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Gaelic Mass Homily
Honoring St. Patrick
Redemptorist Church
March 12, 2005

I grew up in a country which honors St. Patrick as its national apostle. I made my first confession, first communion, was confirmed and offered my first Mass in a parish dedicated to St. Patrick. If there is validity in the concept of osmosis I would like to believe that the spirit of Patrick had something to do with a vocation to the priesthood with a missionary twist. And in our diocese because the Irish railroad builders were temporarily halted by the Missouri River, I have discovered that they constructed no less than eleven churches honoring St. Patrick, seven of which are still in use. Patrick never gave me the option of ignoring him!

I discovered very quickly that the popular Patrick we all know so well is a caricature, and a poor one, of the real Saint. I refer to the Patrick of the parades, the Patrick of the shamrocks, the snake-expelling Patrick, the corned beef and cabbage Patrick, the Erin go Breagh Patrick. Now, I am not a kill-joy. These saccharine relics of dubious folklore along with the green beer and the killer shillelaghs have their place. They add immeasurably to the hilarity surrounding this mid-Lenten festival but, as the Irish would say, they should not be confused with "him-self."

There was a time when we knew very little about Patrick's coming to Ireland and even less about the island and its people who became the beneficiaries of his evangelization. All that has changed dramatically during the past fifty years and many scholars in multiple disciplines have provided us with exciting new insights into fifth century Ireland and its place on the western rim of the European continent. Some chronological facts will always remain beyond our reach and others will be the fodder for serious intellectual dialogue but the mist has lifted and we are invited to enter.

The fifth century marked the sunset of the Roman Empire. The legions were withdrawn from Britain. The Visigoths and the Vandals roamed, almost at will, throughout Europe and Rome was sacked twice in the space of fifty years. Augustine died. Carthage and Hippo were captured. In the midst of all this turmoil, the Holy Father, Pope Celestine II, was persuaded to appoint a bishop to the few Catholics who lived across the Hibernian sea, "*ad Scotos in Christum credentes*," "to the Irish believing in Christ" the rescript read. Palladius was his choice, a trusted deacon who had worked diligently in his service. Another candidate for the position, Patricius, was passed over probably because he was not too well known in Rome, his intellectual capacity was suspect and, as he himself wrote later in life, because a close friend of his betrayed a confidence involving some indiscretion of his early teens. The mission of Palladius ended within a year in circumstances which history does not record. Patricius, the man we now call Patrick, was consecrated a bishop and received the mandate to take his place.

When Patrick and his companions landed on Irish soil he fulfilled the Isaian prophecy, "*how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation . . .*" It was his second coming to a land where he would spend, not without homesickness, the rest of his life in missionary endeavor. Twenty seven

years previously he had been dragged ashore by a marauding band of cross-channel raiders. He was sold into slavery and began a six-year odyssey in search of God while working for a pagan master and living among an alien people. This self-directed novitiate was laced with severity and hardship; his faith was nurtured by constant prayer.

His only confidant was the God, who, he says, "*opened the senses of my unbelief... so that I might be converted with my whole heart to God. He preserved me before I was aware of it. . . at that time when I was not able to distinguish between good and evil, he came to my help and consoled me as a father does his child.*" @ (Confessio)

Here on the windswept Irish mountainside the teenager became a man and his soul was seared by the spirit of the Savior. Six winters later he escaped but this fact of chronology is really only a half-truth. By now he was by God possessed and as he wrote in his Confession, "*I saw in a vision of the night, a man coming as it were from Ireland. . . with countless letters, and he gave me one of them, and. . . as I was read-ing . . . I heard the voice of those who live beside. . . the Western sea, and they cried out as with one voice; 'We beg you, holy youth, to come and walk once more among us.'* And I was greatly troubled in heart and could read no further, and so I awoke." (Confessio, 23) Call it vocation, call it destiny, call it the providence of God; whatever it was, it would mean that the island which had never known the tread of Caesar's legions, would soon surrender itself to the spiritual message of a former slave, who prided himself on being a free-born citizen of the Roman province of Britain.

How did the historical Patrick lose his identity to a whole series of legendary Patricks? One of the liabilities of becoming famous is the risk of exposing oneself to the ulterior motives of one's biographers. Patrick has not been well served in this regard. Writing centuries after his death, some of them were clearly infected by the hero syndrome: he was portrayed as a secular hero with powers greater than all the Old Testament figures combined. A little exaggeration now and again is not unknown to the Irish character! Some probably twisted the truth just a shade to protect the primatial status of Armagh. We might call it a little green lie for a good cause! In medieval times his biographies were rewritten to conform to the continental ideas of sainthood. In recent centuries his personality has been recast as a symbol of the nationalist movement.

We mention this because, luckily for posterity, two of Patrick's own writings are still available to us. In these documents, whose authenticity is beyond doubt, we can find the real Patrick, the lover of God, the slave, the missionary, the saint, a man for our age.

His LETTER TO COROTICUS is a rather angry denunciation of a British prince who had dared to kidnap a number of Patrick's converts. It readily reminds one of Christ's forceful criticism of the Pharisees. It must have reminded Patrick of his own youthful experience in servitude. Indeed, this fiery letter was probably the first ever Christian condemnation of slavery and nothing to equal it was produced until the ugly days of the slave trade during the seventeenth century. (See *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, Cahill)

His other manuscript, in our better translations very aptly entitled his CONFESSION OF GRACE, reveals Patrick, the self-confessed sinner, whose life is totally and permanently transformed by God's grace. It is a spiritual classic which has been neglected for far too long, a victim, perhaps of the distorted modern image of its author. The CONFESSION was written in his declining years. It is an answer to a number of his detractors who were maliciously critical of his life's work and, no doubt, jealous of his success. It is his apologia.

"With the frankness of a great man and a great saint," the Austrian scholar Ludwig Bieler notes, ("Patrick") confesses himself to be a sinner, raised to a great vocation by the grace of God, guided by Providence and the Spirit within him towards his goal against all possible odds, and rewarded by a success which is not his, but God's."

Over the years Patrick's CONFESSION OF GRACE has been seriously misinterpreted in one very important understanding of the author's intellectual status. It is easy to see why this has happened. In the literary style of the day Patrick, like Paul some centuries before, deliberately downgrades himself. Intimidated by the overwhelming mercy of God, cowed by the unmerited intimate participation of Christ in his life, Patrick sees himself as a rustic, poorly educated, theologically ignorant, linguistically disabled and *"the least of all the faithful."* (Confessio 1)

A recent study by Daniel Conneely clearly shows us why we must not take these protestations of humility too seriously. Certainly Patrick's Latin left much to be desired but a line by line analysis of his CONFESSION OF GRACE uncovers over two hundred scriptural passages and references to at least twenty of the Church Fathers occur in his two works. The CONFESSION OF GRACE is truly a deeply Augustinian understanding of the power and work of grace in the life of the Christian. All other opinions to the contrary, Patrick was no theological or intellectual lightweight. (THE LETTERS OF SAINT PATRICK, Daniel Conneely, An Sagart, 1993) This was a remarkable achievement for a missionary who lived far from the known centers of learning in the mid fifth century, who had no books, much less access to web pages and who probably had not yet heard of the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon.

Even more remarkable, however, were the results of his preaching.

As he reached the autumn of his years, he clearly recalled his missionary purpose. "We were gravely bound," he says, "to spread our nets so that a great multitude. . . should be caught for God and that everywhere there should be clergy to baptize and exhort a needy and thirsting people, as the Lord in the gospel admonishes and teaches, saying, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. . .

- Patrick brought Christianity to almost the entire island.
- He did so without bloodshed. There were no martyrs in the early Irish Church.
- His evangelization brought about an extraordinary cultural revolution by which the well-established Celtic civilization was substantially preserved despite its complete transformation into a Christ-centered society.
- He lived to see a native clergy continuing his work in Ireland, and in subsequent years his spiritual sons and daughters poured back onto the continent to rekindle the light of faith amid the shambles of a devastated church.
- His spiritual offspring adopted a brand of spirituality which in many ways reflected the personality of the saint himself. It produced a tenacious faith which later had to survive frequent persecution, crude attempts at proselytism and the social upheavals caused by a national famine of tragic proportions.
- Irish Catholicism from the beginning displayed a strong loyalty to Rome, a Christocentric ecclesiology and a special devotion to the Mother of God for whom the Irish,

in their native language, reserved the unique name of Muire.

- Patrick's legacy included a love affair with missionary activity. In every century Irish priests and religious have followed the empire builders across the globe. The United States received a fair share of these missionary clergy as they followed in the footsteps of the starving and harassed emigrants. The monastic annals called this a "white martyrdom," renouncing country, family and friends for the sake of the gospel.

Patrick's people were your ancestors. We honor them today, because despite their trials and their difficulties, they kept the faith. There would be very little English-speaking Catholicism in the world today were it not for the great scattering of the Irish race. From the agony of a terrible disaster God molded a miracle of evangelization. Their icons are everywhere from the great Cathedral on New York's Fifth Avenue to the hundreds of St. Patricks to be found in every diocese of the United States and every State of the Union.

We are not interested in ancestor worship but it is important to know one's roots. Those who know their roots usually know where they stand. We have a tradition and a heritage, not only to remember but also to sustain. We also have an obligation to future generations to pass along the values we have received. There is no more appropriate time to do this than the present as our Holy Father has voiced a great call in this new millennium for a new evangelization sustained by the Eucharist.

We need to be re--nourished by the inspiration of the real Patrick as we ponder anew the teachings and example of the Christ for whom he lived and died. Patrick asked God to bless the Irish, you, his people, in these words: ". . . *may my God preserve me from ever losing his people, the people he has won for himself in the furthest parts of the earth. I pray God that he will give me perseverance, and deign to keep me a faithful witness to Him until I die. . .* His prayer is not copyrighted: we need to reach his convictions.

As a member of the FBI, the Foreign Born Irish, I possess the mystical power to bestow the privilege of being an HONORARY IRISHMAN FOR THE DAY on all those present who cannot discover even the tiniest drop of Irish blood in their veins. Such deprivation needs immediate attention but I regret that at the stroke of midnight Thursday evening all so honored will have to return to the ranks of ordinary mortals!

Dia is Mhuire is Padraig dibh - May God and Mary and Patrick be with you.

AMEN