cases, the Irish monks, with their books, striped on their back, spread culture and faith everywhere they went.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the abbot of Iona, Adamnam (624-704 A.D.), in *De locis sanctis* 3, 6, 1-3, writes how the monk **Arculf**, being in Catania for a few days, saw the fire of the Volcano at night and was fascinated by the rumbles of Mt. Etna, that made all Sicily tremble.

Before the end of the 8th century, Irish monks reached **Modra** in Moravia (now in the Slovak Republic), 30 km North of Bratislava. The ruined wall of an ancient church, similar to the little St. Kevin church at Glendalough, and nearby town of Malacky seem to speak of the presence of the Irish monks in this part of central Europe.

A Celtic cross in **Ják**, the most complete Romanesque church in Hungary, is another example of this presence. Up and down the length of western and central Europe, as far east as Kiev, we can find a living legacy of the travels and achievements of these intrepid Irish monks from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

They founded the **Schottenstift** in the city centre of Vienna, today a Benedictine monastery.

In 782 we find **Alcuin**, at Charlemagne's Court as director of the Palatine School, that turned into the University of Paris.

Another Irish monk, **Dungal**, was sent by Charlemagne to Pavia, the capital of the Longobards and of the Franks in Italy, to preside over the local Palatine School. This School, that became the University of Pavia, was the most important of his Kingdom and all young people from Milan, Bergamo, Brescia, Novara, Lodi, Asti, Tortona, ecc., had to continue their higher studies in this College -"In Pavia convenient ad Dungalum", as the Corteolona Capitulary (year 825) stated. So we can say that Irish monks were at the birth of the Paris and Pavia Universities and of the education in general of the Kingdom of Italy in the late Middle Ages.

**John Scotus Eriugena** (800-877), dominated the philosophical scene of the 9<sup>th</sup> century and certainly he was one of the best scholars of the Greek and Latin world. He was "the giant of the Carolingian Renaissance, whose like was not seen again in Western Christendom until the Italian Renaissance" (Toynbee).

Many were also the pilgrims who went towards Italy and Europe. Among them there was **King Donough O'Brien**, youngest son of Brian Boru, who, once he arrived in Rome in 1064, renounced his title and entered the Roman monastery of "Santo Stefano Rotondo", where a memorial tells us about his death.

The *Visio Tugdali* of 1149, written by the Irish monk, **Marcus**, influenced Dante in his *Divina Commedia*, as well as many other European writers. At the same time the highest Italian Poet exercised a great fascination upon many Irish writers, including Ciaran Carson, Louis MacNiece, Seamus Heaney, W.B. Yeats, both Nobel Prize for Literature.

The knowledge of reading & bookmaking made of them counsellors in Charlemagne's Court and of other kings, teachers and educators, publishers and very well respected people in many other fields. According to Arthur Porter, *from Ireland, England learned her later writing*.

From these monks Europe received again culture and values, hope and an Irish style of Christianity.

**Daniel-Rops**, the most important historian of Church History, writes: *The history of this Celtic Christianity is a history which has not always met with the notice it deserves, but anyone who studies it fairly, will find, it is of capital importance.*

They left us with master pieces like the *Book of Kells*, the most beautiful manuscript, created between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Also the development of a form of confession fully private, of which an equivalent did not exist in the continent, is attributed to them.

They were truly at the centre of the new Christian life in Ireland and Europe, as St. Columbanus and St. Cathaldus.

**Columbanus**, the most eminent representative of Irish ascetics, left from the land of the *ultimi habitatores mundi* – the inhabitants of the world's edge -, from the small port of Bangor, offering a great contribution to the common European house, as a restorer of civilization in the old Continent. At the age of 50, he started his pilgrimage throughout Europe, passing from England and Cornwall to Brittany around 592; then he went from the Northern Provinces of Gaul, descending along the Moselle, up to Oberland and to the Uri canton in the heart of Switzerland, in Costance; Bregenz in Austria was his next stop; finally, Milan, Pavia and Piacenza saw him as pilgrim before settling in Bobbio, in the Spring of 613. Tradition wants that he stopped also in San Colombano al Lambro, on the river of the same name, of which the poet Redi wrote:

*bel colle / cui bacia il Lambro il piede / ed a cui Colombano il nome diede.*(beautiful hill whose foot the Lambro kisses and to whom Columbanus gave the name).

He covered about 5.000 km of desolate lands, marshes, Alpine and Appennine passes, preaching passionately the faith among the Franks, the Swabians and the Lombards. Many are his foundations at Annegray, Luxeuil, Fontaines, in France, and afterwards in Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Italy, which were for many centuries, *beacons of light for all Europe*. He wrote to Popes and Kings in defence of the human dignity, proclaiming everywhere a message of peace and universality. He contributed with his mission as evangelizer and legislator to the construction of Europe, based upon Christian values, the centrality of the human person and the primacy of the common good. These are elements common to the Europe of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, that sees in Columbanus its natural protector. For his diplomatic skills as builder of peace, his vast culture and his work at the Christian origins of the same Europe, he should be proclaimed Patron Saint of Europe, at the dawn of the new European Union, seen as the land of all its citizen, be they Galls, British, Irish, Italians or of any other nationality. His European vision of this new social world, called to grow in justice and perfection, and his untiring work make of him the most equipped man of European spirit, almost 200 years before Charlemagne. And Columbanus is certainly, together with the founder of the Sacred Roman Empire, the most eminent personality of the

late Middle Ages. Robert Schuman wrote that Columbanus is *the Saint Patron of those who are trying to build a united Europe*.

*St. Columbanus merits becoming copatron of Europe because in the 6<sup>th</sup> century he anticipated with his pilgrimage throughout the nations what became later the European Union*, is said in a ANSA news flash on the 23th November 2007. These are words of Dermot Ahern, Irish Minister of Foreign Affairs, who, in Bobbio, received, together with Card. Cathal Daly, the Freedom of the city by the town made famous by this Irish monk.

Today the European West owes in part its history to the work of this “itinerant” for Christ, a true European, pioneer of civilization, father founder of monasteries, precursor of justice and freedom, witness and champion of the supreme dignity of the human being for his time and also for ours. For his pilgrimage throughout Europe, for the creation of so many communities on the continent, for the Christian civilizing European function of his foundations, for his message and for his social vision, Columbanus represents the man and the European Saint who was a true engine in the reunification of the various countries, promoting their freedom and dignity in an universal vision. Robert Schuman, father of the new Europe, saw in Columbanus its Patron.

Fra Anselmo Tommasini, in *Irish Saints in Italy*, described Columbanus as *a giant Irish Saint*.

Bobbio, a natural cross-road of the most important communications path-ways during the Middle Ages, became with Columbanus the capital of monastic culture and the centre, for many centuries, of religious, philosophical, scientific, artistic & social life.

Petrarch, at the beginning of Renaissance, and Muratori found in Bobbio Capitular Archive 150 Latin manuscripts, written before the 7<sup>th</sup> century, among which Cicero’s *De Re Publica*, works by Virgil and Frontone, the Biblical *Codex K*, only to name a few.

The majority of these codex can now be admired in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan, in the Royal Library in Turin, in Naples and Vienna. The codex of these illuminators and their style of writing were the treasure of these libraries. Many classics would have been lost if not were for the patient work of these monks in their land and abroad.

Poggio Bracciolini, the prince of Florentine humanism, discovered many completely new orations by Cicero, *Argonautica* by Flaccus, *Silvae* by Statius and an entire Quintilian in the libraries of the monasteries of Cluny and St. Gall.

If Columbanus was the great European monk, **Cathaldus** was the most commemorated and venerated Irish Saint in Italy and other parts of Europe, though we haven’t historical documents about him. Towns, villages, churches, hospitals, monasteries, ports,, have been named after him.

The Cathedral of Taranto, where, according to the tradition, he is buried, is dedicated to him. Mosaics of the Saint can be admired in the Basilica of the Nativity, Betlem, in the Palatine Chapel of Palermo, in the Cathedral of Monreale (12th century). In the County of Caltanissetta there is S. Cataldo town, and he is also the Patron of various cities, as Taranto, Gangi and many others.

The contribution given by the Irish monks to the various countries of Europe was incalculable. They brought perennial values and Christian hope in a decadent world. *The Irish clergy enjoyed great prestige everywhere throughout Europe*, Arthur Kingsley Porter wrote. And the Bishop Milner: *They were the luminaries of the western world and to them we owe the Bible, the Fathers and the Classics*. Card. Henry Newman stated: *Their monasteries became the storehouse of the past and the birthplace of the future*. This is a lot for a small country like Ireland.

To build the EU upon solid basis, it is not enough to appeal only to a mere economical and commercial union or to economical interests, which, if sometimes unite, other times divide. It is necessary instead to aim at authentic values, based upon the universal moral law, written in the heart of every human being and, therefore, upon an authentic spiritual, ethical and cultural unity, notwithstanding religious, ethnical differences or of any other kind.

Without the **Europe of culture**, the economic and political union could easily fail, as it is happening in our days. Such Culture implies the deep sense of belonging to a common intellectual and spiritual tradition, of sharing a common source of respect for values, united in the common wish of defending and spreading the ideals of freedom and democracy.

This vision of culture or style of life, as foundation of all values, first of all the right to life of the human person with his/her inner dignity and his/her eschatological vocation, was promoted by the Irish monks from the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards, as common anthropological, cultural and ethical heritage, and it will be celebrated by the International Eucharistic Congress ( Dublin, June 10-17, 2012). Only a similar vision can exalt pluralism, exploit the richness of the various cultural and religious identities and put the basis for a common journey towards social, civic, political, spiritual and cultural goals, capable to renew our world.

Enzo.farinella@gmail.com