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COLUMBA SAILS EAST

by Columba Bruce Clark

You say you are Orthodox? And *what* did you say your baptismal name was? I am a Northern Irish convert to Orthodoxy who regularly finds himself working and going to church in places which are much closer to the traditional heartland of eastern Christianity. So I am often asked, by gingerly Greeks or sceptical Serbs, about my path to Orthodoxy and in particular my patronal saint. When I give the answer, the scepticism sometimes deepens. And so – if the conversation is worth pursuing at all – I find myself attempting to explain the Christian heritage of the place where I grew up, and my own relationship to that place. Sometimes people are interested; sometimes I can watch their eyes glaze over. But since my story is the story of many western Orthodox Christians, I shall try telling it in print.

When I had the joy of being received into the Orthodox Church just over seven years ago, I took the name of Columba, the saint of Ireland and enlightener of Scotland. The process whereby priest and catechumen settle on a name is always a mysterious one; but in my case the decision to accept the name and seek the protecting guidance of Columba seemed to accord well with my own cultural origins; and also with the calling I had felt, however dimly, to another Kingdom, in which all national and cultural differences are set aside.

I was brought up in the north of Ireland, in a family of keen seafarers; the north and northwestern coasts of Ireland, and the Western Isles of Scotland, were the locus of my childhood. While my father and brother had a fascination with the business of boating itself – sails, winds, tides, charts, naviga-



St. Columba's Bay, Iona, where the monks landed.

tional aids and so on – I was always more interested in the places we sailed to, and the way they spoke there. From my earliest consciousness I was intrigued with words, written or spoken, in almost any tongue; one of my clearest boyhood memories is of sailing to small Scottish islands and trying out my few phrases of self-taught Gaelic on bemused shopkeepers and postmen. These islands, the stepping-stones between Scotland and Ireland, were the country of Columba, who stands out among the saints as a navigator and a scribe: a gifted boat-handler and master of the written and spoken word who wrote poetry himself, was an accomplished calligrapher and mastered Latin as well as his native Gaelic. He made many voyages through this stretch of water, but one journey in particular has always been regarded as the great turning-point in his life: the one he made in or around 563 AD, when he left his native Ireland and set out with a dozen companions to establish a monastery on the tiny island of Iona. He lived for another 34 years on the island; by the time he reposed in great holiness in 597 AD, the monastery had become one of the leading centres of Christian asceticism and learning in western Europe. Columba's spiritual children continued to train kings,



Martyr's Bay, Iona.

produce beautiful manuscripts and above all worship God for another two centuries, before the community was wiped out by the Vikings.

As an Orthodox catechumen, I remembered at least these elementary facts of Columba's life because of a landmark event in my own family history: in 1963, when I was just four, my father skippered and led an Anglican Church project which recreated the saint's voyage from Ireland to Scotland, in a small wood-framed sailing and rowing-boat. As far as possible, the vessel was designed to resemble the craft which Columba would have used; it was a kind of boat known as a curragh, lined with leather, canvas, and tar, which Irish fishermen were still using in the 20th century. At one level, the 1963 voyage had been a boisterous and enjoyable historical pageant; but at another level, I knew, it had been a deep spiritual experience for all the participants. Whenever I heard my father and other veterans of the voyage reminisce about the experience, I realized it had been a pilgrimage as well as a sailing-trip. So for all those reasons, it was a great and awesome privilege for me to receive the sacraments under the name of Columba and to seek Columba's protection in my daily prayers.



"Let not the Old Glen be harmed, The place of the slabs of heaven" - St Columba.



Then, as my gushing convert's enthusiasm waned a little, I ran into a difficulty in my Orthodox life: or rather two, inter-related difficulties. One was that as I travelled round the traditionally Orthodox countries – Russia, Georgia, the Balkans – I ran into a wall of popular scepticism about the legitimacy of western saints, even pre-schism ones, as Orthodox baptismal names. “No, there must have been some mistake, you can't have been baptised properly,” I was told more than once. In reply, I would rehearse the well-known (and perfectly correct) arguments: Columba and the other great saints of the early Christian West are part of the common heritage of the undivided Church, and so they have a well-deserved place among the treasures of Orthodoxy. But for good reason, people from the old Orthodox world are reluctant to be taught new tricks by upstart converts from strange countries; so more than once I found myself put down rather sharply. The other difficulty I encountered was with western Christians: “We know the Roman Catholics have an interest in the early Celtic Church,” they would say, “and so do the Scottish Presbyterians and the Anglicans – but what possible connection can there be between Gaelic saints like Columba and the eastern Orthodox?”



Glencolumbcille – the glen is named after St Columba and is the site of one of his monastic settlements

So to satisfy both schools of questioners – the eastern and the western – I found myself asking, at times rather desperately: where, if anywhere, is the *Orthodox* Saint Columba? I clutched rather feverishly, and gratefully, at any straws of reassurance I could find. It was a joy to find that *Alpha i Omega*, a Russian quarterly journal published in Moscow with the blessing of the Patriarch, had featured a very competent article on Saint Columba in 1997; and better still to discover a good little book on Columba and the Celtic saints written in Greek by Thanasis Papathanasiou. It was comforting to hear of several Orthodox priests, and at least one nun, with the name of Columba.

Even more important was the discovery of the various connecting threads between Christianity on Europe's western fringe and the early Christian East. For example, I came across the beautiful Gaelic hymn of praise to Saint Columba, written very shortly after his repose, which describes him as a great follower of Saints Basil the Great and John Cassian. The latter saint, as I remembered, was a great teacher of the Egyptian and Palestinian monastic tradition to the Christian West; it made perfect sense that Columba was, at

least indirectly, his spiritual child. Then people pointed out to me the uncanny resemblances between the stone carving and illuminations of the Celtic world and the art of Christian Egypt or Armenia. I also heard of the tantalizing references to “a vine transplanted from Egypt” or to “seven monks from Egypt” in the surviving fragments of liturgical language from early Christian Ireland. Then there was the fact that Columba's saintly biographer Adomnan was quite an authority on the sacred geography of the Christian East. With the help of a wandering priest who washed up on Iona's shore, Adomnan penned a remarkable account of Christian Jerusalem during the early years after the Arab conquest. Adomnan was an excellent linguist whose Latin was peppered with Greek-derived words. So for all these reasons, it seemed entirely legitimate, after all, for an Orthodox Christian to try walking, however inadequately, in Columba's giant foot-steps.

But is Orthodoxy simply one among many competitors for a slice of the Columba heritage? Reading the ecclesiastical history of the British Isles in the 19th century, you can trace the almost comical way in which one



The incised crosses at Glencolumbcille show a clear eastern mediterranean influence.

Christian denomination after another tried to lay claim to the saintly enlightener of Scotland. Roman Catholics tried to proclaim Columba as a loyal servant of the Pope, while the non-conformists stressed the differences of practice between Rome and the early Celtic Church, making the saint into an early anti-Papist hero. In the 20th century, a charismatic Presbyterian churchman, George McLeod, founded a community on Columba's island which modelled itself on the saint's gritty practicality: it was supposed to combine religious practice with engagement with the problems of the world at its most sordid and grimy. Since then, the Iona community has become inter-denominational and, from an Orthodox perspective, far more political than spiritual. There is also an Anglican retreat house on the island and as of quite recently, a Roman Catholic one. So are the Orthodox, who have been organizing pilgrimages to Iona since 1997, simply johnnies-come-lately who want to plant their own flag on Columba's Iona, along with all the others? And where do the Orthodox stand in the contest between many different constituencies (by no means all religious) to claim a piece of Columba's heritage? Ecologists call him an early green, Scottish nationalists call him a proto-patriot, feminists see him and the Celtic Church as pioneers of gender equality. So does it make sense, then, for an Orthodox Christian to ask: which is "our bit" of Saint Columba?



Historical marker of St. Columba's birthplace, Gartan, Northern Ireland.

In the end, it is only the saint himself who can answer that question. Reading the Life of Columba, a vivid and often intensely moving narrative penned about a hundred years after his repose, many things are strange, and many are uncannily familiar to an Orthodox Christian. The world in which he lived could hardly be more different from our own. The Celtic lands had never been part of the Roman empire; there were no roads, no towns, no money, no stone buildings or monuments. There was perpetual warfare between petty tribal leaders, and life had a high probability of ending violently. Every sea voyage had a good chance of ending in shipwreck. A chance



St. Oran's Chapel, Iona. 12th century.

encounter with another human being was an occasion of deadly danger, rather than mild curiosity.

So the external circumstances in which Columba lived are so far removed from our own – even if we live in one of the planet's wilder corners – that we can hardly imagine them. But reread his life, and there are moments which are so close to the ongoing Orthodox tradition of asceticism that they might have been written yesterday – or any other time in the last 2,000 years. Above all, Columba was gifted with a mixture of compassion and discernment which cut across the barriers of time, space, life and death – in very much the same way as the contemporary elders of the Greek church, such as Fathers Porphyrios and Iakovos. From his cell on Iona, Columba was aware of the fellow monastics who were in peril on the sea hundreds of miles away; of a pregnant woman in Ireland who was undergoing the pains of labour; and of the spiritual war being waged over the souls of the newly departed. This was no clairvoyant trick, it was a gift which flowed naturally from his own spiritual struggles to free himself from the sins of pride and self-centredness and hence to share the travails of others, both far and near.

Columba was endowed with what we call *pro-oratikotita* in Greek and *pro-zorlivost* in Russian: an acutely developed sense of the spiritual destiny of the people around him – where they stood in relation to God, and what they must do to repair that relationship. The fruits of his spiritual struggle were manifested in all manner of physical signs which would seem weird or incredible to many western Christians but perfectly familiar in the Christian East: these included the divine, radiating light in which his body was bathed and the fragrant scents that signified his presence, even when he was physically far away, and above all, the palpable reality of his communion with angels, both during his life and after his repose.

This is what an Irish holy man, hundreds of miles away from Iona, experienced on the night of Columba's passing: "In the hour of his blessed going, I saw his island of Iona. Though I have never been there in the flesh, yet in the Spirit I could see it, bathed in the bright light of angels. And all the air and sky above even to the heavenly ether was filled with the radiance of the countless angels sent down from heaven to carry home his soul. I heard the most sweet songs of the angelic hosts singing on high in the



Bruce Clark

very moment when his soul departed and was carried among choirs of angels." The account is both breathtaking and yet entirely familiar to anyone who is versed in the literature of sainthood and spiritual warfare in the East.

So is that it then? Simply put, the answer is yes: while the greens celebrate Columba as a friend of nature, and the Presbyterians call him an adversary of the Pope, the Orthodox claim is precisely to Columba the Saint – because ultimately there may be nothing we can understand about Columba, except his sainthood. Such a statement could – and perhaps often does – make the Orthodox insufferably arrogant and condescending towards others: lucky old us, silly old them for not seeing the point. But if we do respond in that way, we

too are missing the point even more fundamentally. Columba's sainthood begins with his humility: his renunciation of worldly power as a tribal leader in his native Ireland, and his willingness to place himself unconditionally in the Power of Christ. As Orthodox we probably have less excuse than others for failing to see that; because of the insights into the nature of sainthood that our tradition bears, we will be held to a higher standard. If we were truly worthy to carry Columba's name, we would hardly need to engage in arguments with anyone about his heritage and significance; our witness would speak for itself.

That is what I try to tell my Serbian or Georgian or Lebanese friends when they challenge me about my saint; but I am not a good enough story-teller – and that is not merely a statement about my narrative or linguistic powers. ✚

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Pilgrims to St. Columba's Bay, Iona.