

St. Patrick, Enlightener of Ireland

By Very Rev. Fr. Lawrence Farley

Patrick was born on the west coast of Roman Britain in about 385, the son of the deacon Calpurnius and the grandson of a priest. When he was sixteen he was abducted by pagan raiders and carried off to Slemish in Ireland, where he served in misery as a slave and swineherd. His faith in Christ deepened in those years, and he would often spend all night in prayer. One day he found an opportunity to escape from his masters back home to Britain. He wandered for a time and ended up in a monastery in Lerins in Gaul.

Patrick returned to Britain, yet still found himself restless, wanting to serve God as a missionary. He repeatedly had a dream in which Irish voices called to him, "We pray you, holy youth, come to us and walk among us as before!" He went to Auxerre on the continent to prepare himself for his apostolic labors, then returned again, with the blessing of the Pope of Rome, to Ireland.

Patrick taught the people about the Holy Trinity, using the three-leaf clover as an illustration of God being three and also one. He worked long and hard among the Irish, striving to win over the high kings to Christ and to vanquish the rival pagan druids. One evening, when no fires were to be lit until the great pagan sacred fire had been lit at the royal castle at Tara, Patrick lit a fire first anyway—the great Paschal fire for the celebration of Pascha. It was a challenge to paganism. The king sent soldiers to arrest Patrick, but God protected him and he escaped their hands.

At length Patrick won the friendship of the king, and the gospel spread more and more throughout the land. He established his see at Armagh and traveled abroad, preaching to all. Patrick was a wise and sensitive missionary. He refused to use coercion but won all by simple preaching and humble service. He invited lepers to live near him and washed their sores with his own hands. A breakthrough in his work came when he destroyed the great idol Cenn Cruaich. After he tumbled the idol to the ground with his own staff, the hold of paganism on the people's hearts was broken.

Patrick died in peace in 461. His surviving writings include his *Confession* and a *Letter to Coroticus*, a pagan soldier, denouncing his raid on a Christian congregation. For all his great success, Patrick remained a humble man of steadfast faith. He wrote, "I Patrick, a sinner, am the most ignorant and of least account among the faithful, despised by many. I owe it to God's grace that so many people should through me be born again to Him."