

SAINTS IN GLORY (PART 5)

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18th April Lascrian (Laisrean) *Seventh century*

Laserian, otherwise known as Molaise, studied as a youth under an abbot of Fahan in Co Donegal. One tradition suggests that he subsequently travelled to Rome and was ordained there by St Gregory the Great – the same Pope that sent St. Augustine to England. When he returned to Ireland, he was caught up in the controversy about the date of Easter, not unnaturally supporting the Roman dates against the Celtic method of calculation. In this he clashed with St Fintan. The same tradition suggests that he subsequently returned to Rome and was there consecrated bishop before once again returning to his native Ireland. Like many of the early Irish saints, he founded monasteries, one at Holywood and another on Inishmurray in Donegal Bay. He is also venerated in Scotland, where he is supposed to have lived as a hermit on Holy Island off the coast of Arran.

27th April Assicus (Assan) *Fifth century*

This saint is also known as Tassach, but little is to be known about him. He appears to have been a bishop, at Raholp near Downpatrick, and is reputed to have attended St Patrick when he was dying.

10th May Comgall of Bangor (Comhghall Bheannchair) *Late sixth century*

Comgall is famed, and especially remembered, for the foundation of Bangor Abbey in Co. Down, where a church still stands today. He was born in the early sixth century at Machramorne, in Co Antrim. He received his early education under St Fintan at Clonenagh, and later studied under St Finnian at Clonard and St Mo-bhi at Glasnevin. He also stayed with Columba at Iona for a while. He also spent some years as a hermit near Lough Erne. Like many of the early Irish saints Comgall had great missionary zeal, founding monasteries and cells before finally settling at Bangor on the shores of Belfast Lough. The monastery he founded there was reputed to be the largest foundation in Ireland with over three thousand members – a veritable monastic city. Not only did Comgall himself practice great austerities, reciting psalms at night immersed in the cold water of a nearby stream, but his foundation also was famed for its austerities. Only one meal a day was permitted, and taken in silence, and general conversation was reduced to a minimum. Comgall was renowned for his spiritual guidance; according to George Simms he is reputed to have said "A man without a soul friend is a body without a head." While public confession of sins was practised in the monastery – as indeed was common in the early Church – the practice of private confession and spiritual guidance by a 'soul friend' appears to have been practised and developed in the early Irish church.

It is a ministry known today in the Church of Ireland as the Special Ministry of Reconciliation.

14th May Carthagh (Carthach) *Seventh century*

This saint is associated with the diocese of Lismore where the diocesan cathedral is dedicated to him. It is built on the site of an ancient monastery.

16th May Brendan, the Navigator (Breandan Loingseoir) *Sixth century*

Brendan was born near Tralee in Co Kerry and is reputed to have come from one of the important families of the Ciarraige Luachra. He has long been venerated in Kerry, and many places have been named after him, for example Mount Brandon (Cnoc Bhreannain) on the Dingle peninsula, which is still a place of pilgrimage. He was fostered in his early life by St Ita, who guided him towards a devout and holy life, and received his education from, amongst others, St Finnian at Clonard, that great teacher of the early Irish saints. Like many of the early Irish saints, he had a longing to travel and preach the Gospel in new lands. For Brendan this took the form of his famous voyages earning him the name the Navigator. These are detailed in the famous monastic romance *The Voyage of St Brendan*, written in the eighth century. In it Brendan sails from Kerry with fourteen monks in search of the Island of Promise. For centuries this was believed to be a real place, and expeditions as late as the eighteenth century set out to find it in the Atlantic. While much of the detail of *The Voyage* is pure fantasy, there appears to be a kernel of truth in it. It is believed that he reached Iceland and sailed on to the North American mainland, arriving at what is now Connecticut or Virginia – anticipating the Vikings, to say nothing of the Elizabethan explorers and the Pilgrim Fathers, by centuries! On his return Brendan established his famous monastery at Clonfert, which drew monks from the other Celtic lands of Scotland and Wales, and continental Europe. Not unnaturally he became the patron saint of sailors during the Middle Ages.

3rd June Kevin (Caoimhin) *Late sixth, early seventh centuries*

Kevin, like many other Irish saints was of noble birth, his family at one time providing the kings of Leinster. His name Coemhghéin in Old Irish suggests 'noble' or 'fair birth'. He was tutored during his early years by a devout Welshman, Petroc, on whose advice he later went to study at Kilnarnagh, in what is now Co Dublin. Subsequently he was ordained by Bishop Lugid and became a monk. His desire for solitude led him to the Valley of the Two Lakes (Gleann da Loch) in the Wicklow mountains, where he lived in a cave, now known as St Kevin's Bed on the shores of the Upper Lake. He attracted a great number of followers and was forced eventually to move his settlement to the shores of the Lower Lake, where the monastic city developed. Kevin later returned to the solitude of the Upper Lake. Glendalough became an important place of pilgrimage – seven pilgrimages to it were considered to equal one to Rome. Kevin was reputed to be extremely handsome, which made him attractive to 'the opposite sex'. There is a story told of one unfortunate woman who was so in love with him, that she followed him to his retreat at Glendalough. When the saint awoke and found her gazing at him, he pushed her away, whereupon she fell to her death below the cliff – an interesting comment on avoiding 'the sins of the flesh'! Despite this, Kevin had a great love of nature, equalling that of St Francis of Assisi.