

# far east



MAGAZINE OF THE COLUMBAN MISSIONARIES

NOVEMBER 2025

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## THE FAR EAST

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## THE PURPOSE OF THE FAR EAST IS

To promote an awareness of the missionary dimension of the Church among readers; to report on the work of Columban priests, Sisters and lay missionaries; and to seek spiritual and material support for missionaries.

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### Front Cover

'The Way': on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Photo: Columban Missionary, Fr Alvaro Martinez.



Life is what happens between the two great mysteries of birth and death. I work among a tribal people in Pakistan. They live in mud and timber houses on land owned by their landlords. They are usually in debt to these landlords for whom they work and so they are called bonded-labourers.

Some years ago, I was visiting a village of ten families. It was early evening. The intense heat of the day was beginning to subside and there was a hint of a cool breeze rising. We celebrated Mass on the ground of the small mud-floored courtyard. Colourful quilts were spread on the mud floor for people to sit on. A large tin box, which contained a family's 'valuables', was brought out and covered with a cloth. This served as the altar. There were a few hens running around and a few tethered goats watching on.

During Mass there was a bit of a commotion as a few women got up and left Mass for one of the little thatched mud houses some yards away. The rest of us continued with Mass. When Mass finished, I sat with the men, chatting and having a cup of tea, when word came through that a young woman had given birth while Mass was taking place, and the women who had

left the Mass did so to help her deliver her new-born. Thankfully mother and child were well, which, unfortunately, is often not the case in this kind of context.

As I sat there with the men and sipped sweet milky tea, I reflected on the birth of a child while Mass was being celebrated. I was struck by the fact that I, as the male priest, was saying the words of consecration: "This is my body given up for you," as a young woman nearby was giving her body to bring to birth new life. As I said the words, "This is the cup of my blood poured out for you," this young woman shed her blood to give new life.

If there is any group of people who can claim a unique insight into what is going on when we gather to celebrate Eucharist; if there is any group of people who have a deep intuition of what the signs, the gestures and the words of the Mass try to express, and who have an intuition of the depth of its mystery, then it must be mothers! ●

Fr Tomás King

01. Parkari Kholi tribal community with whom the Columbans work in the Sindh province, Pakistan. Photo: Cathal King.




# RADICAL VISIONARY

St Columbanus was a man who crossed borders, literally and figuratively, and was the first to speak about a European identity. For his feast day on 23<sup>rd</sup> November we publish an extract of former president of Ireland Dr Mary McAleese's talk 'Columbanus, the Man from Myshall' which was given as part of the XXV Columbanus Day International Meeting in Carlow.

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**T**he beautiful Italian town of Bobbio keeps alive the story of St Columbanus just as passionately as we Irish keep alive the story of St Patrick. It is the story of a stranger who came among them and founded his last monastery and died there on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 615AD.

St Columbanus' story endures and we are entitled to wonder why? He and his companions were first and foremost - *peregrini pro Christo* - pilgrims for Christ. Columbanus' faith was the driving force that allowed him as a middle-aged monk, already a successful celebrated career behind him, to set out across the seas with twelve companions bound for the madhouse that was Europe, where the new Christian religion was teetering on the brink of vanishing. He had heard the awful stories from the refugees coming to Ireland. He knew he was in a place of relative safety with no pressure on him to leave. He knew he was heading into serious uncertainty and trouble. Columbanus believed with a ferocious certainty that love of one's neighbour could change the world, could bring peace out of war and harmony out of discord.

Fortunately, we know a lot about the

life of Columbanus because he is the first Irishman to have left a body of his own writing, including poetry, sermons and letters, some of them rather cross letters to the pope of the day. He is also the first Irishman to have been the subject of a biography. His medieval life is in fact well documented including his often argumentative nature but also his great courage and forward thinking.

It was Columbanus (543-615) who was the first to describe Europe as a potentially collaborative union of distinct nations; the first to coin the phrase '*totius Europae*', the first to persuade the warmongering leaders of a broken Europe, that it was possible to be Irish, Frankish, German, Spanish and also to share a common European identity which would be a shared platform for building a sustainable peace and prosperity through partnership. In a documentary I made several years ago about his life I describe him as the First European. It was not an exaggeration.

Columbanus' radical vision for a shared Europe of the nations would become the inspiration for the miracle we know today as the European Union. From the still warm ashes of twentieth century

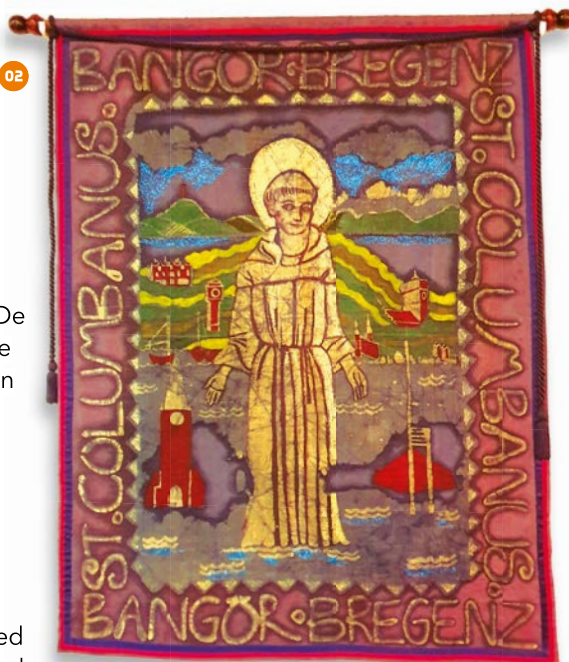
02 wars there emerged in the minds of four Catholic intellectual and political leaders the memory of an idea articulated by the medieval Irish monk Columbanus for a Europe of the nations. They fanned those medieval embers into a flame.

Robert Schumann, Jean Monet, Alcide De Gaspari and Konrad Adenauer became the founding fathers of the European Union, an egalitarian homeland for all, the best and noblest idea anyone in the world has had in millennia except Christ himself. In July 1950 they met in secret in Luxeuil, the site of a monastery founded by Columbanus. They met on the margins of a conference celebrating the 1400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of St Columbanus. Schuman described Columbanus as having “willed and achieved a spiritual union between the principal European countries of his time”, calling him “the patron saint of all those who now seek to build a united Europe”.

Among those present at that secret meeting were members of the Irish government, Winston Churchill and the papal nuncio to France whom we know today as Pope John XXIII. A few years later he would match the historic watershed created by the European Union by convoking the Second Vatican Council and asserting the Church was to become a garden not a mausoleum.

In 1963, Pope John XXIII published the greatest papal encyclical so far - *Pacem in Terris* - on the rights and obligations of people and their states, as well as proper interstate relations. It emphasises human dignity and human equality, endorses women's rights, immigrant and refugee rights, argues strongly against the arms race and advocates nuclear non-proliferation, support for the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The imprint of that meeting in Luxeuil is on every page of this encyclical, the imprint of Columbanus is also on every page.

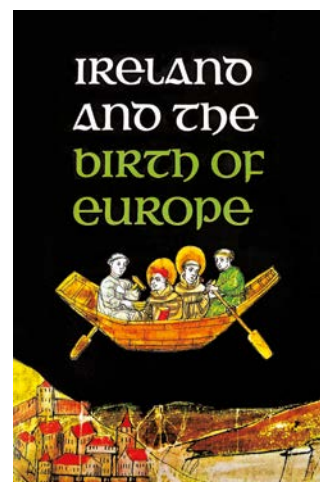
If you doubt Columbanus' relevance to our times take a look at our world with the existential polycrisis all around as humanity and the earth grow weaker not stronger. He is the author of the Sacred Ordinary, an appeal to religious and secular, to politicians and kings, to find the commonalities which could yet save us from the looming dangers which impact all. To see Columbanus only in the



stones of the monasteries he founded all over Europe is to miss the point. It is his life-enhancing vision of the human person and our earthly home and its flora and fauna that is the real light left by Columbanus.

His words are inscribed on the wall of the Columbanus chapel in St Peter's Basilica in Rome: '*si tollis libertatem tollis dignitatem*' - 'if you take away human freedom you destroy human dignity'. Those words are to be found too in the first Article of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (declared 2000, came into force 2009): "Human dignity is inviolable. It must be respected and protected." From his grave in Bobbio Columbanus speaks still to a world that needs to hear and heed his voice. ●

01. Bishop Denis Nulty of Kildare & Leighlin making a presentation of a bell, modelled on the St Columbanus Bell, to former president of Ireland, Dr Mary McAleese following her talk 'Columbanus, the Man from Myshall' on 12th July 2025 as part of the XXV Columbanus Day International Meeting in Carlow. Photo: Patrick Bramley/Kildare & Leighlin Diocese.
02. Artwork depicting St Kolumban in the Church of St Kolumban in Bregenz (Austria). Bregenz is associated with St Columbanus because he founded a monastery there around 611 AD with his companions, though they only stayed for about a year before the outbreak of war forced them to move on to Bobbio. Photo: Sarah Mac Donald.
03. Illustration from the exhibition 'Ireland and the birth of Europe' which Professor Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (UCG) launched in Carlow County Museum on 11th July as part of the XXV Columbanus Day International Meeting in Carlow.



### Anyone who wishes to explore St Columbanus' life and legacy a bit further:

- Scan the QR code to listen to this radio drama: 'St Columbanus – the First European'.
- Rite & Reason: As Pope Leo XIV has reminded us, the Irish missionary's perspective is as relevant now as it was more than 14 centuries ago. Read an opinion piece by Bishop Denis Nulty of Kildare and Leighlin for The Irish Times on Sunday, 13 July 2025. Scan the QR code to read the article.
- 'Mary McAleese and the Man Who Saved Europe', directed by Declan McGrath, is a documentary available on YouTube. You can watch it by scanning the QR code.

