

Today we thank God for the gift of faith brought to Ireland by St. Patrick. Yes, the faith was there already before him in the south and east of Ireland, probably due to traders and contacts with the continent; and another bishop named Palladius who was sent before Patrick. We celebrate Patrick in a special way because of his outstanding efforts and achievement in converting much of the north and west of Ireland.

There are many legends about Patrick some of which have a foundation in actual events and some which are, well, just good stories. For example, he is supposed to have driven all the snakes out of Ireland, but most authorities now agree that there never were snakes there after the last ice age.

We see Patrick's humility when he wrote, "I am Patrick, a sinner, the most unlearned of men, the lowliest of all the faithful, utterly worthless in the eyes of many" (Confessions §1). He was over emphasizing his humility there because he was not the most unlearned of men as we see from the Latin of his writings.

Patrick was the son of a deacon named Calpornius and his mother was Conchessa. His grandfather, Potitus, was a priest. Patrick was taken captive at about the age of 16 and he wrote, "I did not know the true God. I was taken into captivity to Ireland with many thousands of people. We deserved this fate because we turned away from God; we neither kept his commandments nor obeyed our pastors who used to warn us about our salvation." (Confessions §1) While Patrick was working as a shepherd in Ireland he underwent a conversion experience. In his *Confessions* we read:

"The Lord there made me aware of my unbelief that I might at last advert to my sins and turn wholeheartedly to the Lord my God. He showed concern for my weakness and pity for my youth and ignorance; he watched over me before I got to know him and before I was able to distinguish good from evil. In fact he protected me and comforted me as a father would his son." (Confessions §1)

Many adventures and difficult times followed before he managed to escape and return to his family. In all this he found himself being more and more drawn to God in prayer.

He was held captive for six years and during this time he learned Irish, which would be essential for his later mission. Also, his master was a high priest of the Druids so he learned their sophisticated religion from him which would be so beneficial for his later mission converting them to Christianity. So God's plan was working itself out in his life even if he could not see it at the time.

Finally he returned to his native England and then went to France for training as a missionary. He was ordained bishop and commissioned for the mission in Ireland by Pope Celestine who gave him the name Patrick, which means 'father' (from the Latin word "pater") since he was to be a father to the Irish.

The year 432 AD is usually said to be the year when Patrick came to Ireland, but there is not certainty about this. How was Patrick able to convert Ireland so successfully so easily? Before Patrick came to Ireland there was a strong belief in all kinds of gods - dating back to 3,500 BC the pre-Celtic peoples of Ireland worshipped the sun with shrines. In the ancient religion wells and rivers were associated with goddesses - the rivers Shannon and Boyne are named after goddesses. Patrick tapped into these pagan beliefs and taught the people the true faith about the true God. Patrick's great shrine at Croagh Patrick in County Mayo had previously been a shrine to the Celtic god Lugh (god of the sun). The lighting of the Spring fire at Tara by the Ard-Rí (high king) was taken over by Patrick and became the lighting of the Easter fire of Holy Saturday.

He set up his base at Armagh and from there walked over much of northern and central Ireland, evangelising the people and making many converts. His ministry was marked by simplicity and deep pastoral care. He proclaimed the unearned and boundless love of God.

He encountered strong opposition and his life was often in danger, but he was always ready to face persecution. In his preaching he made no distinction between classes and he was deeply concerned to abolish paganism – though he tried to be sensitive to the culture of the people. Patrick erected churches over sites already regarded as sacred. He had crosses carved on the old druidic pillars and standing stones – and from this comes the development of the magnificent Celtic “high crosses”. He put sacred wells and springs under the protection of Christian saints. He baptized people in wells, and many holy wells in Ireland today are called after him.

He understood the Irish clan system; he knew that if the chieftains of the various clans became Christian, the rest of the clans would also. Spreading the word of God involved politics and diplomacy. Patrick used every means possible to spread the word of God. The shamrock was the sacred plant of the Druids and a legend says Patrick used it to teach the Trinity.

He worked night and day to bring the faith all over Ireland. He preached with authority and acted with miracles. He was what we would now describe as a charismatic person. He didn't just come quietly into a town. When he came he and the faith were noticed. Bringing the Irish to know the true God could be described as his vocation.

We read in Patrick's own writings that he would have loved to return to his parents and his companions in France but he made the sacrifice of not returning for the sake of spreading the faith in Ireland. “I am bound by the Spirit who gives evidence against me if I do this, telling me that I shall be guilty and I fear to waste the labor that I began, not I, but Christ the Lord, who commanded me to come to be with them for the rest of my life.” What kept Patrick going during his trials was obviously his close friendship with God. He drew the strength for living from God.

Through our trials we become bitter or better. St. Patrick became better.

He was humble, there was no pride in him, he realized that it was God who was working through him. At the very end of his *Confessions* he admits that he did nothing, it was God who did it all. “But I want you to know and sincerely believe that anything I achieved was not through my effort, it was the gift of God and this is my confession before I die.” (Confessions §25)

He is said to have died on March 17th , 461, and is buried in the same grave as St. Brigid and St. Columba in Downpatrick in County Down.

As we remember St Patrick, it is an opportunity to ask ourselves:
are we grateful to God for the gift of faith which has been passed down to us?
Have we taken up this gift and made it our own?
Are we like St Patrick using every means to pass on the faith and spread it?

St Patrick encourages us not to be negative and oppose everything in the world, but to look for points of connection and ways to engage with people where they are.

St Patrick also highlights that there are times when we are called to leave the comfortable and the familiar to be true to the call of the gospel. St Patrick was a sign of God's grace and God's presence as he lived among the people and shared their life. He showed that God is real and that there is a new and abundant life for everyone through Jesus Christ.

This is the faith we have inherited.
This is the faith we celebrate today.
This is the faith we are to share with the people we live and work among.

St Patrick “Quiz”

Let's see if we can come up with 10 facts or snippets of information about St Patrick

For each one that is correct there is a “prize”
(bag of mini chocolate bars)

Can I please have a “helper” who will give out the prizes for me. Thank you.

Right – ten things about St Patrick, here we go ...