

The Holiness of



Saint Patrick

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By

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MANY CATHOLICS are quite heavily committed to Saint Patrick with so many cathedrals, churches, colleges, and schools under his patronage and so many persons bearing his name. Yet I think that I am right in saying that he is not particularly well known or as well loved in some areas of the world, even amongst the best informed Catholics.



If I speak of Saint Patrick, it is not of the historical figure who emerges somewhat hazily from a complex era. Also, it is not of the heroic figure about whom the folklore of a grateful people has woven so many beautiful legends. Rather, it is of Saint Patrick as a vital force in the living church. He is an exacting person who, if properly understood, gives the lie to much that is false in modern piety and points the way to such a relationship with the Father as Christ envisaged for his followers. Any person interested in achieving holiness of life can profit from a study of the holiness of Saint Patrick.

Saint Patrick Today

The question arises how a man who died in the year 461 (or thereabouts) could possibly be a vital force in the church of today. The first thought that suggests itself is that he can certainly offer immediate support to the church and its members from his place in heaven. The merits that he acquired during his life on earth enable him to intercede with an intercession more powerful than that of our friends on earth.



“The saints cooperate with us in obtaining our salvation,” says Saint Thomas Aquinas, “and by their help obtain from God what we ask of him. It is more glory for them to be able to help others, because in this they are co-operators with God.”

This does not suggest that any saint, or even Our Lady, can be the final support on whom we rest our hope. The final support on whom we rest our hope must always be Christ, for in no other name is salvation found. It is quite wrong to think that we can, or would even want to, bypass Christ in approaching the Father. We are united to God in Christ. Christ is man as we are men; with him and by him and in him we are truly sons of God. By this truth we live.

Application of this truth to the life of Saint Patrick serves to indicate his present role in the church more clearly. The same Christ who lives in us, making us sons of God, lived in Patrick, making him also a son of God. Patrick lived, and still lives, as a member of the same Christ in whom we live. Hence, the passing of fifteen hundred years need not make him remote from us and it does not alter Christ's formula for holiness in life.

"If any man love me, he will keep my commandments and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him." (Jn. 14/23.) The presence of Saint Patrick and the other saints with God at this time is an encouragement to us to live by the same formula.

"Since we are watched by such a cloud of witnesses," says Saint Paul, "let us run with all endurance the race for which we are entered." (Heb. 12/1.)

Although it is never easy to state precisely the role of a saint in the church at a given time, it seems reasonable to suggest that all saints have a special work beyond the general ones already mentioned. Origen, suggests, for instance, that the spirit and power of Saint John the Baptist must come first into the soul of a man who learns to believe in Christ to prepare him for the coming of Christ. We remember Saint Patrick chiefly as a great missionary, a man who won a whole nation for God by his word and example. As with Saint John the Baptist, neither the power of Patrick's word, nor the witness of his life is lost to the church.

The Power of His Word

The power of Saint Patrick's word remains in two of his writings that we still possess—his "Confession" and his "Letter Against Coroticus." Of these two documents, the Confession is by far the more important because it provides an outline of his life and insights into the motives behind his missionary effort.

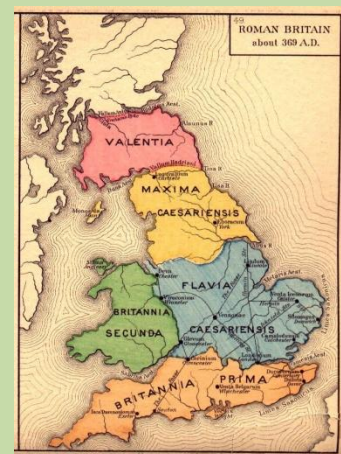


The witness of his life is a compelling one. In his day, he exerted tremendous influence over the lives of other men. He still has the power to deepen our understanding of the Christian vocation in the world of men and to inspire us to shake off our half-the-day self-indulgence that constantly impedes the work of Christ in the world.

The sense of our own value as persons made in the image of God is easily lost in the noise and movement of modern life. Even if we cling to a realization of the value of our own immortal souls and are determined in our efforts to save them, we are still likely to overlook the value of those persons, many in number, over whom we are going to exercise power for better or for worse. Whether we like it or not, we are in fact the representatives of Christ in those circles in which we move. Simply by what we are, we are either effective or ineffective witnesses of Christ. Many souls are dependent upon the influence of our lives for their introduction to Christ. There was a time when Patrick, as a Christian, did not realize this; but once he saw his vocation as a Christian and understood it, he pursued it with Pauline vigor and energy. Just to see him in action is to have the value of our own souls impressed upon us and the urgency of our Christian vocation stressed.

Early Life

Although little of the detail of Patrick's life is known for certain, its outline is reasonably clear. He was almost certainly born in Roman Britain about the year 385. Shortly after the year 400 he was captured at his home in Roman Britain by a raiding party and carried off as a slave to Ireland. In his Confession, he remarks that he was then sixteen years old but still did not know God. This does not mean that he was not a Christian, for he was. It means rather that he lived without much thought of God and, in general, neglected God. He attributes his capture and the capture of many other Christians at this time to their neglect of God and their refusal to serve God faithfully.



It must surely have been a jolt for a sixteen-year-old boy to be torn away from a happy and comfortable home and to face the prospect of a life spent in slavery. He was a sensitive person with a deep affection for his parents and real feeling for his own country so the thought of living among barbarians in a foreign country was a hateful one. We would have expected his captivity to make him embittered and disillusioned. It had the opposite effect. He always recalled his capture with gratitude because this crisis "opened

the sense of my unbelief that I might at last remember my sins and be converted to the Lord my God.” It was the beginning of a relationship with God that was to continue to develop during the remainder of his long life. It was a relationship in which Patrick saw God as his Father—loving him, caring for him and protecting him—even during those years when he was not conscious of God’s presence. “He watched over me before I knew him,” wrote Saint Patrick, “and guarded me and comforted me as a father would his son.”

Slavery in Ireland

Patrick worked in Ireland for six years as a slave. He tells us his work was to tend sheep. We know that he lacked food and clothing during that time but he does not complain of cruel treatment. The important thing about these years is that knowledge, love, and fear of God all grew in him and his faith was strengthened. They were years of intense and fervent prayer. During the day and at night, in the woods and on the mountain, he sought and found opportunities for prayer. “I used to get up for prayer before daylight, through snow, through frost, through rain, and I felt no harm, and there was no sloth in me—as I now see, because the spirit within me was then fervent.”



It seems unlikely that Patrick would have received any kind of instruction at this time or even have had any manuscripts of Christian teaching to read. We may therefore conclude that he was “taught of God.” His ability to approach God simply and directly was probably learned in the Irish woods and mountains. To the end of his life, however, he regretted his lack of formal education, speaking often of his slow tongue and only hesitantly committing his thoughts to paper for fear of revealing his lack of education. At the same time, he was aware that he had received from God gifts often withheld from those who study most assiduously.

“Whence I, once rustic, exiled, unlearned, who does not know how to provide for the future, this I know most certainly that before I was humiliated I was like a stone lying in deep mire; and he that is mighty came and in his mercy, lifted me up, and raised me aloft, and placed me on the top of the wall.”

Like Saint Paul

It is interesting to note that Patrick was introduced to his Christian vocation in much the same way as Saint Paul—by the direct action of God rather than by the ordinary means of instruction through the church. In telling his story, Saint Paul writes, “And then he who had set me apart from the day of my birth and called me by his grace, saw fit to make his Son known in me, so that I could preach his gospel among the Gentiles. My first thought was not to hold any consultations with any human creature; and I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who had been apostles longer than myself; no, I went off into Arabia, and when I came back, it was to Damascus. Then, when three years had passed, I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Peter and I stayed a fortnight there in his company.” (Gal. 1/15-18.)

**I pray to God to
give me
perseverance and
to deign that I be a
faithful witness to
Him to the end of
my life for my God.**
Saint Patrick

Patrick tells his story in more vigorous language than Paul in this instance, but we note that the two stories run parallel in several respects. Patrick says, “And therefore I ought to cry out loud,” writes Saint Patrick, “and so also render something to the Lord for his great benefits here and in eternity—benefits which the mind of man is unable to appraise. Wherefore, then, be astonished, ye great and little that fear God, and you men of letters on your estates, listen and pore over this. Who was it that roused up me, the fool that I am, from those who in the eyes of men are wise, and expert in law, and powerful in word and in everything? And He inspired me—me, the outcast of this world—before others, to be the man (if only I could!) who, with fear and reverence and without blame, should faithfully serve the people to whom the love of Christ conveyed and gave me for the duration of my life, if I should be worthy.”

Escape from Slavery

After six years in Ireland came the second crisis in Patrick’s life. He heard a voice in his sleep that said, “See, your ship is ready.” It should be noted that Patrick does not at any time speak in his Confession of working a miracle, although there is no reason why some of the miracles attributed to him may not be true, but he does say that God used to

forewarn him of many things by a divine message. This particular message about the ship followed another message he had received earlier. It said, “It is well that you fast, soon you will go to your own country.”

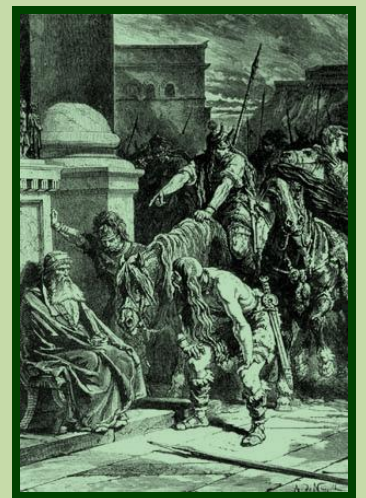
He took flight from the man to whom he was bonded. He journeyed “perhaps two hundred miles” to a port (probably on the southeast coast) where he knew nobody. He tells us that he made this journey in the strength of God, who directed his way. He further tells us that he feared nothing until he came to the ship.

If he feared nothing on the way, he was timid and nervous enough in his approach to the ship’s captain. Despite an offer to pay, he met a curt refusal. After he had turned disappointedly away to make his way back to the hut where he had been sheltering, he was recalled by a crewmember and taken aboard the ship, which set sail at once for Gaul.

Still Amongst Barbarians

They reached Gaul in three days only to find it impossible to dispose of their cargo because the country had been devastated by barbarian invasions. This may well have been the year 407, the year of a great Vandal raid on Gaul. These were grim days for the church. Only three years later the Goths, led by Alaric, entered the city of Rome and spent three days of destruction there. Alaric and his Goths were followed shortly by Attila and the Huns, and they in turn by Genseric and his Vandals. The work of Saint Patrick can be fully understood only against the background of his times.

Those times are well described by Saint Jerome who lived through part of them at least. “The mind shudders,” he wrote, “when dwelling on the ruin of our day. For twenty years and more, Roman blood has been flowing ceaselessly over the broad countries between Constantinople and the Julian Alps, where the Goths, the Huns, and the Vandals spread ruin and death. How many Roman nobles have been their prey! How many matrons and maidens have fallen victim to their lust! Bishops live in prison, priests and clerics fall by the sword, churches are plundered, Christ’s altars are turned into feeding troughs, and the



remains of martyrs are thrown out of their coffins. Everywhere there is sorrow, everywhere lamentation, everywhere the image of death. . . . What is safe if Rome is gone? What is safe if the city that had taken captive the whole world is taken captive?"



The reply to Saint Jerome's question is that the spiritual resources of the church were not seriously impaired by the fall of the Roman Empire. Christianity faced the problem of converting the barbarians. Patrick was a pioneer in that work. At the beginning of his "Letter against Coroticus," he wrote, "I, Patrick, a sinner, unlearned, resident in Ireland, declare myself to be a bishop. Most assuredly, I believe that what I am I have received from God. And so I live among barbarians, a stranger and an exile for the love of God."

We note here Patrick's awareness of two important things. His life's work lay among the barbarians. He had been equipped by God for their conversion. At the same time, he is aware of the importance of his episcopate. In the early days of the rebuilding of Europe, the authority of the emperor and his representatives was largely replaced by that of the bishop. One tradition from the Middle Ages has Patrick presiding over a council of the rulers of Ireland to bring their laws and social customs into line with Christian teaching.

Arrival in France

Patrick's arrival in France at this particular time must surely, therefore, have given perspective to his later work among the barbarians on what was then the fringe of the known world. However, we do not know in detail what happened to Saint Patrick in the few years after he landed in Gaul. He tells us that he was captured and held prisoner for sixty days before escaping. It was only after many journeys over long distances that he was eventually able to make his way from Gaul to the home of his parents in Britain. One thing we know for certain is that he remained very close to God during these difficult days. As the country had become a "desert" after the ravages of the invaders, travelers were in constant danger of starvation. He recalls that on one journey of twenty-eight days they traveled through deserted country and that God gave them food and fire and dry weather until they met people. "As I said above," he wrote, "we traveled twenty-eight days through deserted country and the night we met people we had no food left."



After a few years, he found his way back to his people in Britain who received him as their son and sincerely begged him that, having suffered so many hardships, he should not leave them again.

A Voice from Ireland

It is doubtful whether it would now have been possible for Patrick to settle down at home as much as he loved his parents and his country. His future was made plain to him by a vision that he experienced after returning home to his parents. He saw in the night a vision of a man who appeared to hand him a letter on which was written the words, “Wake thee, boy, come and walk amongst us once more.” At the same time he appeared to hear the voice of the Irish from beside the Western Sea making the same request.

We must not imagine that he arose immediately from his bed and set about the conversion of Ireland. Many years were to pass before he again set foot in Ireland. He first journeyed to Gaul and remained there for perhaps fifteen years. These years were spent for the most part at the monastery of Lerins and at Auxerre, where he prayed, studied, and worked, first as a deacon and later as a priest.

The fruit of these years is seen in his writing and in his later work. His writing is rough and unpolished but it shows a most remarkable knowledge of the Scriptures. He quotes from the Old and New Testaments readily and effectively. His writing echoes the Pauline Epistles and, even when he is not quoting directly from the Scriptures, his outlook and even his phrasing reflects them.

The other benefit derived from these years in Gaul was his realization of the worth of the monastic way of life. Although he never became a monk himself, he loved the monks at Lerins and wrote as an old man that he longed “to visit the brethren and behold the faces of the Saints of the Lord.” There can be no doubt that the monastic movement in Ireland dates back as far as Saint Patrick because he speaks himself with pride of the “countless sons and daughters of kings who became the monks and virgins of Christ.”



Return to Ireland

During Patrick's stay in Gaul, Saint Germanus, Bishop of Auxerre, was sent by the Pope to examine the state of the church in Britain. Among other things, his visit revealed that the British slaves in Ireland had converted many pagans to Christianity but that the Irish church was not yet properly organized. As a result of this, a priest named Palladius was named Bishop by the Pope and sent to Ireland.

Palladius lived only a short time and it soon became necessary to find a successor. The Confession indicates almost certainly that Patrick was nominated as leader of the first expedition and even had "inside information" that he was to be consecrated Bishop. This event did not take place because a misdemeanor of his very early life was quoted against his character. He was bitterly disappointed but was strengthened by a vision in which God made known to him that He was displeased with the rejection. Since he was sure that his vocation to work among the Irish came from God, he pressed his claims and was appointed to replace Palladius. It seems possible that he may have received this appointment directly from the Pope, as did Palladius, but we cannot be certain of this. We do not even know who consecrated him Bishop, but we do know that, at the time of his consecration, he was already a middle-aged man.



Work in Ireland

In the "Confession" Patrick claims that it would be tedious to give an account of all or even part of his labors as a Bishop in Ireland. Perhaps he is right. The important thing is that his labors were highly successful. In his favor would have been his knowledge of the customs of the people amongst whom he worked. The traditions that have been handed down about his missionary work invariably point to a deep insight into the mentality of the Irish. What he lacked in intellectual gifts he made up for by shrewdness tempered by a native kindness that shows through all his writing. He worked close to God and knew where true values lay.

He saw himself as a fisher of men and tells how he spread out his nets so a great multitude and throng might be caught for God. It was a great consolation for him to see

so many who had worshiped “idols and things impure” join the ranks of the people of God. Recalling his missionary work he wrote, “For I am very much God’s debtor, who gave me such great grace that many people were reborn in God through me and afterwards confirmed, and that clerics were ordained for them everywhere.” In this way, he consolidated his work so successfully that the nation he won for God has never defected. Although he consciously attempted to leave a bequest, he could not have envisaged what a great bequest it would be.

“I must spread everywhere the name of God,” he said, “so that after my decease I may leave a bequest to my brethren and sons whom I have baptized in the Lord—so many thousands of people.”

As the episcopal office demands, he became so deeply attached to his people that he could not bear the thought of leaving them.

“How I have wished to go to my country and my parents, and also to Gaul in order to visit the brethren and to see the faces of the saints of my Lord. Even if I wished to leave them and go to Britain, God knows that I much desired it, but I am bound by the Spirit, who gives evidence against me if I do this, telling me that I shall be guilty.”

His attachment was not a personal one. It was founded in the commission he had received from Christ.

“I am afraid of losing the labor which I have begun— nay, not I, but Christ the Lord who bade me come here and stay with them for the rest of my life, if the Lord will, and will guard me from every evil that I may not sin before them.”

Death

Saint Patrick died of a natural illness in his mid-seventies. The exact circumstances of his death are not known, but, when he died, Ireland was no longer a missionary country. It had already been won for God. Very soon, missionaries were to leave Ireland for Europe. The English historian, Philip Hughes, in acknowledging this, pays Saint Patrick a great compliment saying, “From Ireland, which was Patrick’s creation, the light was one day to return and enlighten Europe itself.”

A Sinful Man

One of the features of Saint Patrick's spirituality was a constant awareness of his own sinfulness. There is no doubt that a deep sense of sin is one of God's great graces. It can be given only to a person who has learned to love God deeply and sincerely. Romano Guardini formulated a prayer, part of which reads,

“Holy God, teach me to recognize your love,
so I may see how great is my guilt.”

In Patrick's life, and in the life of every saint, this prayer was answered. He introduces himself to us with the words, “I am Patrick a sinner.”

He recognizes that he needs constant support from God saying, “I do not trust myself as long as I am in this body of death, for strong is he who daily strives to turn me away from the faith and purity of true religion.”

He squarely faces the fact that “the hostile flesh is ever dragging us unto death, that is, towards the forbidden satisfaction of one's desires,” but not without recognizing the power of God's grace to overcome sin.

“From the time I came to know him in my youth, the love of God and the fear of him have grown in me, and up to now, thanks to the grace of God, I have kept the faith.”

The natural corollary of the recognition of God's love is confidence. Romano Guardini's prayer sums this up perfectly.

“Holy God, teach me to recognize your love,
so I may see how great is my guilt.
But grant that this recognition may also become confidence.”

The Trinity in His Life

Many pictures and statues of Saint Patrick show him with a shamrock in his hand and snakes beneath his feet. Without entering into the question of whether Saint Patrick drove the snakes out of Ireland, we might say that the symbolism is good.

It points to the fact that he waged a successful fight against the forces of evil in Ireland. The symbolism of the shamrock is equally good. Its value for teaching the doctrine of the Trinity is strictly limited, but the Confession indicates that Saint Patrick lived the mystery of his own life and, with or without the help of a shamrock, taught it successfully.



He sees clearly that the sanctification of men has its wellspring in the Father.

“He watched over me before I knew him and guarded me and comforted me as a Father would his son.”

Patrick praised God. He thanked Him. He loved Him. He trusted Him. He feared God. He saw the hand of God in everything. He said often that the strength of God directed his way. He accepted with equanimity whatever God asked of Him. He was in all things a devoted son to his Father.

He expresses his belief in the Son in a compact formula saying, “Him we believe to have always been with the Father, spiritually and ineffably begotten by the Father before the beginning of the world, before all beginning; and by Him are made all things visible and invisible. He was made Man, and, having defeated death, was received into heaven by the Father; and He has given Him all power over all names, in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue shall confess to Him that Jesus Christ is the Lord and God, in Whom we believe, Whose advent we expect soon to be, judge of the living and the dead, Who will render to every man according to his deeds.”

He was glad to be poor with Christ. He was confident that Christ would guard him from every evil. He was prepared to sacrifice himself with Christ.

“Ready I was that He should give me His chalice to drink, as He gave it also to the others who loved him.”

He expected one day to reign with Christ.

“Of Him and by Him and in Him we shall reign.”

His attachment to the Holy Spirit was no less real. He says that it is the Holy Spirit who makes those who believe and obey sons of God and joint heirs with Christ. He speaks of God saving him from evil “because of the Spirit that dwelleth in me.” He regrets that he, who was chosen to be God’s helper, “should have been so slow to do as the Spirit suggested.”

We have very few pages of Saint Patrick’s writing. Altogether, they would scarcely be the length of a short story. They nonetheless give a graphic picture of Patrick as a man who lived for God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“To Serve Faithfully . . .”

Saint Patrick saw himself as an ambassador of God.

“I commend my soul to my faithful God, for whom I am an ambassador in all my wretchedness.”

He regarded it a privilege to serve God’s people. He wanted above all else, “to serve faithfully” the people to whom Christ had given him. As already stated he regarded himself as a fisher of men and he tried “to fish well and diligently.” He was driven by his love for men “to make known the gift of God and everlasting consolation.” His great desire was to spend himself for the souls committed to his care.



Saint Patrick’s Cross

As an ambassador for God, Saint Patrick was a tremendous success. To be a successful ambassador for God is an exacting task, demanding full use of the power of divine love that lies within us. Perhaps Saint Patrick, by his example, inspiration, and intercession, may help us to exercise those powers more fully.

The Breastplate of Saint Patrick

In this , have made reference to two writings of Saint Patrick. There may possibly be a third. An old Irish morning prayer called the “Breastplate of Saint Patrick” can be traced back in its present form to the 9th century. The possibility of its composition by Saint Patrick should not be dismissed since it is one in spirit with his own writing. Here are some lines from the prayer.

I arise today through God’s strength to pilot me,
God’s might to uphold me, God’s wisdom to guide me,
God’s eye to look before me, God’s ear to hear me,
God’s word to speak for me, God’s hand to guard me,
God’s way to lie before me, God’s shield to protect me,
God’s host to secure me—

Against the snares of devils, against temptation of vices,
against inclinations of nature, against everyone who shall wish me
ill, afar and near, alone and in a crowd . . .

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on
my left, Christ where I lie, Christ where I sit, Christ where I arise,

Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me,

Salvation is of the Lord,
Salvation is of the Lord,
Salvation is of Christ,

May thy salvation, O Lord, be ever with us.

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