

THE REAL PATRICK: A PILGRIM OF HOPE



*"I am Patrick a sinner, the most unsophisticated,
and unworthy among the faithful of God."*

INTRODUCTION

Across the world there are St Patrick's Day parades from Dublin to Belfast and from New York to Tokyo. But how many of those celebrating these events know much about the life of man that they are celebrating? Even in Ireland much of what is known about St Patrick comes from legends and folklore; the snakes, the shamrock and the fire at Tara which were written at least a hundred years after his death. How much is known about 'the real Patrick'; who he was and what motivated him.

It may come as a surprise to many that we have two written documents which most scholars agree were written by St Patrick in Latin (1) **the *Confessio*** (sometime translated as 'His Confessions') and (2) **the Letter of Excommunication of Coroticus**. These documents do not give us the exact dates or many details of his life, but they do give us an insight into St Patrick's character and holiness.

PATRICK'S OWN WRITINGS

The **Confessio** is not the confession of a list of sins but is more akin to his spiritual testimony, written towards the end of his life. **The Letter of Excommunication of Coroticus** was a letter of excommunication against a Christian tribal chief, a Briton, who murdered some of Patrick's Irish converts and sold others into slavery. This may have been written by St Patrick because other Bishops in Britain were not as courageous in chastising such a powerful man. There is no certainty as to which was written first, but both originate around a similar time.

This short pamphlet on ‘the real Patrick’ is based solely on the **Confessio**. It attempts to let St Patrick’s own words speak for themselves (*these are the sentences in bold italic type*). In his own writings we discover a man who,

- knew the pain of human trafficking,
- discovered a ‘higher power’: the power of the Spirit, at a time of brokenness and loneliness in exile
- was betrayed by a close friend in the Church,
- was misunderstood and rashly judged by his own Church,
- reached out to his captors with a message of God’s love and forgiveness,
- had a special concern for women who were abused (i.e. female slaves),
- who was not afraid to challenge the powerful and privileged,
- who inspired countless young men and women to dedicate themselves to God.

To simply read the **Confessio**, as it stands, can be confusing. It needs some historical context and this short pamphlet attempts to provide that context. Hopefully when you do read the **Confessio** it might be more understandable.

PATRICK AND PALLADIUS

Older traditions have St Patrick born around 385 AD, sent on mission to Ireland in 432 AD and dying in 461 AD. Some scholars now think that these traditions mistakenly tied Patrick to another Bishop of the Irish, a man called Palladius. Palladius was from Gaul (France) and was sent by Pope Celestine to be bishop of “*the Irish who believe in Christ*” around 431 AD. The Pope, who was concerned about the Pelagian heresy in ‘*the Britains*’, first sent St Germanus of Auxerre in Gaul on mission to the Church in Britain and later sent Palladius to Ireland,

possibly the south. These facts are recorded in the Chronicle of Prosper of Aquitaine.

Patrick may have been sent to Ireland at a later stage, to the Ulaid in the north, as part of the outreach of the Church in Roman Britain to form a new ecclesiastical province. Some scholars opt for a later date for Patrick's birth 415 AD after the fall of Rome (410 AD) when the Roman Legions had been withdrawn from Britain and Irish raids on the west coast of Britain became more common. However, there is no clear evidence in his writings for dates about his birth, mission or death.

A ROMAN BRITON

Patrick tells us himself, that his grandfather, Potitus, was a priest and his father, Calpornius, was a deacon. Celibacy was not mandatory for priests at that time in the Church. His father was also a Decurion, a member of the provincial Roman governing class and the landlord of a small estate. The **Confessio** records his home as '*Bannavem Taburniae*', but no such a place is known. One scholar suggests that if this name has come about because of a scribal error and that if the proper name was 'Banna Venta Berniae' this would locate his home at Birdoswald, west of Luguvalium (modern day Carlisle).

CAPTIVITY IN IRELAND

As a young man - "*I was just short of my sixteen birthday*" - he and "*thousands of others*" were taken captive from his father's estate into slavery to the "*to the edge of the world [i.e. Ireland]*". Ireland was outside the bounds of the Roman Empire and the furthest known point west. If the later dating is correct and this

was around 430-431 AD it places St Patrick's captivity around the time of Palladius' mission.

It must have been a traumatic experience for the young man and St Patrick could certainly empathise with the trauma felt by those caught up in human trafficking today. But as the trauma was healed over time and through prayer, as an old man in Ireland, St Patrick begins to see God's providence in his life even in his captivity. He comes to believe that God's plan of salvation can take the bad experiences of life and turn them to good: ***"But it was here in Ireland that God first opened my heart so that – even though it was a later start – I became aware of my failings and began to turn with my whole heart to the Lord my God. For he looked on my miserable condition and had compassion for me, young and foolish as I was...He protected me and loved me even as a father does his own child."***

This transformation in St Patrick would become the foundation for his extraordinary mission to the Irish. With hindsight St Patrick would see that the time he spent in Ireland was preparing him for something greater, to return to that land as the Apostle to the Irish. ***"Believe me, I did not go to Ireland willingly that first time, I almost died there. But it turned out to be good for me in the end, because God used the time to shape and mould me into something better."***

St Patrick refers to his time in Ireland in his writings several times. He mentions the ***"Wood of Foelut near the Western Sea"***; this is where he was held captive. However, no-one today recognises this name or where it was situated. The reference to the Western Sea, for a Roman Briton, could be the Irish Sea. Then again writing as an old man now living in Ireland for some time it could refer to the Atlantic Ocean, placing his captivity on the east coast of Ireland.

In his **Confessio**, Patrick speaks of a religious awaken through hardship and suffering; ***“After I came to Ireland I watched over sheep. Day by Day I began to pray more frequently – and more and more my love of God and my faith in and reverence for Him began to increase. My spirit was growing, so that each day I would say a hundred prayers and almost as many at night, even during those times when I had to stay overnight in the woods or mountains, through snow and frost and rain. No harm came to me and I was certainly not lazy. I see now looking back that my spirit was bursting inside me.”***

God revealed Himself and His plans to St Patrick in dreams and through voices, as God did in the Bible. Just as his captivity was part of God’s plan, so also was his escape. Patrick surely thought of the great biblical story of the Exile in Babylon, when God’s people were led into exile in a foreign country to eventually re-emerge as a new transformed people: a people who recognised and learnt from their mistakes. ***“We deserved slavery – for we had abandoned God and did not follow his ways. We ignored the warning of our priests who pleaded with us again and again to be mindful of our eternal souls.”***

ESCAPE AND eventual RETURN HOME

One night in his sleep St Patrick heard a voice say that he would soon go home: ***“You have fasted well – soon you will be going home.”*** A short time later he heard the voice again, ***“Behold your ship is ready’. The port wasn’t nearby at all, maybe two hundred miles away and I did not know anyone who lived there”.***

After six years in captivity in Ireland, ***‘I ran away and fled the master I had served for six years. I left trusting in God, who took care of me on my journey..’*** This escape was highly dangerous and St Patrick was taking a great risk. If caught a

runaway slave could lose his life. When he reached the ship there was an initial disagreement with the captain but eventually, he boarded the ship and made his escape.

“After three days we reached land” – Gaul? – and for twenty-eight days they travelled through deserted country. When they were near starvation the captain mocked St Patrick, ***“You say this God of yours is so great and powerful – why don’t you pray to him for us? We’re dying of starvation here!”***. St Patrick challenged him and called all the crew to have faith, encouraging them to turn to the Christian God and He would save them. ***“Just turn with your whole heart to the Lord my God, because nothing is impossible for Him. Today He is going to send food right into your path because his abundance is everywhere’*** “. And it came to pass that a large herd of pigs stumbled into their path. Just as the people of Israel who grumbled against Moses in the wilderness were fed with quails and manna, so God fed St Patrick and the crew who turned their hearts to the Christian God of St Patrick. ***“After this they offered thanks to God and they looked at me in a whole new way – with respect.”***

St Patrick mentions that ***“after many years, I finally returned to my family in Britain...their long-lost son.”*** He was taken to Ireland just short of sixteen years of age, spent six years in Ireland and ***“after many years”*** – say between five and seven years – returned home roughly around the age of twenty-seven to twenty-nine years old. It was at home that he had his famous vision although he does not say when this occurred. In a dream a man called ***“Victoricus”*** gave him countless letters, ***“The Voice of the Irish...We beg you, holy boy, come here and walk once more among us!”***. But it was only ***“after many years”*** the Lord led him to return to Ireland in response to that dream.

THE MISSING YEARS

There is a large gap between this vision and the time that St Patrick must have returned to Ireland. He returned to Ireland as a Bishop when, he says himself, he was in ***“his declining years”***. The custom at the time was only to ordain a man Bishop when he reached fifty years of age (the Didiscalia). The only mention St Patrick makes of the intervening years was a strange story relating to the time of his preparation for Holy Orders. Before he was ordained a deacon, he confided to a close friend an incident from his youth, an hour of weakness, ***“At that time, because I was so troubled in spirit, I let slip to my best friend something that I had done one day in my youth – not even a day but in an hour – because I was not yet then strong in my faith. I was, maybe, fifteen years old and didn’t believe in the living God (I hadn’t since my childhood).”***

We do not know what St Patrick did at this young age, possibly something to do with paganism or idolatry. He mentions it because, as we will see later, it was cast up before him many years later when he was a Bishop in Ireland.

While St Patrick, himself, makes no mention of where he trained for Holy Orders some scholars suggest that there is evidence that his theological knowledge and vocabulary have associations with Gaul. In his writings, as a Bishop in Ireland, he mentions his desire to ***“go home to Britain and see my family and to Gaul to visit with the Christians there and see the holy people of God in person.”*** However, there is no clear evidence about these intervening years, between his thirties to his fifties, as to where he lived and worked, where he trained for Holy Orders or where he worked as priest before he was ordained a Bishop. Some scholars speculate that he may he have already been working as a priest in Ireland before becoming a Bishop there.

MINISTRY IN IRELAND AND A TIME OF CONTROVERSY

St Patrick's **Confessio** was written, while he was Bishop in Ireland, in response to controversy and denunciations against him coming from the Church in Britain. It even appears that an ecclesiastical court may have been held in his absence: *"I was attacked by my superiors in the Church – those who accused me of sins contrary to my role as a bishop – on that day I felt beaten down with such force that I thought I would never rise again...The pretence of their attack on me was that, after thirty years, they found out about a confession I had made in the days before I was even a deacon."* His friend, for some reason, disclosed St Patrick's youthful transgression mentioned above.

It is not clear from the **Confessio** whether this was a formal ecclesiastical trial with charges or just disgruntled superiors harbouring doubts about his integrity. St Patrick did not fit the mould of a 'normal' bishop and the ecclesiastical regulations from around the time may have given grounds for concern about his ministry. Firstly, it is important to remember that Bishops were not sent on mission to pagans i.e. evangelizing missions but rather were sent to minister as leaders to settled Christian communities. The Church did not have a good experience of 'wandering clerics'. The Council of Elvira in Spain (ca 300 AD) and later the Council of Arles in Gaul decreed that, *"Bishops, priests and deacons must not leave their churches to engage in business and must not go about the provinces in search of profitable markets."*

However, St Patrick was no 'normal Bishop'. Like St Paul, he felt that he had a mission from God to bring the 'Good News' to the pagans, possibly those with whom he had spent his captivity.

To make his converts and travel among the pagan tribes St Patrick had to pay for safe passage and hire 'security guards'; ***"in my travels around the island, I used to make payments to the local kings. In addition, I also gave money to their sons who accompanied me on my journey"***. This may have been misconstrued by his fellow Bishops as evidence of bribery or St Patrick involving himself in clandestine trading. Aware of this possibility, St Patrick had always been quite careful not to accept any gifts that could be used to misrepresent his intentions. His integrity shines out strongly. ***"I have been offered many gifts here by those sorry for their sins but I turned them down."***

From the **Confessio** it appears there were three main accusations against him,

- (1) his mission to the pagan Irish was not the proper order,
- (2) that he had not authority for acting in this way,
- (3) that he was acting for profit of some kind.

In his **Confessio** St Patrick answers those accusations honestly and with integrity. ***"Heaven knows I have not led a perfect life (as some of you undoubtedly have) but I have made my peace with God and am not ashamed to stand before him. This I declare, the from the time I was a young man, the love of God and respect for him has grown in me. Now I can say, that with the help of God I have been faithful."***

THE CONFESSIO: A TESTIMONY OF THE TRUTH

Up until the fifth-sixth centuries there was no clear understanding in the Church that barbarian races should be directly converted. To be Christian was to be Roman. Could it have been that while St Patrick's initial mission in Ireland was to the Christians already living there, he realised a long-standing call by God to evangelise the pagan Irish and minister to the slaves with whom he had spent

his captivity? This was a new initiative in the Church at that time and, like St Paul with his mission to the Gentiles, St Patrick experienced opposition. It appears some of his fellow Bishops believed he was neglecting his episcopal mission and this may have led his fellow Bishops to question his motives.

St Patrick, however, believed sincerely that the very reason for his captivity was somehow part of God's mysterious plan to make the Irish ***"a people of the Lord and children of God."*** He was a Bishop ahead of his time and a man inspired by God. St Patrick's **Confessio** was the opportunity to set the record straight, to outline how he saw God's plan for him and to bear his soul,

"I would write these words of my defence again and again if I could. I declare in truth and with joy in my heart – before God and his holy angels – that I have never had any motive in my work except preaching the good news and its promises. That is the only reason I returned to Ireland, a place I barely escaped from alive."

"Every day I keep expecting to be murdered, assaulted, sold back into slavery or some such thing. But I'm not afraid because I know Heaven waits for me. I throw myself on the mercy of God who is in charge of everything. As the prophet says, 'Turn your thoughts to God and He will take care of you.'"

"So, I will trust my spirit to my most faithful God. I serve here as His ambassador in spite of my shortcomings, but God doesn't use the world's standards in such matter. He chose me (i.e. a humble sinner) for this job, me, one of the least of his servants to be his assistant."

"This is my confession before I die."

St Patrick, like St Paul, was a Christ-driven man. He wanted to share with the Irish the illuminating light of Christ that shone in his heart during his captivity. The privilege and status of his youth had left him blind; the darkness and suffering of his captivity had opened up his eyes.

At the end of his **Confessio**, recognising that his pagan converts had once worshipped the sun, St Patrick encouraged them to remain faithful to the 'true sun': the Son of the Father; the Lord Jesus Christ.

“For that sun that we see with our eye rises every day by the will of God, but it is not divine nor will its light remain. Everyone who worships that sun will face punishment someday, but we who believe in and follow Christ the true Son will never really die. We will become forever as Christ has been always, ruling with God the all-powerful Father and the Holy Spirit and forever, Amen.”

A PILGRIM OF HOPE

In his letter introducing the Jubilee Year Pope Francis, encouraging us to live with hope, quotes from St Paul's letter to the Romans 5:1-5,

5 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

St Patrick taught the people of Ireland to live with hope; a hope that does not disappoint because it comes from God. That was his message and that was the

example of his life. In the midst of betrayal and criticism, he found peace with God. In the midst of his captivity, he learnt and showed that suffering can bring endurance, endurance produce character, and character produce hope because it is rooted not in this world but in the world to come.

St Patrick's hope came from his faith and life of prayer. His courage, his perseverance in the face of difficulties, his life-giving sacrifice for the people of Ireland was enabled by his faith and prayer.

"I must give thanks to my God continuously. He has helped me to keep my faith through difficult times, so that I can fearlessly offer myself as a kind of living sacrifice to Christ."

His message and example of faith and hope transformed Ireland in the centuries that followed. Let us pray that his message and example of faith and hope will transform Ireland again.

St Patrick, Apostle of the Irish and Pilgrim of Hope.

Pray for us.

Recommended for further reading.

St Patrick of Ireland: A Biography (A Historical Biography) by Philip Freeman

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MODERN HYMNS BASED ON ST PATRICK'S BREATPLATE

1. CHRIST BE WITH ME

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me and before me.
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore.

Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in hearts of all who know me.
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger,
Christ in quiet and in roar.

*Love, blessed Trinity of three, bound in unity
Who guides my journey.
I will arise with strength of heaven
Trusting in Your light to guide my journey
Shine before me, lead me home.*

Power to guide me, might to hold me,
Wisdom teach me, watching o'er me.
Ear to hear me, hand to guard me,
Love to conquer every fear.

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2. CHRIST BE WITH ME

Christ be with me,
Christ within me,
Christ behind me,
Christ before me,
Christ beside me,
Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.

Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ in hearts of all who love me,
Christ in mouth of friend or stranger
In his name I will arise.

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