



# St. Patrick

BORN 385 OR 387; DIED 461  
BISHOP AND MISSIONARY  
FEAST DAY: MARCH 17

**S**T. PAUL, no stranger to ill-treatment, wrote: “See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all” (1 Thes 5:15). St. Patrick, the great Apostle to Ireland, responded to these words by evangelizing the people who had enslaved him in his youth. Patrick was born in the British village of Bannavem Taburniae. His father, Calpornius Sucatus, was a deacon and his grandfather Potitius a priest (whether a married priest or one ordained after being widowed is not known). Patrick’s father had a “country seat” as well as a home in the village, so the family probably was at least comfortable financially. His family’s names and the name of his native village suggest that he was born in Roman Britain, but the location of the village is guesswork. At the time he was born, much of Britain had been part of the Roman Empire for some four hundred years, but it had come under attack by barbarian tribes in the north (the last Roman legions were withdrawn in 406). He seems not to have grown up speaking Latin, but since both his father and grandfather were members of the clergy, he may have received a good religious education at home; he says in his *Confession* that the village’s priests “used to remind us of our salvation.” However, he was probably an irreligious youth. He wrote at the end of his life that he at that time “was ignorant of the true God,” and also regretted a great sin committed then.

Patrick was about sixteen when he was snatched from his father’s country home by raiders from Ireland, and taken there as a slave. Many thousand others were also captured — perhaps during a coastal raid — but evidently no one else in his family. During the hardship and isolation of his six years of enslavement, tending sheep, his character was formed by fervent prayer and discipline; it was only then that

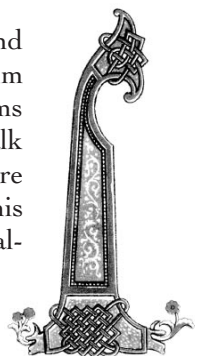


*St. Patrick, 19th century lithograph*

he came to know the love of God. He also acquired fluency in Gaelic.

One night in a dream, Patrick heard a voice telling him that his ship was ready. He fled his master, making his way two hundred miles to a port he had never seen. He had difficulty convincing the pagan captain to take him aboard, but eventually the captain took him in good faith. They landed in an area of Gaul (modern France) that had recently been devastated, and the ship’s crew starved for nearly a month until the captain challenged Patrick to pray to his “all-powerful” Christian God for food. Patrick did so in complete confidence, and a herd of pigs suddenly appeared, enough to feed them all.

Patrick stayed in Gaul for a few years and then returned home. His family begged him never to leave again, but in visions in his dreams he heard the call of the Irish to “come and walk among us once more.” Although the details are no longer known, he subsequently received his training as a priest in Gaul, and perhaps partial-





*“He heard the call of the Irish to ‘come and walk among us once more.’”*

ly in Italy. There is a long gap in the story at this point, since he did not arrive in Ireland until his mid- to late forties.

The mission to Ireland was not, originally, Patrick’s. A friend who had been a great supporter of his, and whom he had told about the great sin of his youth, turned on him and revealed the sin. Patrick was passed over to lead the mission. This disappointment was the worst spiritual crisis of his life. However, the original missionary died shortly after his arrival. When word came of this, Patrick was consecrated a bishop and assigned to evangelize Ireland, arriving in 432. There he spent twenty-nine years preaching the faith, accomplishing the conversion of the Irish people to the faith.

Patrick’s work began in the north, in the region of Antrim, which is thought to have been the place of his enslavement. However, he did not confine his mission to this area, and he did not long work alone. By 439, three additional bishops were sent from Gaul to help him. His method seems to have been to begin working with the rulers and the learned class (although Ireland lacked cities and towns, it had very sophisticated educational and legal systems at this time). All of the first Irish bishoprics were near the seats of the petty kings and chieftains. Among his earliest converts were the brother and two daughters of the current high king, Laoghaire. Other eminent converts followed, including many chieftains, pagan priests, and bards. However, he did not confine his evangelization solely to the high-born or well-educated; for example, he recruited nuns from among slave girls.

Patrick moved about Ireland continually, disregarding his own safety in a land that was treacherous to travelers. He had to bribe local chieftains to permit him to evangelize in their territories and to pay the king’s sons who served as his bodyguard in especially dangerous areas. Even so, he was captured a dozen times, and once sentenced to death but reprieved. He also experienced bitter opposition from pagan priests, whom he sometimes bested with miracles. He lived austere and carefully avoided any kind of

personal gift or stipend for administering the sacraments, so that he would never be thought to seek financial gain, paying his expenses instead from gifts to the Church in general. The Church also took up collections to redeem captives from slavery. He quickly began training native Irish priests, consecrating hundreds of bishops before his death. He also strongly favored monasteries and small groups of consecrated women (convents came later), which afterward became a hallmark of Irish Catholicism.

One of the reasons for Patrick’s great success was his accommodation to pagan feasts, for example substituting All Hallows Eve (modern Halloween) for the major pagan festival of Samhain. The Irish Church never hesitated in accepting Irish pagan literature, and this attitude was so notable that Irish monasteries were the ones that, by hand-copying texts, preserved nearly the whole of the literature of Greek and Roman antiquity during the centuries of the Dark Ages

of European civilization.

An interesting incident is Patrick’s defense of some members of his flock who had been taken into slavery, not from Britain, but from Ireland to Britain. He wrote a letter to the offending prince, Coroticus, full of indignation, protesting their enslavement. The tone of the letter revealed that by then he had become Irish in heart and soul. Although it is not certain that he composed the hymn-prayer “St. Patrick’s Breastplate,” it nevertheless authentically expresses his complete trust in God, his fervent adherence to the true faith, and his deep communion with the saints.

At the end of his life, when he wrote his *Confession*, Patrick showed the characteristic attitude of sanctity: complete humility. He called himself a sinner, “the least of all the faithful, and utterly despised by many” for his poor learning and country manners. His sole reason for returning to the land of his enslavement had been to preach the Gospel to the very people who had so grievously wronged him, and he expressed “joy of heart before God” and saw his success entirely as a gift from God.

