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What the Real Saint Patrick Teaches us about Faith Today

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NCR Today

If you ask your average ?Irish American? about the life of Saint Patrick you would hear something about an Irish Shepherd who rid the Ireland of snakes with the power of Christianity?if you?re lucky. It is more likely that you would hear nothing about the ?real? Saint Patrick, instead being forced to listen to incoherent mumblings from someone wearing all green and drinking Guinness out of a solo cup. Now I?m not trying to downplay the festivities of Saint Patrick?s Day, but I am going to suggest that the life of Saint Patrick has important lessons for people of faith today. If we ignore the ?real? Patrick of Ireland then we miss an opportunity to provide deep context to the March celebration, and rich spiritual reflection.

Born into a wealthy English family (most likely in Wales), Patrick was kidnapped at the young age of sixteen. He was brought to Ireland and sold into slavery, spending much of his teenage years and early twenties tending to sheep, working as a shepherd. The little we know about Saint Patrick comes from his *Confessio*. It was within this Confession that he talks of how he heard God tell him to flee from Ireland and return to England. It was there that he would take up his religious studies, as he hid away in a monastery, leading to his eventual priestly ordination.

Eventually, Patrick would return to Ireland (ordained as a Bishop) as a Christian Missionary and

is said to have baptized thousands of people, been a charismatic speaker, and ordained new priests to minister to the new Christian population. He preached, converted and spent roughly forty years travelling around Ireland until he passed away in Sault, there he had built his first church. The date of March 17th (the most commonly agreed upon date of death) would later be chosen as his feast day, which is celebrated in Ireland as a Holy Day of Obligation.

This brief synopsis of the life of Saint Patrick highlights two important points for people of faith: that God speaks to the "least of these," and that we are all called and qualified to spread the word of God.

Saint Patrick was born into a wealthy family and had no material wants in the world. Yet it was not in this time of luxury that God chose to speak to him, but rather in his time of lacking and emptiness. It was in the solitude of the Irish countryside that God spoke to Saint Patrick and gave him the opportunity to develop his faith. This is not to suggest that God only speaks to those on the margins of society, but suggests that when we are so cluttered with material worries we may not take the time to listen for God's guidance. It also reminds us that the vulnerable are seen as equals in the eyes of God, and that faith is not reserved only for the elite.

Additionally, Saint Patrick did not believe that he was unique, or especially qualified to bring faith to people. The humble evangelist even referred to himself as an "unlearned sinner," and tells us that anything good he achieved should not be seen as work of himself, but as a gift from God. If someone like Saint Patrick believes that he was not especially empowered to spread the word of God, neither should we. We have a communal responsibility to build the kingdom here on earth.

So today when we are celebrating Saint Patrick's Day, it is important to remember the important faith lessons taught to us by this great man of faith. Though his ministry was thousands of years ago, we still have much to learn as we try to exemplify the humble evangelization of Patrick of Ireland.

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