

Icon of Patrick

St Patrick an Icon

I was delighted to be invited to view and write a short appreciation of this commissioned Icon of St Patrick on the 150th Anniversary of the Armagh Cathedral that bears his name. Icons are a way that God uses to reach out and draw us into Himself. Christians have venerated this unique presence by anointing icons with Holy Chrism and praying with and through them as sources of blessing and grace. Hence they are usually placed with a burning lamp or candle and incensed on special occasions.

To pray with an icon is to be united with God as Father Son and Holy Spirit. It is to venerate those millions of disciples who in faithfulness have shared God's Love and the Gospel message we call the Good News. Patrick was a Christian disciple who during his years as a slave in captivity learned to relate at a very deep mystical level with God as Trinity during his time on Slemish Mountain and the surrounding landscape. His isolation and silence taught him to turn to his God as the Desert Fathers and mothers practiced in their isolated hermitages in Syria and the Arabian deserts. Mysticism is the gift of the community we know as God.

Patrick became a deeply committed Trinitarian and this led him to priesthood and later ministry as a bishop; to the very people who had enslaved him and taken him to a foreign land. We know from his writings both his Confessions and letter to Coroticus that Patrick was indeed fully attuned to the similar path being at that time explored in the Middle East the cradle of the Church. Filled with zeal for God like Patrick these souls lived austere lives praying the gospels and using disciplines like the Jesus Prayer as a means to enter the circle of life and love God enjoys as Father Son and Holy Spirit.

In this icon Patrick is shown holding the Cathedral a symbol of the See or Church of Armagh. As its first bishop and founder it is appropriate he holds it in support and surrounds it with his prayer and protection. Patrick is wearing the pallium that special collar woven from the wool of lambs and kept by the tomb of Peter to be bestowed on every Archbishop reminding them and God's holy people of our close link to the church of Peter and the Apostles. Their mission or task was and is to share and live the Gospel as taught by and lived by Jesus our Saviour and Master.

Above the main figure of Patrick we are shown two more important patron saints of the Armagh Church, St Brigid of Faughart (Mhuire na nGael) baptized herself by Patrick and also St Malachy who in his turn reformed the whole Irish Church and united it with fresh vigor to the See of Peter in Rome. These patron saints together with St Oliver Plunkett are depicted on either side of Jesus on the present High Altar in the Cathedral. In Patrick's right hand, we find his great reputed teaching aid the sprig of green shamrock. With its three leaves but one stem. Three persons but one God.

The God of Christianity although in continuity with the Hebrew God is radically a Community of equal but distinct persons. "The Father and I are one" Unthinkable to Jews yet revealed by Jesus as the core of all life here and in heaven. The intimacy He shows with The Father is amazing and inspires Christians to pursue a similar bond by living daily the spirit of the Beatitudes. Those early desert-dwelling mothers and fathers thirsted for ways to live intimately in the love the Father shared with the Son and Holy Spirit. "To see Me is to have seen Him." This was the new Way. The Magi returned home in a new Way prefiguring a whole upturning in our knowledge of God. Jesus tells us He is "The Way, the Truth and the Life" He lived this bond to the Father as easily as breathing air.

We know Patrick shared this desire to know and love God and he longed to share this with all he encountered. Patrick was familiar with the great teachers of prayer. Anthony of Egypt, John Cassian, and other greats of the desert shared their knowledge and teaching. We can sometimes be surprised at how fast the Good News was shared and how far it traveled. From Egypt and Syria to the Skelligs! This Trinitarian Faith spread all around the Mediterranean coastline moving ever farther through Italy, Gaul, and Spain and it was Patrick who was the main instrument the Father used to draw the Irish peoples of the time to a new radical vision of eternal life and its prospects. "Where I am you too will be" What hope and what life these

words offer to us. Today as then, Patrick calls us all to unite in praise for this Community of God whose living Heart yearns for each of us to step into their life of love. “ I bind unto myself today the strong Name of the Trinity,^[i]By invocation of the same, The Three in One and One in Three. “ Each of us today must embrace these words and live our Trinitarian Faith aware of and living the relationship they offer us daily. Each morning like Patrick let us step into their circle of love embracing and taking ownership of the space they have left us to complete so that when we step from this life we will behold their faces and share in their life of love I pray you may be indeed embraced by God as you gaze at and pray before this most holy Icon. St Patrick pray for us. Amen.

Declan O’Loughlin. July 2023