



St. Patrick: The Apostle of Ireland

ISSUE: Who was St. Patrick? Why should we care about him today?



RESPONSE: St. Patrick is the Patron Saint of Ireland and known for his efforts to evangelize and convert the pagan Irish of his time. In more recent times, his sanctity is less known. The feast day of St. Patrick, March 17, has become more of a secular holiday than a remembrance of St. Patrick's life and holiness. Despite the secularization of his feast, St. Patrick provides an example of the need for personal renewal, evangelical love, Christian courage and total devotion to God. His feast should be claimed by all Catholics as a memorial of his life, and his life example should be used to claim the world for Christ.

DISCUSSION: For those who claim no Irish heritage or devotion to the saints, all the fuss about St. Patrick's feast day must seem hard to comprehend. After all, most people don't know when the saint lived or what he did to become so famous. Some may have the vague notion that he brought Christianity to Ireland and had something to do with ridding Ireland of snakes. Even if they know this much about him, they have a hard time understanding the significance of all this for people today. When we know who he was, what he did, and the effect of his life on the Church and world, it humbles us and we recognize a call to greater fervour in our faith. Most importantly, his example shows us what can happen when we faithfully follow God and fearlessly proclaim Jesus the Christ, regardless of the cost. After all, as Christians, we are called to do nothing less (cf., Mt 28:18; James 5:20; Jude 22; and 1 Tim 4:16).

St. Patrick's Early Life

Patrick was born in Roman Britain at the end of the Fourth Century in what is now known as Scotland. His father was a deacon and his grandfather a priest. The family belonged to Roman citizenry. His father was a civil magistrate and tax collector for the Roman Empire. As a result of his background, Patrick was not only a nobleman and citizen of the Empire, but also baptized and raised Catholic. Despite his upbringing, he "did not recognize the True God" and "did not follow His commands." In the words of St. Patrick, "That was why I was taken as a captive to Ireland, along with many thousands of others with me."

While staying at a holiday villa outside his hometown of Bannaventa Berniae, Patrick was captured by pirates. He was 16 years old at the time. The pirates took him to the pagan land of Ireland and sold him as a slave to Chief Milchu. For six years, he toiled as a shepherd. It was there, in Ireland as a slave that Patrick found consolation in his faith. As he wrote:

And there also “the Lord opened my senses to my unbelief,” so that, though late in the day, I might remember my many sins; and accordingly “I might turn to the Lord my god with all my heart,” Who “has looked upon my lowliness’ and kept safe watch over me before ever I knew Him, yes, even before I had wit enough to tell good from evil.

During his captivity, Patrick learned to pray. He spent entire days and nights in prayer. Having only God as his companion, he learned to fear nothing. After six years of slavery, an angel spoke to him in a dream and told him it was God’s will for him to escape. The angel showed him the route to freedom.

After returning home, Patrick could have lived the rest of his days enjoying the leisurely life of a middle- class nobleman. However, God had other plans. In a dream, Patrick was summoned back to Ireland to bring knowledge of the True God to his captors. As Patrick wrote,

“I had a vision in my dreams” of a man who seemed to come from Ireland: his name was Victoricius and he carried countless letters, one of which he handed over to me. I read aloud where it began: “The Voice of the Irish.” And as I read these words I seemed to hear the voice of the same men who lived beside the forest of Foclut, which lies near the Western Sea where the sun sets. They seemed to shout aloud to me “as if with one and the same voice”:
“Holy broth of a boy, we beg you, come back and walk once more among us.”

Before returning to Ireland, Patrick recognized a call to become a priest. Making him Bishop of Ireland, Pope St. Celestine I sent him to evangelize the land of his captivity, so the barbaric Irish could know Christ.

Patrick Returns to Ireland as Bishop

Returning to Ireland, Patrick first went to Tara, the sacred home of Irish Celtic paganism. He was met by the druids and chieftains who had the intent to kill him and his companions. He narrowly escaped and set about finding more friendly territory to spread the good news of redemption. As his popularity grew and more people received baptism, the druids and chiefs grew more determined to kill him.

The situation came to a head on the eve of March 26, 433—Easter Sunday. That night the Ard-Righ (supreme monarch) at Tara decreed that in honour of the Celtic gods of darkness, people should extinguish all fires until a signal was given from the royal palace. St. Patrick arrived at the hill of Slane, at the opposite end of the valley from Tara on Easter Eve. On the summit of that hill, he kindled the Paschal fire. The druids at once raised their voices to the king begging permission to extinguish it. They made repeated attempts to douse the blessed fire and to punish St. Patrick. Despite their efforts, they could not extinguish the holy fire. The saint, shielded by Divine Providence, came away unscathed.

The next day, preceded by a disciple carrying the Gospels aloft, Bishop Patrick walked in procession to Tara. There the druids used their incantations in an attempt to maintain their sway over the Irish people. They covered the hill and surrounding plain with a cloud of darkness. Patrick prayed to Christ, and the sun sent forth its rays, causing the brightest sunshine to light the entire island. Unwilling to admit defeat, the arch-druid Lochru used his demonic power to lift himself

high into the air. Patrick again knelt in prayer, and the old druid fell from the sky and was dashed against a rock. Following these miracles, the Ard-Righ gave his consent for Patrick to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ across the island. Immediately, people came to St. Patrick in droves. The country began its conversion to Christianity.

During his mission in Ireland, St. Patrick consecrated no fewer than 350 bishops. When not engaged in preaching or saying Mass, he spent his entire time in prayer and fasting. He practiced many austere penances such as wearing a hair shirt. His bed was a slab of rock. Royalty would fling precious ornaments at his feet out of respect, and he would return them saying, "I come not for earthly wealth, but to see all of Ireland graced with the spiritual wealth of the Catholic faith."

Miracles and Stories of Old



Patrick went to Magh-Slecht where there was a huge pillar devoted to the Gaelic god Crom-Cruach. This pillar was covered in slabs of gold and silver and surrounded by 12 minor idols. Taking his crosier, Patrick struck the idol and it crumbled to dust.

Early one morning, while near a royal palace, St. Patrick and his companions were singing praises to God near the fountain of Clebach. Ethne and Fedelm, the daughters of the local chieftain, came upon them wishing to bathe in the waters. "Who are ye, and whence do ye come? Are ye phantoms, or fairies, or friendly mortals?" they asked. St. Patrick answered, "It would be better for you to adore and worship the one true God, whom we announce to you, than that you would satisfy your curiosity by such vain questions."

Ethne began to ask, "Who is God, and where is He? Where is His dwelling? Has He sons and daughters? Is He rich in silver and gold? Is He everlasting and beautiful? Are His daughters dear and lovely to the men of this world? Is He on the heavens or on earth, in the seas, in rivers, in mountains, in valleys? Make Him known to us. How is He to be seen? How is He to be loved? How is He to be found? Is it in youth or in old age?"

Filled with the Holy Spirit, St. Patrick said,

God, whom we announce to you, is the ruler of all things. He is the God of heaven and earth, of the sea and the rivers, of the sun and the moon, and all the stars. He is the God of the high mountains and of the low-lying valleys. He is above heaven, and in heaven, and under heaven. His dwelling is in heaven and on earth and the sea and all therein. He gives breath to all. He gives life to all. He is over all. He upholds all. He makes the sun shine and gives the moon its splendour. He makes overflowing wells in dry lands and islands in the ocean. He has appointed the stars to serve the greater lights. His Son is co-eternal and co-equal with Himself, and the Father is not older than the Son. The Holy Spirit proceeds from Them; the Three are undivided.

After hearing this, the women immediately desired baptism. They made a profession of faith, were clad in white, received baptism and attended their first Mass.

Once, in obedience to his guardian angel, St. Patrick made a spiritual retreat of 40 days to the highest mountain in Ireland, now called Croagh Patrick. While praying there, the demons who inspired Celtic paganism set upon the saint to tempt him. They gathered around the mountain in the form of vast flocks of hideous birds of prey. So dense were their ranks that Patrick could see neither sea nor earth. He begged God to send them away, but God seemed to ignore his prayers and his tears. Finally, he rang the bells he used to announce his preaching of the Divine truths and the demons began to scatter. Some cast themselves into the ocean. According to some biographers, St. Patrick's defeat over Satan was so complete that "for seven years no evil thing was to be found in Ireland."

During his retreat, St. Patrick begged God to grant him a number of petitions. Among these was the request that seven years before Judgment Day, the sea would spread over Ireland to save its people from the temptations and the terrors of the Antichrist. He resolved not to come down from the mountain until his prayers were answered. At the end of the 40 days on the mountain, according to legend, God granted his requests.

On March 17, 460, St. Patrick went to his eternal reward. For several days, the light of heaven shone around his funeral bier. Irish devotion to this blessed man sprang up immediately.

Conclusion

This saint, who accomplished so much in his lifetime, accomplished so much more after his death. During the darkest days of English oppression, the Irish felt confident in requesting the prayers of the former slave St. Patrick. They knew they had someone interceding for them who understood their plight. When they came to the United States or went to other foreign lands and faced tremendous prejudice and discrimination, they continued asking for St. Patrick's intercession. In time, the Irish organized parades to honour him in the larger cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. These celebrations spread west as the country grew. By the late 19th century, March 17 became the day when everyone is Irish, wears green and eats corned beef and cabbage.

In St. Patrick's life, we see an example for our own. Though he was born into privilege, he spent many years living as a slave. Where others might have cursed God for this fate, Patrick took an objectively evil situation and sanctified it through Christ. Eventually, he won not only physical freedom from the bonds of slavery, but spiritual freedom from the bonds of sin. Recognizing the obligation this put him under; he took the message of Jesus Christ and evangelized a nation. This nation took the Christian life to heart and helped change the course of Western history. Let us renew our commitment to the Lord by resolving to perfectly imitate St. Patrick's example.

