

Lectio Magistralis

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**On the occasion of the conferral of the Honoris Causa Doctorate from
the Pontifical University and St. Patrick's College, Maynooth (Ireland)**



Columban, a cornerstone for Ireland, a bridge for Europe

St. Patrick College, Maynooth

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Your Excellencies!
Your Magnificences!
Illustrious Professors!
Ladies and Gentlemen!

My deepest heartfelt thanks to the academic representatives of St. Patrick's College and the Pontifical University of Maynooth for their generous decision to elect me as a *doctor honoris causa*. It is with great emotion that I am being welcomed to an institution which embodies the cultural heritage and historic-religious tradition of Ireland, with its contribution throughout the centuries to the advancement of learning in Europe and which in this solemn circumstance transmits the sense of our shared European belonging. All of this happens today, in the name and in the enduring memory of a son of this land, Saint Columban, to whom Europe owes a great deal, just as does his homeland, Ireland. His deeds, his thought and his teachings have crossed many centuries and are still incredibly current in all their strength, as they operate through the men and women who I like to term his third millennium disciples. Columban is a foundational heritage for Europe in its struggle to find unity, since the unity of the people of Europe was in his dna. The Christian roots, which have been planted and have grown since the very beginning, also thanks to the decisive contribution of his work, have endured and still endure the wind of disintegration, division and competition. They still germinate, they grow, and are still bearers of good in the continent's various cultures.

When I learned about this solemn recognition, my thoughts immediately went to all those who since the very beginning, or just for a short time, have shared with me the same passions and ideals, the same thirst for knowledge and a need for industriousness. Or those who still collaborate on religious-cultural projects inspired by the life of Saint Columban, which seems a quite inexplicable adventure unless it is read in light of a providential hand which makes its presence known in many ways.

I think that the most important outcome of an almost twenty-year-long commitment is exactly this: meeting, gathering and uniting in a single family all of the entities which for their faith, history and traditions are inspired in Europe by our mutual father Columban. The great 'Columbanian family' has gathered again after 14 centuries: it shines in its new light as a token of hope for Europe today and tomorrow.

This marvellous ecclesial experience, which I share with many friends whom I meet from time to time as I simply mention the name of the Irish abbot, was born from a simple question, which arose from the need of having better awareness of our Christian roots. We often leave to others the responsibility of recognising and defending our origins; we ask international organisations, governments, administrators and the authorities in charge not to deny the genesis of our history. But first of all, each one of us, in his/her role or in the position he/she holds, in the situation or in the place in which he/she operates, should act in a concrete manner; only in this way, with our enthusiasm, will we be able to convince everyone about the original beauty of coming from shared roots.

1. A RELIGIOUS-CULTURAL PROJECT INSPIRED BY SAINT COLUMBAN

It all started with simple questions: "where am I from?" "where do I come from?" or "where do I live?" and the answer was always the same: "I am from San Colombano (al Lambro)". But who was Saint Columban after all? I knew little about him, only a few things my teacher had taught me at school and what I had learned during catechism. My curiosity spurred an experience and an interest, which little by little grew larger and larger, for the discovery of many aspects connected to the spirituality and the deeds of this man and his

European personality, his influence on the world and on the Church at the time and now. I began seeking to discover places in Europe first hand, and I met many lay men and women who shared my 'belonging' who later – like me – became friends of Saint Columban.

A religious-cultural project was thus developed, which was later approved by the diocesan bishop. It had three main goals: re-presenting Columban's life and writings, drawing all of the European communities, even the smallest ones, who were devoted to the Saint, closer to each other; and organising an international annual meeting aimed at strengthening these bonds, which this year has reached its 18th edition.

During the years which led to the great Jubilee in 2000, on the basis of the programme traced by Saint John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, I was somehow inspired to view the themes of penance, pilgrimage and Europe (a Synod of Bishops had been summoned by the Pope in 1999) as extraordinarily summarised in the life and works of Saint Columban. These themes invited us to live faith in the second millennia of the Christian era in a new and original way. Us 'banini' – as the citizens of San Colombano al Lambro are called – had a unique opportunity: that of letting the protector of our community guide us once again and to live the Holy Year in a very special way. With this idea I 'infected' some friends who accompanied me during numerous trips as I tried to re-discover our patron saint. I came into direct and personal contact with all the communities which preserved his memory and still prayed to him, either because he was the titular saint of a parish church or because there existed a small church or chapel dedicated to him.

Almost twenty years later, as we celebrate throughout Europe the 14th centenary of the death of Saint Columban the 'Columbanian family', which is spread more or less everywhere in the old continent, is now gathered in a movement of parishes, associations and civil entities which share experiences, participate in communal initiatives and support the missions operated by the Society of Saint Columban for Foreign Missions by fostering twinnings and organising pilgrimages to the areas evangelised by Columban.

One of the many outcomes of this work is the re-discovery of the 'Way of Saint Columban', one of Europe's oldest pilgrimage routes, which is currently being examined by the European Council in the hopes it will be granted the status of 'European Cultural Itinerary'.

All of this, and much more, was born from a single question, from the desire to be acquainted with one's origins and to draw nourishment from them for a new evangelisation that springs from our parish churches.

In John Paul II's words: "Saints never age; they are continuously witnesses to the youth of the Church. They never become characters from the past; on the contrary, they are the men and women of tomorrow"¹. "Saints are in history to be permanent reference-points. What is expressed in them is long-lasting and timeless. Saints guide the Church and humanity"².

Benedict XVI, too, often showed his spiritual proximity to our work. He also cited Saint Columban in some of his speeches.

The invitation Pope Francis made to the faithful just after his election to the Pontificate, that of 'exiting from ourselves' and walking towards others in order to bring them the lively presence of the merciful Jesus, supports and encourages us to proceed in this direction. These are His words during his first General Audience: "Following and accompanying Christ, staying with him, demands "coming out of ourselves", requires us to

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Omelia in occasione della Visita Pastorale a Lisieux*, in w2. vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/homilies/1980/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19800602_lisieux-francia.html, 2nd June 1980.

² JOHN PAUL II, *Discorso ai pellegrini polacchi convenuti a Roma per la canonizzazione di Padre Massimiliano Kolbe*, on www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1982/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19821011_pellegrini-polacchi.html, 11th October 1982.

be outgoing; to come out of ourselves, out of a dreary way of living faith that has become a habit, out of the temptation to withdraw into our own plans which end by shutting out God's creative action [...] to bring the joy and light of faith"³.

In the footsteps of Columban, a man from an ever-changing Church, for years we have been members of a great 'open' parish whose boundaries are those of Europe. Even nowadays, during the laborious European re-unification process, Columban remains a model to whom everyone, individuals and communities alike, can look in order to draw from his work and his faith the necessary strength in this tormented phase in the life of our common European motherland⁴.

We can even dare to compare the current crisis of values Europe is experiencing with Columban's time, albeit in a different historical context and in the presence of extremely diverse causes. Without losing his nerve and by putting his trust in God alone, at the time Columban helped Europe to cheer itself up and regain faith in its identity, since it was deeply rooted in Christ. Nowadays, He serves as a travel companion and a guide who instils courage and optimism.

2. COLUMBAN, THE MOST EUROPEAN AMONG IRISHMEN

Columban deeply bonded his name with Europe's fate, due to his missionary activity and industrious peregrination. Columban built a bridge between Ireland and the European continent, thus allowing his Land to decisively contribute to Europe's noble cause, to forge 6th and 7th century civilisation and to make such contribution decisive for the survival and flourishing of Europe during its incessant decline.

Thomas Cahill's masterpiece *How the Irish Saved Civilisation* supports the idea - which many historians back, and which I too endorse - according to which Saint Columban and his monks can be seen as an instrument for the shelter of civilisation against the ruin caused by the barbarians⁵. Whereas Saint Patrick incentivised studying and learning for both monks and laymen, Saint Columban completed the former's promotion of culture with his work, which became widespread thanks to the *scriptoria* in the various abbeys.

Regarding monks-scribes, Ó Connor stated: "Without their intelligent and restless work, Greek and Latin literature would have been completely lost, as happened to that of the Babylonians and the Phoenicians"⁶. On the silent work of a few monks, who were downright unsung heroes, depended the cultural destiny of the West. What would have become of Western culture, had the monks committed to other activities during that crucial moment? It is certain that the fate of Western Civilization was in their hands.

If the contribution of Irish tradition in learning and spirituality saved civilization from barbarization and the Church from a perilous drift as it fell prey to widespread corruption and rampant heresy, I am certain that not only does Europe still need Columban's model, but so does Ireland, first and foremost. His belief in certain ideals marked his life on earth and has left an unfading mark in Western culture; his ardor in pursuing them still triggers positive energy and is still useful in our time of crisis, which is no less momentous than the dark and transitional era during which Columban lived.

³ FRANCIS, *Udienza Generale*, on w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130327_udienza-generale.html, 27th March 2013.

⁴ See G. CORRAO, *San Colombano. Un uomo di una Chiesa sempre in movimento*, Ed. Il Nuovo Giornale, Piacenza 2008.

⁵ See T. CAHILL, *Come gli Irlandesi salvarono la civiltà. La storia mai raccontata del ruolo eroico dell'Irlanda, dal crollo dell'Impero romano alla nascita dell'Europa medievale*, Fazi Editore, Roma 1997, 12.

⁶ B. Ó CONNOR, *Monasticism and Civilization*, P. J. Kenedy, New York 1921, 114

In these years I have been able to experience how Columban does not remain idle when summoned to our world that is in need of people who are able to build unity; his sanctity still radiates light, warms the hearts and enlightens the mind.

I would hereby like to encourage Ireland to recover the memory of its son and his European though primarily Irish personality. I would like to encourage it to re-adopt him, to feel as though he is one of its prized possessions, since his fame as a civilizer and evangelizer derived from his being first and foremost an Irishman. He never ceased to underline his proud belonging to his homeland, even though his defense of Irish customs was not a short-sighted dependence upon a circumscribed vision of Ireland; rather, it was a witness to the true evangelical message that was free from being sabotaged by human reason with the aim of adapting God's thought to the temporary situations of the world. It was for that very reason that the message had to be preserved, protected and spread. In one of the six extant letters, he told his people:

We are all Hibernians, inhabitants of the world's edge, we accept nothing outside the evangelical and apostolic teaching; none has been a heretic, none a Judaizer, none a schismatic; but the Catholic Faith, as it was delivered by you first, who are the successors of the holy apostles, is maintained unbroken⁷.

Columban has injected this 'irishness' in the still tender and frail roots of Europe, giving them nourishment and the necessary strength to grow and be fulfilled.

3. A STEADFAST SUPPORTER OF UNITY IN DIVERSITY

If the re-discovery of Saint Columban is still being so beneficial to Europe through our small communities, it would be even more advantageous to his beloved people, of whom he was always proud. In order to defend its traditions and customs, he preferred to fight instead of surrendering; he preferred risk to compromise, exile and persecution to yielding and recanting.

In 2007 Pope Benedict XVI was presented with Columban's *Opera Omnia* in Italian. One year later, on June 11th 2008, during his series of lectures on the Church Fathers, just after he had spoken about Saint Benedict, the Pope Emeritus beautifully summarized the life and work of Saint Columban. Benedict XVI grasped the features we had been highlighting for years, and which no Pope before him had ever underlined in such detail. As he opened his speech, the Holy Father confirmed the certainty we had been developing during the years: the most renowned Irishman of the High Middle Ages can be considered to be the first 'real' European saint. The Pope stated that "he can reasonably be called a European saint" and ended his catechesis by saying that "he devoted all of his energy to nurture the Christian roots of Europe, which was being born at the time. With his spiritual energy and with his faith, with his love of God and his neighbor he really became one of the Fathers of Europe. Nowadays, he still shows us where the roots are for the birth of our Europe"⁸.

Columban's role in building Europe has also been underlined in another passage, which reflects historical truth: "the *Regula monachorum*, integrated by the *Regula coenobialis*, was for a certain time much more widespread in Europe than that of Saint Benedict"⁹. And this network of Columbanian monasteries, together with Benedictine ones, made a decisive contribution in giving the re-construction of Europe a solid structure.

⁷ SAN COLOMBANO ABATE, *Lettere e Poesie*, Abbazia San Benedetto, Seregno 1998, 96.

⁸ BENEDICT XVI, *Le radici cristiane per la rinascita dell'Europa*, «L'Osservatore Romano», 12th June 2008, 1.

⁹ Ibid.

An expert observer of the world during his time, Columban had seen it crumbling, its political and military instability, its different ethnicities, cultures and religions. But he had also seen a point of suture in Christianity, thus striving for the rooting and spreading of faith. He did not pose a geographical limit to this heterogeneous world, since his work knew no boundaries. With the expression *Totius Europae*, which he coined, he defines a whole world, an immense area that was diverse in its customs and in ruins due to the destruction that was taking place. This was the world in which he was able to scatter his abbeys and introduce innovative agricultural techniques, together with transmitting knowledge.

In no less than two letters to the Pope, he used that very expression; as he was writing to Gregory I he addressed the Holy Father as he who is “a most honoured flower of all Europe in her decay” – “*totius Europae flaccantis augustissimo quasi quidam Flori*”¹⁰, while he spoke to Boniface IV with these words: “The most fair Head of all the Churches of the whole of Europe” – “*Pulcherrimo omnium totius Europae Ecclesiarum Capiti*”¹¹.

The concept of a brotherhood of all people is also summarised in a letter dating back to 602 or 603 and addressed to the synodal fathers which had gathered at Chalon-sur-Saone on his own initiative. In a heartfelt manner, he asks them not to see him and his community as foreigners, since “we are all joint members of one body, whether Franks or Britons or Irish or whatever our race”¹².

His vision was that of a social fabric that had to grow in justice and perfection; that had to be promoted, appreciated, corrected and loved. A mix of relations where the features of each people are a positive wealth that leads to neither division nor confusion.

In a historical speech he gave off the cuff in Luxeuil in 1950, Robert Schuman marked Columban as the “patron saint of all who commit to the cause of unity in Europe”. The modern founding father, at the dawn of the project for unity in the old continent, felt as though the Saint was close to him in a geographical way, since the Abbot had served at Luxeuil for twenty years and Schuman was born and conceived the European dream at Metz, a crossroads of people, only a hundred kilometres away. But Columban was also close to Schumann for the undisputable influence his work had on the politician. Today, a request to the Holy Father so that Schuman’s desire could be fulfilled is unanimously backed by the Pastors of the Church and the highest ecclesiastical hierarchies.

During his visit *ad limina apostolorum* with the Irish bishops on 28th October 2006, the Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland Sean Brady underlined how the legacy of Christian faith has left an indelible mark upon European heritage and memory. In the light of a growing loss of Europe’s memory and Christian heritage, and recalling the courage and the witness of those who – just like Columban – revitalised such memory in the past, on that occasion the Irish Church asked in the name of many other European bishops, that Saint Columban be included among the co-patrons of Europe.

In 14 centuries, many pontiffs have praised the man, but nobody before Pope Ratzinger had ever deemed Columban as one of the Europe’s Fathers, thus placing him in a rightful European dimension.

Recently, Pope Francis has confirmed the view of his “esteemed predecessor, who deservedly and rightfully designated him as one of the Fathers of Europe, since he has endowed this continent with solid Christian foundations”¹³.

In the face of a decaying empire, in a civilisation that was prey to corruption and almost totally deprived of all rules, Saint Columban raised his own voice against the mighty

¹⁰ SAN COLOMBANO, *Le Opere*, Jaca Book, Milano 2001, 4-5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

¹² SAN COLOMBANO ABATE, *Lettere e Poesie*, Abbazia San Benedetto, Seregno 1998, 75.

¹³ FRANCIS, *Lettera del Santo Padre all'Inviato Speciale alla Celebrazione Eucaristica in occasione del XVIII Meeting Internazionale delle Comunità Colombariane nel 1400° anniversario della morte di San Colombano*, Città del Vaticano, 23rd July 2015.

in order to call them to the superior values of peace, the respect for life, liberty, justice, brotherhood and solidarity. Europe missed these values, and thanks to Columban it was able to retake possession of them once again.

4. LIBERTY AND DIGNITY: AN INSEPARABLE COMBINATION

*“Si tollis libertatem, tollis dignitatem” – “If eliminate liberty, you eliminate dignity”*¹⁴ is the motto chosen by the Irish people for the cartouche that features in the mosaic that adorns the national Irish chapel within the Vatican Grottoes, close to the tomb of Saint Peter. It is perfect in summarising Saint Columban’s polyhedral personality. It does not speak about freedom in an absolute sense, in the way freedom is well known to today’s world and its relativism, where in the name of liberty it is legitimate to kill life at any stage, even when it is weak and frail, before birth or when life is coming to an end, when men become – in the words of Pope Francis – a burden for society, some kind of waste; it does not speak of freedom of expression without respect, a freedom to manifest one’s own religion by forbidding others to do so, or even to manipulate in the name of science the most recondite mechanisms of life, or eventually to create a new model of family despite natural laws.

Columban lays claim to being able to appoint the monastery’s abbot without being subject to the authority of bishops; he lays claim to being free to follow the customs and liturgy of his own land, to being free to travel to wherever God told him to go. But real freedom is experienced in his personal battle against internal and external challenges; it is there that human dignity is at stake.

Columban also calls for the freedom of death, the outcome of confession and penance, which the monk uses in his struggle for good.

In order not to struggle in vain, let us strive, with the help of God, to free ourselves from vice, in order to be adorned with virtues. By purifying ourselves, as much as we can, from all stains of vice, most of all pride, envy, anger, blasphemy, iniquity, malice, sadness, vainglory, cupidity, evilness and bitterness, we will be filled with humility and tenderness, generosity, gentleness, temperance, benevolence, justice, gladness, charity¹⁵.

Columban’s dignity is the same we have as children of God and as his heirs: “heirs of God, co-heirs of Christ” (Romans 8, 14-17). This type of dignity is the only one that makes us free. The only condition is that of belonging to him: being of Christ and not our own *“Christi simus, non nostri”*¹⁶.

With this programme of life, he enters the world’s scene as Europe’s Saint Paul – as I like to call him: The Apostle to the people of the old Continent. He gives new strength and force to Paul’s voice: «We are of Christ, not our own! We are not our own property, but we have been bought at a price (see 1Cor 6, 19-20)”¹⁷.

¹⁴ SAN COLOMBANO, *Le opere*, Jaca Book, Milano 2001, 68-69.

¹⁵ SAN COLOMBANO ABATE, *Istruzioni e regola dei monaci*, Abbazia San Benedetto, Seregno 1997, 33

¹⁶ SAN COLOMBANO, *Le Opere*, Jaca Book, Milano 2001, 228-229.

¹⁷ SAN COLOMBANO ABATE, *Istruzioni e regola dei monaci*, Abbazia San Benedetto, Seregno 1997, 75.

5. BANGOR: IRELAND'S ASSISI

I firmly believe that first and foremost, Columban can be an 'opportunity' for interaction and dialogue for his homeland; the seeds we have sown during these years, as our admiration and veneration towards him have never ceased, prove to us that he can still be of great help for his people.

I would hereby like to recall an episode that witnesses how 'recovering' the memory of a steadfast supporter of peace like Columban, can give - for Ireland - a great contribution to unity, in mutual respect, among the many religious denominations. I believe it to be the most marvellous outcome of the 2010 Columban's Day, which was held at Bangor and Armagh on 26th and 27th June that year. The day was 23rd November: on initiative by Ullans Academy, a meeting was held at the East Hotel in Belfast between President Ian Adamson, Lord Bannside and the President of Ireland Mrs. Mary McAleese. The guests saluted that day as a special occasion, since it was the feast day of a man of peace and reconciliation: a heritage shared by both Catholic and Protestant Christians, unanimously recognised as a great treasure that must not be wasted, since it represents a convergence in the process of building unity in harmony. Let me quote this extraordinary episode to underline the fact that Columban is still 'active': for him, harmony and unity came before all other things and had to necessarily be pursued even when he saw a threat to one's freedom in following his own traditions. In his opinion: "the diversity in customs and the variety of traditions has harmed and still harms peace between the Churches"¹⁸. Such a great lesson for human society, that is still extremely current nowadays.

To the bishops of Gaul who had gathered in a Synod aimed at fixing the date for Easter Sunday, Columban expresses his desire for peace: "Far be it then that I should maintain the need to quarrel with you, [...] far be it indeed, far be it. [...] We may agree in some other way, so that either each should remain before God in the condition in which he was called, if both traditions are good (1 Cor 7, 20); or else, what agrees better with the Old and New Testament should be maintained without ill-will at any"¹⁹. Great words, which most of all aim at unity in diversity, and at substance instead of form. In them, harmony and peace must mark Christians, "so that a conflict among us Christians should rejoice our enemies, I mean the Jews or heretics or Gentile heathen; far be it indeed, far be it"²⁰. Let this heartfelt plea still echo nowadays: "If any man is quarrelsome, we have no such custom nor has the church of God (1 Cor 11, 16)"²¹.

Celebrating it with the Jews (in the years in which both feasts could coincide), was the same as abiding with the will of God, who had wanted it to be that way.

Therefore, the possibility to celebrate Easter together with the Jews aligns with the universal vision of God's family; Columban does not cease in front of this event, even though for his open-mindedness many will accuse him of heresy.

My dear Irishmen, so great is his legacy, and the road towards reaching this still unfulfilled goal is still long. Bangor, thanks to Columban, can become Ireland's Assisi. It can turn into what Saint Francis's village became when in 1986 John Paul II gathered there all religious denominations to pray jointly for peace. Let us work towards this, and let us not fear that we might not make it; Ireland will surely benefit from this. I am sure Columban, who was not a man who likes easy tasks, will be by the side of peace builders. He still wants to perform miracles for the beloved children of his homeland.

¹⁸ SAN COLOMBANO ABATE, *Lettere e Poesie*, Abbazia San Benedetto, Seregno 1998, 67

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

6. CONFESSION AND PENANCE: COLUMBAN'S WARNING FOR THE YEAR OF MERCY

As in the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, when Columban was chosen as a guide by the many communities that are inspired by him, in the Holy Year proclaimed by Pope Francis, too, the theme of mercy still connotes him as a master of faith in the journey to conversion.

The image people usually have of him, which has become standard in the portrayals of this Man of God, is that of a hard, austere, strict and uncompromising monk with a Celtic nature, both emotional and feisty, passionate and generous, tough and enthusiastic. But Columban was not only that (even though often people only see these traits of his personality).

If Irish monasticism sends a powerful call to conversion, Columban was the man who spread the Irish penitential model throughout the continent. Columban opens a new era for humanity, which from that moment onwards would be flooded with an unprecedented river of grace. The Irish mission sent a powerful call to conversion: even though it required radicality, it was welcomed by many and was able to awaken and educate a wealth of youth thirsty to find God.

The fundamental principle underlying it is that each sin automatically and immediately implicates a corresponding sanction, but in the Irish penitential system it is not only repressive and aimed at maintaining order. "It proceeds [...] from the profound will to repair each guilt and to preserve pure souls in the face of God"²².

The transition from public to private penance, one that is proportionate in its punishment, was successful. This is where Columban's charm lies: he was a father for his monks, the *abbas* who cured souls and was a confidant and spiritual guide in the journey to purification and internal renewal. Crowds flocked to his monasteries not only because they chose monastic life, if the latter was all about some difficult-to-bear life of penance.

This is the greatest gift Columban makes to those who want to reconcile with God: making mankind aware of the limitless profundity of God's bottomless love. The Church, throughout history, would eventually embrace the Irish 'method' and still offers it to the penitent as a means to sanctification.

In the letter addressed to Msgr. Gianni Ambrosio, Bishop of Piacenza-Bobbio, for the celebration of the 18th Columban's Day in Bobbio on 29th August, the Cardinal Secretary of State underlined this peculiar aspect of Columban: "He was a privileged channel of God's grace, as he attracted floods of pilgrims and penitents and welcomed several youngsters to the many new monasteries that embraced his *Regula monachorum*. He was convinced that grace was the specific aid Providence gives each human creature faithfully accepting God's love in his/her existence; he bravely spread Confession, a sacrament endowed with a personal nature, which had to be repeated throughout one's existence as an irreplaceable means for a serious conversion journey".

This is why, each time we will approach the Sacrament of reconciliation during the Holy Year of Mercy, we will thank God for having given Columban to the His Church.

²² See C. PAGANINI, «Colombano legislatore monastico», *Archivio Storico Lombardo* 96 (1971) 281-284.

7. CONCLUSION

The “deeds of the blessed Columban”²³ – as recounted by Jonas in the prologue to his biography – make him a peculiar man. From the furthest boundaries of the land in which he was born, he was able to leave an uninterrupted trail of good throughout the places he crossed or visited during his life, benefitting them with his luminous presence. Heedless of his age and difficulties, he travelled through Europe on foot, reuniting in the name of Christ many different peoples. His rigorously ascetic life, marked by hardship and sacrifice, endowed him with often superhuman strength. His charm, which we still admire nowadays, did not lie in his ‘ruggedness’, in the fact that he was upright, coherently tough and uncompromising. Rather, as some of his works witness, he was tenderly sweet to the point of tears as he praised God or celebrated friendship with his monks.

I would like to end this close examination of some traits of his polyhedral personality by citing a passage from the letter Benedict XVI sent to the Catholic faithful of Ireland on 19th March 2010. With it, I would most of all like to restore in the hearts of all Irishmen a veneration for the ‘real’ Columban, a true friend of he/she who journeys through Europe in the third millennium.

In evoking the glorious history of the ‘Island of Saints’, the Pope Emeritus explicitly cites Columban: “Historically, the Catholics of Ireland have proved an enormous force for good at home and abroad. Celtic monks like Saint Columban spread the Gospel in Western Europe and laid the foundations of medieval monastic culture. The ideals of holiness, charity and transcendent wisdom born of the Christian faith found expression in the building of churches and monasteries and the establishment of schools, libraries and hospitals, all of which helped to consolidate the spiritual identity of Europe. Those Irish missionaries drew their strength and inspiration from the firm faith, strong leadership and upright morals of the Church in their native land”²⁴.

The commitment I made with many friends of Saint Columban springs from a personal homage I want to make to a man who had a decisive role in the re-Christianisation of the lands that had been the boundaries of the Roman Empire. He was an undisputed protagonist of Europe’s first re-evangelization: in doing that, he began the advancement of Christianity in the areas which had been left out from Rome’s control. To us Europeans in the 21st Century, he stands as an enduringly current example: we still feel as if he is walking alongside us in the new evangelization of Europe, the second time it happens in our Old Continent in its bi-millennial history.

In the post-communio prayer in the proper mass of Saint Columban, God is invoked so that He might “confirm us in faith, so that we can testify to the Evangelic truth for which Saint Columban worked ‘tirelessly’ until his death”. All Irish bishops who have been honoring my parish – where it all started - with their presence since the year 2000, find it difficult to pronounce the Italian equivalent of ‘tirelessly’, which is ‘instancabilmente’. But this adverb is the best in describing the tireless and unstoppable work this Irish abbot carried out.

This is my wish to you, my dear Irishmen: may you take inspiration from your fellow countryman, who has made Europe great. May you be like him in his energy, and may you recognize the fact that after 14 centuries he is still restless. Rather, through his spiritual children, his work in defending and promoting timeless values, which the world needs so badly, ‘tirelessly’ continues.

²³ GIONA, *Vita di San Colombano*, Abbazia San Benedetto, Seregno 2001, 38.

²⁴ See Lettera Pastorale del Santo Padre Benedetto XVI ai cattolici d'Irlanda del 19 marzo 2010.