

The Witness of St. Patrick

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Text: Matthew 28: 16 – 20

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I am Patricius, a sinner, a simple country person, and the least of all the faithful. It was the Irish who called me Patrick. I was born a Roman citizen in Britain in a small Roman settlement. My father was the local magistrate, and his father was a Priest. Thus I was born 1,600 years ago into a Christian family in the year 389. But I did not keep the ways of faith or remember the responsibilities of our salvation. Neither did the people. And so the Lord brought down his fury upon our people and spread them among many nations. And so, in this way, I was captured in an Irish raid upon our settlement. My home was destroyed. My family killed and scattered. Our wealth plundered. And I was delivered into slavery, being taken over the sea to Eriu, to live among the Barbarians, the Irish. I was captured as a beardless boy, before I received a true education, and so today I feel ashamed of my ignorance, of my lack of eloquence. I am unable to explain what the Spirit has been eager to do in my soul. But is it not our very lives which should speak for us? You are an epistle of Christ in greeting to the world ... It is written on your hearts, not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God.

In Eriu I was sold into the service of a chieftan named Milchu, and made to suck on his nipple, for that was their sign of service and loyalty. I wore a bronze collar as a sign of my slavery. I pastured his flock of sheep on the hills. In my desolation I would pray one to one hundred times each day, and the same at night. The more I prayed the more I would be filled with the love of God. I would wake up before daylight to pray in the snow, in icy coldness, in rain, and I would not feel the weather. I see now that it was because the Spirit was burning in me. It was a time of great hardship for me, but it was also a time of preparation. For I learned the barbarians' language, their ways, the religion of the druids. I came to know their heart, not knowing that I would one day bring Christ to that heart.

One night when I was 20 I heard a voice prophesying: 'Behold, your ship is ready. You may return to your homeland.' So I turned about and fled from the man with whom I had been for six years, and I came, by the power of God, 200 miles by foot to a ship. They were barbarians, yet they allowed me to join them. We sailed for three days, then traveled by foot for 28 days through Britain. They were traders looking for business. As day passed day, seeing no habitation, we grew tired and

hungry. One of the barbarians asked: “Christian! You say your God hears your prayers. Why not pray for us that we not starve in this forsaken land?” I said to them, confidently: 'Be converted by faith with all your heart to my Lord God, because nothing is impossible for him, and today he will send food for you on this road.' They converted, and behold, a herd of swine appeared on the road before our eyes. After this I was esteemed in their eyes. But this was in no way more important than the lesson I learned there that day: that I had a calling to bring people to Christ.

So I made my way back to my homeland. They welcomed me as a son, and asked me to never leave again, for I had suffered too much. And I was content to do so, for those years had been very, very hard. But one night I saw a vision of Christ coming to me out of Eriu with countless letters. He said, “He who gave His life for you, it is He who speaks to you”. He gave me one letter, and I read the Voice of the Irish. It said, 'We beg you, holy youth, come and walk again among us.' And I was stung intensely in my heart so I could read no more, and thus I awoke. And I remembered my calling to bring faith to the barbarians. So I went to Gaul (that you call Fance) and studied. On my way I met a hermit there who gave me shelter one night in his house. He asked my name and in courtesy I gave it to him. Then the hermit smiled, and laughed! He picked up a staff, and gave it to me. He told me, “Many years ago I sheltered another man who on his departure told me that he was Jesus Christ. He gave me this staff, and bade me to keep it safe until another stranger came under my roof. Christ told me, his name is Patrick.” So I accepted from him the Bachal Isu (how the Irish would say Staff of Jesus). And as the Lord did many miracles through the staff in Moses hand, so God through the Bachal Isu would help me lead many Irish out of their land of darkness into the light of God’s kingdom. In time,

I became a Deacon to prepare myself for the mission. Before I set sail for that heathen land the office of Bishop was conferred upon me so I might take the authority of Christ with me in my work. My friends and colleagues begged me not to go to Eriu. “The Irish” they said, “are barbarians. They are violent, lawless people who do not have the capacity to hear the gospel’. They pointed out that Palladius, the only missionary ever to go there, came back in fear and humiliation. But still I went at the age of 48....it was an age at which most men died in my time. But I felt compelled to go: to preach the Gospel; to endure insults from unbelievers; to endure persecutions even imprisonment; and to be prepared to give my life without hesitation for His name’s sake.

We arrived in Eriu in the year of our Lord 432 and we announced our presence dramatically. The pagan festival of Ostara was being celebrated. That day all the fires in the land were extinguished, and then in the darkness one great bonfire would be lit on the hill of Tara to commence the festival. Well, we climbed the hill of Slane, across from Tara, and lit our own bonfire. When the king saw our flames, in defiance of his orders, he sent soldiers to extinguish our bonfire. The soldiers came up the hill of Slane to our fire as we went down the hill to their king. As we walked we chanted Faed Fiada. I believe you call it St. Patrick's Breastplate. And indeed it acted as a breastplate, preserving us from harm as we debated the Druids for the right to preach the Gospel. Soon the soldiers returned to declare they were unable to extinguish our fire. While some became Christian that day, King Laoghaire did not....but he did grant us the right to continue our mission and preach Christ.

The Druids contested my preaching, the chieftans contested my authority, and Milchu contested my freedom – for to him I was still no more than his runaway slave. Him alone was I able to appease, for I went back to my old owner to pay the freedom price that I might truly have my slavery removed.

The power of God moved among these people. So many came to faith. It humbled me, for Christ's commission to the disciples has also been his commission to me. Christ said to His followers, "I will make you fishers of people". So it behooves us all to spread our nets, that a vast multitude and throng might be caught for God. Just as the Lord says in the Gospel, admonishing and instructing: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And I will be with you... even to the ends of the earth". Eriu is indeed the ends of the earth, for it lays beyond the Roman Empire. But when this land is brought fully under Christ's dominion, we know that Christ will return again.

God prepared me for this work. I could speak to them in their own language, a language I learned in slavery. I could debate with Druids for I knew their religion. I baptized many thousands of people. Once at Killala the whole people of the region turned out to hear me preach. The King, his six sons, and 12,000 souls. That day they all became docile to the faith. I ordained priests to care for them. It is a land of pagan worship with many gods and idols. When I found their idols I smote them

with Bachal Isu. My countrymen speak of the Irish as barbarians, but in truth I no longer see them this way. They are a people in need, and I have received a calling to walk with them in that need. Of the wisdom the Lord gave me, I knew that I was not to turn them into Romans, so I did not impose upon them Roman ways and beliefs. They needed not become Romans, only Christians. So I explained Jesus using their stories. I showed them how Christ was like their god. I believe the wisdom of this helped in the conversion of so many.

Of all who suffer in this land, it is the women who suffer most. They are treated like slaves, even being sold by their fathers to strangers. The Lord gave his grace to so many women; and though they are forbidden to do so, they follow him with backbone. Some have said that I was the first male Christian since Christ Himself to speak well of women. I know not of this. What I do know is that women, like men, are children of God. Though it was not the practice of the Roman Church, I encouraged many women into the service of Christ and his church—as long as they remained chaste. I am told that today you call such women nuns.

God gave us to understand how best to conduct our mission. We would go into a new village—10 or 12 people strong. We would approach the tribe's leader in hope to convert him...or at least to be granted permission to stay. We would set up our camp nearby. We would meet the people. We would minister to their needs, demonstrating the love of Christ. In time one would become Christian, then two, then three...and they would encourage their families to do the same. We would form them into a church and leave one or two of our group to lead them. Then we would take one or two of these new converts with us, moving on to the next tribe, and begin again.

12 times I was captured by marauders, by chieftans and Druids. One day Druids captured me, desiring to kill me. They plundered everything they found in our possession, fettered me in irons, and I was held over unto death. Yet on the fourteenth day I was freed from their power by God's power. My time, it seemed, had not yet come. Yet still I lived daily expecting to be murdered or betrayed or reduced to slavery. That fear remains with me to this day. It was a riotous land where life was bought and sold and lost so very cheaply.

Yet, I fear nothing for myself, because of the promises of Heaven; for I have cast myself into the hands of Almighty God, who reigns everywhere. As the prophet

says: 'Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you.' So He has sustained me. And beyond any doubt at the end we shall rise again in the brightness of the sun, that is, in the glory of Christ Jesus our Redeemer, as children of the living God.

For thirty years I wandered the wilderness. Countless souls came to Christ. I consecrated 350 bishops, and ordained many deacons. The son of my former master Milchu himself became a Bishop. But it was never me. It was the Spirit working through the land. As Chieftans became Christian, the practice of slavery declined. As Lords became Christian, the frequency of war declined. As the power of the druids declined, the practice of human sacrifice disappeared forever. Civilization was descending upon this land, guided by the hand of God, even while it was disappearing in the Roman Empire. I am told that years from now a dark age will fall over the Empire. But here in this land civilization and learning and faith would be held in trust. And once that darkness lifts, what this land first received from them will be returned.

And so, it is with contentment in God that I live out my remaining days in Saul, a place also known as Armagh. It was here a barn was given us to be our first church, and it is here I am content to return. I share this story as my confession, to speak of how God has worked wonders in Eriu. I do not speak to you as an occasion for flattery or selfishness, nor hoping for honour from any one of you. Sufficient is the honour which is not yet seen, that comes from above. Sufficient for me is the wonder of seeing God bring forth fruit from my labour in mission. For this is our calling. Your life is a gospel to the Lord Jesus Christ. You are an epistle of Christ in greeting to the world ... It is written on your hearts, not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God. Your life is a tangible witness to the power of God. Your life is to be read by others, as you have read mine, that others may come to share our Christ.

But I see that even here and now, I have been exalted beyond measure. I am not worthy that he should grant me this. Many are the legends told of me today. Perhaps some are true, but they matter not. While I am called a saint, in truth no Pope has ever canonized me. And in Eriu I never once saw a snake. What matters is our faithfulness to our calling. May God bless you that you too may fulfill His will. And this is my confession before I die.

Sources: The Confessio of St. Patrick
Letter to Coroticus