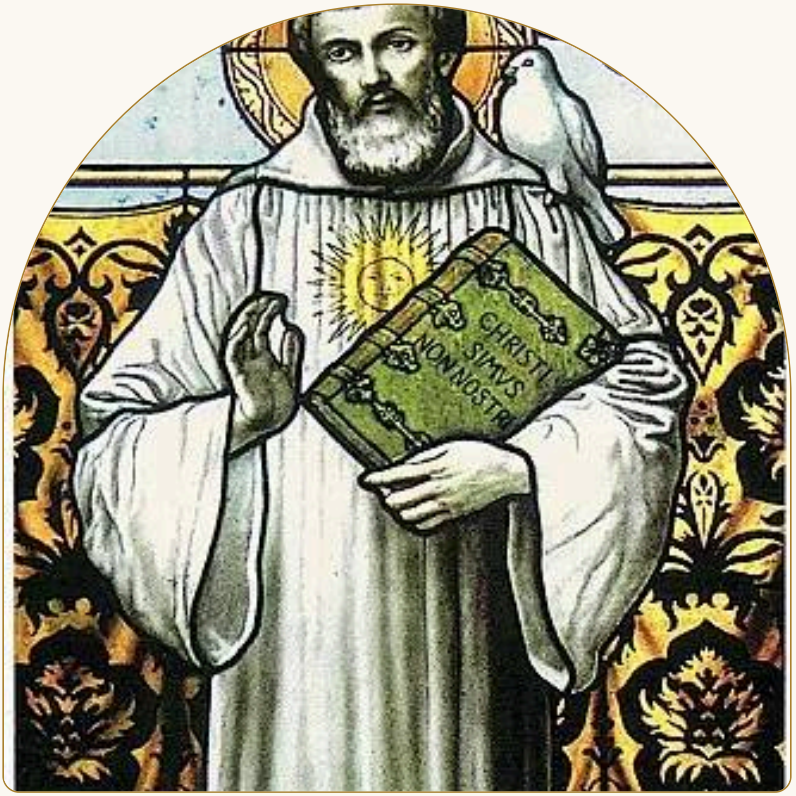


BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Columban

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: November 23

IN BRIEF

Saint Columban

Irish monk and missionary in Gaul, Alemannia and Italy, founder of Luxeuil and Bobbio.

Feast day	November 23
Born	c. 540-543, Leinster, Ireland
Died	November 23, 615, Bobbio, Italy
Canonized	pre-congregation (immemorial veneration)
Era	7th century
Patron saint of	Bobbio, motorcyclists (in Italy)

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Columban, Pilgrim for Christ

Novena to Saint Columban

Abbey of Saint Columbanus at Bobbio, Tomb of Saint Columbanus

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Columban

Saint Columban was a 6th-century Irish monk and one of the great builders of Christian Europe. Leaving Ireland around 590 with twelve companions, he founded the monasteries of Annegray, Luxeuil and Fontaine in Gaul; then, driven out by Queen Brunhilda, he crossed the Rhine and the Alps to Bobbio, in Italy, where he died in 615. His disciples planted dozens of monasteries across Europe. The Church celebrates him on November 23, the date of his optional memorial in the General Roman Calendar.

Who was Saint Columban?

Columban, in Latin *Columbanus*, "little dove," was a demanding, ardent and sometimes uncompromising monk. He feared neither kings nor bishops, and he left a strong mark wherever he went. We know him mainly through the *Life of Saint Columban* written around 640 by Jonas, a monk of Bobbio who had known his direct disciples. He also left writings in Latin: a monastic rule, a penitential, sermons, letters and poems.

Pope Benedict XVI, in a catechesis in 2008, called him "one of the fathers of Europe." In a letter to Pope Boniface IV, Columban speaks of "all of Europe," one of the first times the word was used for the Christian West. In 1950, at Luxeuil, Robert Schuman hailed him as the patron of all who seek to build a united Europe.

In the English-speaking world, his name is also carried by the Columban Fathers, an Irish missionary society named after him, which works in Asia, the Americas and the Pacific.

Key dates in the life of Columban

- **Around 540-543**: Born in Leinster, Ireland.

- **Around 560**: He enters the monastery of Bangor, in the north of Ireland, under the abbot Saint Comgall.
- **Around 590**: He leaves for the continent with twelve companions, among them Saint Gall.
- **590s**: Founds Annegray, then Luxeuil and Fontaine, in the Vosges, with the consent of the Merovingian king.
- **603**: Summoned by the Frankish bishops over the date of Easter, he refuses to appear and appeals to the pope.
- **610**: Expelled from Luxeuil on the orders of Queen Brunhilda and King Theuderic II.
- **610-612**: Stays near Lake Constance, at Bregenz.
- **612-614**: Crosses the Alps, is welcomed by the Lombard king Agilulf and Queen Theodelinda, and founds the abbey of Bobbio.
- **November 23, 615**: Dies at Bobbio, where he is buried.

A monk of Bangor

Born into a well-off family in Leinster, Columban received a solid education in Latin and the Bible. Jonas tells how, despite the tears of his mother, who lay across the threshold, he stepped over her and left home to give himself to God. He entered the monastery of Bangor, a great center of study and asceticism, under Saint Comgall. He lived there for about thirty years before choosing what Irish monks called *peregrinatio*: voluntary exile for Christ, with no return.

Luxeuil, a light for Europe

Around 590, Columban landed on the continent, perhaps in Brittany, and made his way to the Frankish kingdom. The king allowed him to settle in the Vosges. He first lived at Annegray, in the ruins of a Roman fort, sometimes

withdrawing to a nearby cave. Vocations poured in. He then founded Luxeuil, on the site of an old spa town, and later Fontaine.

Life there was hard: long prayer, continuous chanting of the psalms, fasting, work in the fields and strict obedience. Columban's rule set precise penances for each fault. But Luxeuil became a radiant center. Many young Frankish nobles were trained there; they would later found monasteries and become bishops. It is estimated that about sixty monasteries came, directly or indirectly, from the Columbanian movement. During the 7th century, Columban's rule was gradually combined with, then replaced by, the rule of Saint Benedict.

Columban also brought to the continent the Irish practice of personal, repeated confession, with a penance in proportion to the fault. This practice, known as "tariff penance," played a major role in the history of the sacrament of reconciliation.

The monk who would not bend

Columban kept Irish customs, including the Irish way of calculating the date of Easter, which differed from that of the Frankish Church. Summoned by a council of bishops at Chalon in 603, he refused to appear and wrote to Pope Saint Gregory the Great, and later to Boniface IV, letters that were respectful but frank.

Above all, he opposed King Theuderic II, who lived with concubines, and refused to bless the king's illegitimate sons when they were presented to him by their great-grandmother, the powerful Queen Brunhilda. In 610, he was expelled with his Irish monks and taken to Nantes to be shipped back to Ireland. But according to Jonas, the ship was driven back onto the shore, and Columban took to the road again.

From Lake Constance to Bobbio

Welcomed by Chlothar II, then by Theudebert II, he traveled up the Rhine and settled at Bregenz, on Lake Constance, to evangelize the Alemanni. When the region fell under Theuderic's power, he had to leave again. His disciple Gall, who was ill, stayed behind in what is now Switzerland, where the abbey of Saint Gall would later grow. Columban, already old, crossed the Alps and reached Milan.

The Lombard king Agilulf and his wife, the Catholic queen Theodelinda, gave him land at Bobbio, in the Trebbia valley. There in 614 he founded his last abbey, which would become a great center of learning, famous for its library. He spent his last days in a nearby hermitage and died on November 23, 615. His tomb is still venerated in the crypt of the abbey church of Bobbio.

Why is Saint Columban a patron of Europe and of travelers?

Columban was a man of fire. He left everything for Christ and never stopped setting out again. His severity sometimes shocked, but his freedom before the powerful, his burning faith and his love of prayer marked generations. He reminds us that Europe was built in large part by monks who came from elsewhere.

He is the patron of Bobbio, and in Italy he is also considered a patron of motorcyclists. Christians pray to him for Europe, for migrants and travelers, for missionaries, and for those who must speak the truth to the powerful. To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Columban, or follow the novena to Saint Columban from November 14 to 22, ending on the eve of his feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Columban in art

Columban is usually shown as an abbot in a monk's habit, holding a crosier and a book, the sign of his rule and his teaching. Images at Bobbio and Luxeuil show him this way, sometimes surrounded by his monks. His statue in front of the basilica of Luxeuil-les-Bains presents him as a monk with a crosier.

Where to pray to Saint Columban

- **Bobbio** (Italy): the abbey church of San Colombano, whose crypt holds his tomb.
- **Luxeuil-les-Bains** (France): the Basilica of Saint Peter, on the site of his abbey.
- **Annegray and Sainte-Marie-en-Chanois** (France): the site of his first foundation and the cave where he used to withdraw.
- **Bangor** (Northern Ireland): the site of the monastery where he was formed.
- **Saint-Coulomb** (Brittany, France): the place where tradition says he landed on the continent.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Columban, Pilgrim for Christ

Saint Columban left sermons in Latin, called *Instructions*, which often end with a prayer. One of them, on the lamp of love, is often quoted. This page offers it in a free translation, followed by an original prayer to Saint Columban for travelers, migrants, Europe and the courage to speak the truth.

The prayer of the lamp, after Saint Columban

In one of his *Instructions*, Columban reflects on the parable of the virgins who wait for the bridegroom with their lamps lit. He asks the Lord for a love that never goes out. Free translation by Saintspedia:

> *Lord, I beg you, in the name of Jesus Christ your Son, my God, grant me that love which never fails, so that my lamp may be lit and never go out, that it may burn for me and give light to others.*

Source: Saint Columban, *Instructions*, XII; free translation by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Columban, pilgrim for Christ

Saint Columban, you left your land of Ireland to become a pilgrim for Christ: teach me not to settle down, and to remain open to whatever God asks of me.

You founded monasteries where prayer rose day and night: give me a love of prayer and faithfulness in my daily work.

You dared to speak the truth to kings and to the powerful: obtain for me the courage to speak frankly, and the humility to admit my own faults.

Driven from your home, you took to the road again all the way to Bobbio: watch over migrants, exiles, travelers and all who are on the road. Protect the Europe you helped to bring to birth, and keep it faithful to its Christian roots. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Through your intercession, may my lamp burn for God and give light to those around me. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Columban is celebrated on November 23, the anniversary of his death at Bobbio in 615. You can pray to him:

- before a journey, a move or a new departure;
- for migrants, refugees and all who live far from home;
- for Europe and its Christian roots;
- for missionaries, including the Columban Fathers who bear his name;
- before a courageous decision or a difficult conversation.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Columban, and read the life of Saint Columban.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Columban

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Columban, Irish monk and missionary of Europe. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on November 14; it ends on November 22. You can also pray it at any time of year, before a journey, a new beginning or a courageous decision.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for each day helps you carry the prayer into your life. If you miss a day, simply continue.

The nine days follow Columban's road, from the threshold of his family home in Ireland to his tomb at Bobbio. Walk it with him, as a pilgrim.

Day 1: Leaving everything for Christ

Jonas tells how Columban stepped across the threshold of his home despite his mother's tears. Following Christ sometimes means leaving behind things that are very dear to us. Columban did not love his mother less; he loved Christ more, and trusted God to care for those he left behind.

Prayer: Lord, show me what I must leave behind to follow you more freely. Saint Columban, pray for me. Amen.

Today: Give up a habit that clutters your heart.

Day 2: The school of Bangor

Columban spent many years at Bangor, in study and obedience, before being sent out. Great missions are prepared in patience and formation. Thirty years of hidden life prepared the fruitful years that followed. God is never in a hurry with those he shapes.

Prayer: Lord, give me the patience to learn and to let you form me. Amen.

Today: Read a passage of the Gospel and meditate on it slowly.

Day 3: A pilgrim for Christ

Irish monks set out with no return, for love of Christ. A Christian is a pilgrim, who does not own the land he passes through. Columban's whole life was a journey: Ireland, Gaul, the Rhine, the Alps. Wherever he went, he carried his true home within him.

Prayer: Lord, keep me open to your call, and teach me to live as a pilgrim. Amen.

Today: Pray for migrants, and welcome kindly someone who has come from elsewhere.

Day 4: Unceasing prayer

At Luxeuil, the monks chanted the psalms day and night. Columban knew that everything begins and ends with prayer. The great works of Luxeuil, its schools and its missions, all flowed from this source.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to pray without ceasing, even in the middle of my daily tasks. Amen.

Today: Pray a psalm in the morning or the evening.

Day 5: The work of our hands

Columban's monks cleared forests and farmed the land. Work offered to God becomes a prayer too. Their patient labor, offered day after day, turned forest into fields.

Prayer: Lord, I offer you my work today; may it serve your glory and the good of others. Amen.

Today: Carefully finish a humble task you usually neglect.

Day 6: Truth before the powerful

Columban refused to bless the king's illegitimate children, at the price of exile. He did not confuse truth with what was convenient. He was not always gentle, and his firmness sometimes hurt. But he never sold the truth to keep his peace or his position.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me the courage of truth, with gentleness and without pride. Amen.

Today: Speak a true word that you have been holding back for fear of what others think.

Day 7: Forgiveness and conversion

Columban spread on the continent the practice of frequent confession. God never tires of forgiving those who come back to him. Personal, repeated confession, with a penance in proportion to the fault, helped many Christians to begin again, again and again.

Prayer: Lord, give me a contrite heart, and the joy of receiving your forgiveness. Amen.

Today: Prepare for confession, or make a serious examination of conscience.

Day 8: Setting out again

Driven from Luxeuil, then from Bregenz, Columban set out again when he was over seventy years old. Failure did not have the last word. Each expulsion became the start of a new foundation: Bregenz, then Bobbio. God writes straight with crooked lines.

Prayer: Lord, when my plans fail, help me to set out again with trust wherever you send me. Amen.

Today: Take up again a project you had abandoned, or encourage someone who has failed.

Day 9: A lamp that never goes out

At Bobbio, Columban finished his race. He asked God for a love that would burn without going out and give light to others. His tomb, in the crypt of the abbey church, still draws pilgrims fourteen centuries later.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Columban, light in me the fire of your love, so that it may burn for you and give light to those you entrust to me. Amen.

Today: Light a candle before an image of Christ and pray for Europe.

Closing prayer

Saint Columban, pilgrim for Christ and father of monks, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for Europe, for travelers and exiles, and for missionaries. Obtain for us an ardent faith, a free heart and a love that never goes out. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Columban and the prayer to Saint Columban.

PILGRIMAGE

Abbey of Saint Columbanus at Bobbio, Tomb of Saint Columbanus

The Abbey of Saint Columbanus at Bobbio, in the Trebbia valley south of Piacenza, was the last foundation of Saint Columbanus. He died there in 615 and still rests there, in the crypt of the abbey church. A major center of medieval culture, famous for its library, Bobbio remains the main pilgrimage site of the Irish saint.

Columbanus's last foundation

In 614, the Lombard king Agilulf and Queen Theodelinda gave Columbanus an estate at Bobbio, where there was a small ruined church dedicated to Saint Peter. The aged abbot built a monastery there with his companions. After his death, his successors, Attala and then Bertulf, expanded the abbey, which very early received privileges from the popes. In the Middle Ages, its *scriptorium* produced and preserved many manuscripts; some of these treasures are now in the Ambrosian Library in Milan, the Vatican Library, and Turin.



The Abbey of Saint Columbanus at Bobbio.

The abbey church and the crypt

The present abbey church was rebuilt in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Beneath the choir, the crypt preserves the tomb of Saint Columbanus, a marble sarcophagus carved in the late 15th century and decorated with scenes from his life. The tombs of several of his successors, including Saint Attala and Saint Bertulf, are beside it. The crypt floor keeps fragments of a medieval mosaic depicting, among other things, the labors of the months.

The monastic buildings house a museum displaying objects connected with the abbey's history, including pieces of early Christian and medieval art.

Praying at the tomb of Saint Columbanus

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Columbanus. In the crypt, a time of silence before the sarcophagus lets you entrust Europe, travelers, or a project you are beginning. The prayer to Saint Columbanus suits this moment well. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Columbanus

- **The Ponte Gobbo**, the old bridge with irregular arches spanning the Trebbia at Bobbio, linked by local legend to the saint.
- **Luxeuil-les-Bains** (Haute-Saône): the Basilica of Saint-Pierre, on the site of his great abbey.
- **Annegray and Sainte-Marie-en-Chanois**: his first foundation and the cave where he used to retreat.
- **Bangor** (Northern Ireland): the monastery of his formation.
- **Saint Gall** (Switzerland): the abbey of his disciple Saint Gall.

Practical information

Bobbio is a small town in the province of Piacenza, in Emilia-Romagna, about 45 kilometers (28 miles) southwest of Piacenza by the road up the Trebbia valley. It can be reached by car or by bus from Piacenza. The abbey church is a parish church open for worship; the abbey museum has its own hours. Check with the parish or the tourist office before you come, especially around November 23, the saint's feast day.

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