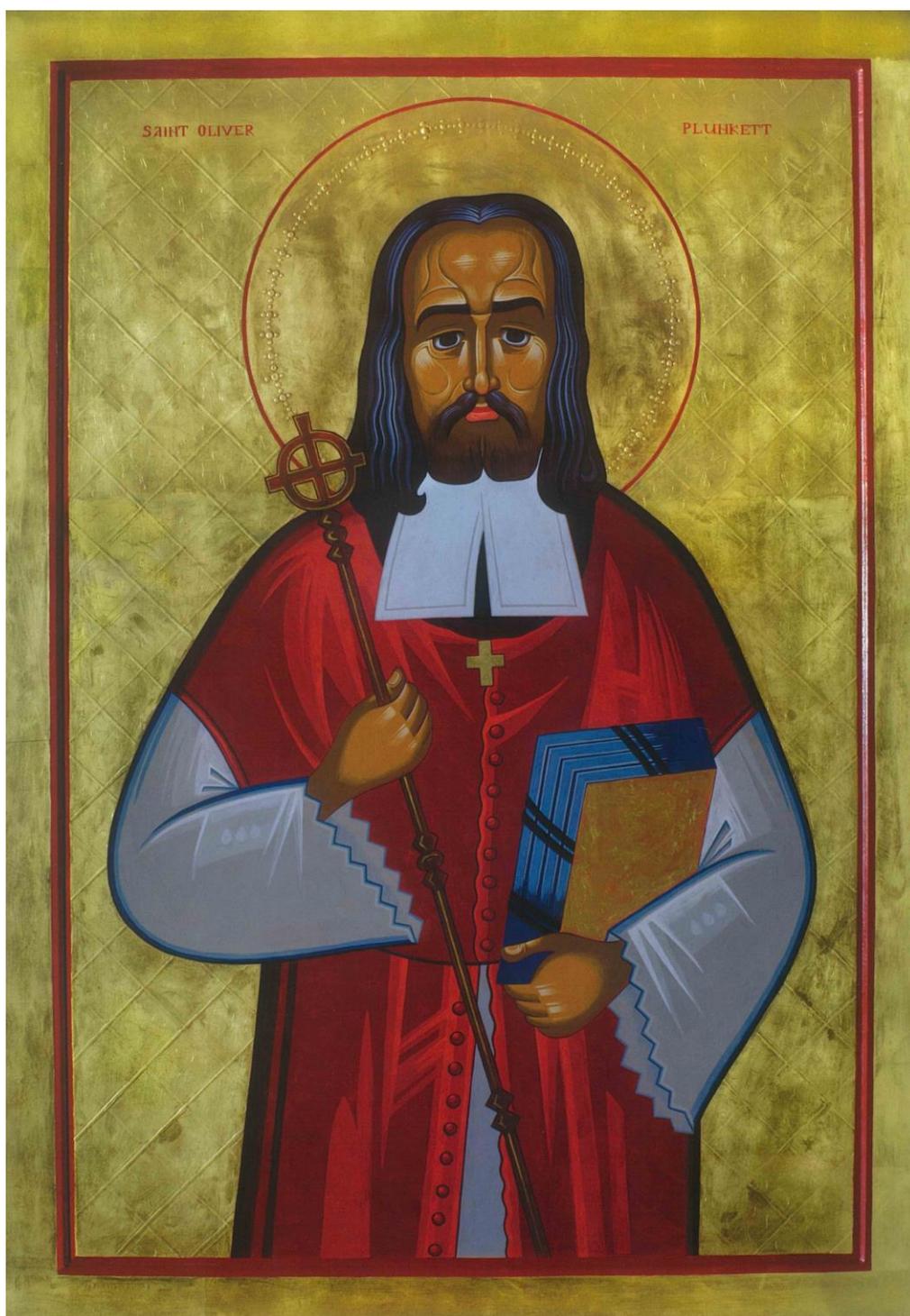


ALL MY CELTIC SAINTS

Part 2

Writing about my icons of Celtic, practically Irish saints, in March 2018, I missed mentioning my icon of **Saint Oliver Plunkett**. Rectifying that error, here it is below. Rare are the depictions of this noble saint who had faced huge and most difficult challenges in his life in Ireland culminating in his martyrdom in England, where he was found guilty of high treason in June 1681 "for promoting the Roman faith".... Accordingly, I did not base my icon on any known depiction but, instead, created a new one, 100x70cm.



Some 25 years ago, while in Christchurch, New Zealand, running a series of icon painting workshops, I was shown a video tape about **Saint Columba (Colmcille)** and the island of Iona. I recall it having a great impact on me, producing an immediate impulse to create an icon of this famed saint, but, seemingly, an artistic gestation takes as long it needs to take; in my case, it was nothing less than 25 years!

For years I have been thinking about the concept of that icon but was not keen on depicting the saint as commonly depicted, praying or writing. I wanted something else, but that concept was not to morph out until May 2018. The idea was to base my image on the story or legend of the saint and the beast he banished from the Ness River. This action exemplifies his inherent strength and power.

Colmcille life was indeed extraordinary. He was born a prince of a branch of the Uí Néill dynasty. Christened **Criomhthann**, he was so often found in prayer that he was given the name **Colmcille** - 'the dove of the church'. In pursuit of his vocation, he undertook his monastic formation at St Finian's monastery in what is now County Downe. He was ordained as a priest c 546 ce. After 17 years of preaching and teaching in Ireland, he went into exile, eventually settling on the island of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland.

We know about Colmcille's monstrous encounter because of his 7th century biographer St Adamnán , who narrates that, while standing upon the bank of the River Ness which flows out of Loch Ness, in northern Scotland, **Colmcille** contemplated the best way to cross to the other side.

As he considered the problem before him, he came across a group of heathen Picts who were busy burying a friend who had been attacked by an enormous 'water beast' while swimming in the river.

When **Colmcille** got the gist of the story from the assembled mourners, he laid his staff across the dead man's chest and, miraculously, the man stood up, hale and hearty.

Against everyday common sense, **Colmcille** ordered Br Lugne Mocumin, one of his fellow monks, to swim across the loch and bring back a flat-bottomed fishing boat (known as a *coble*) which was moored on the opposite shore.

Without hesitation, Lugne stripped off his tunic and jumped into the water.

The monster, alerted by Lugne's splashing around and eager for a bite, roared a might roar, darting towards the swimming monk. However, **Colmcille** was unmoved. He stepped forward boldly to the edge of the river and, making the sign of the cross while invoking the Name of the Lord, spoke in a commanding voice.

"You will go no further! Do not touch the man! Leave at once!"

Even though the monster was no more than a spear's length away from the swimming monk, at the sound of the saint's words, it stopped and immediately fled the scene, terrified. As Adamnán described it, the monster moved "more quickly than if it had been pulled back with ropes."

The monster quickly absconded to the depths below him, allowing Br Lugne to paddle the boat back unharmed. Everyone, including **Nessie**, was astonished. Even if the heathens at the funeral hadn't been sufficiently impressed with **Colmcille** bringing their friend back to life, they were certainly impressed with how the monster obeyed the saint! They all gave glory to the God of the Christians. The Picts converted on the spot, being baptised in the very waters of the River Ness.

A few years after I first heard of St Columba in Christchurch, I also heard the story involving Nessie, from the Anglican minister in Auckland. Her version of St Colmcille's words were: "**Get you gone, you beastie!**"

Well, here we are, the icon conceived at last, with the raging waters, which have a turbulence more like that of the sea or an ocean, and the saint standing alone in the boat with the cross facing the beast. Icons are an ideal medium to depict not only saints but also legends and stories, using their surrealistic aspects and techniques!

St Colmcille is a patron of Derry, one of the three patron saints of Ireland, a protector against floods and evil, and a protector of bookbinders, poets, publishers, editors, authors, diplomats, statesmen, Scotland and Ulster County.

This icon is a 45×35cm piece, framed with an elaborate Celtic pattern on the raised edge, while the inscription says St Colmcille as Columba was also known in his day – ‘Columba’ being the subsequent Latin translation.



Michael Galovic, August 2018