

Pope Reviews Career of St. Columbanus

(By MGR. ENRICO PUCCI, Rome Correspondent, N.C.W.C.)

The following is the Papal Brief addressed by his Holiness to Cardinal Ehrle, Legate *a latere* to the celebration of the 13th century of St. Columban at Bobbio, in which Pope Pius extols the virtues of the saint at whose tomb it was read:

Our Beloved Son. Greetings and Apostolic Blessing.

Since it is the custom to renew at certain intervals the memory of those who have gained eternal glory (and would that all should attain it), it is fitting, now that the opportunity has arisen, that we should call to mind with grateful heart the name and deeds of St. Columbanus the 13th centenary of whose death occurred during the war. Columbanus has a place among those great and extraordinary men whom Divine Providence gives us in times of crises to save us from ruin. It was through the special design of God that he succeeded, as it were, to St. Benedict, for he was born at about the same time that the patriarch of the monks began to enjoy eternal life. God has indeed given St. Benedict and his monks a vaster field to work in—a field that embraces far the largest part of Western Europe. Even the very regions which had been cultivated by Columbanus entered later almost by inheritance into the possession of the Benedictines.

Yet wide flung were the countries in which this illustrious son of Ireland poured forth his zeal and his labors. As the studies of the learned shed a clearer light upon the Middle Ages, it becomes all the more manifest that the rebirth of Christian knowledge and civilisation in various parts of France, Germany, and Italy was due to the labors and zeal of Columbanus. In this he showed the greatness, especially of Catholic Ireland. Many traces of pagan superstition remained among the customs of those regions, and the many invasions of the barbarians had clouded men's minds with error and brutalised their hearts. Christian civilisation has almost collapsed and the glory of the arts which are the ornament of civil life seemed to be gone forever. It is marvellous how Ireland, justly called the Island of the Saints, and no less justly the home of the arts and the sciences, shone forth amid the darkness and the clouds of those days in her love of religion and civilisation. History tells us that the deep recesses of her valleys and forests echoed with the prayers and the work of her hermits and that there arose numerous monasteries which stood as so many schools of sanctity and, for those times, of perfect learning in every branch of knowledge. Thither eager young men hurried to learn literature and science.

Migration of Columbanus.

Excellently prepared in the various branches of learning, trained in the virtues under the holy discipline of Cungallius and burning with the desire to accomplish great deeds—and those were times which required his zeal—Columbanus, accompanied by a few associates, abandoned his fatherland and commenced those successive migrations from Ireland which down through the centuries have brought benefits innumerable to so many peoples.

He labored first in France. Renewing there the discipline of Bangor, he established monasteries first at Annegray, then at Luxeuil, and last at Fontaine. Among these the monastery of Luxeuil is the most celebrated for the number of its monks and its regular observance of the rule so that it came to be considered the chief seminary for the priests of France, and the principal centre of the conversion which was accomplished in the religious life and the political institutions and customs of the people. While Columbanus seemed perhaps too fiery according to the genius of his race in imposing discipline in France, yet according to the testimony of Iona, he restored again the "medicine of penance and the love of mortification" which for some time had fallen into disuse. Yet it was not his fiery nature, but his virtue, that caused his expulsion from the confines of Burgundy. For having vigorously rebuked as a duty of conscience the vices of the court, he was torn from the embraces of his beloved brethren and was forced to change his country and abandon the harvest now ripening through his labors. God permitted him, however, to show his fervor and his love in another country.

As an exile with his followers from Ireland, he was obliged to pass from one region to another. On this pilgrimage he met at Maux Burgondofora a woman who afterwards founded the Convent of Marmoutiers, which followed his rule. At Bregenz, on the Lake of Constance, where, in search of solitude, he remained for a time, he underwent incredible sufferings, was subjected to all sorts of privations and was looked upon with hatred by those inhabitants of the country who were still given over to idolatry. While he was planning there new journeys and thinking of converting to Jesus Christ through the preaching of the Gospel, the Slav peoples of the Norico and Pannonia, the way was opened to him to enter Italy. Toward Italy he had long been drawn as by instinct, for it was in the design of Divine Providence that Italy should receive the last and ripest fruits of his labors and merits. His grief was great in starting upon this journey, for Gallus, his best beloved follower, would not come with him in spite of all his prayers, but would stay to preach the Gospel there.

Thus not without regret, this holy man, now grown old, went to Milan. There by the intercession of the pious Theodolinda, who made him forget the unpleasant memory of Bruenhilde, he obtained through the generosity of King Agilulf a site well adapted to build a monastery. Losing no time, he set to work with so much courage that he not only directed the construction of the monastery, but even helped the workers, though he was growing old, and carried great weights through the steep mountain passes. He was not permitted however, to see the monastery completed, for during the following year he was called to his heavenly reward. To his disciples whom he left in great numbers and whom he had animated with his own spirit, he entrusted the duty of completing the work he had started.

The Beginnings of Bobbio.

Using all their resources his followers established the great Monastery of Bobbio, which was so celebrated for its nurturing of penance and the other Christian virtues and for its learning that it enjoyed a fame for many centuries in Northern Italy equal to that of Monte Cassino. The library at Bobbio will never be forgotten by the learned for having saved from ruin so many and such priceless monuments to literature. Formed at the beginning of precious relics from the more ancient libraries and, above all, as some maintained, from the library which Cassiodorus had brought together for the use of his Vivarese Monastery, the library was increased by the daily toil and industry of the monks (thanks to which the *Scriptorium Bobbienes* is so much esteemed), and by the gifts of pious men, among whom the famous Dungal deserves special mention. So rich became the library that when during later adversities the celebrated monastery had declined many Italian and foreign libraries secured from it conspicuous additions. In this regard we owe much to Paul V. and Frederick Borromeo, Cardinal Archbishop of Milan, our predecessor, who in the Vatican Library and in the Ambrosian Library preserved great numbers of the Bobbian Codes with the greatest care and vigilance.

If there are people who should preserve and religiously cultivate the memory of St. Columbanus they are, above all, the citizens of Bobbio, who owe everything to him. In him they have not only the author of their name and fame, but the founder as well of their city, and their principal patron before God. There is no one who does not know that the valley through which the River Bobbio flows was a wild and deserted land before St. Columbanus came, which no one penetrated except to gather wood and hunt the wild beasts. This was indeed the reason why this lover of solitude chose it as his dwelling. From the time, however, when the Monastery of Columbanus was built it underwent a change and houses and villages sprang up until finally it became an episcopal city. It is therefore fitting that the people of Bobbio, spurred on especially by our Venerable Brother Pietro, the Bishop, after having restored the vault in which St. Columbanus, with 26 of his holy disciples, lies buried, should prepare with great care to celebrate with splendor of ceremony the solemnity of his death.

We wish to make this solemn feast still more august and more fruitful through the power of our apostolic authority, especially so as to show how much we venerate this