

# THE IRISH ROVER



## Br. Columba C.S.C. Proclaimed Servant of God

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Cause for canonization proceeds for “Miracle Man of Notre Dame”

**B**r. Columba, C.S.C. was declared Servant of God by Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades this summer, officially opening his cause for canonization. Fr. John Jenkins, C.S.C. announced this to the student body of the University of Notre Dame during the opening Mass for the academic year on August 23, 2022.

In his homily, Fr. Jenkins explained, “That announcement begins a formal process in the Church of the examination of Br. Columba’s life that, if successful, will lead to him being the first person who spent the bulk of his life at Notre Dame to be declared a saint.” Currently, his life is being examined for sanctity by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and if they approve, the case will proceed to the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints in the Vatican. The dicastery would then have the power to declare Br. Columba “Venerable.” For venerables to be beatified, one posthumous miracle attributed to their intercession must be approved by a canonical investigation. A second approved miracle is necessary for canonization to sainthood.

Br. Philip Smith, C.S.C, archivist for the Midwest Province of Brothers, formally lodged the petition for Br. Columba’s canonization with Bishop Rhoades on behalf of the Midwest and United States Provinces of Priests and Brothers of the Congregation of Holy Cross on October 28, 2021.

Only recently appointed as archivist for the province, Br. Philip happened to stumble upon “three large cases” full of items related to Br. Columba tucked away in the attic of the archives in 2019. Over the course of the pandemic in 2020, he had ample time to examine, digitize, and sort the contents of these boxes with the help of some seminarians. This led him to call Bishop Rhoades, who after meeting with Br. Philip to discuss his findings, asked him to formally compile and submit an account of Columba’s holiness, which would ultimately become the petition for Br. Columba’s canonization.

Br. Columba, born John O'Neill in Mackeysburg, Pennsylvania on the 5th of November, 1848, joined the Congregation of Holy Cross at the age of 27. A cobbler by trade in spite of his deformed foot, Brother Columba worked for most of his life (and nearly all of his time as a Holy Cross Brother) at the University of Notre Dame. A contemporary of the founding fathers of Notre Dame, Br. Columba served as Fr. Sorin's caretaker from 1891 until the former president's death on October 21, 1893.

In addition to working as a caretaker and cobbler, Columba tirelessly promoted devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. He is estimated to have made over 10,000 Immaculate Heart badges and over 30,000 Sacred Heart badges which he would send by mail to those requesting favors or cures of him along with instruction to "attach it to the part of the body that you want healed and then begin making a novena, nine days of prayer." Br. Philip attests that: "usually between the seventh and the ninth day [of the novena] something dramatic happens." Simultaneously, Br. Columba would pray a personal novena to the Sacred Heart for each person's intention as well. According to Br. Philip, there are over 10,000 letters pertaining to Br. Columba, 1,400 of which are in thanksgiving for various cures.

One such cure is that of Ms. Velma Agnes Gorman of Atlanta, Georgia circa 1921. She wrote a letter to Br. Columba thanking him for the miraculous cure of paralysis in her arm and hand through his intercession. Her doctors had initially said her "arm and hand would never be of any use to [her] again" and that "it was useless to try anything." After the cure, her doctors purportedly declared that they "could not understand it. It was a miracle."

Because of these miracles and his saintly life, Br. Columba was called "a miraculous man" by then-provincial Fr. Charles O'Donnell, C.S.C. in his eulogy. Following Columba's death on November 20th, 1923, the Community House of the Brothers of Holy Cross on the campus of Notre Dame was renamed in his honor.

Unfortunately, devotion to Br. Columba and knowledge of his holiness had all but faded into obscurity after 1960. Even many members of the Congregation of Holy Cross had forgotten Columba's heroic life. One Holy Cross priest even confessed to the Rover: "To be honest, I had never heard of Br. Columba until his cause was recently opened. I always assumed the brothers had named Columba Hall after the Irish saint, not a C.S.C.." Br. Philip himself also admitted that he had thought Columba Hall was named after Br. Columba Curran C.S.C., a prominent chemist in the 20th century.

For Br. Columba to be named a saint, his *cultus* must be built up. That is, in order for the required posthumous miracles to be attributed to his intercession, people must be praying for his intercession. Therefore, many people, especially members of the tri-campus community, must learn of him and his sanctity first.

To this end, Br. Jacob Eifrid, C.S.C., a fourth-year temporarily professed brother who has worked with Br. Philip Smith, offered a suggestion: "Br. Columba can be an example of what this University is about in a pretty humble and simple way. Br. Columba's cause [for canonization] is open, so let's make a statue [for him]. Pray for that."

Br. Jacob also said that the canonization of Br. Columba could be a boon for the awareness of the vocation of brotherhood and of the Brothers of the Congregation of Holy Cross in particular, which he said do not receive as much attention as other religious vocations. With the centennial of Br. Columba's death in November of next year, Br. Jacob would like to see Br. Columba's biography *These Two Hearts* by Br. Ernest, C.S.C. updated and republished, and Br. Philip would like the University to host a large-scale celebration and Mass in his honor.

When asked what message Br. Columba would give today to the students of the University of Notre Dame, Br. Joe DeAgostino, C.S.C., said the following: “The formal opening of Br. Columba O’Neill’s cause points out the very real plausibility of saints living among us in their simple ways without any great fanfare by merely being obedient to their vocation.” Br. Joe also noted how well the life of Servant of God Br. Columba exemplified the vocation of a Holy Cross religious.

Br. Philip said, “During his lifetime and while he was on campus, [Br. Columba] had a specific interest in the men of Notre Dame going to Mass daily, making frequent communion (which was not *en vogue* at that time), and ensuring they went to weekly confession. And I would hope that we can inspire that once again.”

For more information on Br. Columba and the cause for his canonization, visit: [www.brothercolumba.com](http://www.brothercolumba.com)

*Brandon “Buddy” Williams is a junior mechanical engineering major from the great state of Texas. You can catch him shooting pool in the Knights of Columbus building or staying up all night to finish his differential equations homework. If you would like to offer him suggestions for his viral Gregorian Chant playlist, he can be reached at [bwilli32@nd.edu](mailto:bwilli32@nd.edu).*

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