

Saint Columba, Abbot of Iona, 597

(Proper 5)

June 8, 2020

Said Mass

by the Reverend James Ross Smith

1 Kings 17:1–6; Psalm 121; Matthew 5:1–12

Today we commemorate Saint Columba, Abbot of Iona, who died in 597. Columba, or Colmcille, was a learned monk, a missionary, a fierce preacher, and a founder of monasteries. In the annals, he is remembered as a big man, powerfully built, with a “loud and melodious voice,” not bad things in a preacher. His family was not poor, and he got a good education, studied Latin and theology, became a monk, then a deacon, and finally a priest. He spent time in more than one Irish monastery and was imbued with the traditions of Celtic spirituality, mostly at the famous monastery of Clonard in Ireland’s northeast, where Columba was taught and guided by Saint Finian.

Columba is remembered mostly for his role in evangelising the people of Scotland. His journey across the Irish Sea to Scotland and then on to Iona, where he founded that island’s famous monastery, is commemorated at Saint Mary’s by a small wood sculpture of Columba’s head and torso, which adorns the newel post of the pulpit. The saint is seated in a

small boat, known as a curragh. The figurehead which adorns the bow of the boat is a seahorse. Behind the story of Columba's voyage across the sea, lies a tale of discord and conflict. It is said that Columba borrowed a book of the psalms, a manuscript of course, from Finian, but neglected to return it, which led to trouble. It is also said that he got caught up in some sort of political dispute that grew violent. The details are uncertain. It does appear that Columba had to face an ecclesiastical tribunal of some sort, at which he was nearly excommunicated. The findings of this church court were later overturned. Still, something had taken place that left Columba's conscience uneasy, and so, on the advice of another monastic teacher, he decided to leave Ireland as a kind of penance or expiation. And so he did. He went to Scotland. He founded Iona. He changed history.

And so Columba is one of those saints whose humanity and frailty is right out there for all to see, a saint who wasn't always saintly. The dean of the Anglican Cathedral in Derry, Northern Ireland, which is named for Columba, has written, "[He] was human; he made mistakes. This is true for us too. None of us is perfect. We have and we do make mistakes and, sometimes, we have to pay a costly price for those actions, but God still loves us and he can still use us in a wonderful way just as he used Saint Columba."

I grew up “going to confession,” a sacrament that was shaped in the West, in part, by the penitentials written by some of those Irish monks. It was sometimes a dry, unpleasant sort of rite, though not always. More than once, I learned surprising lessons about forgiveness in those old confessionals. But note, the accent was always on the confessing—going to confession, going into the *confessional*. The later name, “The Sacrament of Reconciliation,” is a bit of a mouthful, and, to some, sounds like an evasion. But in the end it’s a name that puts the accent where it needs to be: the sacramental rite of reconciliation is meant to open the heart to allow God to do what God loves to do, to heal wounds and mend what is broken. “Confessing” is an essential part of all that, but it’s just part of it.

Here’s a generalization for you: in my experience as a confessor and as one who goes to confession, everybody is evasive in one way or another when they go to confession. I know I am. It was long my habit, developed when I was a child, to tuck the thing most weighing my conscience, somewhere discreetly in the middle of my confession so God and the priest wouldn’t notice. I still try to do that now and again. Such evasion inside and outside of the sacrament is common because we are all human. Shame and guilt are hard to bear, and our egos are fragile things. Of

course, we evade! But the process of wrestling with our evasions can be a fruitful thing: it teaches us that we cannot drive God away with our failures or our sins. God forgives us, embraces us, loves us, breathes new life into us, and we learn that it's the mending, the healing, the reconciling, and the loving that are the most important things.

Saint Columba, pray for us, that we may have the courage to name our sins and live in hope, moving toward the future that God has prepared for us.

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