

Echoes of Blessed Columba Marmion in Ireland Today

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I have had a certain personal interest in the story of Blessed Columba Marmion since I, like him, was a priest of the Dublin diocese before joining a Benedictine monastery, not Maredsous, but the daughter house of Glenstal. In my diocesan days I was trained, and later taught, at Holy Cross College Clonliffe, was a resident at the Irish College in Rome (now moved to its current location on the Coelian Hill) and also had the pleasure of being chaplain to the Redemptoristine Sisters in Drumcondra. So I feel that I have walked in his footsteps, at least geographically, though perhaps the similarity ends there!

My first meeting with Blessed Columba was at the age of sixteen, when a copy of *Christ the Life of the Soul* was put into my hands. It seemed to speak about the spiritual life with a depth that I had never encountered before, but it was also difficult to digest. I must confess that I only read about thirty pages or so, and then gave up! A personal project of mine in this centenary year, is to produce a small book that outlines his spiritual teaching in a more accessible form for the average reader, commenting also on important ways of updating his ideas. Published by Veritas Publications, its title is *Becoming Human Becoming Divine: The Christian Life According to Blessed Columba Marmion*. A year after reading *Christ the Life of the Soul* I was acting organist in the Dublin city-centre church of St Andrew's, Westland Row. Only in later years did I discover that this was the church where Blessed Columba's parents were married.

My next encounter was as a seminarian at Holy Cross College, Clonliffe. I entered in 1983, and in that year one of the principal assembly rooms of

the college was named the « Marmion Room ». Students there heard a story about an intense spiritual experience that Blessed Columba had in one of the college rooms, though the details were vague. This year, that college finally closes completely because the number of seminarians is much reduced.

It is in Dundrum parish, where Blessed Columba ministered as a curate shortly after ordination, that we find his memory most alive. The Dom Marmion Society was founded there in 1969. Members of the society care for the elderly and the lonely in the Dundrum area, cheerfully and with compassion, as did their one-time curate in a previous century. This includes a variety of activities four days a week in the Dom Marmion House. Summer holidays and festive social gatherings feature during the year, as do visits to hospitals, nursing homes and private houses. The legacy of Blessed Columba is kept alive in a very practical way that I think must give him immense pleasure! Even a local bridge is named after him. As part of the centenary year celebrations, the Society hopes to pay a visit to the chapel at Edermine House, Co. Wexford where Blessed Columba and the novices of Maredsous took refuge during the First World War.

In 2018 the parish commissioned a new icon of Blessed Columba from the artist Mihai Cucu. Around the central figure of Blessed Columba himself are pictures of six Church buildings related to his life: St Paul's in Dublin, where he was baptised; St Agatha's in Rome where he was ordained; Holy Cross Church in Dundrum; Clonliffe College where he was both student and lecturer; Maredsous; and St Peter's at the Vatican where he was beatified. Other images representing the Trinity and the Mother of God relate to his teaching and his spirituality. The icon also includes a scriptural quotation: *For Me to Live is Christ*. The icon was blessed by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin on 30th September 2018 during a celebration of Evening Prayer. The occasion also offered the opportunity for a short presentation of the spiritual teaching of Blessed Columba.

The nearby parish of Ballally is of much more recent origin, and was opened in 1977. A visit to the parish church will reveal another icon of Blessed Columba. The link here is more human than geographical. The current parish priest of Ballally, Fr Jim Caffrey, worked for a number of years in the diocesan Catholic Youth Care, based at St Paul's Church Arran Quay, where Blessed Columba was baptised. Other diocesan appointments were in the Dundrum area where Blessed Columba also served, as well as the parish of St Columba, Iona Road, in which the monastery of St Alphonsus is located. His own godmother was baptised by Blessed Columba. An icon which he

had commissioned has travelled with him to its new location in Ballally. The parish has a mission statement for building hope: *Meditation and Service*. They have Blessed Columba as patron of the first, and Mary of Magdala as the second.

The death occurred in June 2021 of Tom Marmion who, with his wife Bernadette, had been engaged in ongoing research into the family background of Blessed Columba. Bernadette has continued the work by putting together the various pieces of evidence that help to clarify the picture of previous generations, especially on his mother's side. Tom had been a regular visitor to Maredsous. His ashes were buried at Glenstal Abbey.

I write these lines at Glenstal, where I receive requests for information, short articles and presentations about Blessed Columba. A portrait of him features in one of the side chapels of our monastery church. But he is also commemorated in the very title of our church and monastery: the monastery of Saints Joseph and Columba, the names given to him at his baptism and monastic profession respectively. Correspondence I receive here includes accounts of blessings and healings, some of which are quite remarkable, believed to have been received through his intercession, though none of the kind that would satisfy the rigorous conditions required for canonization. These include recovery of a young man from brain damage and the extraordinary success of brain surgery on a newborn infant, beyond all expectations. It appears that Blessed Columba does indeed intercede for those in need, but in a manner that is modest and tactful...

In The Company of the Blessed

Blessed Columba is not the only Irish person of recent memory whose sanctity has been officially recognised by the Church.

Saint Charles of Mount Argus was not, strictly speaking, an Irishman. Born in Holland in 1821, he ministered as a Passionist Priest in Dublin for twenty-eight years, beginning in 1857. Unlike Blessed Columba, he was not a good preacher, but was outstanding as a confessor, and known for gifts of healing. He died in 1893. He was canonised in 2007.

Blessed John Sullivan entered the Society of Jesus in 1900, four years after his conversion to Catholicism. His ministry was mostly in connection with the Jesuit school Clongowes Wood College (a place also visited by Blessed Columba in his youth). The boys recognised his holiness. One boy went home and said, « Mother we were taught by a saint. And we knew it! » His ministry was not confined to the pupils of the school but extended to the

poor, sick and needy in the surrounding area, where his reputation for healing began to grow. He died in 1933 after a short illness. He was beatified in 2017.

Venerable Matt Talbot was an unskilled labourer who worked mostly in the Dublin docks. Born into a family of heavy drinkers he became an alcoholic in his early teens. His drinking ended after a visit to a priest in Clonliffe College at the age of 28 in 1884. Always a hard worker, his working day began at 5 am with daily Mass, and his evenings were filled with prayer. He died on Trinity Sunday 1925 and was buried on the feast of Corpus Christi. Although there have been attestations of healing through his intercession, to date the right kind of evidence has not become available to advance his beatification. He is for many an unofficial patron of those struggling with addiction. After pledging not to drink any more alcohol at the age of 28, he remained sober until his death forty-one years later.

Born in 1889, **Servant of God Frank Duff** is remembered especially as the founder of the Legion of Mary, with the first meeting taking place on 7th September, 1921. He was a lay observer at the Second Vatican Council, greeted with applause by the assembled bishops when he arrived. He combined a deep compassion for the underprivileged of his native city of Dublin with an intense life of prayer, and was convinced that every person was called to be a saint.

Venerable Edel Quinn (1907-1944) was an Irish lay missionary with the Legion of Mary who worked in Africa. Despite her delicate health (she suffered from tuberculosis), she was tireless, generous and joyful in her faith. She was declared venerable in 1994 by Saint Pope John Paul II.

Blessed Columba emphasised the uniqueness of each person in their pattern of holiness. The stories of these holy people shows clearly how the hand of God works with great delicacy moulding each person according to their gifts, their history, their spiritual aptitude.

Echoes in a Changing Ireland

The Ireland of Blessed Columba Marmion, Saint Charles, Blessed John Sullivan and those whose causes for beatification are still underway, is no longer with us. That era in fact represented an unusually high-water mark in Irish Catholic faith and practice. Historians point to a variety of factors, including the growing confidence of the Catholic middle classes after Catholic Emancipation (1829), major social change in the aftermath of the Irish potato famine (1845-1849), and the emergence of a strong movement towards independence from Britain that fused Nationalism and Catholicism as markers

of Irish identity. The Catholic Church in Ireland was a powerful force in social and political life, with a special status even recognised by the Irish Constitution for many decades. Some would say it was too powerful, and being Catholic was, in the minds of many, synonymous with being Irish.

The Irish Bishops recently published a document synthesising the results of the consultation that forms part of the preparation for the forthcoming synod of bishops. It refers to the changing situation of the Church in Ireland: « This change is being experienced, from a national identity overly dependent on Catholic culture, to one suspicious and often intolerant of its Catholic inheritance. » It speaks of « a modern society whose culture is still capable of a Christian sensibility and of affording space for the transcendent, but which has roundly rejected the model of Church which shaped its past. » In this context, the call to ‘meditation and service’ in Ballaly parish, the social outreach of the Dom Marmion Society in Dundrum and the continued attraction of monastic communities such as Glenstal and the Redemptoristine Monastery of St Alphonsus as places for spiritual refreshment represent signs of hope. In this respect, those echoes of Blessed Columba that still resonate here and there are a welcome sound in the Ireland of today.

The extraordinary and widespread success of the publications of Blessed Columba in the early twentieth century is something worth reflecting on. Blessed Columba himself put it down to the fact that it was based mostly on the word of God. Indeed we know from his personal notes that the main ideas of conferences and writings were the fruit of his own personal meditation on scripture. As the Irish Church undergoes such dramatic changes, with serious questions arising as to its future, perhaps these words from Vatican II represent an avenue forward: « Such is the power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigour, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life. » (*Dei Verbum* 21) These are strong words indeed, and offer a basis for planting seeds of new life in the Church today.

