



# *A New You Ministry*

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## **St. Patrick and the Early Celtic Church** **A Historical Investigation of the man** **and his teachings.**

### **In Search of the Legendary St. Patrick**

*by Mario Saric*

Tradition has it that Patrick died on 17 March, 461 AD and Irish people have been celebrating this day all over the world as Saint Patrick's Day. But myths and legends often obscure his true identity. Was he a great miracle-working missionary to Ireland? Was he the one who chased the snakes off the Emerald Isle? Who was he, really?



### **Visit to the Emerald Isle**

Few years back I had the opportunity to work and live in Ireland and my curiosity was kindled when I had the opportunity to visit the ruins of a monastery in Glendalough, County Wicklow, just South of Dublin.

I discovered that the early Celtic Christian Church (even before the arrival of Patrick) had its influence from the Coptic Christianity of Egypt, which was derived directly from Jerusalem, not Rome. Its beliefs and practices were distinctly dissimilar from those of Constantine's Church. Under Roman rule a man could travel from Berwick to Babylon without crossing a single international frontier. There was an infrastructure of roads that would have been as useful to traders as they were for soldiers. Traders came to Britain from other parts of the Empire and left Britain for regions of the Empire most likely merchants brought Christianity to Ireland, which at that time was outside the Roman Empire. So who was Patrick? We only have two primary historical sources, as having come from the hand of Patrick's; The letter to King Coroticus and the other is Patrick's autobiography, Confessions. I learned that the St. Patrick of history – was quite a different man from the Patrick of legend and tradition.

## **Early Life of Patrick**

Patrick was the son of a Roman British deacon, Calpornius, and the grandson of a priest, Potitus. As a free-born provincial, Patrick was a Roman citizen. In 405, when Patrick was 16, the Irish King Niall ventured on a warlike expedition to Britain. Among those captured and enslaved was Patrick.

## **Contrary to the belief, Patrick was neither Roman Catholic nor Irish.**

In Ireland he was brought by Milinc, a landowner at Slemish, near Ballymena in County Antrim. For six years Patrick tended the herds of Milinc. While he was a slave Patrick discovered God in a fresh, new way. He recorded this in his Confessions;

*“Every day I had to tend sheep, and many times a day I prayed—the love of God and His fear came to me more and more, and my faith was strengthened.....and this even when I was staying in the woods and on the mountains; and I used to get up for prayer before daylight, through snow, through frost, through rain....And there one night I heard in my sleep a voice saying to me: Soon you will go to your own country.’ And again, after a short while, I heard a voice saying to me: ‘See, your ship is ready.’ And it was not near but a distance if perhaps two hundred miles, and I had never been there, nor did I know a living soul there; and then I took to flight, and I left the man with whom I had stayed for six years, And I went in the strength of God who directed my way to my good, and I feared nothing until I came to that ship.”*

Taking advantage of a well-known trade route, he sailed to Gaul (France).

## **Lerins, the Mediterranean Island**

In Gaul this experience was further demonstrated by a change in his life; a genuine Christian conversion. This gave him a hunger for biblical knowledge and theological training. On the island of Lerins, located in the Mediterranean off southern Gaul (France), which was a training center where monks from the Near East thronged, Patrick stayed here studying and meditating on God’s Word. The Coptic Christianity of Egypt was the dominant influence here. After a period of years Patrick returned to his homeland. No sooner had he arrived that he received a vision that he was needed to preach the gospel of Christ in Ireland, the land of his former captivity. Patrick did not immediately heed the Macedonian-type cry. ‘Come over to Ireland and help us.’ However an opportunity came when another Bishop that had been sent to the Ireland died within one year, and Patrick now over 40 was about to embark upon his life’s work.

## **Patrick's Mission to Ireland**

In his ministry in Ireland from 432 to his death circa 460 - Patrick's task was to lighten the darkness of heathenism. His enemies were the Druids. And preparatory to evangelize the masses, his first task was to tackle the king. To assist him, Patrick appointed sub-bishops; missionary noted for their piety and sense of commitment rather than church governors. The Druids were the custodians of the pagan lore of Ireland as of other Celtic lands. Behind the pantheon of gods, the Druids in fact, worshiped the creative forces in nature, universe and man. The sun was the embodiment of their highest divinity. When Patrick landed to begin preaching Christ to the Irish, Druidism was at the height of its power and development,. Ulster, Meath and Connaughts were the main centers of Patrick's evangelism. By the time he resigned his episcopate at Armagh in 457, it is likely that Patrick presided over an Ireland that can be considered predominately Christian.

## **Missionary Centers**

Here he set up missionary centers where the gospel went to Scotland. Wales, Britain, and other parts of Europe. Followers like Columba, David, Aidan and Piran, took the pure teaching of the gospel to a people that were under the dark shadow of the Roman Catholic Church who claimed that tradition and her writings were above the Bible. From the famous training center set up by Columba and his followers on the remote island of Lona, missionaries were sent to Scotland. Their religion was quite different from the Latin - or Roman - Christianity that was taking over in other parts of Western Europe. And what they believed was based on their understanding of Scripture. "Unlike the theologians of Roman Christianity who appealed more and more to the teachings of Church and councils. Celtic teachers stressed the Bible." (*Leslie Harding in The Celtic Church in Britain*).

This loyalty to the Bible is what separated the Celtic Christians from the much larger Roman Christian community. Because the Bible was the foundation of their faith, it was difficult for them to accept the authority of the Roman Church. You see, the Celtic church grew up beyond the reach of Roman influence. It was rooted in the Sabbath-keeping church that began with Jesus and His apostles back in the first century. In addition the Celtic Christians had a married priest hood. Something else that isn't so well known about Patrick and the early Celtic Church is that they kept the seventh day Sabbath according to the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment, In fact, the observance of the Saturday Sabbath-keeping by most Scots went hand in hand with their refusal to recognize the authority of the Pope.

## The Celtic Distinctiveness

What was there about the Celtic Church that made Pope Gregory I and his successors so determined to destroy it? What was its distinctive message? In the same year that Columba died, 597 AD, aged 76, Pope Gregory sent Augustine as much as to subdue Celtic independence as to convert the heathen Saxons.



We really don't have to rely solely on the writings or experience of Patrick to understand the history of keeping the seventh day in Ireland. After all, ancient Irish laws governed the history of the Irish tribes for many years, and those laws stipulated that the people were to, among other things, keep the seventh-day Sabbath, as a day of rest from labor.....They obeyed the fourth commandment literally upon the seventh day of the week....”(James C. Moffat in *The church in Scotland*). As the influence of the Roman religion increased, it gradually affected the Sabbath practice of some Celtic Christians in the British Isles. By the early sixth century, it was not unusual for Celtic believers to keep both Saturday and Sunday as holy days. As the various segments of the Celtic Church accepted assimilation into the Roman Communion so the shift from Sabbath to Sunday observance – which had taken place centuries earlier in other parts of Europe - began to take place in Ireland and the Celtic portions of the Britain. However , as Queen Margaret discovered in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, it was one thing for kings to make an accommodation with Rome, but quite another to root Celtic Christian customs out of the lives of the people. In the glens of Scotland, and in the distant coves of Cornwall, the biblical Sabbath brought more blessing than Constantine's 'venerable day of the sun' edict, which had been issued back on March 7, 321, AD.

The Celtic church “distinctiveness” did not die when the kings and the chieftains accepted Roman authority.. Accusations of heresy [heresy [Gr. Hairesis, choice], deciding for one self what one shall believe and practice”], and separatism continued to be fired from the Vatican at the Celtic lands for centuries to come. Wales in particular clung to her old traditions long after the other Celtic countries had joined the Roman Order. Not only in some remote areas of the British Isles were Christians still holding on to the scriptures ut in the city of Milan there were reports; “But Christians in the Italian city of Milan dared to openly observe the Sabbath no matter what the leadership in Rome wanted. “....The Church of Millaine....followed the Churches of the East; it seems the Saturday was held in faire esteem....They the Churches of the East came together on the Sabbath day, to worship Jesus Christ the Lord of the Sabbath.” (Peter Heylyn in *The History of the Sabbath*).

Also there were remote places where the Scriptures still existed in the language of the peoples, and in those places there were very courageous groups who resisted church authority and persisted in keeping the seventh-day Sabbath. In the mountains of northern Spain and Italy and southern France, there are entire groups of individuals who are legendary for their resistance to the power of Rome. People like the Albigenses, the Cathari, the Passagini, and the Waldenses Patrick like all the other Celtic missionaries “*diligently followed whatever pure and devout customs that they learned from the prophets, the gospels, and the writings of the*

*Apostles*” states J.H. Merle d’Aubigne. Some of the other distinctive teaching by the Celtic Christians were; deep love for the scriptures, literal second Advent of Jesus, an attitude that all life was governed by the Ten Commandments - not just the 4<sup>th</sup> that was held in reverence, man was not saved by the merits of his deeds, but by God and His grace, Salvation was by grace through faith in the merits of Christ on Calvary, Law keeping was the fruit and not route of salvation to the Celtic Christians, and the practice of baptism by immersion was practiced.

## **In Conclusion**

The Historical journey of Who Was Patrick gives us a different picture of the famous “Irish” man. He was simple, humble, and Scriptural in character, doctrine, and manners. Most of all he wanted people to experience the joy by accepting Christ as their personal Saviour. Without realizing it, Patrick and Columba were the pre-runners to the Protestant Reformation. They were practicing the great truths, later to become the watch words of the sixteenth century Reformation, Sola Scriptura (Bible and Bible Alone), Sola Gratia (Grace Alone through faith) and Sola Christus (Christ Alone).

### **St. Patrick’s Breastplate**

Christ be with me, Christ within me,  
Christ behind me, Christ before me,  
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,  
Christ to comfort, and restore me,  
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,  
Christ in hearts of all that love me,  
Christ in mouth of friends and strangers.