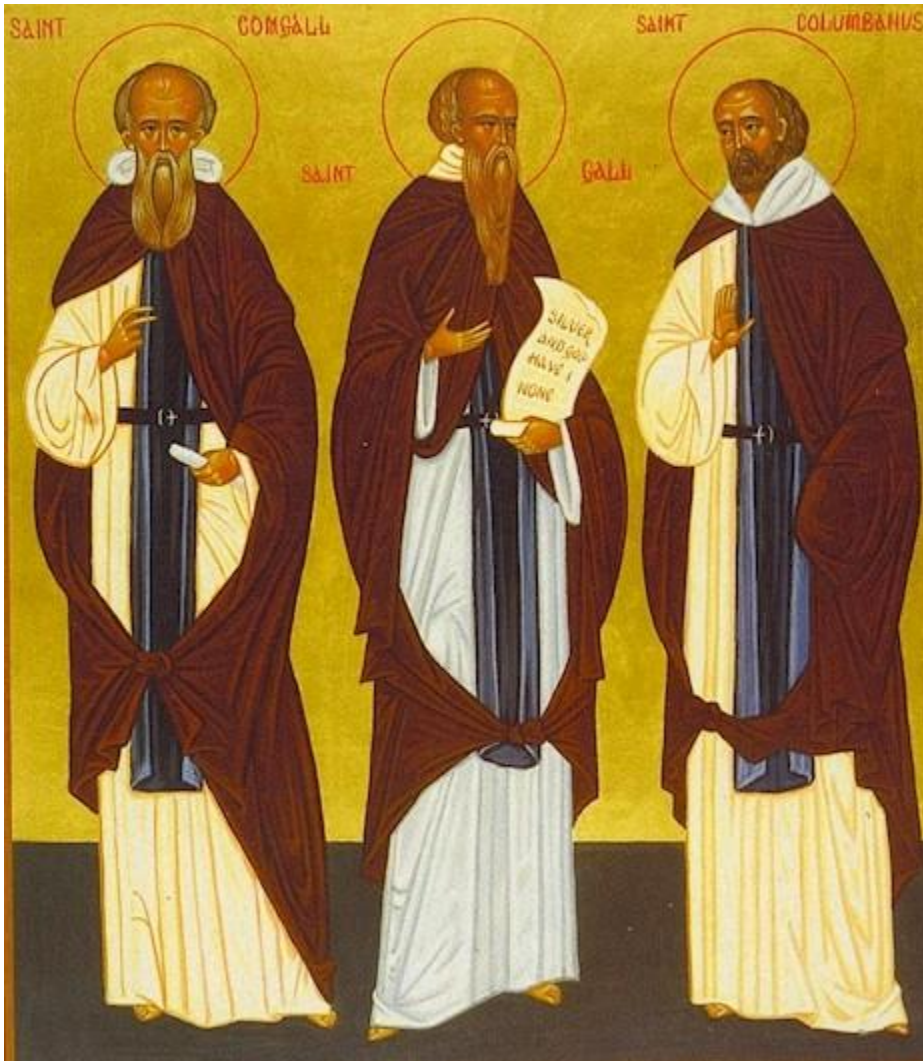


St Comgall of Bangor



Saints Comgall - Gall - Columbanus

ST.COMGALL, who founded the great school of Bangor, and is not greatly celebrated for his own learning, was the founder of a school which of all others seems to have exercised the widest influence both at home and abroad by means of the great scholars which it produced. Bangor and Armagh were by excellence the great Northern schools, just as Clonard was the school of Meath, Glendaloch of Leinster, Lismore of Munster, and Clonmacnoise and Mayo of Connaught. For it must be borne in mind that Clonmacnoise was founded by St. Kieran from Roscommon, that he was the patron saint of Connaught, and that until a comparatively recent period it formed a portion of the Western Ecclesiastical Province.

The influence of the other schools however was mainly felt at home, or to some extent in England, Scotland, and Germany; but the influence of Bangor was felt in France, and

Switzerland, and Italy, and not only in ancient times but down to the present day. There are great names amongst the Missionaries who have gone from other monastic schools in Ireland to preach the Gospel abroad, but if we except St. Columba who was trained at many schools in Ireland, there are no other names so celebrated as St. Columbanus the founder of Luxeil and Bobbio, and St. Gall who has given his name to an equally celebrated Monastery and Canton in Switzerland. It is, then, highly interesting and instructive to trace the origin and influence of this famous Irish school.

St. Comgall, the founder of Bangor, was a native of the territory anciently called Boirche or Mourne in the County Antrim, a district to the north of Belfast Lough opposite to the place where he afterwards founded his Monastery. There is some difference of opinion as to the exact date of his birth, and indeed as to the length of his life, although all admit that he died in the year 600 or 601.

He seems to have been during his life from boyhood to old age a friend and companion of St. Columcille, and hence if we accept the length of his life given by the Bollandists as eighty years we may fix his birth at about 520 which was also the date, or near it, of Columcille's birth. Comgallus the name by which he was baptized has been frequently explained to signify the lucky pledge 'faustum pignus' because he was a child of benediction, the only son of his parents, and born too when they were advanced in years. As usual in the case of our Irish saints, several prodigies are said to have taken place both before and shortly after his birth. His father was Sedna a small chief of the district then known as Dalaradia or Dalaray, his mother was a devout matron called Briga, who is said to have been warned before his birth to retire from the world because her offspring was destined in future days to become a great saint of God. These pious parents took him to be baptized by a blind old priest called Fehlim, who knew however, by heart, the proper method of administering the Sacrament of Baptism. There being no water at hand a miraculous stream burst forth from the soil, and the old priest feeling the presence of the divine influence washed his face in the stream, and at once recovered his sight, after which he baptized the child and gave him the appropriate name of Comgall. This is only one of the numberless miracles recorded in the two lives of St. Comgall given by the Bollandists, but it will be unnecessary for our purpose to refer to them in detail.

The boy in his youth was sent to work in the fields and seems to have assisted his parents with great alacrity in all their domestic concerns. When he grew up a little more he was sent to learn the Psalms and other divine hymns from a teacher in the neighbourhood whose precepts were much better than his example. The young child of grace, however, was not led away from the path of virtue, on the contrary he seems in his own boyish way to have given gentle hints to his teacher that his life was not what it ought to be. On one occasion, for instance, Comgall rolled his coat in the mud and coming before his master, the latter said to him, "Is it not a shame to soil your coat so?" "Is it not a greater shame," replied Comgall, "for any one to soil his soul and body by sin?" The teacher took the hint and was silent; but the lesson was unheeded, and so the holy youth resolved to seek elsewhere a holier preceptor.

This was about the year 545. At that time a young and pre-eminently holy man named Fintan had established a monastery at a place called Cluain-edneach, now Clonenagh, quite near Mountrath in the Queen's County. The fame of this infant monastery had spread far and wide over the face of the land; for although in many places in those days of holiness there was strict rule, and poor fare, and rigid life, yet Fintan of Clonenagh seems to have been the strictest and poorest and most rigid of them all. He would not allow even a cow to be kept for the use of his monks consequently they had no milk, no butter; neither had they eggs, nor cheese, nor fat, nor flesh of any kind. They had a little corn, and herbs, and plenty of water near at hand, for the bogs and marshes round their monastic cells were frequently flooded by the many tributaries of the infant Nore coming down from the slopes of the Slieve-bloom mountains. They had plenty of hard work too in the fields tilling the barren soil, and in the woods cutting down timber for the buildings of the monastery as well as for firewood, and then drawing it home in loads on their backs or dragging it after them over the uneven soil. The discipline of this monastery was so severe and the food of the monks so wretched that the neighbouring saints thought it prudent to come and beg the Abbot Fintan to relax a little of the extreme severity of his discipline, which was more than human nature could endure. The Abbot though unwilling to relax his own fearful austerities in the least, consented at the earnest prayer of St. Canice to modify the severity of his discipline to some extent for the others, and they were no doubt not unwilling to get the relaxation. It speaks well for the love of holy penance shown by these young Christians of Ireland that in spite of its severe discipline this monastery was crowded with holy inmates from all parts of the country, and amongst the rest came Comgall from his far-off Dalaradian home to become a disciple of this school of labour and penance.

He remained a considerable time under the guidance of the holy Fintan, the Benedict of our Irish Church, who, although his "senior" or superior in religion, was probably about his own age in years. There is little doubt that it was from Fintan, Comgall learned those lessons of humility and obedience which, as we know from his rule and from his disciples, he afterwards taught with so much effect to others. His teacher then advised him to return to his own country, and propagate amongst his kindred in Dalaray the lessons of virtue which he had learned at Clonenagh.

Hitherto it seems Comgall had received no holy orders. He was a monk and a perfect one, of mature age too, but in his great humility he had hitherto declined the responsibilities of the priesthood. Now, however, he resolved to pay a visit to Clonmacnoise, which is not very far to the north-west of Clonenagh. Its holy founder Kieran was scarcely alive at this time, for he died in 548 ; but then and long after the fame of the school was great, and crowds of holy men were attracted to its Avails. Here Comgall was induced to receive the priesthood from the holy Bishop Lugadius, and after a short stay he returned northward to his own country. This was probably about 550, or perhaps a little later.

Some authorities place the foundation of Bangor at this time; but it must be understood only in a very qualified sense at this early date. Comgall was now, indeed, a famous saint himself, and likely enough companions came to place themselves under his spiritual guidance. But we are expressly told that for some time after his return he went about

preaching the Gospel to the people, especially amongst his own kith and kin, and in all probability this took place before he established his monastery at least on any permanent footing at Bangor. But the holy man longed for the solitary life, and so we are told that he retired to an island in Lough Erin, called *Insula Custodiaria*, or, as we should now say, Jail Island, and there he practised such austerities that seven of the brethren who accompanied him died of cold and hunger. He was then induced to relax his penances and fastings; and shortly after, it seems at the earnest prayer of his friends, he was again persuaded to leave Jail Island and return to Dalaray. This was about the year 559, which seems to be the most probable date of the founding of Bangor, although the Four Masters fix it so early as 552.

Bangor is very beautifully situated. It is about seven miles from Belfast, on the southern shore of Belfast Lough, in the county Down, and may be reached either by rail or steamer. It commands a fine view of Carrickfergus on the opposite shore of the bay, with the bold cliffs of Black Head further seaward; to the right across the narrow sea the bleak bluffs of Galloway are distinctly visible, and far away due north in the dim distance the Mull of Cantire frowns over a wild and restless sea. We saw this fair scene on a fine day last June, when the sun lit up the steeples of Carrickfergus, and glanced brightly over the transparent waters, so deeply and purely blue, whose wavelets played amongst the bare quartzite rocks, and we felt that if the old monks who chose Bangor to be their home loved God they loved nature also. Most of all they loved the great sea ; it was for them the most vivid image of God ; in its anger, its beauty, its power, its immensity, they felt the presence, and they saw, though dimly, the glory of the Divine Majesty. It was on the shore of this beautiful bay sheltered from the south-western winds, but open to the north-east, that Comgall built his little church and cell. Crowds of holy men, young and old, soon gathered round him; they, too, without much labour built themselves little cells of timber or wattles ; the whole was then surrounded by a spacious fosse and ditch, which was their enclosure, and thus the establishment became complete. If St. Bernard in his *Life of St. Malachy* was rightly informed, it is clear that there were no stone buildings in ancient Bangor before the time of St. Malachy; and even he when restoring the place with a few of his companions only built a small oratory of wood which was finished in a few days.

Not its buildings, however, but its saints and its scholars, were the glory of Bangor. St. Columba from his home in Iona came more than once with some of his followers to visit Comgall and his good monks. On one of these occasions one of the brothers died during the voyage, and the corpse at first was left in the boat whilst the monks with Columba went to the monastery. Comgall received them with great delight, washed their feet, and on asking if all had come in, Columba said one brother remained in the boat. The holy man Comgall going down in haste to fetch the brother found him dead, and perhaps thinking it might have happened through his neglect, besought the Lord, and calling upon the monk to rise up and come to his brothers, the dead man obeyed. Walking to the monastery Comgall perceived that he was blind in one eye, and telling him to wash his face in the stream that still flows down to the sea from the church, he did so, and at once recovered his sight. So Comgall brought back the brother from the grave, and moreover restored to him his eyesight. In this age of ours we are apt to smile at such miracles as

these, because ours is not an age of faith ; and the incredulity of the world around us make us incredulous also. Yet our Saviour said to his disciples (Luke xvii. v. 6), " If you had faith like to a grain of mustard seed, you might say to this mulberry tree, be thou rooted up, and be thou transplanted into the sea, and it would obey you." I doubt if any of our Irish saints ever did anything apparently so foolish as this, yet even this they could do in the greatness of their faith. St. Comgall paid a return visit to Columba, and it is said that he even founded a church in the Island of Heth, now called Tíree, one of the western isles to the north of Iona. He also accompanied Columba in the famous visit which he paid to King Brude, the Pictish King, who, at the approach of the saints, shut himself up in his fortress on the shore of the river Inverness. But Columba signed the sign of the cross, and the barred doors flew open in the name of Christ ; and the pagan King of the Picts, fearing with a great fear, allowed the saints to preach the Gospel to his subjects.

A man so famous for holiness and miracles, soon attracted great crowds to Bangor. St. Bernard, in his life of St. Malachy, says that "this noble institution was inhabited by many thousands of monks." Joceline, of Furness, a writer of the twelfth century, says that " Bangor was a fruitful vine breathing the odour of salvation, and that its offshoots extended not only over all Ireland, but far beyond the seas into foreign countries, and filled many lands with its abounding fruitfulness." In the time of the Danes we are told on the authority of St. Bernard, that nine hundred monks of Bangor were slain by these pirates an appalling slaughter, but not at all an unusual, much less an incredible massacre for the North men to perpetrate. The second life given by the Bollandists says distinctly that in the various cells and monasteries under his care, Comgall had no less than three thousand monks; but this, it seems, is to be understood of all his disciples in other monasteries as well.

Amongst these disciples besides St. Columbanus and his companions, of whom we shall presently speak, were Lua, called also Mo-Lua, the founder of Clonfert-Molua, now Clonfert-Maloe, in the Queen's County, and St. Cartagh founder of the great school of Lismore, which became almost as famous as Bangor itself. Luanus, from Bangor, who seems to be the same as Molua, is said by St. Bernard to have founded a hundred monasteries a statement that seems somewhat exaggerated. Even kings gave up their crowns and came to Bangor to live as humble monks under the blessed Comgall.

Special mention is made of Cormac, King of Hy-Bairrche, in Northern Leinster. That prince had been freed from the fetters in which he was held by the King of Hy-Kinselagh at the earnest intercession of St. Fintan of Clonenagh. Before his death, however, he retired to Bangor, and in spite of great temptations to return to the world, he persevered to the end in the service of God under the care of Comgall, to whom he gave large domains in Leinster for the endowment of religious houses. Comgall, according to some authorities, ruled over Bangor for fifty years, others say for thirty, which is more likely to be true, and died on the 10th of May, at his own monastery of Bangor, in the midst of his children, after he had received the Viaticum from the hands of St. Fiacra of Conwall, in Donegal, who was divinely inspired to visit the dying saint and administer to him the last rites of the Church. His blessed body was afterwards enclosed by the same Fiacra, in a shrine adorned with gold and precious stones, which subsequently became the spoil of the

Danish pirates. That literature, both sacred and profane, was successfully cultivated at Bangor, will be made evident from the writings of the great scholars whom it produced, even during the life-time of its blessed founder. Humility and obedience, however, were even more dearly prized than learning. It was a rule amongst the monks that when any person was rebuked by another at Bangor, whether justly or not, he immediately prostrated himself on the ground in token of submission. They bore in mind that word of the Gospel, "If one strike thee on the right cheek, turn also to him the other." But the career of the great Columbanus will prove that when there was question of denouncing crime against God, or adhering to the traditions of the holy founders of the Irish Church, the monks of Bangor were men of invincible firmness, who felt the full force of the apostolic maxim we must obey God rather than man. In the question of celebrating Easter according to their ancient usage this firmness bordered on pertinacity; but it was excusable seeing that it sprung from no schismatical spirit, but from a conscientious adhesion to the ancient practice of the Church of St. Patrick.

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