

AN EARLY IRISH MISSIONARY.

“**G**O ye into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature” was the command by which the Apostles were sent to the conquest of a pagan and idolatrous world. It is in virtue of the same divine order that the hundreds of thousands go forth at all times to evangelize those sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death. Missionary work has always been and ever will be one of the bright ornaments of the Catholic Church, because as Fr. Burke once said “the spirit of the Catholic Church is sacrifice and the highest sacrifice is the sacrifice that gives a man entirely to God in the service of his fellow-man.” Hence missionaries have ever been found giving up wealth, kindred and even their lives for the spiritual benefit of their fellowmen.

The different Catholic nations have always taken a more or less conspicuous part in this holy work; but it is a fact which deserves to be more widely known that for several centuries following the introduction of Christianity into Ireland, her sons held the foremost place as missionaries, and formed the corps d'élite of the Catholic church.

Ireland was converted early in the 5th century, and so heartily did the whole nation “enter into the spirit of the Gospel, that she became a nation of monks and nuns almost on the day she became a nation of Christians.” These monks readily obeyed the Divine precept of “preaching the gospel to every creature.” From the 6th to the 11th century Irish missionaries were to be found throughout Europe. During that period the *Insula Sanctorum* et *Doctorum* gave to the European Calendar of Saints some of its brightest names. Germany honors no less than 150 Irish saints, many of whom laid down their lives for the doctrines they taught. France has over 40, Belgium 30, Italy 14, while the northern countries of Europe such as Norway, the

Hebrides and even Iceland have each a fair proportion of Irish saints in their calendar.

Let us follow the footsteps of only one of those Irish pioneers of the Gospel, one whose name is connected with the celebrated monasteries of Luxeuil and Bobbio, and who is honoured at the present time in the north of Italy under the musical name of San Columbano.

This rival of St. Benedict, as he is called, was born in the same year in which the patriarch of Monte Casino died. Of his early boyhood little is known, but we learn that upon the advice of a holy solitary he determined to abandon all as a necessary means to salvation. Notwithstanding the great opposition he encountered from relatives and friends, he left his home in Leinster, and entered the monastery of Bangor* on the southern shore of Belfast Lough. This celebrated monastery founded by St. Comgall counted its disciples by thousands, and was one of the most renowned religious centres, even at that time when monastic institutions of learning and holiness were innumerable in a land:—

Where the school and the cloister gave
light to our shore

From clifft Iona to wooded Lismore.

In this “Valley of the Angels” as it is styled by St. Bernard did the young Columbanus enter to make his novitiate and prepare himself for the rude warfare he was about to wage against the powers of darkness. Incessantly hearing the voice of Him who formerly said “Go forth out of thy country... and come into the land

*Bangor was destroyed by the Danes in the beginning of the 9th century. It was glorious even in its downfall. During the space of 300 years it had sent out an army of apostles, and its Abbot together with 900 out of its 3000 students found martyrs' graves in its ruins when it was laid low by the fierce Northmen.