

SAINTS OF IRELAND: ST. PATRICK AND ST. BRIGID

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of
God for salvation to everyone who believes. . . .¹

—Romans 1:14

ST. PATRICK (ca. 389 – ca. 493 A.D.)²

5th Century Ireland. In about 400 A.D., the Irish still worshipped a variety of nature-gods (for example, the sun and moon), and believed in magic, fairies, and elves. The Irish routinely sacrificed their first-born infants to one of their chief gods, the Crom Cruach. Christianity was almost unheard of. But 100 years later, by the close of the 5th century A.D., Ireland was almost entirely Catholic. This remarkable turn of events was due largely to the determined efforts of one man, the most famous saint of Ireland: St. Patrick.

Patrick's First Trip to Ireland. Patrick was born in about 389 A.D., in Roman Britain,³ in the English village of Bonnavem.⁴ He was the son of middle class Christian parents,⁵ and he tells us in his *Confessions* that he was the grandson of a priest. Although Patrick received only a simple education, he was quite well-versed in the Bible and could quote many passages from memory. At the age of 16 he became an unwilling immigrant when some Irish raiders kidnapped him and carried him to Ireland. He became the slave of Miliucc MacBuain,⁶ who required young Patrick to tend flocks near what is now the town of Ballymena.⁷ In this isolation, Patrick found God, or perhaps a deeper relationship with Him. Patrick began to fill his waking moments with prayer. His religious devotion became so strong that he would go outside to pray every morning before sunrise, even in rain or snow. In addition, he acquired knowledge of the Celtic language, religion, and customs; this knowledge would one day prove invaluable.

After six years in Ireland, Patrick escaped. He walked to a coastal town, obtained passage on an Irish ship to England, and eventually found his way back to his parents. There he lived for a few years until he felt Ireland calling him back. He had dreams and/or visions in which an Irish voice (whom Patrick called Victoricus) summoned him back to Ireland. Perhaps this calling was from God. In any event, Patrick thought so.

In preparation for his mission, he went to France, where for about eighteen years he studied and served under St. Germain, Bishop of Auxerre.⁸ During this time, the bishop ordained Patrick as a priest, bringing him a step closer to his dream of returning to Ireland. He also visited Italy, and probably assisted St. Germain's missionary work among the Britons. Patrick's opportunity finally came when the first bishop to Ireland, Palladius, died within a year after being sent there.⁹ In about 432

A.D., Pope Celestine I, ¹⁰ in one of his last official acts as Pope, sent Patrick to Ireland as Palladius' replacement. Patrick arrived in Ireland in about 433 A.D.

Patrick's Second Trip to Ireland. During the remaining years of his life, Patrick would travel throughout Ireland, spreading the Gospel. ¹¹ Although Laeghaire, the king of Ireland, was a pagan, he was tolerant enough to allow Patrick freedom to carry out his mission. Not so the pagan priests, who often opposed him violently. Patrick himself states that his life was in danger a dozen times. On one such occasion he and some companions were kidnapped, held for two weeks, and threatened with death; they were saved by the intervention of some friends who secured their release. One of Patrick's primary companions in his mission work in Ireland was a youth named Benen (or Benignus), the son of an Irish chieftain. Benen would become Patrick's successor after his death.

Many miracles have been attributed to Patrick, none of which can now be confirmed. ¹² But no one doubts his courage and determination, or his incredible faith. He brought the alphabet to Ireland, gave them a written language, and helped them write down some of their history. He built churches, ordained priests, established monasteries and convents, converted thousands, and spread the Gospel across Ireland. ¹³ He also attracted many men and women of similar courage and dedication, who helped him carry out his mission. Patrick was in fact so successful that Ireland has stood firm in its Catholic Christianity ever since, and has influenced many other nations and cultures with its faith. He is believed to have died on March 17th, ¹⁴ in about 493 A.D., at Sabhall, and was buried in a shroud made by another Irish saint, St. Brigid.

ST. BRIGID (ca. 450 - ca. 525 A.D.)

St. Brigid ¹⁵ was born in eastern Ireland, probably in or near Faughart, in about 450 A.D. She was the daughter of an Irish chieftain named Dubthach and a slave girl named Brocca, who was a devout Christian. Brigid's mother raised her, probably on farm lands belonging to Dubthach. Even as a child, Brigid demonstrated a strong religious devotion, and when she was old enough she became a nun. At Cill-dara (meaning "Church of the Oak Tree," now known as Kildare), ¹⁶ in about 470 A.D., Brigid founded a monastery for men and a convent for women, and placed herself in charge of both. She also built a church and a school there, both of which became famous throughout Ireland. She chose St. Conleth (later Bishop of Kildare) to help her run the monastery and the school.

Brigid was known for her compassion for the poor and the sick. The Irish tell many stories about her kindnesses, and legends about her miracles, which cannot be confirmed as historical. ¹⁷ However, we do know that she distributed much food and clothing to the poor people of Ireland, particularly those in and near Kildare. As with

Patrick, Brigid's fame spread throughout much of Ireland. The two saints were probably good friends.

One story which likely has a basis in fact tells of Brigid's visit to a dying Irish chieftain, a pagan. She sat beside his bed, making crosses from the rushes¹⁸ on the floor. When the chieftain asked her what she was doing, she explained the Gospel to him and he became a Christian. This started the Irish tradition of hanging rush crosses in barns and houses each year on February 1st, which is St. Brigid's Day.

St. Brigid died in about 525 A.D., probably in Kildare. Her body was later moved to Downpatrick, in Northern Ireland, to protect it from Scandinavian raiders, and is buried there along with that of St. Patrick. St. Brigid is a patron saint of Ireland, and is known as the "Mary of the Gael."¹⁹

Sources:

- (1) *The Story of Civilization, Volume 4 (The Age of Faith)*, by Will Durant (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1950).
- (2) *A History of Christianity, Volume 1 (Beginnings to 1500)*, by Kenneth Scott Latourette (Harpers and Row, New York, 1953, 1975).
- (3) *Lives of the Saints You Should Know, Volume 2*, by Margaret & Matthew Bunson (Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., Huntington, Indiana, 1996).
- (4) *The Lion & the Cross (Author's Notes)*, by Joan Lesley Hamilton (Ballantine Books 1981).
- (5) The following articles in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:
“St. Patrick”: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11554a.htm>
“St. Germain”: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06472b.htm>
“Pope St. Celestine I’’:
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03477c.htm>
“St. Brigid of Ireland’’:
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02784b.htm>
- (6) “St. Brigit of Ireland: From Virgin Saint to Fertility Goddess,” by Lisa M. Bitel, found at the web site *Monastic Matrix*, at:
<http://monasticmatrix.usc.edu/commentaria/article.php?textId=6>
- (7) The following articles in *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, at:
“Saint Patrick’’: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Patrick
“Bannaventa’’: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bannaventa>
“Episcopal See’’: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Episcopal_see
“Brigid of Ireland’’: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Brigid

Endnotes for “Saints of Ireland: St. Patrick and St. Brigid”:

¹ All Biblical quotations are from the New American Standard translation.

² Some believe Patrick died as early as 461 A.D.

³ Britain did not remain Roman for long. The Roman army withdrew from Britain in about 409 A.D., which was probably during the time Patrick was a prisoner in Ireland.

⁴ This village—called *bannavem taburniae*, or Bannavem of Taburnia, in Patrick’s *Confessions*—was probably located along the western coastline of Britain. Its exact location is uncertain.

⁵ Patrick’s father, Calphurnius, was a Roman official in Britain. Patrick’s mother, Conchessa, was a distant relative of St. Martin of Tours.

⁶ MacBuain means “son of Buain.” When Patrick later returned to Ireland, MacBuain burned himself to death rather than face Patrick again.

⁷ Ballymena is located in the County of Antrim, in Northern Ireland.

⁸ St. Germain lived from about 380 to 448 A.D. The city of Auxerre is located about 115 miles southeast of Paris.

⁹ Palladius may have fled back to Britain and died there, frightened by the ferocity of the resistance to his mission in Ireland.

¹⁰ Pope, 422 – 432 A.D.

¹¹ Most of Patrick’s journeys began and ended at Armagh, in Northern Ireland, which served as his episcopal see (i.e., his headquarters as bishop of Ireland).

¹² For example, when Patrick confronted the Irish king, Laeghaire, and his Druid priests, the saint is said to have won the day for Christianity through many marvelous miracles and demonstrations of God’s power. Of course, many healings are attributed to Patrick’s ministry, as is protection from danger through divine intervention. One story tells of an Irish chieftain named Dichu, whose arm was paralyzed when he drew his sword to kill Patrick. The arm became normal again only after Dichu submitted to the authority of Patrick and of God. The famous legend that Patrick drove the snakes out of Ireland has no literal truth, since Ireland had no snakes in Patrick’s lifetime. However, this legend may have symbolic meaning, such as driving out the paganism of the Druids, or the heretical Pelagianism, both of which have been symbolized by serpents. (For more on Pelagianism, see footnote 16 in the article on St Augustine on this web site.)

¹³ Patrick is said to have illustrated the Christian doctrine of the Trinity—i.e., three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in one God—by using a shamrock, which has three leaves, but is a single plant.

¹⁴ For this reason, March 17th is celebrated as St. Patrick's Day.

¹⁵ Also known as Bridget, Bridgit, Brigit, or Bride

¹⁶ Kildare County is located in eastern Ireland, near Dublin.

¹⁷ The earliest biography we have for Brigid was written in about 650 A.D., more than a century after her death.

¹⁸ "Rushes" refers to any of several grass-like plants. In Brigid's time, these were used as a kind of disposable carpet.

¹⁹ "Gael" is another name for the Irish people. "Mary" refers to the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus.