

How should Christians lead their lives? An exploration of the image of lay people in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*¹

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Christianity is not only a belief system but also a way of life, the parameters of which were set out in the teaching of Jesus. Thus a good Christian life is a fundamental theological and spiritual question, which ultimately derives from man's right relationship with God. It features largely in the Bible, and it permeates the writings of the patristic Fathers. It is a moral question that has relevance to all Christians, not only in this life but with fundamental repercussions in the afterlife, since the moral quality of earthly life determines one's destiny in the hereafter. Attempts to answer the question 'How should Christians lead their lives?' can be found in several genres of writing such as moral and theological treatises, penitentials, letters, monastic rules, autobiographical writings, and wisdom literature. Hagiography can also be understood as one such genre, where the answer is given through the portrayal of the personification of Christian virtue, the saint.

The author, however, can deal with these questions not only through the exemplary image of the saint, but also through the portrayal of other characters, both lay and ecclesiastical, and good and bad. Although Columba is clearly a monastic saint, the minor characters in *Vita Columbae* (hereafter VC) include several lay men and women. They feature as witnesses and as receivers of the products of the saint's miraculous powers, which can be either positive or negative from their point of view. In this paper, therefore, I will explore the ideal image of a Christian, and especially that of a lay person, rather than the image of the saint in VC.

Since the Life considered in this study was written in Latin, a language not understood by the majority of people in early medieval Ireland, we may infer that the principal audience of VC consisted of monks and clerics. Yet does the model of

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a good Christian life provided in this text apply only to the ecclesiastics, since avoiding sin and attaining salvation should be equally in the interests of all Christians? Although the *Life* was written by a churchman, and principally for a monastic audience, it still is likely to reflect the author's understanding of Christian life that should apply to all Christians.

Due to the brevity of this paper I will not try to cover all aspects of Adomnán's vision concerning the ideal Christian behaviour of laity, but rather cite a few illustrating examples that hopefully will give an impression of the parameters of a good Christian *Life* in VC, and demonstrate how Adomnán uses the minor characters in the narrative to portray the diametrically opposed destinies of good and bad.

I will start by looking at the portrayal of the relative merits of marriage and virginity, these being the two aspects that clearly separate lay and monastic ways of life. In the learned treatises concerning marriage and especially of virginity it is women who feature most often although these topics should arguably concern men alike. The most extensive discussion of marriage in VC occurs in an episode that features the wife of a man called Luigne.² This episode presents us with a lesson concerning marriage and woman's duties towards her husband.

...a certain layman came to him and complained regarding his wife, who, as he said had aversion to him, and would not allow him to enter marital relations. Hearing this, the saint bade the wife approach, and began to chide her as well as he could on that account saying: 'Why, woman do you attempt to put from you your own flesh? The Lord says, "Two shall be in one flesh (*Erunt duo in carne una*)" Therefore the flesh of your husband is your flesh.' She replied: 'I am ready to perform all things whatsoever that you may enjoy on me, however burdensome: save one thing, that you do not constrain me to sleep in one bed with Lugne. I do not refuse to carry on the whole management of the house; or, if you command it, even to cross the seas, and remain in some monastery of nuns.' Then the saint said: 'What you suggest cannot rightly be done. Since your husband is still alive, you are bound by the law of the husband; for it is forbidden that should be separated, which God has lawfully joined (*Quod enim deus licite coniunxit nefas est separari*) (VC ii.41).

After this the saint, the wife and the husband all fast, and during the night the saint prays for them. As a result the wife's heart is changed from hate to love, and she is ready to fulfil her marital duties towards her husband.

² Of all the women in VC Columba physically encounters only three, these being the mother of the saint (who carries him in her womb) in VC iii.1, Luigne's wife in VC ii.41, and the innocent girl who is murdered before the saint's eyes in VC ii.25. Luigne's wife is furthermore the only one the saint directly addresses.

In the foregoing episode Adomnán uses the Bible, that is Matt. 19.5–6 and Mark 10.8–9,³ to make a statement about the value of marriage. Adomnán’s citations in turn refer back to Gen. 2.20–25, where Eve is created as a companion to Adam from one of his ribs, and it is stated: ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one in flesh (*erunt duo in carne una*).’ We infer, therefore, that Adomnán reminds his public that marriage is an institution created and blessed by God, while he also provides a lesson on the duties of a woman towards her husband, and on the indissolubility of the marital bond. The woman offers to go to a monastery of nuns instead of sleeping with her husband, but Adomnán makes Columba promote the good of marriage and marital relations instead of continence.

Adomnán’s recommendation to give to the husband what is his due, could be read against Paul’s statement in 1 Cor. 7.3–5 that both the husband and the wife should fulfil their marital duties towards each other, and that they should come together so that Satan would not tempt them because of their lack of self-control. Augustine, on the other hand, could be writing directly to Luigne’s wife when he states:

Observe how continence has usually been pleasing to the woman, but does not please the man. The wife leaves him and begins to lead a life of continence. She obviously intends to remain chaste, but she will make an adulterer of her husband, which the Lord does not wish. For, the husband will seek another woman when it becomes impossible for him to restrain himself. What are we to say to the woman, except to repeat what the sound doctrine of the church maintains, that is, render the debt to your husband, lest, while you seek after a source of further glory, he find the source of his damnification... All this, because you have not authority of your body, but he does; and he has not authority of his body, but you do. Except by mutual consent, do not refuse each other his dues. (*De Coniugiis Adulterinis* i.4)

Therefore, both Augustine and Adomnán agree in presenting marriage as a safeguard against adultery and fornication, and intercourse in marriage as blameless. Adomnán’s view of marriage, the essential element of lay life⁴, is thus

³ Matt. 19.5–6 ‘and said ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh (*erunt duo in carne una*)’ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate (*quod ergo Deus coniunxit homo non separet*).’ The wording of Mark 10.8–9 is practically identical.

⁴ See VC ii.20, where Adomnán writes about a man called Nesán saying ‘And because this Nesán was a layman (*homo plebeus*), with wife and children...’ thus asserting wife and children to be an essential part of lay way of life.

positive and he does not expect everybody to take the pursuit of Christian perfection as far as the celibate monks and nuns do.

This positive image of marriage in VC is reinforced in the episode where the saint sees a happy and virtuous woman being taken to heaven by angels. A year later the saint sees how the woman helps the angels to rescue the soul of her pious husband from the demons (VC iii.10). The order of wife and husband here is noteworthy; it is the woman who goes to the heaven directly without battling demons and who helps to rescue her husband's soul. Here it seems that the wife is more virtuous, though both of them have merited heaven by being pious and virtuous. Therefore, it is Adomnán's view that married people can lead good Christian lives.

Two wives in VC show by their example the right role a wife should have in the family. They are virtuous wives who give sound advice to their husbands: the first advising her husband to trust the power of the saint and to sow grain even after midsummer, and the second counselling her husband to refuse the gift sent by the saint and to let their servant be released without payment (VC ii.3, 39). Their prudence and respect towards the saint is rewarded in the first case by the grain sown late being miraculously ready for harvest at the beginning of August, and in the second by the implied blessing of the saint. By giving beneficial advice to their husbands these two wise women demonstrate the right role for a woman in supporting her spouse, who is the decision-maker of the family as stated in Eph. 5.23. These two wise women can be contrasted with a wife who tells her husband to get rid of a stake blessed by the saint, not trusting the saint's word that it would not hurt people or cattle (VC ii.37). It is said that she does not act like a prudent person but like a fool. The lesson about trusting the saint's powers is underlined when the loss of the blessed stake reduces the family to its original poverty, and Adomnán states: 'but the malice of the devil reached this wretched man, as it did Adam, through his wife.' Eve is thereby implicitly the archetype of a wife who channels demonic plans for ruining a man.⁵

However, the only named woman in VC, besides the mother of the saint, is the virgin Maugin (VC ii.5). The fact that she is named, and presented as an independent entity, unlike other women in the Life, who frequently feature as unnamed companions to the named men,⁶ demonstrates that she held a special status as a holy virgin dedicated to the Church. Adomnán thus can be seen to

⁵ The same idea concerning Eve's role is also presented by Patrick who writes in his *Epistola* 13 'just as Eve did not understand that she certainly handed over death to her husband.'

⁶ Of the twenty women who have any role in the narrative five are introduced as wives, four as mothers, and four as women with no further distinguishing attributes. For a detailed evaluation of all female roles in VC see Borsje 2001.

imply that the value of virginity was greater than that of the married, although marriage was not condemned as such.

Other aspects of good Christian life focused in Adomnán's image of lay people are the virtues of hospitality and charity. Hospitality had important social implications in early medieval Irish society, since it was a duty of clients to pay part of their food-rent while entertaining their lords in their own homes, and there was also a class called *briugu*, 'a hospitaller', whose duty it was to offer hospitality to all freemen.⁷ Although hospitality thus has special significance in the Irish context, Adomnán seems to be giving to the concept more Christian overtones.

Adomnán states in VC ii.20 that an inhospitable rich man had 'spurned Christ in pilgrim guests,' the guests being in this instance the saint and his companions. However, it was not only the saint but all needy persons that could be seen to represent Christ. Thus Adomnán's rejection of the niggardly rich man has to be read against the wider background of charity. Adomnán shows knowledge of Sulpicius Severus's *Vita Martini* (hereafter VM), and thus he must have known the famous miracle of saint Martin involving the divided cloak given to a beggar (VM 3). There Christ appears to Martin in a dream wearing the beggar's half of his cape, thus demonstrating that the beggar represented Christ. Adomnán might also have in mind the biblical maxim in Matt. 25.40, 'whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me,' which is also quoted by Sulpicius Severus in the above-mentioned chapter of VM. This overall image of charity and its value in Christian life is confirmed by Adomnán when he writes about the rich man who enjoyed God's mercy on account of 'his mercies to the poor, and his generosity' (VC i.50). This could be a reference to Matt. 5.7: 'Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.' Charity is clearly seen by Adomnán as a salient feature in a truly Christian life, since it is a means of earning God's mercy, and therefore a place in heaven. Charity can also be seen as the foundation on which a truly Christian society, where all men would be merciful towards each other, could be built.

The moral positive can also be expressed through the portrayal of the immoral negative and the evil consequences of bad behaviour. Thus the value of generosity is also highlighted through the representation of its opposite, the sin of avarice in VC. Among the four men who are guilty of avarice in the Life, one is a leader (VC i.35), and one rich (VC ii.20). The other two are simply named without giving details of their social status (VC i.50), but the context of their appearance suggests that they are likely to be men of property. In this episode the first man

⁷ On this see for example Charles-Edwards 2000, 525–527; Jaski 2000, 105–107; McCone 1990, 124–128.

whose gift the saint immediately accepts is denoted as rich, and his generosity highlights the others' lack of the virtue. Gregory the Great tells a similar story about a sinful man who had seduced a virgin of God and whose gift is rejected by a holy man called Menas (*Dialogi* iii.26). In both cases the donations are anonymously placed with others, but the saint is able to recognize them as being given by sinful men. The function of these episodes seems to be to illustrate in practice the principle that God will not accept the gifts of the wicked as stated in the deuterocanonical book of Wisdom of Sirach or *Ecclesiasticus* 34.18.

The first man whose gift is readily accepted by Columba is an example of a rich man who uses his riches generously to help the poor. Adomnán clearly sees avarice as a sin of rich people, who can overcome it by acting generously towards the needy. Another example of the right use of riches is that of the charitable iron-smith of whom Columba states as follows:

Columb Coilrigin the iron-smith has not laboured in vain. He has been fortunate in procuring with the labour of his own hands the eternal rewards that he desired to buy. See now, his soul is being carried by holy angels to the joys of the heavenly country. For whatever he has been able to gain by practising his craft he laid out in alms to the needy (VC iii.9).

Thus, riches are not a hindrance in leading a good Christian life and in earning a place in heaven, as long as they are well used, according to the Christian principle of charity.

Besides avarice, a lack of respect towards the saint is another prominent sin of lay people in VC. The presentation of this sin has to be understood in the context of hagiographical literature, which as a genre aims to engender veneration for the saint (and his or her successors) by relating the benefits of the miraculous powers of the saint for those who believe in them. The same message can also be conveyed by telling what happens to those wretched people who oppose or mistrust the saint.

Episodes have to be understood from their hagiographical context, but the centrality of particular themes might be reinforced by tendencies native to Irish society. Status and honour were central ideas in the early medieval Irish social order, and the principal vehicle through which these were conveyed was *enech*, the value of the face. Honour was due to those who upheld their status by fitting conduct, but it could be always threatened by the loss of physical attributes, or by being attacked by ridicule and satire. Thus these episodes involving disrespect towards the saint can also be understood from an Irish social background, where

status was upheld and made visible through fitting social response, and thus public acts of disrespect towards the saint could have wider social implications.

One example of the sin of disrespect is the above-mentioned fool wife in VC ii.37 whose lack of trust towards the saint's powers leads to the family being reduced back to poverty. There are, however, also plenty of examples of much graver transgressions against the saint than mistrust of his word. These transgressions are committed by deeply sinful men who are guilty of killing and other grave sins, and who are denoted as bloody, wicked, cruel, hard, treacherous, unyielding, and greedy. They not only mistrust the saint, but also actively mock and scorn Columba and his God (see VC i.39, ii.20, 22, 23, 25). The moral of these stories becomes clear when we look at how this disrespect is repaid by the punishments that are meted out to them by the saint and God. One illustrative example of these is the case of Ioan who had scorned the saint and plundered the house of Columba's friend with his band of men in VC ii.22. When the robbers sail away Columba prays to the Lord and predicts that they will be drowned by a sudden storm, which then in due course happens.

Another sin connected with a lack of respect towards the saint is pride (*superbia*). It is often considered by Christian authors, such as Augustine, John Cassian and Gregory the Great, to be the root of all evil.⁸ Adomnán mentions pride in VC ii.35 in connection with a king who is uplifted with royal arrogance and refuses to open the gates of his fortress for the saint. After the saint miraculously opens the gates, the king learns his lesson, and from that day onwards he honours the saint with high esteem. Here Adomnán treats pride in connection with the powerful status of royalty, while giving a lesson on the fitting esteem and reverence to be shown to the rulers of the Church, or at least to the followers of Columba. Pride, therefore, is seen by Adomnán as a sin especially relevant to powerful people, who can be puffed up by their status and start abusing their authority.⁹ Here Adomnán's thinking agrees with that of Athanasius, who presents pride as a sin specifically threatening rulers, when he describes how saint Antony gave advice to Emperor Constantine, and to his sons Constans and Constantius, concerning their salvation, warning them against the lure of imperial power and against allowing the royal authority to make them swell with pride (*Vita Antonii* 81(50)). John Cassian also treats vainglory and pride as sins especially relevant to rulers, since all the biblical examples he gives in order to illustrate the sins of vainglory and pride are of kings who are proud, just like the king in VC

⁸ On the sin of pride see Bloomfield 1952, 69–73.

⁹ Adomnán furthermore enlarges upon the opposite of pride in the context of monastic life when discussing the saint's own humility and the monastic virtue of obedience. See VC ii.1, iii.7 for Columba's humility and VC i.2, 18, 19, 31, 32, 34, 41, 48, ii.27, iii.16 for monastic obedience.

ii.35 who is puffed up by royal pride.¹⁰ Adomnán thus is not the only author to make a connection between pride and royal status, but he is rather following a line of thinking available in earlier Christian writing.

Penance has a central role in Adomnán's vision concerning a good Christian life, since only the saints can be without sins. Penance can be understood as a key to a Christian life, since it is the means of purging oneself from one's sins and healing one's soul, and thus helping oneself to go to heaven. In VC two wise men are healed of their vices by their true repentance (VC i.30, 50), and another man finishes seven years of penance following the instructions of the saint and toiling for 'the salvation of his soul' (VC ii.39). However, there is also a man who has committed incest with his mother, as well as fratricide, and to whom the saint answers: 'If you do penance among the Britons with wailing and weeping for twelve years, and do not return to Ireland until your death, perhaps God will condone your sin' (VC i.22). The saint, however, later concludes to his monks that the man will not fulfil his penance, but will return to Ireland, and be killed by his enemies. Thus the wretched man might have a chance if he repents, the word *forsan*, 'perhaps', reflecting possibility. It can either refer to the gravity of the man's sin, and thus to the fact that the sin might be too grave for forgiveness, or to the fact that the saint knows that the man might not, after all, fulfil his penance, and thereby be doomed. The latter option seems more plausible, since the saint's successor Baithéne suggests that the man's penance would be accepted, quoting Holy Scripture to support this view. Adomnán does not reveal which biblical passage he has in mind, but he might be referring to Psalms 32.5 'Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity, I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord", and you forgave my sin', and 51.17 'a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.' Adomnán himself quotes the latter in VC i.30. A similar view is reflected in the Irish penitential of Finnian, which comments that 'there is no crime which cannot be expiated through penance so long as we are in this body' (Finnian 47). Furthermore, Augustine states that mercy is not denied of those who repent (*Epistolae ad Romanos inchoata expositio* 22). Thus it seems that Columba is not denying the possibility of penance because of the gravity of the man's sin, but because he knows that the man's repentance is not

¹⁰ *Institutiones* xi.10, 11, xii.21. Cassian is primarily directing his words to monks. He warns especially monks who have already conquered the other vices of pride. When read in this context it seems interesting to me that he chooses to use the example of kings to illustrate pride and vainglory, instead of stories of monks. This seems to suggest that there is some kind of profound connection between pride and royal status. What makes kings fitting examples to illustrate pride and vainglory to monks seems to be the parallelism between the height from which both the king and the perfect monk fall when guilty of pride.

genuine. This would suggest that anybody who genuinely repents his or her sins can have them forgiven.

The right attitude towards penance is illustrated by the exemplary penitent Féchna who flings himself at the saint's feet, weeping and grieving and publicly confessing his sins in VC i.30. Adomnán could here have in his mind Luke 7.36–50 where a repentant sinner washes Christ's feet with her tears. Weeping and lamentation are mentioned as part of penance also in VC i.22 and 30. They seem to function as outer signs of inner compunction and remorse, thus guaranteeing the sinner's true repentance.¹¹

The importance of preparing the soul for death with penance is highlighted in the episode concerning a man of whom the saint says:

Much to be pitied is that man who is shouting and who has come to seek things suitable for physical remedies, when today the fitter thing for him was to occupy himself with true repentance for his sins. For in the end of this week he will die (VC i.27).

The connection between penance and death also becomes clear when the saint says of the above-mentioned man who had committed incest and fratricide: 'This man is a son of perdition; he will not fulfil the penance that he has promised, but in a little while will return to Ireland, and will there shortly perish, killed by his enemies' (VC i.22). The man will suffer a violent death at the hands of his enemies, which functions as a punishment and indicates that he is destined to hell, since he did not expiate his sins by penance.

The destinies of good and bad men at the time of their deaths are most clearly contrasted in VC. There is a connection between the way a man lives and his manner of death, which mirrors his destiny in the afterlife. In the Life the saint predicts to good men that they will never be delivered into the hands of enemies, and that they will die in peace, in old age, in their own house, and surrounded by friends (VC i.10, 13, 15). The good death gives a man time to prepare his soul, and it is very similar to the deaths of many saints. For example, both saint Antony and Columba himself die peacefully in old age, surrounded by their followers, after giving instructions to them (*Vita Antonii* 91(58), 92(59), VC iii.23).

Bad men, on the other hand, have violent and sudden deaths at the hands of enemies (VC i.1, 22, 36, 39, ii.20, 24). The opposite of this sudden death, *mors subita*, of the wicked men is the *mors placida*, the peaceful death at old age, which is the exemplary good death. Adomnán is not alone in using the image of the sudden

¹¹ According to O'Loughlin the background of the idea of repentance with tears is in the 'baptism of tears' promoted by the Eastern theologian Gregory Nazianzen. O'Loughlin 2000, 54–55.

death as a punishment, since it also features in other Irish saints' Lives¹² and in the *Dialogi* iv.33 (in PL iv.32) of Gregory the Great, where a man guilty of seducing a young girl is overtaken by a sudden death. Adomnán's thinking agrees also with that of Cassian, who recommends preparation for death early on, since sudden death (*subitae mortis*) can carry off even children and young people (*Collationes* xxi.8). A biblical model for the image of the evil-doers, who die as a punishment by drowning and of whom not one will survive to tell the story in VC ii.22, can be found in the Pharaoh's army in Ex. 14.28 who are swept away by the Red sea as a punishment and of whom it is stated that not one of them survived.

The sins for which wicked men deserve violent and sudden deaths in VC include plundering, killing, committing fratricide and incest, trying to kill the saint, being responsible for the death of a man under protection, and scoffing and mocking the saint (VC i.1, 22, 36, 39, ii.20, 22, 23, 24, 25). Adomnán clearly demonstrates that these kinds of violent deaths are a deserved punishment from the bad deeds of these men, when saying of one of them, 'And Aid, unworthily ordained, will return like a dog to his vomit,¹³ and he will again be a bloody killer, and at last, pierced with a spear, will fall from wood into water, and die by drowning.¹⁴ He has deserved such an end much sooner, who has slaughtered the king of all Ireland' (VC i.36).

Christianity is a religion where the ultimate rewards and punishments come after death in either heaven or hell. Heaven is the goal of all good Christians, and the reward for their good deeds. This is clearly demonstrated in VC on the four occasions where souls of lay people are seen by the saint to be taken to heaven by angels. The first instance concerns a righteous and charitable iron-smith who gave alms for the needy (VC iii.9). Then, there is a happy and virtuous woman, followed by her pious and righteous husband (VC iii.10). The fourth is a guest at Abbot Comgall's monastery, who is drowned with a group of monks (VC iii.13).¹⁵ These examples clearly demonstrate how in Adomnán's view lay people could earn a place in heaven by doing good deeds, such as practicing the Christian virtue of charity.

Correspondingly there are some episodes in VC where the souls of evil men are taken to hell. Three of the evil men whose souls are dragged to hell are specifically said to have had a sudden death. In the first two cases the same

¹² See for example *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae* 80, 118.

¹³ ...*sicuti canis ad uomitum reuertetur suum* is a quote from Prov. 26.11. *sicut canis qui reuertitur ad uomitum suam*...

¹⁴ Here Adomnán seems to be referring to the motif of three-fold death known from early Irish literature. See Picard 1989, 372.

¹⁵ I take this man to be a layman since there is no indication of his ecclesiastical status.

structure *subita... morte* is used (VC ii.22, 23), while in the third case death happens *dicto citius*, ‘more quickly than speech’ (VC ii.25). There is also one case where death can be understood to be sudden, although there is less specification than in the three above-mentioned cases. The man is found lying in a bed with a whore by his enemies, who cut his head off (VC i.39). This is worth noting since in the remaining two cases where men are taken to hell neither their sins nor their way of dying is specified (VC i.1, 35). Thus in those episodes of VC where souls are taken to hell, and where there is some information about the crimes and deaths of the men, the deaths are specified, or at least implied, to be sudden. In Adomnán’s view there clearly is a connection between sudden and unpleasant death and the soul’s final destiny in hell. Adomnán has here in mind the death of Ananias in Acts. 5.1–11 who falls down and dies suddenly as a punishment for his greed, because he refers to him when writing about the murderer who fell dead on the spot ‘more quickly than speech... like Ananias before Peter’ and whose soul was taken to hell (VC ii.25).

If we look at the deaths of all people, both laity and ecclesiastics, whose souls are taken to heaven in VC, we find out that there is no unequivocal correlation between the way those people died and their final destiny. It is thus evident that not all good people have good deaths, although Adomnán presents us with a clear model for the desirable death in other episodes concerning prophecies of death rather than visions of souls carried to heaven. In the cases where the way of dying is mentioned in connection with a soul taken to heaven, in three cases the death happens naturally in old age (VC iii.9, 14, 23), while in one case the death is apparently due to a sickness, in one case the people in question are drowned, and in one case the person is murdered (VC ii.25, iii.6, 13).¹⁶ However there is a clear connection between the way of living and the destiny in afterlife. The people whose souls are taken to heaven are specified as being just, innocent, virtuous, pious, and devoted to charity and acts of righteousness.

The episodes describing the encounters between Columba and lay people can be seen as having a moral and didactic purpose, besides strengthening the renown of the saint by telling about his powers. In these encounters the good and the bad people are clearly divided, and thus the characters are some kind of archetypes that can be used to give a lesson on the type of behaviour fitting for Christians. Adomnán clearly presents his audience with a well-developed moral lesson based on his theological learning. This moral lesson concerning a good

¹⁶ The violent death of the innocent girl in VC ii.25 can be viewed against the model of the violent deaths of the martyrs, which explains why the correlation between her soul’s destiny in heaven and her way of dying seems to be reversed.

Christian life is not conveyed so much through the portrayal of the saint, but through the portrayal of the diametrically opposed destinies of other, minor, characters in the Life. The virtues of charity and respect towards the saint and his followers are central for Adomnán's vision of a good Christian (lay) life. Penance also has an important role in this vision, since it is the means of purging oneself from one's sins and thus helping oneself to go to heaven. The evidence of the episodes concerning souls taken to heaven or hell in VC can be read together with the episodes about good and bad people, bearing in mind especially the information about the manner of their dying. In VC wicked men have violent deaths, often at the hands of enemies, while the model of a good death is dying in old age, at home and surrounded by family and friends. The episodes featuring heaven and hell take the destinies of souls one step further, revealing the otherworldly aspect, and thus the final destiny of all men and women. If we combine these statements about good and bad men and their respective destinies, both in this world and in the beyond, we can conclude that Adomnán is clearly trying to convey an integrated worldview concerning good and bad Christians, and the rewards and punishments that they merit from God. The episodes concerning the rewards and punishments of the good and bad deeds in VC can therefore be interpreted as conveying a clear moral message concerning the good Christian life and its antithesis.

This vision of Christian behaviour, which is rewarded in heaven applies both to the ecclesiastics and the laity alike. It is therefore a fitting lesson for the Columban monks who would have been Adomnán's primary audience, and whose task it was not only to contend for heaven themselves, but also to help by their prayers, if not by their pastoral functions, the rest of the world in reaching the same goal. The fact that the Life provides a clear moral message suitable also for the lay people, however, raises the question of whether Adomnán meant the Life, or at least some episodes of it, to be used as a basis when preaching in the vernacular to the laity attached to the Columban monasteries by economic or more spiritual ties of affection.

We can conclude that in Adomnán's mind a good Christian lay life involves charity towards the poor and respect towards the Columban community among other virtues. Penance has a central role as the means of freeing oneself from the consequences of sin, in other words as a means of securing a place in heaven. Such aspects of lay life as marriage or high social status and riches are not hindrances in reaching this goal, although the rewards meted out to the laity in the hereafter may be less than those given to the virgins and the ecclesiastics. On the whole it seems

that Adomnán's attitude towards lay people and their chances of attaining heaven is generally positive, as long as the sinners mend their ways and repent their sins.

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Abbreviations

- PL *Patrologia Latina.* J.P. Migne, ed. Paris, 1841–64.