

Memorial of St. Patrick
Homily of Bishop Barres
St. Agnes Cathedral
March 17, 2021

St. Joseph, St. Paul and St. Patrick were all guided by dreams.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, immediately after the genealogy of Jesus, an Angel appears to Joseph in a dream to illumine his understanding of the plan and will of God and his role as the Guardian of the Redeemer and Mary.

In Matthew chapter two, an Angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him to take Mary and Jesus and flee into Egypt. Two more dreams guide Joseph to return to Israel and ultimately to Nazareth. The Holy Spirit spoke to Joseph through a Messenger Angel in four different dreams in the Gospel of Matthew.

St. Paul was also guided by dreams described in the Bible. In the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 16, verse 9, we hear: “And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us,’ And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”

The life of the great missionary St. Patrick echoes the dream and experience of St. Paul with the Macedonians described in Acts 16.

St. Patrick (389-461) was from England. He was kidnapped and brought to Ireland. He was forced to work as a shepherd-slave and suffered constant threats to his life, loneliness, violence, hunger, and exposure to the harsh elements. His Catholic faith had been lukewarm but this experience of the Cross in Ireland enkindled his faith and spirit of prayer and forged his missionary spirit.

St. Patrick’s life is a commentary on the words we heard in the first reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah: “Say to the prisoners: Come out! To those in darkness: Show yourselves! Along the ways they shall find pasture, on every bare height shall their pastures be. They shall not hunger or thirst, nor shall the scorching wind or the

sun strike them; For he who pities them leads them and guides them beside springs of water.”

Eventually, after his years of intense suffering and bondage in Ireland, Patrick escaped back to England.

Probably the last thing he ever wanted to do was to return to Ireland.

But he had a dream while sleeping, a dream quite like St. Paul’s dream of the Macedonian calling him to Macedonia, except it was a dream of the Irish calling Patrick back to Ireland to be their servant missionary.

In *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, Thomas Cahill describes the spiritual evolution of Patrick’s life and how an intense experience of the Cross prepared him to be the missionary to Ireland. Cahill writes: “The life of a shepherd-slave could not have been a happy one. Ripped out of civilization, Patricius had for his only protector a man who did not hold his own life highly, let alone anyone else’s. The work of such shepherds was bitterly isolated, months at a time spent alone in the hills. The occasional contacts, which one might normally seek out, could bring their own difficulties. Deprived of intercourse with other humans, Patricius must have taken a long time to master the language and customs of his exile, so that the approach of strangers over the hills may have held special terror.

We know that he did have two constant companions, hunger and nakedness, and that the gnawing in his belly and the chill on his exposed skin were his worst sufferings, acutely painful presences that could not be shaken off. From this scant information – Patricius is not a man of many words – we can deduce that the boy had a hardy constitution and had probably been a beloved and well-nourished child; otherwise, he could not have survived.

Like many another in impossible circumstances, he began to pray. He had never before paid attention to the teachings of his religion; he tells us that he didn’t really believe in God, and he found priests foolish.

But now, there was no one to turn to but the God of his parents. One is reminded of the reports of contemporary hostages how they make it through the dreary years of captivity. ‘Tending flocks was my daily work, and I would pray constantly during the daylight hours. The love of God and the fear of him surrounded me more and more – and faith grew and the Spirit was roused, so that in one day I would say as many as a hundred prayers and after dark nearly as many again, even while I remained in the woods or on the mountain. I would wake and pray before daybreak

– through sun, frost, rain – nor was there any sluggishness in me because then the Spirit within me was ardent.’

Patricius endured six years of this woeful isolation, and by the end of it he had grown from a careless boy to something he would surely never otherwise have become – a holy man, indeed a visionary for whom there was no longer any rigid separation between this world and the next.”

All effective Catholic Evangelization and Missionary activity goes directly through the Cross of Jesus Christ. Great Catholic missionaries in history are great Cross-bearers.

The odds were against St. Patrick being an effective missionary in Ireland. The Irish in the fourth century were dominated by hardened druidic superstition, the type of superstition that is very hard to penetrate.

Yet St. Patrick had embraced the power of the Cross. He trusted the dream, the voice and guidance of God and the voice of the Irish calling him back to Ireland.

He trusted in the power of the Holy Spirit.

We can marvel about how the missionary mysticism of this great saint transformed Ireland and in centuries to come helped to raise up an amazing number of global missionaries who brought the Catholic faith to the ends of the earth and indeed to our own shores.

In 1965, the Jesuit priest Fr. Walter Burghardt wrote these powerful words about our responsibility to the true missionary legacy of St. Patrick. Fr. Burghardt writes:

“The Irish [American] immigrant has never been merely an exile. He has traditionally been a missionary: he has brought to other shores a creed and a culture, a deep faith in God and a rich way of life. It would be tragic indeed if the creed and the culture which your fathers carried to these shores were to be imprisoned here: thus far and no farther! It would mean that St. Patrick is your hero but not your model; that he is a source of pride but not of inspiration; that you have changed the Irish conception of civilization and sanctity from a corporate thing to a selfish commodity, to be wrapped in a green napkin and buried till the Master comes. If your creed and your culture are shackled here and do not escape, if they build only American cities and American cathedrals, if your Celtic heritage does not burst its American chains as Patrick burst the bonds of Roman Britain, I warn you: your creed and your culture may corrupt.”

Fr. Burghardt helps to guide our celebration of St. Patrick's Day today. While it is fine and enjoyable to celebrate Irish culture and Irish roots, it is most important today to celebrate and to give God thanks for St. Patrick's Catholic missionary mysticism and to renew our commitment to it many centuries later.

In a special way today we pray for the Church in Ireland. We pray for Catholic Evangelization in Ireland and a rebirth of the Catholic faith and the Catholic missionary spirit there.

For this intention and for all of our intentions today, I now pray St. Patrick's Breastplate Prayer which exemplifies so powerfully St. Patrick's trust in the moment-by-moment presence of God in our lives:

St. Patrick's Breastplate

Christ with me,

Christ before me,

Christ in me,

Christ beneath me,

Christ above me,

Christ on my right,

Christ on my left,

Christ when I lie down,

Christ when I sit down,

Christ when I arise,

Christ in the heart of every person who thinks of me,

Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,

Christ in every eye that sees me,

Christ in every ear that hears me.

