

Who was St. Patrick? Why should we care about him today?

St Patrick is the Patron Saint of Ireland and is known for his efforts to evangelise and convert the pagan Irish of his time. His feast day is March 17. It is a holiday throughout Ireland. His life provides an example of the need for personal renewal, Christian courage and devotion to God.

For those who do not have Irish heritage, all the fuss about Saint Patrick may be difficult to understand. Many people associate him with having something to do with ridding Ireland of snakes! Some may know that he was captured by pirates and brought to Ireland as a slave; that he escaped and returned home, only to return years later as Bishop. Why is Patrick for us today? Perhaps his life and work can serve to encourage us to answer God's call, to faithfully proclaim Jesus, regardless of the personal cost.



Image on page 1: "[Saint Patrick \(stained glass\)](#)"
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Early Life

Tradition tells us that Patrick was born in Roman Britain at the end of the fourth century in what is variously described as England, Scotland or Wales. His father was a Christian deacon and his grandfather a priest. His father was also a civil magistrate and tax collector for the Roman Empire. As a result of his background, Patrick was not only a nobleman and citizen of the Empire, but he was also baptised and raised Catholic. Despite his upbringing Patrick 'did not recognise the True God' and did not 'follow his commands.' In the words of Patrick 'that is why I was taken as a captive to Ireland, along with many thousands of others with me.'

According to tradition at 16 he was enslaved by Irish raiders who attached him home. They transported him to Ireland and held him there for 6 years. He worked for Milchu. He toiled a shepherd. It was there, in Ireland as a slave that Patrick found consolation in his faith. He wrote 'the Lord opened my senses to my unbelief,' so that, though late in the day, I might remember my many sins,' and accordingly 'I might turn to the Lord my God with all my heart.' During his captivity, Patrick learned to pray. He learned to fear nothing. God was his companion.

After six years of slavery, an angel spoke to him in a dream and told him it was God's will for him to escape. The angel showed him the route to freedom. After returning home, Patrick could have lived the rest of his days enjoying a leisurely life among all his rich friends, but God had other plans.

In a dream, God told Patrick to return to Ireland and convert the Irish people. Patrick wrote,

“I had a vision in my dreams of a man who seemed to come from Ireland. His name was Victoricius, and he carried countless letters, one of which he handed over to me. I read aloud where it began: ‘The Voice of the Irish.’ And as I began to read these words, I seemed to hear the voice of the same men who lived beside the forest of Foclut...and they cried out as with one voice, ‘We appeal to you, holy servant boy, come and walk among us.’ I was deeply moved in heart and I could read not further, so I awoke.” (Confession)

Before returning to Ireland, Patrick recognized the call to become a priest. Making him Bishop of Ireland, Pope St. Celestine I sent him to evangelize the land of his captivity, so the ‘barbaric Irish could know Christ.’

Patrick Returns to Ireland as Bishop

Returning to Ireland, Patrick first went to Tara, the sacred home of Irish Celtic paganism. He was met by the druids and chieftains who had the intent to kill him and his companions. He narrowly escaped and set about finding more friendly territory to spread the good news of redemption. As his popularity grew and more people received baptism, the druids and chiefs grew more determined to kill him. The situation came to a head on the eve of March 26, 433—Easter Sunday. That night the Ard-Righ, (supreme monarch) at Tara decreed that in honour of the Celtic gods of darkness, people should extinguish all fires until a signal was given from the royal palace. St. Patrick arrived at the hill of Slane, at the opposite end of the valley from Tara on Easter Eve. On the summit of that hill, he kindled the Paschal fire. The druids at once raised their voices to the king begging permission to extinguish it. They made repeated attempts to douse the blessed fire and to punish St Patrick. Despite their efforts, they could not extinguish the holy fire. Patrick, protected by God, was unhurt.

The next day, preceded by a disciple carrying the Gospels aloft, Bishop Patrick walked in procession to Tara. There the druids used their incantations in an attempt to maintain their sway over the Irish people. They covered the hill and surrounding plain with a cloud of darkness. Patrick prayed to Christ, and the sun sent forth its rays, causing the brightest sunshine to light the entire island. Unwilling to admit defeat, the arch druid Lochru used his demonic power to lift himself high into the air. Patrick again knelt in prayer, and the old druid fell from the sky and was dashed against a rock. Following these miracles, the Ard-Righ gave his consent for Patrick to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ across the island. Immediately, people came to Saint Patrick in droves. The country began its conversion to Christianity. During his time in Ireland Patrick consecrated no fewer than 350 bishops. When he was not preaching or saying Mass, he spent his time in prayer and fasting. Any gifts he received, he returned.

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Miracles and Stories of Old

Why is the shamrock the symbol of Saint Patrick's Day?⁷

Shamrocks grow in abundance across the Emerald Isle and are sometimes used simply as a symbol of Ireland. But why is the shamrock the symbol of Saint Patrick's Day? Well, that brings us back to Patrick's mission. He wanted to convert the masses to Christianity, and while trying to explain the omnipresence of God, picked up a shamrock to explain the Holy Trinity to the Irish people. He used the three leaves of the shamrock to explain the notion of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, to show how they could be separate entities yet one in the same.

Patrick and the snakes

Patrick is said to have performed many miracles during his time in Ireland to prove he had the Christian God on his side, convincing more and more people to leave their pagan beliefs behind. Of course, the most famous act Saint Patrick is said to have done is banish all of the snakes from Ireland, miraculously driving them all into the sea. Patrick went to Magh-Slecht where there was a huge pillar devoted to the Gaelic god Crom-Cruach. This pillar was covered in gold and silver and surrounded by 12 minor idols. Taking his crozier, Patrick struck the idol and it turned to dust.

The daughters of a chieftain

Early one morning, while near a royal palace, St. Patrick and his companions were singing praises to God near the fountain of Clebach. Ethne and Fedelm, the daughters of the local chieftain, came upon them wishing to bathe in the waters. Patrick encouraged them to worship the one true God. The girls asked, "Who is God, and where is He? Where is His dwelling? Has He sons and daughters? Is He rich in silver and gold? Is He everlasting and beautiful? Are His daughters dear and lovely to the men of this world? Is He on the heavens or on earth, in the seas, in rivers, in mountains, in valleys? Make Him known to us. How is He to be seen? How is He to be loved? How is He to be found? Is it in youth or in old age?"

Filled with the Holy Spirit, St. Patrick said,

God is the ruler of all things. He is the God of heaven and earth, of the sea and the rivers, of the sun and the moon, and all the stars. He is the God of the high mountains and of the low-lying valleys. He is above heaven, and in heaven, and under heaven. His dwelling is in heaven and on earth and the sea and all therein. He gives breath to all. He gives life to all. He is over all. He upholds all. He makes the sunshine and gives the moon its splendour. He makes overflowing wells in dry lands and islands in the ocean. He has appointed the stars to serve the greater lights. His Son is co-eternal and co-equal with Himself, and the Father is not older than the Son. The Holy Spirit proceeds from Them; the Three are undivided.

After hearing this, the women immediately requested baptism. They made a profession of faith, were clad in white, received baptism and attended their first Mass.

On March 17, 460, St. Patrick died and went to his eternal reward. For several days, the light of heaven shone around his funeral bier. Irish devotion to this blessed man sprang up immediately.

Conclusion

Patrick accomplished so much in his lifetime, but after his death his influence was even greater. During times of oppression, the Irish prayed to Patrick. They knew he would intercede for them. Whenever, they faced prejudice and discrimination they continued to ask Saint Patrick for help. In time, the Irish abroad began to organise parades to honour Patrick. Some of the biggest parades are in the United States in – New York, Boston and Philadelphia. These celebrations have spread in popularity around the world. By the late 19th century, March 17 became the day when everyone celebrates what it means to be Irish, wears green, joins in the parades and festivities, etc.