

## Led by the Spirit: St. Patrick

*Andrew Ryder scj* presents the third of his four articles on the Holy Spirit. His address is St Joseph's Retreat Centre; Malpas; Cheshire SY14 7DD; United Kingdom.



A very special thank you to author Fr Ryder and to Mary Ann Foppe of *Review for Religious* who have made it possible for us to have this excellent article available on our website.

The article will be found in the January 2006 edition of *Review for Religious* (65.1.2006).

St. Augustine wrote his Confessions at the end of the 4th century (a.d. 397). Though the exact date is unknown, the end of the following century saw another masterpiece of spiritual writing, the Confession of St. Patrick. Not only are the titles similar, the works have a lot in common, though there are also striking differences.

Patrick and Augustine were both bishops. Augustine was a traditional bishop in a long-established part of the Roman Empire. Patrick was a new kind of bishop, a missionary pastor operating outside the confines of Roman territory. Augustine was in his prime when he composed his famous work and would go on to write many other tracts on all sorts of spiritual, religious, and moral topics. Patrick was at the end of his ministry when he wrote, thanking and praising the God who had brought him so far on his pilgrimage of faith.

### Patrick's Confession

The opening words of the Confession give us a clue to its nature. Patrick does not intend to give a detailed account of his activities. Rather, he wants to tell us about himself and the faith that has guided his life: "Though imperfect in many things, I want my brothers and relatives to know what kind of person I am. Then they can understand the way I have spent my life."<sup>1</sup> Patrick excuses himself from a detailed story of his labors on the ground that such an account would take too long. "So, lest I injure my readers, I shall tell you briefly how God, the all-holy one, often freed me from slavery and from twelve dangers which threatened my life, as well as from many snares and from things which I am unable to express in words" (§35).

The Confession avoids the philosophical digressions of Augustine's work. His style, as Patrick himself would have admitted, does not have the literary polish of the bishop of Hippo, though it is less "rustic" than many have imagined. His own disclaimers of sophistication may have been part of the conventions of the time.<sup>2</sup>

Patrick's Confession is first and foremost a statement of faith. Like Augustine, Patrick saw his episcopal role primarily in terms of teaching. As the Father in faith of the Irish people, his most important duty was to impart to his converts a correct understanding of their newly acquired beliefs. Patrick's preaching, as reflected in the Confession, centers on his faith in the triune God. We get the measure of the man from the fact that he does

not balk at starting his teaching ministry with the most demanding mystery of the Christian religion.

At the beginning of the Confession, Patrick recites a formal profession of faith that resembles the Nicene Creed. His trinitarian profession of faith is the heart of the Confession. Patrick felt moved to write in order to give praise and thanks to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. “So it would be neither right nor proper to do anything but to tell you all of the many great blessings and graces which the Lord chooses to give me in this land of my captivity. I tell you these things because this is how we return thanks to God” (§3).<sup>3</sup>

Patrick is filled with wonder and delight as he reviews the blessings that he has received from God. He is convinced that he has been rescued from sin and error by the unseen hand of an all-merciful Father. He gives frequent expression to a deep sense of personal unworthiness and sees the parable of the Prodigal Son as the story of his own life. He introduces himself in forthright terms: “I am the sinner Patrick. I am the most unsophisticated of people, the least of Christians, and for many people the most contemptible” (§1)

Despite the unparalleled esteem in which their Father in faith has been held by the Irish people down through the centuries, Patrick was the target of criticism during his life. His work did not meet with universal approval. Well-meaning friends tried to restrain him from undertaking a task for which they considered him unsuited. He was even censured by jealous colleagues. The Confession is also, therefore, a defense of his mission to Ireland.

Wariness of his opponents and “fear of men’s tongues,” Patrick tells us, have prevented him from taking up his pen. Now, in his farewell speech to the people he loves, Patrick feels the time has come to set the record straight. Like St. Paul, he has been Christ’s letter of salvation to the uttermost parts of the world, and, despite the imperfections of his style, he will compose this letter, “written in our hearts not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God” (§11 and 2 Co 3:2-3).

### The Call of the Spirit

Patrick’s call to serve the Irish people was part of a process that took several years to mature. His decision to go to Ireland as a missionary bishop was in fact the climax of his own personal conversion. When he was taken captive as a teenager and forcibly brought to Ireland, he later confesses, he was ignorant of the true God. Indeed, he sees the enforced exile of himself and thousands of fellow captives as a direct result of their religious laxity: “This was our punishment for departing from God, abandoning his commandments, and ignoring our priests, who kept on warning us about our salvation” (§1).

Gradually a change came over Patrick. During the six harsh years of his shepherding on the mountains, the Spirit began to take hold of him. As his sufferings increased, he took refuge in God, and his prayer life intensified. On the mountains and in the woods, despite hail, rain, and snow, Patrick prayed through the day and through the night. Describing those far-off days of his first stay in Ireland, he says: “I sensed no evil or spiritual laziness within. I now understand this: at that time ‘the Spirit was fervent’ in me” (§16).

After six years of intense spiritual purification, he was able to escape. In a dream Patrick heard a voice telling him to travel to his homeland: “Behold, your ship is prepared.” He took flight and, after a journey through the length of Ireland, boarded a ship for the three-day crossing to Britain. He came close to death before reaching safety. In his usual terse style, he sums up the hazards of a runaway slave traversing hostile countryside and seas by saying that he “barely” managed to make good his escape (§§16-19).

Back at home once more, he was warmly welcomed by his delighted parents. “They begged me in good faith after all my adversities to go nowhere else, nor ever leave them again” (§23). They must have noticed a change in him. Certainly he was no longer the boy who had been cruelly plucked away from them. The dreams continued, though now they beckoned in a very different direction. A man brought him letters communicating “the voice of the Irish.” Their message is loud and clear: “O holy boy, we beg you to come again and walk among us” (§24).

We hardly need wonder that, like the prophet Jeremiah, Patrick needed some convincing before he could steel himself to return to the land that had treated him so badly. Two more dreams were needed before Patrick was sure that his visions were the work of the Spirit. On waking he was filled with joy and remembered the consoling words of Paul: “Likewise the Spirit helps the weakness of our prayers, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs beyond what words can express” (§§23-25).

Apart from the determined opposition of his family to any mention of a return to Ireland, there were two other trials Patrick had to face, one before and the other after he had embarked on his great adventure. The first was of a spiritual nature, the other of a more prosaic kind. Patrick discovered his total dependence on the Holy Spirit through experiencing the onslaught of a malign spirit: “Satan strongly tried me—I shall remember it ‘as long as I am in the body.’ Something like an enormous rock fell on top of me, and I lost all power over my limbs. . . . At that instant I saw the sun rise in the sky, while I called out ‘Helia, Helia’ with all my strength. Then the sun’s splendor fell on me and instantly dispelled all the crushing weight. I believe that Christ, my Lord, assisted me, and that it was his Spirit who cried out through me” (§20). In his anguish Patrick called upon one of the greatest Old Testament prophets, Elijah. In response to the urgent plea of the Spirit within him, Patrick was enfolded with the splendor of the sun, as Jesus was glorified in the presence of Elijah at the moment of the transfiguration (§20).

To understand the second trial fully, we would need to have a lot more details than we do about Patrick’s life and his preparation for pastoral ministry in Ireland. Even the place where he studied for the priesthood is a matter of speculation, though a later tradition claims that he spent much of his early career in the monasteries of southern France.<sup>4</sup> Whatever his academic background, it was not enough to convince his fellow bishops, when they met to discuss his pastoral activities, that he was a suitable person for the hazards of the Irish mission.

To his consternation, a convocation of church leaders judged him spiritually unfit for his pastoral duties. As well as questions about his theological credentials and his prudence in undertaking such a dangerous mission, there was also the matter of some indiscretion of his youth. The unfavorable verdict of his fellow bishops came as a shattering blow to

Patrick, almost causing him to lose faith entirely: “And when I was tested by some of my superiors who opposed my toilsome office of bishop with my sins—truly on that day ‘I was struck’ mightily ‘so that I was falling’ here and in eternity—then did the Lord in his goodness spare the convert and the stranger ‘for his name’s sake.’ And he powerfully came to my aid in this battering so that I did not slip badly into the wreckage of sin nor into infamy” (§26).

God rescued him from despair and ignominy. Despite the unfavorable attitude of his peers, Patrick pressed on, convinced that the Spirit was with him. We can only presume that a further convocation, or some other ecclesial process that Patrick fails to mention, reversed the initial verdict, restoring Patrick’s good name and vindicating his work. The saint himself attributed the continuation of his labors to the direct intervention of God.

While those around him treated him so badly, Patrick was consoled by the grace of God. In another dream the Lord assured Patrick that he was the apple of his eye: “So it is that ‘I give thanks to him who strengthened me’ in all things that he did not impede me on my chosen journey, nor in my works, which I had learned from Christ my Lord. On the contrary, I felt in myself a strength, by no means small, coming from him, and that my ‘faith was proven in the presence of God and men.’ And so I boldly declare that my conscience is clear both now and in the future” (§§30-31).

Patrick remained faithful to the call of the Spirit despite the tribulations which he had to face every day in the hostile circumstances of his work. So seriously did he take his mission to the non-Christian Irish that he refused to leave the country even to visit his family or friends in the monasteries of Gaul. Perhaps fearing he would have to face another tribunal, Patrick was determined never again to leave Ireland, no matter what the cost. He justified this refusal to return home as a demand of the Spirit who had called him in the first place. “I am ‘bound in the Spirit,’ who ‘testifies to me’ that should I do this he would view me as guilty. Moreover, I fear the loss of the work I have begun here, since it is not I but Christ the Lord who has ordered me to come and be with these people for the rest of my life” (§43).

### Patrick’s Mission

Not all who opposed Patrick’s mission to the Irish did so from malicious reasons. The saint assures us that even his friends were against it because they feared for his safety. We can easily forget just how original and how hazardous the undertaking was. The crucial fact to keep in mind is that Ireland was not part of the Roman Empire. The country had never been a Roman province and lay outside the great civilization of the day. For hundreds of years the whole known world had been integrated in its speech, culture, and law through the forces of imperial rule. Anybody living outside the established system was considered barbaric. Christianity was an integral part of ordered society. Maintenance rather than mission was the order of the day. The originality of Patrick was that he broke out of the traditional practices of the western church by embarking on a mission, as a bishop, to a land beyond the borders of the Roman world.

Patrick’s understanding of his call was quite specific: his mission was to the pagans living in Ireland. We can take it for granted that by the 5th century there already were Christians in the country, however scattered they may have been. But Patrick had other

people in mind: the multitude of rural dwellers who did not follow the Christian way. The life work before him was the conversion of those who had not yet been baptized.<sup>5</sup>

Conscious of the criticisms of his fellow bishops, Patrick defended his work as the inspiration of God and not some fanciful idea of his own: “It was not my grace, but God who conquered in me and who resisted them all that I might come ‘to the Irish nations to preach the gospel’ and put up with insults from unbelievers, that I might ‘bear the hatred of the wanderer,’ endure many persecutions even including chains, and that I should give up my freedom for the benefit of others” (§37).

Patrick was firmly convinced that he had been prepared from youth to bring the gospel to the farthest ends of the earth. The mission to Ireland was the reason he had been called to follow Christ: “So it is right that we should fish well and carefully—as the Lord warns and teaches us saying, ‘Come after me and I shall make you fishers of men.’ And again he says through the prophets: ‘Behold! I send out fishermen and many hunters, says God,’ and so forth. So truly it is our task to cast our nets and catch ‘a great multitude’ and crowd for God” (§40).

Besides the geographical isolation of Ireland, there was also a temporal boundary that Patrick felt he was crossing when he began his mission. He was not only on the edge of space. He was also on the edge of time: “It is he who ‘in the last days’ heard me, so that I—an ignorant man—should dare to take up so holy and wonderful a work as this: that I should in some way imitate those to whom the Lord foretold what was about to occur when ‘his gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations’ before the end of the world. And this is what we see. It has been fulfilled. Behold! We are witnesses to the fact that the gospel has been preached out to beyond where anyone lives” (§34).

Patrick believed that preaching beyond the frontiers of the Roman world was bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth. With the completion of his mission, the era of the apostles, to which he traced his own vocation, had been brought to completion. There was nothing now to delay the second coming of Christ. The close of human history could not be far away. Patrick was convinced that this final act of evangelization ushered in the last age of the church and prepared all Christian people for the return of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

His expectation of the imminent return of Christ in glory, however, did not prevent Patrick from giving himself wholeheartedly to his daily tasks. Nor should we underestimate the difficulties he faced right to the end of his life. He was preaching in a land where he had been forced into hard labor as a slave. He would always be a foreigner and remained in a very real sense “outside the law.” Travel between the numerous petty kingdoms of the country was notoriously difficult since they were frequently at war with each other. Conditions were such that “not a day passes but I expect to be killed or waylaid or taken into slavery or assaulted in some other way. But for the sake of the promise of heaven ‘I fear none of these things’” (§55).

As a roving bishop, Patrick moved ceaselessly from place to place, doing his best to set down roots that would take hold among the people “and that also from among them everywhere clerics should be ordained to serve this people.” He encouraged his converts to go beyond the basic obligations of the Christian vocation and embrace the religious life. Monastic and missionary endeavors were to become the distinctive features of Irish

spirituality. The seeds of these later developments were already evident in Patrick's lifetime: "the Irish leaders' sons and daughters are seen to become the monks and virgins of Christ" (§41).<sup>7</sup>

Patrick rejoices to inform the reader that many thousands have converted to the Christian way. However, the dangers which beset him warn us that the environment in which he worked continued to be grimly inauspicious. Generations of further missionary activity would in fact be necessary before the country was completely won over to Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Patrick was under no illusions about his chances of success when he returned to Ireland. It could never be a land of misty-eyed nostalgia for one whose first contact was through the brutal realities of the slave trade. He placed his trust entirely in God's protection. The fact that Patrick could rejoice in the salvation of the people who had treated him so badly must be one of his enduring claims to relevance today. He had plenty to be bitter about, yet he forgave his enemies and cheerfully tried to secure not only the religious but also the material well-being of his beloved converts.<sup>9</sup>

### In the Power of the Holy Spirit

The secret of Patrick's outstanding courage and success as a pastor can be traced back to his experience as a shepherd-boy on the lonely mountains of Ireland. His whole life became one long uninterrupted communion with God, sustained by frequent periods of prayer, both by day and at night. In the depths of his isolation and suffering Patrick opened up his spirit to the presence of the Holy Spirit: "But then, when I had arrived in Ireland and was looking after flocks the whole time, I prayed frequently each day. And more and more the love of God and the fear of him grew in me, and my faith was increased and my spirit enlivened. So much so that I prayed up to a hundred times a day, and almost as often at night. I even remained in the wood and on the mountains to pray. And—come hail, rain, or snow—I was up before dawn to pray, and I sensed no evil or spiritual laziness within. I now understand this: at that time 'the Spirit was fervent' in me" (§16).

The Spirit that was fervent in Patrick animated his life from the moment of his call and to the concluding years of his ministry. Using different titles, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Living God, and the Spirit of the Father, Patrick invokes the Spirit at every important turn of his life. His understanding of the Holy Spirit praying within him was the core of his trinitarian spirituality. His profession of faith at the beginning of the Confession starts with the Father, goes on to Jesus Christ, and concludes with the Holy Spirit. This was the standard formula for all early church creeds. The Father "has plentifully poured upon us the Holy Spirit, the gift and pledge of immortality, who makes those who believe and listen into sons of God the Father and fellow heirs with Christ."

Dreams played a big part in his life and none was more unusual than the one he had of the Holy Spirit. Shortly after dreaming that the people of Ireland were calling him back to walk once more among them, the saint was strengthened by a dream in which he experienced the Holy Spirit praying within him. In his excitement and astonishment he did not at first understand what was going on. He wondered who was praying. "But towards the end of the prayer it became clear that it was the Spirit." On awakening, Patrick remembered Paul's words in Romans 8. Patrick was being helped by the comforting presence of God's Spirit and prepared for the trials that lay ahead of him.<sup>10</sup>

Patrick had a similar experience of the Spirit praying within him at the other critical moment of his spiritual journey, his encounter with the malignant spirit that fell upon him like a great rock. At that moment too the Spirit cried out on his behalf. The crushing weight was lifted and Patrick prayed that the Holy Spirit would continue to support him in all subsequent moments of temptation and distress.<sup>11</sup>

### Courage and Gratitude

Of the various gifts of the Holy Spirit, courage became the outstanding virtue of St. Patrick. This courage was continuously displayed throughout his life: during his captivity, in making his escape, and above all in returning to the country that had treated him so badly. By going back to Ireland he knew he would be in continual danger for the rest of his life. In a real sense he would remain an outsider, even as a bishop. He would always be a missionary, a foreigner unprotected in the country of his adoption. Yet return he did, despite his well-grounded fears and hesitations.<sup>12</sup>

Patrick's preaching also reveals his courage. He was not afraid to challenge his hearers and propose the deepest of Christian mysteries to them. The trinitarian theme running through the Confession surely reflects the manner in which the saint presented the distinctive Christian doctrine of God to his listeners. The mystery that became such a focus of Irish spirituality has its origins in his own devotion.

Patrick was conscious of being a pilgrim in the world. He saw his life in terms of one long journey and, as he proudly stated in the Confession, his pilgrimage was not in vain. Through his writing he shares his legacy of Irish Christianity with the readers of today. The Confession is a unique document from the darkest of the Dark Ages, 5th-century northern Europe. Short though it is, the book gives us more personal details about St. Patrick than is known of any contemporary Irish or British church leader.<sup>13</sup>

Patrick's develops his Confession into a canticle of gratitude to God for all that has been achieved through him. Looking back on his life, he writes his last testament and final farewell to the people he has loved. His words are full of hope for the future. He stands firm in the belief that God has guided his steps from the beginning. He humbly concludes with an appeal to all men and women of goodwill.

"I now pray for anyone who believes in and fears God who may perchance come upon this writing which Patrick, the sinner and the unlearned one, wrote in Ireland. I wrote it so that no one might say that whatever little I did, or anything I made visible according to God's pleasure, was done through ignorance. Rather, you should judge the situation and let it be truly believed that it was the gift of God. And this is my declaration before I die" (§62).

### Notes

1 Confession, §6 (such references throughout are to the standard paragraph numbers used in the document). English translations are taken from T. O'Loughlin, *St. Patrick: The Man and His Works* (London: SPCK, 1999).

2 M. De Paor believes in the skill and beauty of Patrick's writing; see her *Patrick, the Pilgrim Apostle of Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas, 1998).

3 The 7th-century biographer of Patrick, Bishop Tirechan, attributes a creed to Patrick that ends: "God has a Son who is co-eternal with himself, and similar in all respects to him; and neither is the Son younger than the Father, nor is the Father older than the Son; and the Holy Spirit breathes in them. And the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit are inseparable." T. O'Loughlin believes that this creed stands in a direct line of development from Patrick. *Patrick, Missionary to the Irish* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2002), p. 66.

4 There are no contemporary references to Patrick's mission. In all probability there were other missionaries at work too. So "we must assume that both, alongside many others, were working as missionaries among the Irish in the 5th century, and consequently it was a group of workers (without any known connection between them) rather than a single individual, who should be seen as the 'founders' of Christianity in Ireland." O'Loughlin *Patrick, Missionary to the Irish*, p. 9.

5 "In this matter Patrick is absolutely original. He had no forerunners, at any rate among the Catholic Romans who could write. No one had used a Catholic bishopric as he did." E.A. Thompson, *Who Was St. Patrick?* (Suffolk: Boydell, 1985), p. 83.

6 "The completion of this task ushers in the completion, the judgment, the coming of the Son of Man in glory." T. O'Loughlin, "Patrick on the Margins of Space and Time," *Eklogai, Studies in Honour of Thomas Finan and Gerard Watson*, ed. K. McGroarty (Maynooth 2001), p. 58. *Celtic Theology* (London: Continuum, 2000), pp. 36-40.

7 Patrick goes on to relate how a "blessed Irish woman of noble birth, a most beautiful adult whom I had baptized" came back a few days later to become "a virgin of Christ" (§42).

8 "No one could argue that Patrick, when he was writing his Confession, was overoptimistic or confident about the future. He reserves judgment. Whether or not his mission would survive at all seems to have been in the balance. The Apostle of Ireland certainly did not convert Ireland." Thompson, *Who Was St. Patrick?* p. 89.

9 As well as the Confession, there is a second piece of writing we have intact from the hand of Patrick, *The Letter to Coroticus*. This is a letter excommunicating the slave trader Coroticus and his gang. As he calls for the liberation of the men and women savagely dragged from their homes, Patrick declares that he is "bound by the Spirit" and cannot remain silent in the face of blatant injustice. Patrick "is the first person to call for the abolition of slavery and for the liberation of women. That call will not be made again until the seventeenth century." De Paor, *Patrick*, p. 197.

10 "The more I reflect on this dream-text the more I am held and astonished by it. Indeed I cannot think of any other text from the rich store of Christian witness which can compare with it for strangeness, intimacy, and power." N.D. O'Donoghue, *Aristocracy of Soul: Patrick of Ireland* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1987), p. 47.

11 The most popular prayer associated with Patrick is the "Breastplate." This is a well-used hymn and has long been treasured as part of Ireland's Christian heritage. Yet careful literary analysis reveals that the "Breastplate" is composed in a style quite different from

Patrick's two authentic pieces of writing, the Confession and The Letter to Coroticus. The "Breastplate" most likely comes from the 7th century, the golden age of early Irish Christianity. St. Patrick's Breastplate in the Lorica Tradition, by M.S. Close, unpublished thesis for an M.A. in spirituality, Milltown Park 1999, p. 22.

12 The moral courage of Patrick is shown in his excommunication of the slave trader Coroticus. In his letter the saint did not hesitate to call on his fellow churchmen to take appropriate action in response to the murder and abduction of innocent men and women. They may have seen this as interference, and Patrick's outspokenness could have contributed to the negative decision of the bishops in their assessment of his fitness to continue missionary activity in Ireland. Yet their criticism did not deter him or stop him from courageously continuing in his pastoral work.

13 The Confession and The Letter to Coroticus "are the only personal documents that can be claimed by either the church in Britain or the church in Ireland from that troubled century." De Paor, Patrick, p. 6.