

March 17<sup>th</sup> we celebrate Saint Patrick Day in honor of the 5th century bishop who traveled throughout Ireland to spread the Gospel more effectively than any other missionary to the Emerald Isle.

At the age of 16, Patrick was abducted from his home in northern Britain. Irish raiders slaughtered the servants of his father's household and took him to Ireland as a slave. He was sold to a slave owner who sent him out into the fields to tend to the sheep and swine. We might liken his 6-year enslavement to the existence of the prodigal son who longed for the comfort of home except that Patrick did nothing to squander his inheritance.

Patrick was not particularly religious at the time, but he experienced a vision as he lay watching the stars at night. A voice directed him to escape to a coastal port and look for a ship to take him home. Patrick listened to the voice and by the grace of God was able to find a ship as directed that took him across the sea back home.

Set free from captivity, Patrick's faith began to take hold and strengthen. In time he felt called to the priesthood. "He studied the Christian faith at monastic settlements in Italy and in what is now modern-day France. He was ordained a deacon by [a] Bishop of ... France around the year 418 AD and ordained a bishop in 432 AD."<sup>i</sup> The voice that spoke to him from slavery called out to him again. He felt called by another dream to return to Ireland. In his Confessions, Patrick explains:

I saw, in a nocturnal vision, a man named Victoricus coming as if from Ireland, with a large parcel of letters, one of which he handed to me. On reading the beginning of it, I found it contained these words: "The voice of the Irish" and while reading it I thought I heard ... the voice of a multitude of persons crying out as if with one voice: "We entreat thee, holy youth to come and henceforth walk among us."<sup>iii</sup>

Patrick awoke from the dream with a burning desire to return to Ireland and spread the Gospel. Knowing how wild Ireland still was and how he had previously been enslaved there, his parents argued against this dangerous mission.

Having received this gift of his faith and been strengthened in it because of God's providential call to escape captivity, Patrick felt compelled to return to Ireland to try to help others despite the misgivings of his family. Saint Peter tells us: "Be hospitable to one another without complaining. As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace" (1 Pt 4:9-10).

"When St. Patrick returned to Ireland, he was able to use his knowledge of Irish culture that he gained during his years of captivity. Using the traditions and symbols of the Celtic people, he explained Christianity in a way that made sense to the Irish and was thus very successful in converting the natives."<sup>iii</sup> He used a three-leaf clover, a shamrock, to explain the Holy Trinity.

Slavery was still a widespread problem. Patrick used all of his powers of persuasion to condemn the evil and try to convert people to Christianity. "Saint Patrick's Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus was intended to shame the fifth century general whose raiding soldiers the saint declared to be 'blood-stained with the blood of innocent Christians, whose numbers I have given birth to in God and confirmed in Christ.'"<sup>iv</sup> Saint Patrick's cry of the heart called the wicked to repent and believe in the Gospel.

Despite his difficult years as a slave and his arduous task as a missionary, Patrick grew to deeply love and care for the people of Ireland. In his Confession, Patrick wrote: "May it never befall me to be separated by my God from his people whom he has won in this most remote land. I pray God that he gives me perseverance, and that he will deign that I should be a faithful witness for his sake right up to the time of my passing."<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-patrick-of-ireland-180

<sup>ii</sup> libraryireland.com/HistoryIreland/St-Patricks-Vision.php

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid <sup>i</sup>

<sup>iv</sup> catholicnewsagency.com/news/patrick-the-saint-who-knew-what-it-was-like-to-be-a-slave-77820

<sup>v</sup> Ibid <sup>i</sup>