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The Real St. Patrick - Apostle of Ireland

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There is a church in downtown Baltimore dedicated to St. Patrick. The area is predominantly African-American and the few who happen to be Catholic have inherited St. Patrick's as their parish Church. The descendants of the Irish emigrants who established the parish have long since moved to the suburbs. On March 17 some years ago an enterprising TV reporter, looking for something more creative than an orgy of green beer, revisited the old neighborhood and by chance interviewed a young black girl wearing the St. Patrick's school uniform. She was delightfully candid and unflappable in responding to the reporter's questions. "Tell us what you know about St. Patrick," he cajoled and she replied "I really don't know anything about St. Patrick but he must have been a very important man because we got a day off school!"

Inadequate as her response may have been it was probably more honest than those who have succeeded in smothering the good saint under an avalanche of dewy shamrocks, fleeing snakes, green vestments and ERIN GO BREAGH banners not to mention the rivers which have been dyed green in his honor and the gallons of green beer downed on his feast day each year, all calculated to inspire the drinkers to belt out off-key tributes to Ireland's National Apostle.

It is probably my imagination but fourth generation Irish-Americans seem to be the worst offenders in this regard!

Who was the real St. Patrick? Where did he come from? What do we know about the fifth century country he evangelized? What was his missionary style?

To understand Patrick we need to know a little about the world into which he was born. Europe was in a state of turmoil. About thirty years before the dawn of the fifth century the barbarian invasions had begun. For over two centuries the Goths, the Huns and the Vandals stormed over the continent as the Roman Empire crumbled. In 407 the Romans pulled out of Britain and three years later the Visigoths sacked Rome. The Vandals invaded North Africa from Spain and St. Augustine died in his see city of Hippo as the barbarians battered down its gates. It was the year 430 and a year later the Council of Ephesus met to declare that Mary was truly the Mother of God. This Council took care of Nestorius but it did not eliminate Nestorianism. Twenty years later in 451 another Council was necessary. This time the Church was infected with Monophysitism and Chalcedon condemned the heresy but was unable to eradicate it. Clearly the Church was in trouble and matters went from bad to worse when Rome was sacked for a second time within fifty years, on this occasion by the Vandals. This was Patrick's century and although some of these dramatic events hardly touched his life a few of them profoundly influenced his mission in Ireland.

Ireland was another story. At the time it was a somewhat isolated and almost unknown island on the northwest edge of Europe. It was never conquered by the Romans and was untouched by their administrative abilities and their religion. The people were predominantly Celts and as far as we can tell they were deeply religious. They worshiped an array of gods and their Celtic practices were in the hands of an influential priestly caste of druids. By today's standards we might call them pantheists, seeking God in nature and the mystery of the changing seasons.

Oak groves provided their sacred places and wells, water being so necessary for life, were treated with reverence. Some writers suggest that at one time the Celts may have indulged in human sacrifice, but if this was true, there is no evidence that such was in vogue during Patrick's time. Because this land of scattered tribes had enjoyed a period of relative peace in the preceding centuries there was significant growth in cultural developments which indicated an emerging civilized society. The natural insularity was tempered by evidence that there was increasing commerce between the island and the continent with special reference to those areas known today as France and Spain. Fifteen centuries later it is still possible to identify Brittany and Galicia as inhabited by people of Celtic stock. These similarities can be readily traced in the study of language, folk tales and music, reinforced by some outstanding archeological discoveries.

Where do we obtain accurate information about St. Patrick? We are indeed fortunate that, unlike many of his era, we possess two very reliable sources in the form of his personal writings. There is no question about their authenticity although there are problems regarding their interpretation.

The longer work is his *Confessio*, popularly known as the Confession of St. Patrick. Written towards the end of his life, it is, in many ways, his *apologia pro vita sua*. He feels constrained to write it to defend himself from his detractors and to justify his mission among the Irish. It is not a biography in the modern sense but rather a reflection on certain aspects of his life and a meditation on the goodness of God in empowering him for the task of discipleship. He admits that he is no scholar and his knowledge of Latin syntax leaves much to be desired but this personal self-assessment may be challenged by a deeper analysis of his composition.

His much shorter second writing is entitled The Letter (*epistola*) to Coroticus. Very briefly, it is an angry letter reprimanding a British chieftain, supposedly a Christian, who had attacked and enslaved some of Patrick's converts. Such an event would have awakened personal memories for Patrick as he himself was a victim of human trafficking in his younger years. The letter is also one of the first known Christian writings upholding the concept of human dignity and attacking the concept of slavery.

Patrician scholarship has attracted a great deal of attention during the past fifty years. There has been much speculation and not a little controversy and I am hopeful that such will continue as it separates facts, legends and myths, all of which have a value in assessing the life and times of the saint. Historical research has, in this day and age, the ability to synthesize an extraordinary number of disciplines in an effort to push back the curtain which veils the past. I cannot do justice to all these initiatives so I am selecting, for your benefit, those conclusions which seem to have the most reasonable supporting evidence and are accepted by the majority of competent scholars. If my statements tend to sound dogmatic please keep in mind that practically all the details of Patrick's life are open to modification.

Patrick was born in Roman Britain which would include the eastern shores of the Irish Sea with

the exception of Wales. Two likely areas are the coastline which stretches north from present day Lancashire or the southern shores of the estuary of the Severn River. Patrick called the place BANNAVEM TABURIAE but its actual location is still a mystery. His date of birth was probably between 385 and 390 A.D. Although legends provide him with a number of named relatives, we can only be certain of three, namely his grandfather, POTITUS, a priest (keep in mind that celibacy was not demanded at that time), his father, CALPURNIUS, who was a deacon and he held a position in the secular world known as a "decurio," probably a low level civil servant connected with the Roman administration of the settlement. We believe his mother's name was CONCESSA. His youthful life was akin to that of the average teenager, "not very religious and not very studious," he tells us. He also admits that some youthful indiscretion troubled his conscience in later years. We are not privy to its identity.

At the age of sixteen he was captured by an Irish raiding party, separated from his family and ended up, a virtual slave, on the slopes of Stemish in County Antrim, tending his master's flocks which could have been sheep or pigs or both. As his *Confessio* indicates, it was during this six year period that he found God and he underwent a profound spiritual conversion. At the age of 22 he escaped and, probably by way of Gaul (modern day France) he was reunited with his family. Presumably there was a happy reunion but Patrick was changed forever. No longer the happy-go-lucky teenager, he now felt called by God to bring the faith to the people who had imprisoned him. In many ways his captivity had turned out to be a novitiate preparing him to know and understand the language and the customs of the people to whom he would return as a missionary. He studied for the priesthood and was duly ordained but he did not return to Ireland immediately.

Pope Celestine sent a bishop "*ad Scotos credentes in Christo*" (to the Irish believing in Christ) in 431 A.D. He is known to us as PALLADIUS but almost immediately he and his mission disappeared from the radar screen of history. We have no idea what happened to him.

A year later Patrick was appointed in his stead and there began almost thirty years of constant evangelization as he traveled to practically every section of the island. Many of the wondrous stories told about Patrick are fanciful creations of a pious people but we do not need them to judge the success of his preaching. Let me revisit some of the results and here I will have to indulge in some generalizations to cover the material in a reasonable time.

- I know it sounds almost unbelievable but it seems that Patrick and his followers converted almost the entire population of the island to Christianity during his lifetime.
- Apparently he was eminently successful in winning the local kings and chieftains to the faith which, in turn, made it far easier, and maybe even expedient, for their subjects to embrace Christianity.
- As would be expected, there was opposition from the druids. Naturally, their livelihoods and very existence were threatened. But Patrick outdid them in every aspect of apologetics and he displayed significant missionary genius in the way he responded to their beliefs. He did not condemn or ridicule. He assimilated and integrated their cherished practices into a totally Christian matrix in many ways analogous to the Lord's completion of Old Testament expectations. Their oak groves became rudimentary chapels for the Eucharist; their wells became Holy Wells dedicated to the saints: their chief god, the terrible CROMM CRUACH and his twelve sub-gods became a perfect model for Christ and his twelve apostles. (See the side panels of the Window of Mary, Queen of Ireland, in the Knock Basilica). All of this

was a tribute to Patrick's keen insights in his understanding of the spiritual yearnings of the people. His missionary philosophy produced a conversion of a people with one extraordinary feature: it was accomplished without bloodshed.

- Closely related to my last point was Patrick's awareness of what we know today as inculturation. Far more than seeking an intellectual assent to the Christian Creed, Patrick endowed all the media of the island's culture, its language, arts, crafts, poetry and music with a Christian ambiance. Everything was permeated with the spirit of Christ and this became the fruitful basis for what we know today as Celtic Spirituality, a way of looking at God and his creation with a certain Irish lyricism in many ways generated by the Genesis principal that what God created he accepted as good. Here too were sown the beginnings of those symbols which illustrate the marriage of the sacred and the secular, all testifying to the existence of a people which gloried to live within the family of a knowable paternal God. I refer to Celtic crosses, distinctive church architecture and the illuminated manuscripts of the gospels.
- The conversion proved both permanent and resilient as it subsequently endured many centuries of deprivation and active persecution.
- Patrick exhibited a gift for church organization and the recruitment of native vocations. As he moved on he installed adequate leadership in each local church not unlike what we experienced this morning in Ballina. Over all the local churches he established Armagh as the premier see, a distinction it enjoys to this day. The current Archbishop Seán Brady of Armagh is the 114th successor of St. Patrick. Among his predecessors are two canonized saints, Malachy and Oliver Plunkett.
- Patrick's masterpiece, the early Irish Church, reflected many of the spiritual qualities of its founder. It was known for its penitential practices personalized by Patrick in his association with Lough Dearg (popularly known as St. Patrick's Purgatory) and Croke Patrick, the mount on which legend tells us, he was promised the favor of being Christ's right hand man on the Day of Judgment as far as the Irish are concerned! There was also an honored place and a very tender love for Mary, the Mother of Christ. A special word was exclusively coined for her, MUIRE to be distinguished from MÁIRE which was shared by all lesser Marys. Patrick also transferred his missionary zeal to his spiritual sons and daughters but that is another story and the topic of my next seminar.

Patrick died in 461 and we believe his mortal remains were interred in County Down to the east of Armagh and not far from the location of his sheep herding. The travels and the travails of the Irish have resulted in thousands of churches and chapels being erected in his memory across the globe. The Irish railroad workers who laid the rails across the Midwest to the Missouri River constructed no less than eleven St. Patrick's in my diocese, seven of which are still in operation.

There is one widespread misconception about Patrick which needs correction. Year after year when March 17th rolls around homilists and popular writers depict Patrick as a prayerful man of faith and a hard worker who became an effective missionary. Certainly all this is true but it is frequently stated and often implied that Patrick was a light-weight when it came to intellectual depth. This perception is logically but incorrectly deduced from the opening words of the Confessio where Patrick states:

"I, Patrick, a sinner, very rustic,
and the least of all the faithful,
and very contemptible in the

estimation of most men. . . ."

This is a style of writing. It almost parallels the way the Apostle Paul described himself. It can never be taken too literally. A new study, published in 1993 by Fr. Daniel Conneely, carefully examines the Confessio to unearth multiple scriptural references and quotes from over twenty Patristic authors. Although it is and will always be an "autobiography of grace," it is also the work of a learned man, whose education provided a sure foundation for his zealous pastoral activity.

After Patrick's death he was not short of biographers but, as generation succeeded generation, his influential name was used to bolster the agendas of lesser mortals and their private aspirations. These books must be judged in terms of propaganda rather than serious literature. There emerged another type of biography which neglected the truth in favor of the fantastic. This was a common trait of many hagiographers. Patrick was depicted as duplicating all the heroes of both Testaments and, in many senses, he was pictured as imitating Christ word for word and miracle for miracle. It was from these somewhat outlandish claims that the legends developed. Enter the snakes. Patrick banished them from Ireland because, unlike Adam and Eve, he was not fooled by the evil one whom the serpent of Eden represented. There never were many snakes in Ireland, a fact determined by nature in the separation of the Irish land mass from Britain and the continent, combined with the timing of the retreating ice cap which once covered the country and gave it its furrowed face and fertile valleys. The lesson to be learned is to observe care in the interpretation of saintly life stories which sound too fantastic to be true. They usually are. By and large, you will always discover that the truth is far more impressive than any legend and far more appealing to those of us who wish to find role models in our sainted ancestors.

There are many prayers and other writings which have been attributed to St. Patrick. Most of them were written many centuries after his death but some of them genuinely reflect his spirit and his prayerfulness. The best known of these is THE BREASTPLATE OF ST. PATRICK or, in Latin, the LORICA. It has a somewhat affectionate third title, THE CRY OF THE DEER. Although it was probably penned no earlier than the ninth century, we can steal a few lines as an appropriate ending to this talk as it certainly reflects the persona of the real Patrick. It could have been the invocation for his morning prayer and we can certainly make it our own.

I arise today
Through a mighty strength,
the invocation of the Trinity,
Through belief in the threeness,
Through confession of the oneness
Of the Creator of Creation.

Dia is Muire is Pdraig dibh!
God and Mary and Patrick be with you!

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