

BOOK REVIEW

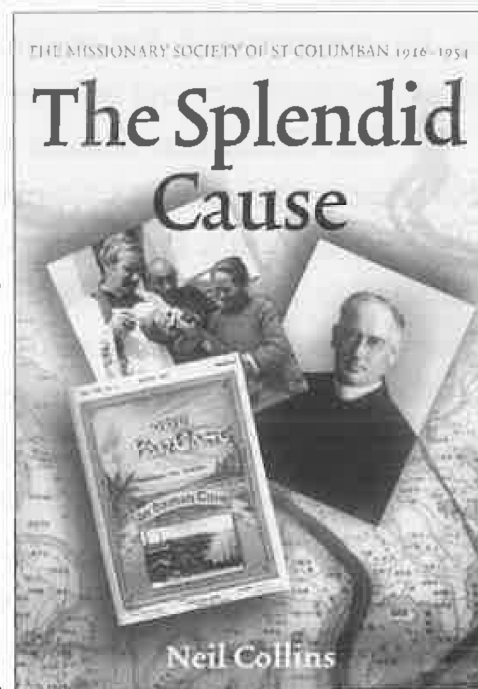
The Splendid Cause: The Missionary Society of St. Columban 1916-1954

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The Splendid Cause: The Missionary Society of St. Columban 1916-1954, by Neil Collins, S.S.C., The Columba Press, Dublin, Ireland, 2009. ISBN 978-1-85607-643-2.

St. Columba (521-597) is so well remembered in Ireland that Fr. Neil Collins does not list him in the index of his book. Columba was a brave Irish monk who went to Scotland with 12 of his monks. They established a monastery and brought both the Gospel and literacy to a violent land. Many in the Reformed Churches in Scotland honor him for his love of the poor, although they speak less favorably of his commitment to the Church of Rome. Talk of an “either or” choice for Christ or for Rome is still fighting language in some circles today, and it was even more so in the Ireland of 1916.

Father (later Bishop) Edwin J. Galvin shared the view of Catholics and Protestants competing for souls.



He returned from China to organize a missionary college, and secured the approval of the Irish bishops on October 10, 1916. Despite personalities and church politics, the Columban (not Columbian) Fathers were canonically erected in Galway, Ireland and a few months later in Omaha, Nebraska, before the end of 1918 to recruit from the Irish diaspora in the USA. Australia also soon provided funds and vocations.

In 1919, Pope Benedict XV, in his encyclical *Maximum Illud*, urged the initiation of greater Catholic mission effort and the establishment of a strong local clergy. Foreign missions generated enthusiasm among Catholics of that era. The first three Columban priests reached Hankow in Hubei Province in October 1920. The story of how the Columbans got their mission in Hankow, described on pages 78 to 80 of *The Splendid Cause*, is mission history at its liveliest and best. Dr. Collins spells out well the negotiations, which the Columbans, and which many a new mission society must have gone through, with both Propaganda Fide and the old established Orders, in order to obtain a mission territory for themselves in early 20th century China.

Some present day Columbans may not be happy with this warts and all account by one of their own. However, Fr. Collins is to be commended for making mission history something more than just statistics and accounts of pastoral visitations.

The Columban Sisters were formed in 1924, and soon *The Far East* magazine was reporting on their work also.

Fr. Galvin's ambition was to focus on cities, not on isolated villages in mountain valleys. Protestants were already channeling their personal into education in urban China. In fact, immediate challenges of primary evangelization and pastoral work generally took precedence over schools. The Columbans later accepted commitments to work in the countryside of the Philippines and in the extremely remote mountains of Burma.

Before antibiotics, health was a problem. One young missionary in Burma died from typhoid (p. 270), where the superior made a bad decision during a high fever (p. 282). One

Columban Sister died of malaria after she returned to Ireland. The Sisters saved lives by distributing vitamin B-1 (p. 285). Tabulated data for Chinese Catholics (pp. 99, 101) show the number of children of Catholics baptized not far ahead of deaths in some years, not to mention those baptized in danger of death. The data may not be complete enough to calculate average life expectancy, which was certainly short. War brought hunger, and sometimes even starvation to the local people. By 1945, many Columbans were underweight, sickly, and stressed out. Between 1929-1950, 17 Columbans were killed.

Ireland was poor. Without fund-raising in the USA, the Columbans might never have been able to take more than one mission territory. The Great Depression and World War II reduced the flow of money and missionaries. The Columbans lived in poverty, and thus gave a strong evangelical witness, which the local churches remembered decades later. They were not scholars, but evangelizers and pastors. They were stretched too thin with, in military terms, “not enough boots on the ground”.

But the Holy Spirit was at work. In Korea, generally speaking, it took only 16 months from starting to study Korean to being in charge of a parish (p. 233). Even allowing for the fact that Mass and other sacraments were in Latin, this was still a shaky foundation for preaching. Hence catechists were indispensable, but paying them a living salary was often a headache.

The pre-Vatican II Church put the clergy at the top. Yet the efforts of the laity, especially the Legion of Mary, formed fervent Catholics in all mission regions. This was especially the case in China. The legionaries did not abandon the faith despite persecution (pp. 184-185).

First China, then North Korea, and later Burma (Myanmar) put an end to foreign missionary work within their boundaries. By methods as brutal as death marches or as subtle as simply revoking residency permits, several nations showed missionaries the exit gate. Elsewhere, the foreign presence shrunk as vocations in

the sending country declined. There were 138 Columban priests in the Philippines in 1954 (p. 223). Web pages for the Philippines on www.columban.org give the current total as more than 70. There are 10 ordained Filipino priests with SSC after their names. The continued existence, not to mention the renewed vitality, of the Catholic communities in areas formerly entrusted to the Columbans proves that they did not labor in vain.

The Splendid Cause stops in 1954, when the last Columban had to leave China. It has 9 maps and 24 fascinating pages of old black and white photos. A second printing would benefit from an extra appendix or two listing the total number of Columbans year by year and their geographical placement. The bibliography contains a long list of primary and secondary sources.

No book is free from at least one error and unexplained term: the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers date their foundation from the verbal endorsement of Pope Pius X to Co-Founders Walsh and Price on June 29, 1911, not from a letter from the prefect of Propaganda Fide on July 3 (p. 42). *A picul* is 65 kg (p. 218).

Dr. Collins devotes 100 pages to China and 40 pages to the Philippines, but covers both Korea and Burma in 63 pages. Either of those missions is worth a full book. Will a Columban Sister step forward to write a companion volume? There is enough material in the archives for several books, but *The Splendid Cause* is a readable, interesting good start.