

St Patrick

by Fr. Tommy Lane, Diocese of Cloyne

It was not St. Patrick who brought the faith firstly to Ireland. It was here already before him in the south and east of Ireland, probably due to traders and contacts with the continent. Also another bishop named Palladius had been sent by Pope Celestine in 431 A.D. before Patrick. We celebrate Patrick in a special way because of his outstanding efforts and achievement in converting much of the north and west of Ireland.

We have two of Patrick's writings, his 'Confessions' in which we see his humility and his 'Letter to Coroticus' in which we see the strong side of Patrick. We see Patrick's humility when he wrote, "I am Patrick, a sinner, the most unlearned of men, the lowliest of all the faithful, utterly worthless in the eyes of many" (Confessions §1). He was over emphasizing his humility there because he was not the most unlearned of men as we see from the Latin of his writings.

Patrick was the son of a deacon named Calpornius and his mother was Conchessa. His grandfather, Potitus, as Patrick says in his own writings, was a priest (Confessions §1). Patrick was taken captive at about the age of 16 and he wrote,

"I did not know the true God. I was taken into captivity to Ireland with many thousands of people. We deserved this fate because we turned away from God; we neither kept his commandments nor obeyed our pastors who used to warn us about our salvation." (Confessions §1)

While Patrick was working as a shepherd in Ireland he underwent a conversion experience. In his Confessions we read,

"The Lord there made me aware of my unbelief that I might at last advert to my sins and turn wholeheartedly to the Lord my God. He showed concern for my weakness and pity for my youth and ignorance; he watched over me before I got to know him and before I was able to distinguish good from evil. In fact he protected me and comforted me as a father would his son."

(Confessions §1)

So when Patrick came to Ireland he became aware of the state of his soul, and converted, finding new life from God. He became a man of deep prayer. Again in his Confessions we read,

"After I had come to Ireland I daily used to feed cattle, and I prayed frequently during the day; the love of God and the fear of Him increased more and more, and faith became stronger, and the spirit was stirred; so that in one day I said about a hundred prayers, and in the night nearly the same; so that I used even to remain in the woods and in the mountains; before daylight I used to rise to prayer, through snow, through frost, through rain, and I felt no harm; nor was there any slothfulness in me, as I now perceive, because the spirit was then fervent within me." (Confessions §6)

While here in captivity for six years he learned Irish which would be essential for his later mission here. Also his master was a high priest of the Druids so he learned their sophisticated religion from him which would be so beneficial for his later mission converting them to Christianity. So God's plan was working itself out in his life even if he could not see it at the time. (God turns everything to good.)

He returned to his native England and then went to France for training as a missionary. While in France wanting to return to Ireland as a missionary brought Patrick a severe setback, probably his greatest, when he was rejected for the appointment, due to a revelation by a priest friend of a misdeed of his 30 years previously (Confessions §27). Patrick said he came close to giving up completely (Confessions §26). But Patrick saw good coming out of the evil, as he says in the Confessions,

"But this was for my good for thus was I purified by the Lord, and He made me fit that I might be now what was once far from me - that I should care and labour for the salvation of others." (Confessions §12)

That very night God comforted him and he heard God saying to him, "Anyone who touches you touches the apple of my eye" (Confessions §29). He was ordained bishop commissioned for the mission in Ireland by Pope Celestine who gave him the name Patrick, which means 'father' (from the Latin word 'pater') since he was to be a father to the Irish. Returning to Ireland as bishop instead of to England meant Patrick was the subject of severe criticism by English clergy.

The year 432 AD is usually said to be the year when Patrick came to Ireland but there is not certainty about this. How was Patrick able to convert Ireland so successfully so easily? Before Patrick

came to Ireland there was a strong belief here in all kinds of gods, e.g. dating back to 3,500 BC the pre-Celtic peoples of Ireland worshipped the sun with shrines. In the ancient religion wells and rivers were associated with goddesses, e.g. the rivers Shannon and Boyne are named after goddesses. Patrick tapped into these pagan beliefs and taught the people the true faith about the true God. Patrick's great shrine at Croagh Patrick in County Mayo had previously been a shrine to the Celtic god Lugh (god of the sun). The lighting of the Spring fire at Tara by the Ard-Rí (high king) was taken over by Patrick and became the lighting of the Easter fire of Holy Saturday. Patrick was cute. He understood the Irish clan system, he knew that if the chieftains of the various clans became Christian, the rest of the clans would also. Spreading the word of God involved politics and diplomacy. Patrick used every means possible to spread the word of God. The shamrock was the sacred plant of the Druids and a legend (some say it is true) says Patrick used it to teach the Trinity. He baptized people in wells, and many holy wells in Ireland today are called after him.

He worked night and day to bring the faith all over Ireland. He preached with authority and acted with miracles. He was what we would now describe as a charismatic person. He didn't just come quietly into a town. When he came he and the faith were noticed. Bringing the Irish to know the true God could be described as his vocation.

A British prince named Coroticus came and slaughtered a number of converts whom Patrick had recently baptized. In his Confessions we saw the humility of Patrick. In his Letter to Coroticus we see the other side of Patrick, his strong personality; he was enraged by what Coroticus did. It reminds us that humility does not mean cowardice. He lists Coroticus' sins; avarice, murder, hatred of brother. He described Coroticus as a man who has no respect for God nor for his priests whom he chose. He says of him, "how much more guilty is he that has stained his hands with the blood of the sons of God whom He has of late purchased in the utmost part of the earth through the call of our littleness." Patrick admitted, "I am hated" but he refused to give up.

"I am hated. What shall I do, Lord? I am most despised. Look, Thy sheep around me are torn to pieces and driven away, and that by those robbers, by the orders of the hostile-minded Coroticus. Far from the love of God is a man who hands over Christians to the Picts and Scots. Ravening wolves have devoured the flock of the Lord, which in Ireland was indeed growing splendidly with the greatest care; and the sons and daughters of kings were monks and virgins of Christ - I cannot count their number. Wherefore, be not pleased with the wrong done to the just; even to hell it shall not please." (Letter to Coroticus §13)

"I ask earnestly that whoever is a willing servant of God be a carrier of this letter, so that on no account it be suppressed or hidden by anyone, but rather be read before all the people, and in the presence of Coroticus himself. May God inspire them sometime to recover their senses for God, repenting, however late, their heinous deeds - murderers of the brethren of the Lord! - and to set free the baptized women whom they took captive, in order that they may deserve to live to God, and be made whole, here and in eternity!" (Letter to Coroticus §22)

We read in Patrick's own writings that he would have loved to return to his parents and his companions in France but he made the sacrifice of not returning for the sake of spreading the faith in Ireland. "I am bound by the Spirit who gives evidence against me if I do this, telling me that I shall be guilty and I fear to waste the labour that I began, not I, but Christ the Lord, who commanded me to come to be with them for the rest of my life." What kept Patrick going during his trials was obviously his close friendship with God. He drew the strength for living from God. He was humble, there was no pride in him, he realized that it was God who was working through him. At the very end of his Confessions he admits that he did nothing, it was God who did it all.

"But I want you to know and sincerely believe that anything I achieved was not through my effort, it was the gift of God and this is my confession before I die." (Confessions §25)

He is said to have died on March 17th 493 and is buried in the same grave as St. Brigid and St. Columba in Downpatrick in County Down. On this beautiful feast of St. Patrick we can ask ourselves are we grateful to God for the gift of faith which has been passed down to us? Do we like Patrick use every means to pass on this faith and spread it? Through our trials we become bitter or better. St. Patrick became better.