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The Day We Celebrate

Response to the Toast
The Hibernian Society
of Savannah, Georgia

Friday, March 17, 2006 - Feast of Saint Patrick

We celebrate this day in honor of Saint Patrick, the National Apostle of Ireland . On this date, March 17, across the world's many time zones his story has been told and retold especially in those lands where the nomadic Irish have transplanted their roots. Today, despite the liturgical starkness of the Lenten season, Masses have been celebrated in his honor, sometimes in great cathedrals which bear his name. Today parades have marched, green sweaters have been taken out of mothballs, pints of green beer have been guzzled, the tricolor has been hoisted, the plaintive emigrant ballads have been resurrected and the staccato tap-tap-tap of sprightly dancing feet have reawakened memories or stimulated imaginations of a romantic land where leprechauns cavort and there are pots and pots of gold at the end of the rainbow, known today as the Celtic Tiger!

If this be the price of preserving his memory I'm sure Patrick won't object, at least not too strenuously. After all, he leads the world in the "saint's recognition category" and the number two, whoever he or she is, is a long way behind. Yes, my dear friends, there is a real saint, a man of flesh and blood, hidden behind the festoons of shamrocks, unencumbered by a plethora of dejected snakes and serpents and we could all do ourselves a favor by making his acquaintance and allowing him to enhance our lives. Patrick is truly a man for all seasons, a saint for our times. He was a man of prayer, a man of passion, and a man of principle. Let's forget the "was." He still is, because saints are eternal.

PATRICK, MAN OF PRAYER

We don't have to rely on eyewitnesses to discover that Patrick was a man of prayer. There are two documents available to us, both of which have been authenticated as coming from Patrick's hand. The first and longest of these, commonly called the *CONFESSIO* or *CONFESSIO*, was written in his declining years precisely because he wanted his friends and his enemies to know what kind of a man he was. He also used the occasion to respond to some accusations which had been leveled against him personally and against his mission in Ireland . In the book he chronicles the growth of his prayer life and outlines the conversion experience he underwent during his enforced slavery as a goatherd and shepherd on the Irish hillsides.

His devotion to prayer and his Christian faith was not always a model of piety. He admits that he was well instructed in the beliefs of his faith, something to be expected when we know that his grandfather, Potitus, was a priest and his father, Calpornius, was a deacon. (Keep in mind that mandatory celibacy was not required to be a member of the clergy at this time). When he was taken into captivity as a sixteen year old he admitted that he "did not know the true God." He even believes that he deserved his tragedy because he and his fellow captives had "turned away from God" insofar as "we neither kept his commandments nor obeyed our pastors who used to warn us about our salvation."

All of us are aware of people who blame God for their misfortunes. Patrick, remarkably, did not do so. Rather, he poured out his heart and soul in thanksgiving to God for this unanticipated opportunity to get to know him more intimately. I cannot improve on Patrick's own words. Finding himself a prisoner among strangers he wrote, "The Lord made me aware of my unbelief that I might at least 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 a son. I cannot be silent than, nor indeed should I, about the great benefits and grace which the Lord saw fit to confer on me in the land of my captivity."

Growth in his prayer life did not come easily to him. Once convinced of the value of his relationship to God he worked assiduously to strengthen it. Here, once again in his own words, is Patrick's testimony. "When I came to Ireland I tended herds every day. More and more my love of God and reverence for him began to increase. My faith grew stronger and my zeal so intense that in the course of a single day I would say as many as a hundred prayers, and almost as many in the night. This I did even when I was in the woods and on the mountain. Even in times of snow or frost or rain I would rise before dawn to pray. I never felt the worse for it; nor was I in any way lazy because, as I now realize, I was full of enthusiasm."

From this point on prayer became the very core of his existence. It played a role in his escape, in his preparation for the priesthood, in his decision to return to Ireland as a missionary and, above all else, it fueled his zeal as he fearlessly preached Christ to his former captors. All his success he attributed to God's grace and he constantly marveled that God could and would use his feeble abilities to be such a productive instrument of evangelization.

We should not be surprised then that when Patrick knew he was close to death he turned once more to God and begged him to grant him the grace of perseverance. "I now entrust my soul to God, who is most faithful and for whom I am an ambassador in my humble station... I am ready..... and I ask God for perseverance, to grant that I remain a faithful witness to him until my passing from this life."

The lesson for all of us is crystal clear. Unless – whatever our avocation in life, parent or priest, doctor or lawyer, carpenter or plumber, professor or politician – unless our relationship to God is constantly nourished by prayer all else is but the dross of worthless platitudes.

PATRICK – MAN OF PASSION

When Pope Celestine sent Patrick back to Ireland "*ad scotos credentes in Christo*" – to the few Christian believers on the island – there were many who were more than critical of the decision. He was ill-suited for the task, he was too uneducated, it was an uncivilized place beyond the reach of the Empire, his predecessor had disappeared without trace – these were some of the claims advanced by the naysayers and there is some reason to believe that Patrick himself may have shared some of them. Some even maliciously raised the fact of some youthful indiscretion in an effort to scuttle his assignment. But Patrick prevailed perhaps aided by a more urgent Roman priority – the devastating chaos being visited upon the continent as the Huns and Vandals began the dismemberment of the once all-powerful Roman Empire. He sailed for Ireland in 432 and he was never to see his homeland again.

Totally convinced that God wanted Ireland to become Christian and even more absolutely confident that the same God would make it possible through his discipleship he did not spare him-

self. Patrick had one great advantage. His six years of slavery on the island had not been wasted; he knew the language, he knew the customs of the people, he understood their tribal organization, he had absorbed their culture and, above all else, he understood their native religion. He utilized all these to the advantage of his mission. He had great respect for the druidic priests and their religious rituals; he changed them by sanctifying them, not by condemning them or obliterating them. This was the main reason he converted almost the whole island to Christianity with minimal opposition and without creating any martyrs, something unknown in the history of missiology. To ensure permanence he immediately set about recruiting a native priesthood so that he was able to write, "the sons and daughters of Irish chieftains are seen to be monks and virgins dedicated to Christ." He organized the administration of his infant church along monastic lines as it more closely resembled the tribal structure already in existence on the island. It worked in Ireland and the monasteries were ideal educational centers when the time came for what we could call "a reverse mission" as hundreds of Irish monks penetrated western Europe to reinvigorate Christianity. Patrick was a man of passion, a man of action and man who in his twenty nine years as a bishop on Irish soil achieved remarkable results. There are few, if any, feats of evangelization which can match his accomplishments. As the end drew near he surveyed all that had been done in God's name and he poured out his thanks to the Lord for his inspiration and constant support and he wrote, "We saw it that way and it happened that way. We are indeed witnesses that the Good News has been preached in distant parts, in places beyond which no man lives."

PATRICK – MAN OF PRINCIPLE

Few people, especially in our modern age, go through life without having to face moral dilemmas of one kind or another. Even when we know deep in our hearts that something is terribly, terribly wrong it takes backbone, it takes courage, to stand up and be counted. We have become adept at avoiding important issues. It is so easy to pass the buck, blame others, turn the blind eye Nelsonesque fashion; pretend it isn't there or even conspire in the wrongdoing at a safe distance, of course. I'm sure you can recall a number of political, corporate, pharmaceutical and environmental disasters which could have been nipped in the bud if a strong voice in the know had insisted, "this is wrong; we cannot go down that road!"

Patrick faced that dilemma, at least once, and he wasn't silent. It is the subject of his second manuscript, *THE LETTER TO COROTICUS*. It is a blistering attack on slavery.

Coroticus, a Welsh prince and supposedly a Christian, with a band of marauders swept across the Irish Sea and rounded up a number of Patrick's new converts. During the raid some were killed and many of those who were captured were sold into slavery. When Patrick received the news he was incensed. He had been a slave himself and he appreciated the value of freedom. He considered slavery a grave affront to the God-given dignity of the human person.

He immediately penned an irate letter to Coroticus and his followers excoriating their actions and sparing no invective. "Fratricide," he declared, committed by "ravaging wolves" deserving of God's direst punishments including hell fire.

Patrick did not mince words. This was a ringing condemnation of slavery in all its forms and, sad to relate, in his book *HOW THE IRISH SAVED CIVILIZATION*, Thomas Cahill makes the claim that the world had to wait another twelve centuries before there was an equally articulate outcry against slavery. Even with this heightened awareness of the evil of slavery our own republic did not fare too well in its beginnings. In his study entitled "*NEGRO PRESIDENT*," Garry Wills points out that ten of our Presidents – from Washington to Taylor – were slave

holders as were many of our Supreme Court justices before the calamitous War between the States and the untimely death of President Lincoln. This may lead you to believe that I am only talking about African-Americans as victims of slavery. I am and I am not. When Cromwell conquered Ireland he shipped hundreds of Irishmen to the West Indies to work as slaves in the sugar plantations. In his "Jail Journal" John Mitchell describes the lot of the Irish incarcerated in the prison ships in Bermuda while thousands more were transported to Van Diemens land at the other side of the world. And it is indeed likely that the ancestors of many Irish-Americans, and even some of you listening to me this evening, came to this country as "indentured servants," dubbed a polite term for slavery.... And if they were lucky enough to retain or to regain their freedom, they had to face the ultimate insult, "No Irish Need Apply."

Yes, we have come a long way in this regard but there are still areas of our shrinking world where the practice of enslaving others is thriving. We can be proud of Patrick for his forthright condemnation of a way of life totally at variance with the God-given dignity of every human being even though he was apparently preaching a message which many did not want to hear. There you have it. Let us rejoice in the memory of the man we honor today for the right reasons. Patrick was a man of prayer, a man of passion, a man of principle, each attribute dependent on the others. Maybe Patrick was a man before his time. There certainly is room for more of his kind in our society today.

Let us raise our glasses in his memory.