

Saint Patrick

He was a contemporary of St. Augustine, St. John Chrysostom, St. Jerome, and Pope Leo the Great. He studied for the priesthood in St. Martin of Tours' seminary. He was a young man when the Visigoths sacked Rome in 410 A.D. and he was a Bishop in Ireland when Pope Leo I persuaded Attila the Hun not to attack Rome. While the Roman Empire was waning, Christianity, because of him, was waxing in Ireland. He is St. Patrick, patron saint of Ireland, one of the best known and most loved saints of Christendom.



St. Patrick left the world two brief documents written in Latin and from these works scholars have attempted to construct a life of St. Patrick and a profile of the personality of a saint best known through the fiction of his life rather than the facts. The works are his Confessions, written near the end of his life, and his Letter to Coroticus, written while he was a Bishop in Ireland.

The important dates of Patrick's life are extrapolated from his works and from the writing of others, with scholars deriving different conclusions from the fragments they have to work with. He was born probably in the late 4th Century, arrived in Ireland as a bishop about the year 432 and died in 461, some say on March 17. Patricius, his given name, was born of Romano-British parents, perhaps in Brittany on the continent or more likely in the west country of Britain. His father Calpornius was a tax collector and a deacon in the church. Patrick admits in his Confessions that when he was kidnapped at the age of sixteen, with thousands of others by Irish raiders, he was not a good Christian, not a believer in "the living God." He was sold to a slave-owner in what is now County Mayo but spent most of his captivity in Antrim. It was during Patrick's six years of enslavement that he experienced a spiritual rebirth that led him to become the St. Patrick who is so widely revered. Patrick reports on an inner voice that directed his escape from slavery, on his three-day voyage to land in Britain or Gaul and on his twenty-eight day trek across land. Probably the vessel was the serviceable curragh that is still in use in Ireland.

The Confessions recounts another captivity of sixty days and with a paucity of detail reports that in a "few years I was in Britain again with my parents," probably at age twenty-five or twenty-six. Patrick, inspired by a dream that

he would be "The Voice of Ireland," embarked on his studies for .the priesthood convinced that he was called by God to win the inhabitants of Ireland to Christianity. Patrick's dream came true when in 432 he returned to Ireland as Bishop. He was not the first bishop in Ireland. Christianity had a toe-hold in Ireland before Patrick, but the religion in Ireland before Patrick was animism, belief in superstition, omens, soothsaying, magic, curses and the power of sacred places. The Confessions reports on the baptism of "so many thousands of persons" and one historian found the Irish conversion to Christianity "amazingly rapid" with no record of martyrdom.

From his own words, scholars interpret Patrick to be a man of simply, steady faith, humble, hard-working and courageous. He possessed a deep love of God and never lost his sense of amazement at his calling to convert Ireland. It is only later, starting in the seventh century, that many of the legends of St. Patrick begin to flower. Politics, of course, enters the story of Patrick. When the O'Neills, who controlled Tara in the seventh century, wanted the king of Tara to be the High King, St. Patrick's legendary but not historical connection to Tara was promoted. St. Patrick's popularity stimulated the creativity of the seanachies: St. Patrick drove the snakes out of Ireland (Ireland's absence of snakes was recorded by the Roman Solinus in the third century); St. Patrick used the shamrock to teach the Trinity (this is a seventh century innovation); St. Patrick has Jesus' assurance that Jesus will judge the Irish and that Patrick will sit with Him (also seventh century).

The historical and legendary St. Patrick have had a real impact. Pilgrims still walk up to the top of Croaghpatrick, some barefoot, saying the Stations of the Cross; the devout go on a three-day silent retreat to Station Island in Loch Derg at St. Patrick's Purgatory; and on March 17 in honor of St. Patrick, everyone is Irish.

The first official saint was Ulrich canonized in 993, but by the consensus of the Irish people, St. Patrick had already been a saint for 500 years.

(originally printed in 1992)

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