



Der Bischof von Feldkirch

St. Columban, A „European“ Saint

Homily of Bishop Benno Elbs at Columban's Day
on July 3rd 2016 in Bregenz- St. Kolumban

1 st Lecture	Jes 66,10-14c
2 nd Lecture	1 Petr 2,4-6
Gospel	Lk 10,1-12.17-20

Dear sisters and brothers,

This is a historical moment for celebrating Holy Mass on „Columban's Day“ and it is a unique Saint who brings us together in this historical moment. St. Columban was a „European“ saint. With these words Pope Benedict characterized the monk, missionary and writer who influenced western European countries one thousand years ago.

So many of us can well understand the questions Pope Francis posed on the occasion of the conferral of the Charlemagne Prize a few weeks ago, on May 6th:

„What has happened to you, the Europe of humanism, the champion of human rights, democracy and freedom? What has happened to you, Europe, the home of poets, philosophers, artists, musicians, and men and women of letters? What has happened to you, Europe, the mother of peoples and nations, the mother of great men and women who upheld, and even sacrificed their lives for, the dignity of their brothers and sisters?“

My question now is: what are the stimuli that we Europeans today can learn from the life of St. Columban?

Missionaries of peace

Today's lectures contain three thoughts I would like to point out. A first thing in the Gospel are the words of Jesus: „Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road. When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.'" (Lk 10,3-5).

I think the Irish abbot and missionary is an apostle of peace and of Christian values. When we follow St. Columban's missionary path – from Bangor cloister via Britain and Bretagne to present-day Luxeuil, to Lake Constance and from there to Bobbio in northern Italy – we can find a network of Christian values in this missionary way that has



been laid over Europe. And if we asked Saint Columban what these christian values are for today he might use the same words as Pope Francis did when he spoke about his dream of Europe in his programmatic speech on occasion of the conferral of the Charlemagne Prize:

„I dream of a Europe that is young, still capable of being a mother: a mother who has life because she respects life and offers hope for life. I dream of a Europe that cares for children, that offers fraternal help to the poor and those newcomers seeking acceptance because they have lost everything and need shelter. I dream of a Europe that is attentive to and concerned for the infirm and the elderly, lest they be simply set aside as useless. I dream of a Europe where being a migrant is not a crime but a summons to greater commitment on behalf of the dignity of every human being. I dream of a Europe where young people breathe the pure air of honesty, where they love the beauty of a culture and a simple life undefiled by the insatiable needs of consumerism, where getting married and having children is a responsibility and a great joy, not a problem due to the lack of stable employment. I dream of a Europe of families, with truly effective policies concentrated on faces rather than numbers, on birth rates more than rates of consumption. I dream of a Europe that promotes and protects the rights of everyone, without neglecting its duties towards all. I dream of a Europe of which it will not be said that its commitment to human rights was its last utopia. “

Missionaries of joy

Secondly, St. Columban is a Missionary of joy who uplifts people. Impressingly we heard about this in the lecture of Isaiah: „Rejoice with Jerusalem... As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem. When you see this, your heart will rejoice and you will flourish like grass. “

This is a wonderful symbol of what church means for today: to help men to flourish. A few weeks ago I could experience this in the Bregenz hospital nearby in the intensive care unit for premature babies. A nurse told me about a tiny baby with only 450 gramms who shows distinct reactions of joy and cosiness when her parents take her in their arms and touch her. It is like flourishing. This is a mission for us Christians, if we want to build up a church of vivid stones as we heard in the lecture, this means to build up a space where people can flourish, where people are uplifted.

This reminds me of the grace of charity. Charity is healthful and makes alive. Charity is not just a moral obligation. In all the crises we meet in these days it is not helpful to make appeals on solidarity. The thing we need is to get in touch with. Being in touch with the fate of people, in touch with the tears of those who are mourning, with the fears of the



marginalized and poor, with the needs of those whose screams have become silent with sorrow.

Then there will be no more need for appeals for solidarity and charity. To be sympathizing is the deepest sign of a Christian. We can feel this attitude which is called hospitality in our International meeting, as Saint Paul says in his letter to the Hebrews: „Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it“ (Hebr 13,2). Such an attitude of attention makes people flourish, it makes them blossom out like fresh grass and joy.

Listening to God's Words and a man of action

Thirdly, St. Columban was a man listening to God's Words and he was a man of action. We hear that in the Gospel with these words: „Heal the sick who are there and tell them, The kingdom of God has come near to you. “

This reminds me of the games of the European Football Championship. We cannot see many men of action there. There are eleven, respectively 22 players on the playground. Up to 100.000 spectators are sitting and watching the game knowing the perfect solutions for winning. But they do not enter the field, they do not exercise training, they avoid the arduousness of labour that would make them a player, they remain smart-alec spectators.

Somehow we find the same situation in our society and in the church as well. As long as we remain spectators our world and our church will not change. We have to become teammates. This is what we need in our days, to be working actively and creatively for a better world, for the church, for the parish. This is what St. Columban did, he lived and preached with fervant zeal and high compassion.

So in this sense, brothers and sisters, we must become missionary people, people of action, not only people of words. To be listening that's the first step of this mission, to listen to the things that are moving people, to listen to their stories of life. And we have to listen to the Word of God which is like an anchor in a changing and insecure world. Then we might bring in touch these stories of life with the Word of God. I am sure St. Columban would not have been sitting on the tribune or in the VIP-section, his desire would have been to play the game. Because he is a missionary, a man of action. The place of a Christian today is not on the tribune, it's on the lawn!



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Dear brothers and sisters, I think, St. Columban was a builder of what we might call the „soul of Europe“, that’s what characterizes our religion, our culture, our values. Today’s celebration shall remind us not to forget our soul and to contribute to build up this vivid house as vivid stones. My wishes for all of us:

- Let us be missionaries of the Christian values of freedom of man, according to our possibilities, in any places of Europe we are living and let us bring these values to the public. We cannot tolerate valuable things and religious views of life being pushed off public space.
- Let us be missionaries and apostles of joy and of uplifting: wherever Christians are living we can see traces of uplifting and of joy.
- Don’t let us remain spectators, let us join as players in our league, weather it is the league of politics, of economy, of arts, of culture, of religion. Any league we can play for charity and hospitality might be our league.

St. Columban may be our orientation.

God bless our personal ways, God bless our Europe.

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