**As Europe risks fracturing, the message of St Columbanus needs to be heard again**

**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**

* The following opinion piece was written by Bishop Denis Nulty of Kildare and Leighlin for *The Irish Times* on Sunday, 13 July, 2025.

Speaking during his weekly papal audience on 11 June 2008,Pope Benedict XVI described Saint Columbanus as “the best known Irishman of the early Middle Ages”.  But it is in the interest of all ages that his life’s work is known of, and celebrated.

Columbanus was the first to coin the phrase “totius Europae” (of all Europe), which appeared in one of his letters written around 600AD to Pope Gregory the Great, showing then, that it was possible to be Irish, Frankish, Spanish or German while also sharing a common European identity. That a son of Carlow, our Columbanus, would have such vision and foresight over 1400 hundred years ago is quite astonishing.

And some of the fruits of this vision are apparent in the current exhibition at the National Museum in Dublin, entitled, ‘Words on the Wave: Ireland and Saint Gallen in Early Medieval Europe.’  This remarkable showcase offers an opportunity to unravel the early medieval journeys of Columbanus, Gall and other monks who travelled to Europe, and to discover what inspired their journey and their mission through manuscripts and other memorabilia of the time. Thisexhibition is hosted as a collaboration between the National Museum, and Stiftsbezirk, Saint Gallen, the Abbey Library of Saint Gall.

I had the pleasure of visiting the Abbey Library in July 2023 as part of the XXIV Columbanus Day when it was hosted in Saint Gallen, and having a guided tour by the library’s director Dr Cornel Dora. I remember being intrigued by these Irish manuscripts. I wondered at the genius of these saints, their giftedness with words and how these words have passed through the generations. I recall the glass cases that were home to gospel texts, Latin grammar books – with corrections by monks written in Irish along the margins! – and parchments telling of particular celestial events, observed by the monks,for instance a solar eclipse and the appearance of Halley’s Comet as far back as August 989AD.

It was in Saint Gallen during the XXIV Columbanus Day celebrations that the Columban Charter of Partnership was signed by representatives from cultural, social and religious groups across the countries that make up the Columban Waytoday, a pathway that follows the footsteps of Columbanus and others. These countries include Ireland, Britain, France, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Liechtensteinand Italy. The Charter is an agreement to develop pilgrim routes, trails and circuits, to map out the entire Columban Way, and to develop religious and cultural tourism.

The annual Columbanus Day celebrations is one such way of giving life to this partnership and promoting the ideals of Columbanus expressed in his letters and sermons; ideals that speak to the issues of the environment, climate change and inter-faith dialogue. It is the privilege for Carlow, and for the diocese of Kildare & Leighlin, to host this year’s celebrations, the XXVI iteration, which ran from 11 July and conclude today.

In a Europe that risks more fracturing at this time, with hostilities on so many fronts, and a much more polarisedpolemic, the message of Columbanus needs to be heard once again.

It is in this context that we hosted this year’s Columbanus celebrations in Carlow which saw pilgrims attending from the four corners of Ireland and throughout Europe.  It was uplifting to hear of Ireland’s contribution to the birth of Europe from Dáibhí Ó Cróinín of the University of Galway, as well as witness the launch of an exhibition supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs, themed, ‘Ireland and the Birth of Europe.’  This was complemented by a symposium on creation, taking inspiration from the first sermon of Columbanus, If You want to know the Creator, understand Creation. An ecumenical Evensong in the Adelaide Memorial Church in Myshall, Co Carlow, in the presence of the relic of Saint Columbanus, took place in advance of a pilgrim procession with the relic to the Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, Myshall, appropriately reflecting the collaborative character of Columbanus.

This spirit of walking together was also captured yesterday in our nine-kilometre pilgrimage of the Columban Way, from Columbanus’ Cairn on the Nine Stones to the village of Myshall, his reputed place of birth. This wonderful collective undertaking was underscored by former President Mary McAleese, who spoke on ‘Columbanus, the Man from Myshall’, followed by a concert in Carlow Cathedral, ‘Praise Resounds – Echoes of the past, hope for the future.’

As this morning’s Mass in Carlow Cathedral to honour the XXVI Columbanus Day concluded the 2025 European gathering, preparations in another diocese, in another country, are already underway to prepare for the XXVII Columbanus Day. And so the cycle of Columbanus celebrations, called for in the Columban Charter of Partnership, continues.

Our new Pope Leo XIV, in a message for our XXVI Columbanus Day celebrations here in Carlow, remindedparticipants that Saint Columbanus can “still teach our world today about how love of God and neighbour requires us to care for creation and to cultivate our souls in the theological virtues, for every aspect of our world reflects in some way the grandeur and goodness of its divine maker.”  This is another way of saying that the message of Saint Columbanus is as relevant in 2025 as it was fourteen centuries ago.

Is Columbanus as well-known as he should be? Perhaps these July days are an ideal opportunity to reintroduce thisEuropean giant of the Middle Ages once again to the place where he was born, to the area where he was raised and to the people he left behind. Without Myshall, the birthplace of Columbanus, there would be no Saint Gallen, Luxeuil or Bobbio, and the totius Europae vision may never havecrystalised.

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