

Saint Patrick, an exceptional figure

Evangelization and Inculturation

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St Patrick is inseparably connected with Ireland. His feast, on March 17th, was already celebrated all over Ireland in the 7th century. From there it spread all over Europe and was then brought to America and Australia by Irish Catholic emigrants. Although there are many legendary details, there are only a few certain facts about his person and mission. According to A. J. Larkin, the VIIth and IXth century sources are not historically accurate. These wanted to project an image of a powerful saint, able to confront the king, as Moses confronted the Pharaoh.¹

Sources

Two writings of Patrick remain: *The Letter to Coroticus* and the *Confession*. *The Letter to Coroticus* is written in his own handwriting, where St Patrick presents himself as: ‘I, Patrick, a sinner, unlearned, resident in Ireland, declare myself to be a bishop’ (LC1). It is addressed to Coroticus and his men, who, while calling themselves Christian, have killed and captured prisoners who were members of Patrick’s community during or just after their baptism or confirmation (LC3). Because of this, Coroticus and his men are ‘separated from me and from Christ, my God, for whom I act as an ambassador’ (LC5).

The *Confession* was written at the end of Patrick’s life, particularly as a reply to accusations made against him. More than a defense, it is an account of his missionary work on which Patrick reflects at the end of a long experience. In the light of its conclusion: ‘And this is my confession before I die’ (C62), it can also be considered as a farewell discourse.

In this article we will try to give some indications of his life, and, especially, how he was able to make a lasting impression on evangelization in Ireland. We will seek to do this through allowing him to speak through his writings.

An extraordinary biography

There is evidence that Christianity came to Ireland in the first half of the fourth century – around the time of the Council of Nicea (325) and the struggle against Arianism.

Patrick was born in Bannaventa of Bernia (C1) in western Britain. There has been much speculation about his date of birth, although between 385 and 392 are regarded as the most likely. His father, Calpornius, was a decurion (a position that made him a member of the municipal senate), and a deacon, while his grandfather was a priest. So, Patrick was born to

a well-off family and educated in the Roman style. He was captured at sixteen and along with many thousands of others, was brought to Ireland as a slave (C1), where he spent six years as a shepherd in the woods and on the mountains (C16). Then he heard a voice announcing his freedom and he escaped (C17). After a long and adventurous journey, he was able to return home. It was during these years that he experienced the love of God, who 'protected me and consoled me as a father does for his son' (C2).

Some years passed, until in a vision at night, a man named Victoricus who seemed to be coming from Ireland brought to him the cry of the Irish: 'We beg you, holy youth, to come and walk again among us.' For Patrick, this was a true calling: 'After many years the Lord granted them what they were calling for' (C23).

It is hard to reconstruct the sequence of events starting from this dream to his formation as a priest, his episcopal ordination and his mission to Ireland. Since he spoke of his brothers in Gaul it is very likely that his formation took place there (at Auxerre, or in the monastery of Lerins facing Nice). Here he was educated in the writings of the Latin Fathers which have left many traces in his writing, and he developed a deep appreciation of the monastic and community life which would be a characteristic of his ministry in Ireland. He does not mention his priestly or episcopal ordination, nor the dates of his Irish ministry, which are subject to debate. The most credible indication is from 462–493 and various sources speak of a thirty-year long mission in Ireland.

A Mission carried out with intelligence

How did Patrick carry out his mission to the Irish? Even if there was already a Christian presence in Ireland, the country was considered pagan territory. It was divided into small kingdoms (*tuatha*) with a ruling legal class (*brehon*) and a predominantly pagan presence of which the figure of the druids was central. During the missionary journeys, permission to preach and avail of official protection had to be granted by the king of each kingdom. Patrick obtained this favor by giving gifts: 'I spend myself for you, so that you may have me for yours. I have travelled everywhere among you for your own sake' (C51). 'You know yourselves how much I expended on those who were the judges in those regions which I most frequently visited. I estimate that I gave out not less than the price of fifteen persons, so that you might benefit from me, and that I might benefit from you in God' (C53).

Above all, Patrick sought the conversion of kings and of important people, because generally this made wider-ranging conversions easier. He had surely been accompanied by priests and others when he came back to Ireland, but in his ministry he was committed to create and support a local clergy. He also carried out his ministry 'even to the furthest parts where nobody lived and where nobody ever went to baptize and to ordain clerics or to bring people to fulfilment. 'It is only by God's gift that I diligently and most willingly did all of this for your good' (C51).

Important facts

It is likely that Patrick could speak in the local language which he had learned while he was a prisoner. In those years he was also able to familiarize himself with the mentality and customs of the people he was evangelizing. This allowed him to combine traditions and local rites with Christianity, without first 'Romanizing.' This was an important new factor.

Patrick was not bringing in something ‘from outside,’ but evangelizing from within Irish culture. The changing of the dates of Christian feasts to coincide with those sacred to the local pagan traditions is credited to him. Even pagan symbols were combined with Christian symbols to make them easier to assimilate into the new religion. So, the three-leaved shamrock was used to explain the Trinity, along with the use of what is called ‘the Celtic cross or St Patrick’s cross.’

Along with creating a local clergy, Patrick introduced monasticism into Ireland. His writings speak of many consecrated virgins and monks, including quite a few of noble lineage, despite the strong opposition of masters when it came to slaves (C41, C42), and fathers. In the *Confession* he speaks of priestly ordinations but not of bishops.

Patrick closely identified with the people of his mission, a people never conquered by Rome, thus not ‘Romanized.’ The Irish were considered ‘barbarians’ and inferior. ‘Can it be they do not believe that we have received one and the same Baptism...For them, it is a disgrace that we are from Ireland’ (LC16). He felt strongly that he could not abandon this people, with a heightened sense of responsibility for the work God gave him to carry out (C43).

From his writings we can see the value of his own experience of slavery and liberation, and the discovery of a God who never abandons him, as a father for his son (C1. C2). He has a strong sense of loyalty to all, including the pagans among whom he lives, with respect and also not to give rise to persecutions (C48). Finally, Patrick is not working alone – he speaks of the young people who accompany him, and of how some of his companions have been captured (52). Passion, zeal, respect, ‘inculturation,’ ascetic life, the development of the clergy and consecrated life wherever he went, generosity, a very strong awareness of paternity and responsibility – all these characterize Patrick’s missionary work.

However, the primacy of the Work of God is always central. ‘That is why I cannot be silent – nor would it be good to do so – about such great blessings and such a gift that the Lord so kindly bestowed in the land of my captivity. This is how we can repay such blessings, when our lives change and we come to know God, to praise and bear witness to his great wonders before every nation under heaven’ (C3).

¹ Cf. A.J. Larkin ssc, *The Spiritual Journey of Saint Patrick*, Messenger Publications, Dublin 2023. This book is the principal source for this article.

² *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*, Royal Irish Academy, 2011 online. <https://www.irlandaonline.com/st-patricks-day/san-patrizio/la-benedizione-del-viaggiatore-irlandese/epistola/>.

³ *The Confession of St Patrick*, Royal Irish Academy, 2011 online. <https://www.irlandaonline.com/st-patricks-day/san-patrizio/la-benedizione-del-viaggiatore-irlandese/la-confessio/>.