

The Spirituality of St Patrick



We have from St Patrick two brief works: his Confession, a spiritual autobiography, and an angry letter to the soldiers of the pirate Coroticus who had kidnapped and murdered some of Patrick's Christians.

Every time we read the Confession we can be struck by some other new thought. There are any number of ways of summing up this great work in a few words, depending on what element of Patrick's teaching or complex personality we focus on at a particular time. But there is perhaps one key to his spirituality, what he called the "desire of his life" which he wants others to know. This lies somehow in his single-mindedness. He had fallen in love with God, he wanted nothing but what God wanted. God's will was expressed for him in the very concrete terms of a mission in exile – so nothing else mattered....

Patrick shows us a spirituality, which is very simple. He is loved, blessed and called by God and he responds. Patrick had stickability. His holy mountain in the West of Ireland – Croagh Patrick – has many lessons for us. We can see its majestic summit from a distance. But as we begin to climb, the summit vanishes and all we can see is the intervening slope. The summit is often covered by fog. For ordinary people Croagh Patrick is quite a difficult climb, and it demands grit and determination to get to the top. Patrick can lead us to ascend life's mountain where, like Moses and Patrick, we meet the living God.

Brother Colmán Ó Clabaigh OSB

Patrick had a dark secret. Around age 15, he had committed a very serious crime. What the nature of this offense was he does not reveal, but it would have been an obstacle to his ordination had it been disclosed.

He confided this to a close friend, who subsequently betrayed his trust. In consequence, Patrick's mission was called into question and the "Confession" contains an anguished defense of his ministry in the face detractors, whom he dismissively addresses as "you men of letters, sitting on your estates."

All this is a long way from the sanitized image of the saint banishing the snakes from Ireland in his green vestments, bishop's staff and oversized shamrock.

However, the reality of St. Patrick as revealed in the "Confession" shows us someone in whom the grace of God was powerfully active.... Patrick himself recognized this; he was conscious of being "rustic, exiled, unlearned," of lacking the sophistication of other bishops. But more than this, he was conscious of the power of God working within him.

Anyone familiar with the stone-walled fields that partition the Irish countryside will appreciate the image that he uses to describe this: "I was like a stone lying in deep mud; and he that is mighty came and in his mercy lifted me up, and raised me aloft and put me on top of the wall. And therefore I ought to shout out aloud and return something to the Lord for the great mercy he has shown me now and for all ages."

Weak though he was, Patrick's success lay in his recognition of the Gospel's power to transform, transfigure and uplift, and this is as true for us in the 21st century as it was for him in the fifth.

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