

St. Patrick: Bishop, Missionary, Monk or All of the Above?

What images come to mind when we hear the name St. Patrick? Celtic festivals in outdoor squares in the early spring? Wearing green on March 17 to avoid being pinched? Shamrocks? There is probably no figure from the early church so well known to the modern world (especially in the west) as Patrick of Ireland and, at the same time, no leader with so many legends associated with his name. It may come as a shock to some modern readers that Patrick was not actually Irish; rather, he was most likely British and spent much of his adult life as a missionary-bishop among the Irish. Thomas O'Loughlin simply writes, "Patrick was a fifth-century Christian of the Roman Empire, who crossed the sea to an alien land to bring its people Christianity."¹

Because of the number of legends connected to Patrick and the abundance of unreliable ancient texts making claims about him, gaining an accurate picture of him is no small task. Ironically, the best sources for knowing about Patrick are the ones written by him. Probably published toward the end of his life, Patrick's *Confessions* were written to "vindicate against defamers [probably British and Irish bishops] "his missionary calling and career."² His other surviving work, *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*, was addressed to the army of a monarch—probably a Pictish apostate Christian—who had brutally murdered and enslaved some of Patrick's disciples.³ While each work was written for a specific occasion and purpose, they offer us a window of understanding into Patrick's world and his work as a bishop, missionary, and monk.

In this paper, I will begin by presenting some background on the Celtic peoples and the early church in Ireland in order to understand Patrick's context for mission. After, Patrick's background and journey to faith and ministry will be presented, including his thoughts about and approaches to mission in Ireland. Finally, I will argue that Patrick went about his work as a missionary and bishop while also living as a monk.

Celtic Peoples and early Irish Christianity

Given the modern fascination with Celtic civilization, it would be good to first ask, who were the Celts? As the Greeks encountered this network of tribal peoples, they referred to them as *keltoi*, meaning "strangers" or "hidden peoples," or *Gallatai* because they inhabited the region of Galatia. Part of this isolation may have been

¹ Thomas O'Loughlin, *St. Patrick: The Man and His Works* (London: SPCK, 1999), 48.

² John T. McNeill, *The Celtic Churches: A History A.D. 200 to 1200* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 55; cf. Thomas O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 62.

³ McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 55; O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 36.

because the Celts were given to warfare and did not mix very well with their neighbors, especially in their pre-Christian period. Because of their geography, the Romans called them *Galli* and Gaul (modern France) was an area occupied by many Celtic tribes.⁴ In addition to Gaul, the Celts, lived throughout the British Isles including modern Wales, Ireland, and Scotland. More than shared geography, what unified this group of tribal peoples was language, which was made of up two major dialects: P-Celtic, spoken by the Welsh and Cornish; and Q-Celtic, spoken by the Irish and Scottish.⁵ In terms of religion, the pre-Christian Celts adhered to their own form of paganism and worshipped as many as 400 gods while also venerating certain animals, sacred places, and sacred dates. Their rituals, which included sacrifices and teaching, were facilitated by a priestly class known as the Druids. More than mere religious practitioners, the Druids occupied an important place in Celtic society as “judges, teachers, healers, politicians, and astronomers.”⁶ It was probably the acceptance of Christianity that ended the influence of the Druids in Celtic religion and society.⁷

The earliest Christian mission among the Celts was very likely Paul’s first-century work in Galatia. In the second century, Irenaeus of Lyons devoted a portion of his ministry in Gaul to rural Celtic peoples and, in the third century, seven bishops from Rome were also sent to minister in Gaul. As eastern Britain became more Romanized in the fourth century, the Celts migrated toward the western side of the British Isles. During this period, the most significant Christian witnesses to the Celts were captured slaves.⁸

In the fifth century prior to Patrick’s mission to Ireland, a certain Palladius was set apart by the church at Rome to be a missionary-bishop to Ireland. Little is known about Palladius except that his focus was probably ministering to established groups of Christians. O’Loughlin argues that these were congregations made up of slaves from outside of Ireland as well as other Irish Christians. During his short tenure in Ireland, Palladius most likely did not engage the larger pagan populous as Patrick would.⁹

Patrick’s Life and Conversion

Patrick was born (ca. 389) in western Roman Britain and grew up in a village near the coast called Bannavem Berniae. Ethnically British and a citizen of the Roman Empire, Patrick was born into a family of means as his family owned their own estate and were part of the local nobility. He was raised as a Christian as his father

⁴ McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 1-7; Ted Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2003), 12.

⁵ McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 6; cf. Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts*, 18; and Philip Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 9-11.

⁶ Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts*, 28.

⁷ Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts*, 26-28; cf. McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 7-9; and Freeman, *St. Patrick*, 94-105.

⁸ Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts*, 30-33, 48; also McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 10, 14, 50; O’Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 33.

⁹ O’Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 37-42; cf. O’Loughlin, *Saint Patrick*, 16, 31; McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 51.

Calpornius was a deacon in the church and his grandfather Potitus served as a priest.¹⁰

When Patrick was sixteen years old, he was captured along with a large number of fellow Britons by a band of Irish raiders and began a six-year journey as a slave.¹¹ On one hand, Patrick immediately identified with thousands who were enslaved in his day—perhaps as many as a quarter of the world’s population by some accounts.¹² On the other hand, John McNeill muses: “How little did Patrick’s barbarous captors guess what they were doing to their country when they hustled into one of their ships amid a throng of bound captives this badly brought up and bewildered teenager and gleefully sails away!”¹³

Though Patrick had been raised in a Christian home, he had rejected or become indifferent to his family’s faith; however, his time in captivity afforded him much time to think about spiritual matters. Spending his days tending flocks of sheep, Patrick struggled a great deal with loneliness, which he attempted to counter with prayer. According to his *Confessions*, he began to rise early for prayer and then spent much of the rest of the day at work in the fields in prayer.¹⁴ Within this environment of quiet, isolated prayer, Patrick was embracing the gospel for himself.¹⁵ While Patrick was growing spiritually during his six year enslavement, Freeman helpfully notes that he was also receiving value intercultural training for future ministry in Ireland: “Even though Patrick scarcely realized it at the time, all his experiences as a slave on an Irish farm were training him for his future career. Every day he picked up more of the language . . . He became familiar with the customs and gods of the foreign land.”¹⁶ Patrick reported that after six years in Irish captivity, he received a vision directing him to escape, board a ship, and return home where he successfully rejoined his family.¹⁷

After a few years of living with his family, Patrick related that he received new visions—only this time they were telling him to go back to Ireland. In the first of three visions, a man named Victoricus held a bundle of letters and called out with the voice of the Irish, “O holy boy, we beg you to come again and walk among us.”¹⁸ Not surprisingly, Patrick’s parents found it inconceivable that their recently liberated son would go back to the very barbaric people who had enslaved him. Later in his life, Patrick interpreted these initial visions in light of his missionary call to the Irish: “The one and only purpose I had in going back to the people from whom I had earlier escaped was the gospel and the promises of God.”¹⁹ From one perspective, Patrick had simply followed in the footsteps of his father and

¹⁰ Patrick, *Coroticus* 10; Patrick, *Confessions* 1; Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts*, 60; O’Loughlin, *Saint Patrick*, 21; McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 56; Freeman, *St. Patrick*, 3.

¹¹ Patrick, *Confessions* 1.

¹² Freeman, *St. Patrick*, 25.

¹³ McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 58.

¹⁴ Patrick, *Confessions* 1-2, 16.

¹⁵ McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 58-59; and Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts*, 61.

¹⁶ Freeman, *St. Patrick*, 28-29.

¹⁷ Patrick, *Confessions* 17.

¹⁸ Patrick, *Confessions* 23; cf. Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, 270.

¹⁹ Patrick, *Confessions*, 61.

grandfather and embraced Christian ministry. From another angle, he demonstrated the value of being a *peregrinus* (wanderer) on Christian mission who was willing to encounter danger and suffering.²⁰

Patrick's Missionary Narrative

Though Patrick responded to the vision and went back to Ireland, his return was not immediate but “after many years had gone by.”²¹ Traditional sources have claimed that he went for some time to Gaul and studied under the Bishop Germanus of Auxerre; however, it was more likely that he trained for ministry by being mentored by local clergy in Britain.²² Tradition further asserts that he arrived in Ireland in 432—a question that has been vigorously debated, especially with regard to the timetable of Palladius' service in Ireland. Though dating his arrival and life in Ireland is difficult, it is certain that Patrick's was a fifth-century mission.²³ Interestingly, Patrick was set apart, presumably by Pope Celestine, as a missionary-bishop. Unlike the bishops in the fourth and fifth century who were appointed as organizers of established communities of Christians, O'Loughlin asserts that Patrick's “missionary work is explicitly aimed at those Irish who are not Christians” and that he saw himself as “the final missionary to Ireland, the one who went to mop up the last pockets of paganism so that Ireland could be wholly Christian.”²⁴

Patrick's Mission Context

Though the seventh-century hagiographer Muirchu claimed that Patrick focused his ministry in the northern part of Ireland, his preaching was probably much more widespread.²⁵ As Patrick served outside of the established church, he was ministering largely within an Irish pagan context. During his time in captivity, Patrick surely observed Irish paganism firsthand and he also encountered pagan practices on board a ship following his initial escape.²⁶ Though Christians were present in Ireland before Patrick arrived to preach the gospel, he described his life in Ireland as living “among Gentiles, in the midst of barbarian worshippers of idols.”²⁷

In addition to this religious environment, Patrick also ministered in a context of hardship and persecution, including threats from pagans. Referring regularly to instances of persecution in his *Confessions*, Patrick adds that God gave him grace in preaching and “put up with the insults from unbelievers . . . [to endure] many

²⁰ Cf. Freeman, *St. Patrick*, 54.

²¹ Patrick, *Confessions* 15.

²² For the traditional view see Muirchu, *Life of St. Patrick* 1.6; cf. Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts*, 66. About his training happening in Britain, see O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 58 and Freeman, *St. Patrick*, 62-63.

²³ Cf. O'Loughlin, *Saint Patrick*, 15-19 and O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 58-59.

²⁴ O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 58-59.

²⁵ Cf. McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 5; Freeman, *St. Patrick*, 73.

²⁶ Patrick, *Confessions* 18; cf. Freeman, *St. Patrick*, 36-38; Dana Robert, *Christian Mission* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 147.

²⁷ Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts*, 66.

persecutions even including chains.”²⁸ In one instance, he reported that he and some fellow missionaries spent fourteen days in jail because of their work.²⁹ Patrick’s hardships were not always on account of pagans and unbelievers as he reported being ridiculed by other church leaders who did not appreciate his mission work.³⁰ Finally, the violence committed by Coroticus’ soldiers against Patrick’s disciples could be considered “Christian on Christian” violence as the monarch and his men were nominal or perhaps apostate Christians.³¹

Theology of Mission

Before discussing Patrick’s practical mission strategies, let us first consider his values and thoughts about mission toward grasping some of his theology of mission. First, visions played an important part in his call to mission. As shown, he responded to visions to escape slavery in Ireland as well as to go back to the Irish as a missionary. In his *Confessions*—largely a defense of his missionary call—Patrick mentions visions and his favorable response to them on seven different occasions. Summarizing the missionary nature of his dreams, Dana Robert helpfully summarizes: “What made Patrick’s calling unique was not that he was called by God through dreams, but that he was called to cross cultures so as to communicate the knowledge of the Christian God.”³²

Second, Patrick believed the scope of his mission work to be the “ends of the earth.” In *Coroticus*, he writes of being “predestined to preach the gospel even to the ends of the earth.”³³ In one sense, this involved continuing the mission that Jesus gave to the apostles. As O’Loughlin notes: “[Patrick’s] work of evangelization belongs to the final, and most difficult, phase of a process that began with the sending out of the apostles by Christ to the whole world (Matthew), starting with Jerusalem and reaching out to every nation out to the very ends of the earth (Luke/Acts).”³⁴ In another sense, given Ireland’s geographic location in the far western end of the known world, Patrick saw Ireland as the literal end of the world. In *Confessions*, he writes of his commitment to reaching those that the Lord had purchased for salvation in the “in the farthest ends of the earth”³⁵ and his need to physically go to them.³⁶ Finally, he saw the Irish mission as part of the bigger picture of “making disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19-20). Patrick affirms that he carried out his work among Irish pagans because he had “sworn to [his] God to teach the nations”³⁷ in the conviction that “believers will come from the whole world.”³⁸ As

²⁸ Patrick, *Confessions*, 37; cf. Patrick, *Confessions*, 46; Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts*, 71; Freeman, *St. Patrick*, xix, 94.

²⁹ Patrick, *Confessions* 52; cf. McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 65.

³⁰ Patrick, *Confessions* 47.

³¹ Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts*, 74; McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 65.

³² Robert, *Christian Mission*, 148; cf. Freeman, *St. Patrick*, 33, 50, 146.

³³ Patrick, *Coroticus* 6.

³⁴ O’Loughlin, *Saint Patrick*, 47; cf. O’Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 72-74; McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 59.

³⁵ Patrick, *Confessions* 58.

³⁶ Patrick, *Confessions* 43; cf. *Confessions* 1, 34; *Coroticus* 9; McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 59; Freeman, *St. Patrick*, 123.

³⁷ Patrick, *Coroticus* 1.

the text of Matthew 28:18-20 figured prominently into Patrick's mission thought, Richard Fletcher makes the insightful point that Patrick was probably the first early Christian leader or missionary who took seriously the task of finishing the task of the Lord's "Great Commission" to make disciples of all of the nations.³⁹

Third, in addition to the global scope of his ministry, Patrick also believed that he was ministering in the last days. A key, recurring text in his writings was Matthew 24:14: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."⁴⁰ In *Confessions*, he wrote that he was "in the last days" and involved in such a "holy and wonderful work, imitating those who [were sent to] preach the gospel for testimony to all nations before the end of the world."⁴¹ This eschatological perspective certainly motivated him to proclaim the gospel among the Irish. Freeman helpfully adds, "There was simply no reason for God's judgment to be delayed once the Irish had heard the good news . . . [Patrick] saw it as his mission to spread the Christian message to as many Irish souls as possible before it was too late."⁴² This future hope probably also helped him to endure the hardship and suffering he encountered in ministry. O'Loughlin notes that Patrick reflected deeply on Matthew 10:23 and applied it to his context: that he should continue preaching, flee to neighboring towns when needed, and complete the task in expectation of the Lord's return.⁴³

A final key element of Patrick's missionary thought is that he saw himself as a stranger in a foreign land in Ireland. His words in *Coroticus* capture a sentiment repeated in his writings: "I live as an alien among the barbarians and as a wanderer for the sake of the love of God."⁴⁴ Given Patrick's experience of being taken from his home as a slave and then returning to Ireland of his own accord, his feelings of being a stranger living in another culture among non-believers make much sense. Though he had spent six years learning the Irish culture and language, part of the missionary reality was feeling like an outsider. Though painful in one sense, Patrick also seems to embrace and yearn for this status of being a "wanderer"; a precursor to the *peregrinus* value that would characterize much of the Celtic monastic missionary story in the centuries to follow.

Patrick's Approach to Mission

Given these underlying values, how did Patrick approach mission in Ireland? At least six strategies are apparent. First, Patrick seems to begin new ministry work in a given area by first approaching tribal or political leaders. Robert Wilken asserts, "In

³⁸ Patrick, *Confessions* 39.

³⁹ Cited in Robert, *Christian Mission*, 150.

⁴⁰ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical references are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

⁴¹ Patrick, *Confessions* 34 cited in McNeill, *Celtic Christians*, 59; cf. O'Loughlin, *Saint Patrick*, 2; O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 74-77.

⁴² Freeman, *St. Patrick*, 125.

⁴³ O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 79. The complete text of Matt. 23 reads: "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes."

⁴⁴ Patrick, *Coroticus* 1; cf. Patrick, *Confessions* 1, 9, 12, 23, 43, 48; O'Loughlin, *Saint Patrick*, 36-40; O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 65-68.

Ireland the basic social unit was a tribe or clan under a king without any fixed territory . . . by making alliances with the local dynasties Patrick was able to advance the Christian mission.”⁴⁵ Part of working within this social structure involved offering gifts to local leaders, especially to gain safe passage through the area.⁴⁶ Freeman adds that “Patrick would have first visited the local king and sought his permission to work with the Christians within the tribal borders—a request accompanied by generous gifts of silver and gold and promises of more to come.”⁴⁷ As Patrick continued to mix with such leaders and build relationships, some leaders embraced the gospel themselves, which Freeman adds “would have made Patrick’s work immeasurably easier.”⁴⁸ Patrick also recruited the sons of some kings to travel with him as guides and mediators on potentially treacherous journeys. The modern reader should resist concluding that this was mission advanced through Christendom or political power; instead Patrick’s actions simply show that he was serving in contexts of violence and he understood how to navigate the social and power structures of fifth-century Ireland in order to preach the gospel.⁴⁹

Second, as Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15, and Matthew 24:14 (“make disciples,” “proclaim the gospel,” “gospel . . . will be proclaimed”) were central texts in his mission thinking, itinerant preaching was naturally a key part of Patrick’s ministry. In his *Confessions* he declares he had “travelled everywhere” to preach and baptize and that “we are now witnesses to the fact that the gospel has been preached out to beyond where anyone lives.”⁵⁰ Building on Jesus’ promise that his disciples would be “fishers of men,”⁵¹ Patrick added an Irish spin to his evangelistic vocation and thought of himself as a “hunter” of men.⁵² The fruit of his preaching included “many peoples” being “reborn” and also new local church leaders set apart for ministry.⁵³

Third, though Patrick’s evangelistic sermons have not survived, we can know something about the content of his preaching because his evangelism was organically related to catechesis—a thorough period of instruction prior to baptism—and, of course, baptism itself. O’Loughlin points out that the confession of faith in the opening paragraphs of Patrick’s *Confessions*, which surely informed his catechesis, was based on a creed that greatly resembled that of Nicaea.⁵⁴ As a “hunter” of men in Ireland, Patrick spoke of the fruit of his ministry: “many thousands, my brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, I have baptized in the Lord.”⁵⁵ Patrick further rejoiced that new church leaders had been raised up who shared those values—“clergy everywhere to baptize and preach to a people who are

⁴⁵ Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, 271.

⁴⁶ Patrick, *Confessions* 52-53.

⁴⁷ Freeman, *St. Patrick*, 91.

⁴⁸ Freeman, *St. Patrick*, 92.

⁴⁹ Cf. Robert, *Christian Mission*, 153.

⁵⁰ Patrick, *Confessions* 51, 34; cf. O’Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 60; O’Loughlin, *Saint Patrick*, 45.

⁵¹ Matt. 4:19.

⁵² Patrick, *Confessions* 6; cf. Robert, *Christian Mission*, 150, 154.

⁵³ Patrick, *Confessions* 38.

⁵⁴ Patrick, *Confessions* 4; cf. O’Loughlin, *Saint Patrick*, 54-55.

⁵⁵ Patrick, *Confessions* 14; also *Confessions* 50-51.

in want and need.”⁵⁶ Patrick’s commitment to catechesis and baptism also come through in the letter to Coroticus’ soldiers as he mourned the deaths of new disciples: “the anointed neophytes—still wearing their white baptismal garb and with the fragrance of the chrism on their foreheads still about them.”⁵⁷ In sum, Patrick’s mission work was church-centered as new believers were instructed according to a creed that resembled Nicene confession, they were baptized, and they became a part of the church. Like the church fathers of the fifth century, Patrick could not have conceived of an unbaptized Christian or a church-less Christianity.

Fourth, Patrick’s preaching also addressed the social sin of slavery. Having personally endured this indignity, his letter to Coroticus’ men was prompted by the enslavement of some of his disciples. Appealing to his own authority as a bishop and condemning Coroticus’ actions, Patrick demands that the captured believers be freed. Despite being a foreigner himself, Patrick identified with the Irish and denounced slavery as a clear violation of human rights.⁵⁸

Fifth, though Patrick denounced the injustice of slavery, he still acknowledged that suffering and persecution were an expected part of mission in Ireland. Despite the hardship that he already endured, including imprisonment and living with the uncertainty of dangerous travel routes, he continued to preach and baptize. Though he denounces the actions of Coroticus and his men, Patrick praises the faith of the martyrs who lost their lives: “still thanks be to God, it is as faithful baptized people that you have left this world and to go to Paradise . . . you will reign with the apostles, the prophets, and martyrs and take possession of the eternal kingdom.”⁵⁹

Finally, in Patrick’s approach to mission, he was committed to working with ministry teams. This point really goes without saying because the sheer breadth of his ministry made it impossible for him to do it alone. As shown, in his *Confessions*, Patrick refers to assistants who were apparently serving with him in ministry and spent two weeks in prison with him.⁶⁰ Though Patrick does not mention them, McNeill notes that the Annals of Ulster of 439 indicated that three bishops were also set apart to serve with Patrick.⁶¹ Finally, as noted, Patrick valued setting apart new church leaders who probably became part of Patrick’s network of co-laborers in Ireland.

Though Muirchu and other sources make claims about Patrick’s missionary strategies and their outcomes, they have not been consulted for their lack of credibility. Though reliable primary sources about Patrick’s work are limited at best, there is enough to describe him as a “warm-hearted, alert, zealous, diligent, and courageous biblical preacher, and the faithful bishop intensely conscious of his unique mission and pastoral responsibility.”⁶²

⁵⁶ Patrick, *Confessions* 40.

⁵⁷ Patrick, *Coroticus* 3; cf. *Coroticus* 19.

⁵⁸ Cf. Freeman, *St. Patrick*, 134-137; Robert, *Christian Mission*, 156.

⁵⁹ Patrick, *Coroticus* 17-18.

⁶⁰ Patrick, *Confessions* 37.

⁶¹ McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 66.

⁶² McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 67.

Was Patrick a Monk?

As this study is part of a largely study on the work of missionary monks, it would be good to establish that Patrick was in fact a monk. In his survey of Christian history, Mark Noll clearly identifies Patrick as a monk; however, scholars such as Philip Freeman are more tentative arguing that just because Patrick had ascetic tendencies does not necessarily make him a monk.⁶³ Also, the most reliable sources about Patrick's life do not explicitly claim that he was a monk. That said, let us consider several pieces of evidence that suggest that Patrick was a monk of some sort.

First, Patrick demonstrated monastic values throughout his entire life. Though he had rejected his family's faith as a youth, following his conversion to the gospel during his captivity in Ireland, his practice of rising early for prayer and then praying as many as 100 times throughout day while engaged in manual (forced) labor was quite ascetic in nature. Later, in *Coroticus*, he effectively argues for a Christian faith in which there was no dichotomy between belief and action—a view of the Christian life that was ascetic and that shaped a developing Irish monasticism.⁶⁴ This approach seems best captured in the “Hymn to St. Patrick” attributed to Patrick's fifth-century colleague Secundius:

Out of the love of God he guards his chaste flesh
that flesh which he prepares to be a temple of the Holy Spirit
by whom he is constantly possessed with pure actions
which he offers to the Lord as an acceptable and living sacrifice.⁶⁵

Patrick showed further evidence of pursuing a monastic calling by praising the ascetic life and through serving as a monk-bishop. O'Loughlin argues: “the fact that Patrick mentions ‘monks and virgins’ (*Confessio* 41; *Epistola* 12), that he praises women who have remained virgins (*Confessio* 42), and his use of the phrase ‘the religious chastity which I have chosen for Christ’ (*Confessio* 44), all incline me to think that Patrick was one of those fifth-century clerics who believed that a perfect minister of grace would be celibate.”⁶⁶ McNeill helpfully adds that while growing up and during his missionary training prior to returning to Ireland, he was very likely exposed to the monk-bishop examples of Martin of Tours and Ninian (ca. 360-ca. 432) and these models shaped his own vision of the episcopate.⁶⁷

Probably the most compelling evidence for Patrick's monastic leanings were the outcomes of his mission work—that he celebrated the fact that many of his converts adopted ascetic lifestyles. Interestingly, this included many “Irish leaders' sons and daughters . . . seen to become the monks and virgins of Christ.”⁶⁸ Freeman

⁶³ Cf. Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*. Third edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 79; Freeman, *St. Patrick*, 117.

⁶⁴ Cf. O'Loughlin, *Saint Patrick*, 92; Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts*, 76.

⁶⁵ Cited in O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 188.

⁶⁶ O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 50.

⁶⁷ McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 69.

⁶⁸ Patrick, *Confessions* 41; also Patrick, *Coroticus* 2, 12; cf. McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 65; Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts*, 76; Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 156. O'Loughlin (*Saint Patrick*, 77) notes that when Patrick uses the term “virgin” in *Confessions* 41, it most likely refers to a type of nun.

adds that as young people from prominent families were embracing ascetic lifestyles, there was a strong negative reaction from their families.⁶⁹ McNeill adds that as Patrick planted new churches around Ireland that he also “formed [ascetic] groups under vows.”⁷⁰ Irvin and Sunquist assert that he deliberately “sought to establish monasteries in the regions of his missionary labors.”⁷¹ In short, the reason that Patrick celebrated these monastic commitments for his converts was because he had already adopted this way of living for himself.

Patrick’s monastic convictions also influenced the leadership structure of the developing Irish church. As there were no towns to speak of in Ireland prior to Patrick’s mission, the monastery communities (and their structures) filled that void and became the first towns. Though there were, of course, bishops in the Irish church, the primary leaders were monastic abbots. This monastic form of church polity certainly made the Irish church distinct from the broader church in the world and it eventually led to conflict between the Celtic and Roman churches.⁷²

Despite the fact that the most reliable sources about Patrick are limited and they do not explicitly claim that he was a monk, the evidence presented shows that he practiced an early form of ascetic renunciation and living.⁷³ This was a way of life that he advocated for his disciples and that they embraced on a significant level and which shaped Irish Christianity for centuries to come.

Conclusion

Born into a family of privilege in Roman Britain, Patrick was an ex-slave who became a bishop. More than anything, his life and journey were characterized by a missionary call and commitment to the very people who had mistreated him. In Patrick, we observe a bishop set apart for the purpose of mission and a type of monk who embraced a life of prayer, service, hardship and leading others toward monastic living and ministering to others from the basis of that ascetic devotion. Irvin and Sunquist correctly note: “The end result was a network of missionary monasteries under Patrick’s direction, where students were learning Latin, studying the Scriptures, and working among the local population.”⁷⁴ In terms of his lasting legacy, McNeill adds that the “life of the monasteries offered an outlet to native talent and energy” toward “missionary adventure by which Ireland was to make its great medieval contribution to the Christian West.”⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Freeman, *St. Patrick*, 113-116.

⁷⁰ McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 69.

⁷¹ Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 236.

⁷² McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 69-70.

⁷³ Cf. Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 143.

⁷⁴ Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 237.

⁷⁵ McNeill, *Celtic Churches*, 70-71.