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EARLY CHRISTIANITY OF IRELAND.¹

III

ST. COLUMBANUS—A.D. 543-615.

BY THE REV. S. HARVEY GEM, M.A.

COLUMBANUS was born in Leinster about the year A.D. 543 : it is interesting to note that in this very year Benedict of Monte Cassino, the great founder of the monastic system which bears his name, died.

Columbanus studied in various monasteries in Ireland, and, as has been already stated, a very high education was then given in the Irish schools of learning, and not only in theological knowledge, but in many other branches of study. The following passage is quoted from Moore's *History of Ireland*, by Smith and Wace, under the heading "Columbanus": "The writings of this eminent man display a varied and extensive acquaintance, not merely with ecclesiastical, but with classical literature. From a passage in his letter to Pope Boniface, it appears that he had some acquaintance with both the Greek and Hebrew languages, and when it is recollected that he did not leave Ireland till he was over forty years of age, and that his life afterwards was one of constant activity and adventure, the conclusion is obvious that all his knowledge of elegant literature must have been acquired in the schools of his own country." Such a result from a purely Irish education in the middle of the sixth century is not a little remarkable.

He remained in his own country till about the same period of his life at which the great Columba had emigrated, and then he sailed, with twelve companions, for the coast of France to enter on a missionary career. Avoiding those parts of the country which were already Christian and civilized, he settled with his small band in the wild mountains of the Vosges, where the former Roman civilization had been crushed, and where towns in ruins were girt with dense forests. One of these, Anagratis, was his first choice, and there a monastic establishment sprang up. But the holy man decided to retire into more complete solitude. Seven miles off he

¹ Previous articles in this series appeared in the *CHURCHMAN* of January and July last.

found a cave, of which the only tenant was a bear. The Irish saint succeeded in evicting the bear without any unpleasant consequences on either side, and indeed it is said that the wolves and bears, and the hardly less wild natives, revered the presence of the saintly monk.

Many aspirants to a better life gathered round him, and soon he founded another monastery on the ruins of the Roman town Luxovium. "The forest around was strewn with marble statues, and magnificent vestiges of the old Pagan worship."¹ On this wreck of heathenism rose the monastery of Luxeuil, which became the parent of several others in his own day, and of a vast number of the French monasteries in after days. At Anegray, at Luxeuil, at Fontenay, forests were cleared, trees felled, and the lands ploughed by hands so often lifted up in prayer, and all acting in obedience to one head. Franks and heathen alike were deeply moved by this mysterious union of the life of heaven with beneficent earthly toil, and hundreds crowded round to receive religious instruction.

The rule of Columbanus was severer than that of Benedict. Whether this was a wise arrangement may perhaps be doubted. However, the intention of the author of it was altogether noble. Columbanus was far too spiritual to teach his disciples to over-value externals as compared with inward piety. "Again and again," says Maclear,² "he reminds them that true religion consists not in the outward humility of the body, but of the heart. He himself ever set them a worthy example. At once practical and contemplative, he would work as hard as the best of them in clearing the waste, and then he would penetrate into the deepest recesses of the forest, there to read and meditate on the Scriptures, which he always carried with him. On Sundays and high festivals he would seek some secluded spot and devote himself entirely to prayer and meditation, and so prepare for celebrating the holy services of the day without distraction. 'Whosoever overcomes himself, he was wont to say, treads the world under foot. *No one who spares himself can really hate the world.* If Christ be truly in us we cannot live to ourselves: if we have conquered ourselves we have conquered all things. Let us die unto ourselves, let us live in Christ, that Christ may live in us.'"

¹ Milman, *History of Latin Christianity*, vol. ii. p. 48.

² Maclear, *Apostles of Mediæval Europe*, p. 62.

For twenty years, we are told, Columbanus carried on this peaceful yet laborious life. But troubles were at hand. There were to be troubles with the Church, and troubles with the world.

The Gallican clergy were annoyed with him for setting a higher standard than they had themselves kept up. Again, they were irritated by his retention of the customs of the Celtic Church, such as the Irish tonsure, and the Irish time of keeping Easter. Several Bishops of the Frankish Church decided to hold a synod with a view to condemning his practices. He wrote to them a letter, of which the following words are an extract.

“ I came as a stranger amongst you,” he says, “ in behalf of our common Lord and Master Jesus Christ. In His name, I beseech you, let me live in peace and quiet, as I have lived for twelve years in these woods beside the bones of my seventeen departed brethren. Let France receive into her bosom all who, if they deserve it, will meet in one heaven. For we have one Kingdom promised us, we have one hope of our calling in Christ, with whom we shall reign together if we suffer with Him on earth. Choose ye which rule ye will respecting Easter, remembering the words of the Apostle, ‘ Prove all things, hold fast that which is good.’¹ Let us not quarrel with one another, lest our enemies, the Jews, heretics, and heathen, rejoice in our contention.” Then he concludes, “ Pray for us, even as we, humble as we are, pray for you. Regard us not as strangers, for we are members together of one Body, whether we be Gauls or Britons, or Iberians, or to whatever nation we belong. Therefore, let us all rejoice in the knowledge of the faith, and in the revelation of the Son of God, and let us strive earnestly to attain together unto a perfect man :² ‘ unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ,’ in communion with Him let us learn to love one another and pray for one another, that with Him we may together reign for evermore.”

Columbanus might have hoped to escape attacks from members of the Church of God ; he could not expect, nor did he expect, to please the world. The mother of the young king of that part of France was an atrociously wicked woman, who encouraged her son in evil. Our Saint behaved like a second St. John the Baptist, but he was eventually obliged to yield to force, was torn from his beloved Luxeuil and sent into exile. He betook himself to Switzer-

¹ 2 Thess. v. 21.

² Eph. iv. 13.

land and preached the Gospel to the fierce heathen on the shores of the lakes of Zurich and Constance. Into the details of his efforts we have not now time to follow him, but must not omit to notice that one of his companions, Callech, an Irish monk, whose name was changed to Gallus, took a distinguished part in this mission, and all who know Switzerland will remember him to this day as St. Gall. After a while Columbanus and Gallus were driven from the neighbourhood of Zurich, owing to venturesome attacks which they made on heathen customs. Often it was a good plan and succeeded well for one or two monks to fall upon the heathen idols with axes, and to cut them down, for it showed to the awestruck crowds who gathered round the powerlessness of their gods to defend themselves, and consequently the folly of trusting in them for protection. But on this occasion Columbanus went too far. In the spirit of a modern teetotaller he broke a vat of beer which was going to be used for a festival in honour of Woden. This proved too much for the heathen Suevi, and the missionaries were driven out. They betook themselves to the lake of Constance and founded a monastery, clearing the forest round it. Gallus was a great fisherman: he made nets, and provided thereby the food of the monks. An interesting legend connects itself with his efforts to catch both fish and men. It runs as follows: "One night," we are told, "while he was engaged in fishing, he heard the Spirit of the Mountain call to the Spirit of the Waters, 'Arise, and hasten to my assistance. Behold, strangers have come and driven me from my temple. Hasten to my aid, and help me to expel them from the land!' To whom replied the Spirit of the Waters, 'Lo, even now one of them is busy on my surface, but I cannot injure him. Oftentimes have I desired to break his nets, but as often have I been baffled by the invocation of an all-prevailing Name, which never fails to cross his lips. Thus defended, he always escapes my snares.' Gallus shuddered at this unearthly dialogue, but quickly crossing himself, addressed the spirits, 'I adjure you in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that ye depart from this place, and never venture to injure any one any more.' He recounted to the abbot what he had heard, who rejoiced at this manifest proof that even the spirits were subject unto the brethren."

Later on Columbanus went over into Italy, St. Gallus remaining in Switzerland, and the former betook himself to the court of Agilulf,

King of the Lombards, from whom he received a hearty welcome. Agilulf gave him the territory of Bobbio, a valley in the mountains between Genoa and Milan. Here he remained and founded a monastery, and died at the age of seventy-two, A.D. 615. It is interesting to know that Bobbio became a considerable school of learning, and that the monastery founded in this remote age lasted until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

On being driven from Luxeuil, Columbanus addressed a letter to the brethren, making a special address to his intended successor Attalus. This interesting record is quoted at some length by Montalembert¹—the few closing sentences, which the enthusiastic Montalembert designates as some of the finest and proudest words which Christian genius has ever produced, are as follows:

“ I had at first meant to write thee a letter of sorrow and tears, but knowing well that thy heart is overwhelmed with cares and labours, I have changed my style, I have sought rather to dry thy tears than to call them forth. I have permitted only quietude to be seen outside, and have chained down grief in the depths of my soul. But my own tears begin to flow; I must drive them back, for it does not become a good soldier to weep in front of the battle. After all, this that has happened to us is nothing new. Is it not what we have preached every day? Was there not of old a philosopher wiser than the others, who was thrown into prison for maintaining, against the opinion of all, that there was but one God? The Gospels also are full of all that is necessary to encourage us. They were written for that purpose, to teach the true disciples of Christ crucified to follow Him, bearing their Cross. Our perils are many; the struggle which threatens us is severe, and the enemy terrible; but the recompense is glorious, and the freedom of our choice is manifest. Without adversaries, no conflict, and without conflict, no crown. Where the struggle is, there is courage, vigilance, fervour, patience, fidelity, wisdom, firmness, prudence; out of the fight, misery and disaster. Thus then, without war, no crown! While I write they come to tell me that the ship is ready—the end of my parchment obliges me to finish my letter. Pray for me, my dear ones, that I may live in God.”

S. HARVEY GEM.

¹ *Les Moines d'Occident*, vol. II.