

Saint Patrick's Day

2024 message of

Archbishop Eamon

Martin to the people

of Ireland



Archbishop Eamon Martin, Saint Patrick's Cathedral, Armagh (Catholic Communications Office archive)

- “Saint Patrick might well be considered a patron saint of migrants ... As we think of Irish emigrants who sometimes struggled to gain acceptance in foreign lands, we also turn our hearts to the many newcomers who have arrived among us”

- “Ireland - north and south - needs an honest and open conversation about migration, both outward and inward”

Message

On Saint Patrick's Day our thoughts and prayers naturally turn to our Irish emigrants abroad. Some left Ireland many years ago and have set down roots in other countries; others, including many thousands of our young people, have only recently gone in search of new places and opportunities. Wherever they are in the world - from Sydney to Toronto, from Manchester to Dubai - we wish them all a very happy Saint Patrick's Day!

Nearly 64,000 people left Ireland in the year to April 2023 - around half of them were Irish citizens; but many Irish also returned home during that period bringing valuable new life skills.

I spoke recently to one mother whose two eldest daughters - both of them recent graduates - have now followed many of their friends to Australia. She was clearly missing them a lot, but she tried to put a brave face on it, saying, “They're having a great time and a better quality of life; hopefully they'll be back, and anyway, what is there here to keep them?”

As a prayer for her daughters, I offered a line from Psalm 121: ‘The Lord will watch over your going and your coming, both now and forevermore’.

Going and coming is a major feature of the modern world. Millions of people are on the move. Some are voluntary migrants, seeking exciting new challenges and opportunities; others, sadly, are forced to leave their homes and families, displaced by war or economic hardship. Still others are cruelly deceived, captured and exploited by human traffickers.

Saint Patrick might well be considered a patron saint of migrants. He certainly understands the predicament of the trafficked unaccompanied

minor; the exploited labourer; the escaping refugee; the immigrant, the emigrant; the expat; the student or missionary abroad! Saint Patrick wrote about enduring many hardships, hatred and insults in Ireland for being a foreigner (*Confession*, 37).

But having escaped his persecution, and finding himself back amongst family and friends, Patrick heard the voice of the Irish, calling him, "Come back gentle youth and walk once more among us". Returning to our shores, Patrick made Ireland his home and liked to call himself 'one of us'.

Today, as we think of Irish emigrants who sometimes struggled to gain acceptance in foreign lands, we also turn our hearts to the many newcomers who have arrived among us.

Pope Francis often speaks about migrants and refugees in terms of 'welcoming', 'protecting', 'promoting' and 'integrating' them:

- 'welcoming', in the sense of offering adequate and dignified initial accommodation;
- 'protecting' by defending their rights and dignity;
- 'promoting' opportunities for their employment, learning the language and becoming active citizens; and,
- 'integrating' them, by fostering a culture of encounter and mutual understanding, inclusion and diversity.

These are the very hallmarks of the kind of society that we would want for our own young people and families who travel to other countries - either willingly, or out of necessity.

It is worth asking ourselves this Saint Patrick's Day, 'how can Ireland live up to its reputation as a land of welcomes, renowned not only as a place of great natural beauty, but also as a country of warm hearted and charitable citizens who are prepared to offer sanctuary to those who arrive in need?'

Ireland - north and south - needs an honest and open conversation about migration, both outward and inward. How can we truly become an island of belonging and hope where our own young people, health workers and teachers

want to stay, and where others want to come and live among us? This important discussion will only move away from the extremes when we recognise legitimate anxieties and resolve to tackle together, at national and community level, the immense challenges of providing affordable homes and services for all.

When Saint Patrick walked among us, he brought the Good News of a merciful and compassionate God, who accompanies all of our comings and goings; God who wants us to welcome the stranger, to reach out to the margins and hear the cry of the poor. An Ireland worthy of Saint Patrick is an Ireland of welcomes which does not tolerate hatred or racism, and which embraces both its returning citizens and its newcomers.

May we always, like Saint Patrick, see Christ behind and before us; on our right and on our left, in quiet and in danger; and in the mouth of friend and stranger.

Amen.

Beannachtaí na Féile Pádraig oraibh go leir.