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May you have warm words
on a cold evening, a full
moon on a dark night, and
may the road be downhill all
the way to your door.

A Celtic Blessing

THERE WAS A MAN NAMED PATRICK

Tomorrow is St. Patrick's Day, when everybody is Irish and many people drink too much! It comes at a festive time this year for it is Carnival season in many places, as people party to prepare themselves for the supposedly somber days of Holy Week beginning with Palm Sunday on March 25th.



There are always a few issues with St. Patrick's Day. To begin with Patrick ("Patricus") wasn't Irish. He was a mixture of Roman and Briton. We know he was kidnapped in his teens by some Irish rustlers and was a slave in Ireland taking care of animals. He was very



much alone, often hungry and cold. But otherwise there is very little we know about his early life. Like when he was born!

At some point he managed to escape and made his way out of Ireland and home, which was probably Gaul. Then comes a lot of legend and not much fact. Later he was ordained a priest, (although he tended to find priests foolish) and then bishop, and sent back to Ireland to convert heathens in the North and West parts of the island. Ancient maps of this time simply describe these areas as "*Here do be monsters.*" Patrick most likely worked in Ireland sometime during the second half of the Fifth Century.

Patrick was not particularly concerned about church niceties. He just went about doing what he thought was right and gave no thought to issues like "permission." He seems to have had particular success among young people. Patrick brought a group of Irish youth into the Christian faith. When a company of Christian Romano-Briton soldiers



captured them with the intention of selling them into slavery, Patrick demonstrated he had an “Irish spirit” by excommunicating the entire militia of kidnappers! British bishops were appalled. Patrick couldn’t care less. He stood by his young converts time and time again and in the process he wedded the ancient pagan spiritual practices with the gospel. British bishops were quick to point out that this was not true Christianity. But Celtic Christianity has actually grown in strength during the centuries, alongside it’s Roman cousin.



Patrick was much bothered by a sin of his adolescence. Thomas Cahill, in his delightful book *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, believes that it was probable Patrick had killed someone in response to an act of brutality.

In his last years Patrick wrote his famous book *Confession*. It contains practical interpretations of the gospel and is likely the first Christian book that denounces all forms of slavery.

The attitude of protecting the poor and underprivileged is something that Patrick gave to church people down through the centuries. I think it's safe to say there is no diocese of Catholics any place in the

world that does not have Irish men and women ministers.

I spent several of my adolescent years in a monastic school founded by European monks. Everything, including the sports teams, was divided into two sections —“German” and “Irish.” That was in the 1940s — a long time since Patrick walked the earth!



The Catholic Church in Ireland has had a checkered history, perhaps because it was a major political power. That combination never seems to work out well as we can observe in our country the strange



unity between fundamentalist Christians and the alt-right political forces.

Things seem more balanced in Ireland at the present time. But nothing in Ireland has been more painful than the violent conflicts between Protestants and Catholics, known as “the troubles”, between 1968 – 1990. A friend of mine, Mark J. Hurley, wrote *Blood on the Shamrock*. He began by

lamenting *“the terrible toll in lives and happiness for all living in Ireland.”* That has improved but not gone away completely. It has been 20 years since the “Good Friday Agreement” settling some differences between the Protestant and Catholic cultures of Northern Ireland but it is still a fragile relationship.

Mark Hurley was also a Catholic bishop, and controversial at times. However he was one of the first religious people to support Starcross as we responded to the needs of people living with HIV/AIDS.



Well, back to Patrick. There is more fiction than fact in many stories. Did Patrick drive the snakes out of Ireland? No. Did he use the



Shamrock to explain the Trinity? Highly unlikely. Is St. Patrick’s Cathedral the tallest church in Ireland? Yes. But it is Anglican, not Catholic.

A number of famous prayers are attributed to Patrick. Frankly there is very little

evidence that he composed them but there may have been some influence. The most famous prayer is *“St. Patrick’s Breastplate”* meaning his, and our, protection. It is a very long prayer. Most of it sounds like it was taken out of a catechism book. But there is one section that stands out from the rest. It may have come from a legend about Patrick and his followers trying to escape from

kidnapping slave traders, giving this prayer an alternative name — *“The Song of the Deer.”* God confused the eyes of the kidnappers and they did not see Patrick and the others. Instead they saw deer running in front of them!

Anyway, here is the section that doesn't really fit with the rest of the prayer, but I think it is applicable to both people and deer!



*I arise today
Through the strength of
heaven:
The light of the sun,
The radiance of the moon,
The splendor of fire,
The speed of lightning,
The swiftness of the wind,
The depth of the sea,
The stability of the earth,
The firmness of rock.*



I leave you with an old Irish parting — *“May You Always Have A Cool Head And A Warm Heart!”*

Brother Toby

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