

# The Apostle of Ireland

by Canon Patrick A. Sheehan

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Chapters on the Mother of God and her saints. *Mariae Corona*, Catholic Truth Society 1902; p 90-98

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There is something distinctive about the devotion of the Irish to St. Patrick, and especially about their annual celebration of his festival. This is something more than the festival of a saint. It is the festival of a nation, which feels and knows that it is in special favour with God, the grateful joy of those who may fairly regard themselves as the chosen people of Heaven. On other saints days we bless God for the graces He bestowed upon them; on the feast of St. Patrick we bless God, not so much for having manifested His glory in His Saint, as for having glorified himself in His people. It is the feast of the most Catholic people upon earth the people who have done more for God than any other Christian nation the most spiritual people upon earth in whose every-day life are multiplied triumphs of grace over nature, of soul over body the people who have upheld, through unexampled sorrow and temptation, the great victory which Christ gained upon the Cross over the world and the flesh and the devil.

It is no exaggeration to say, that to those who deny the existence of God and of everything supernatural, the history of the Irish people in the past is a puzzle beyond solution, and the attitude of the Irish people at present is a standing miracle. They see a nation in the past, that clung to its faith and its traditions through seven centuries of bitterest persecution, that steadily and steadfastly rejected every bribe to sacrifice its beliefs, and patiently endured every kind of suffering to preserve them; a nation that never murmured, never complained, but suffered in silence, like the Divine Master whom it worshipped; a nation that passed through the fire with the calmness and fortitude of the martyrs; a nation that now bears its religious freedom with the same equanimity, and promises to grow in love and loyalty to God until the sacrifice is consummated and the end is gained. All this, I say, to many who are outside the Catholic Church, is a mystery beyond explanation. And they would be inclined to doubt the truth of history, if the

present character of the Irish nation did not so well accord with history, and bear out the facts which it narrates. For with all their faults, the character of the Irish people at the present day is something unique, something exceptional. For the Irish people move and live in a supernatural world. Despoiled of all natural worldly gifts, they live by faith and by faith alone. Poor in all the gifts of fortune, they esteem themselves surpassingly rich in all those spiritual gifts which Christians prize. It can be said of us with truth, that no nation has its God so near to it as our God is to us. For our whole strength is from God, our whole happiness is from Him. In our sorrows we go to Him for comfort, in our joys we go to Him in thanksgiving; those false, fictitious pleasures upon which the people of other nations starve their souls, are absolutely unknown to us; we are a chosen nation, a kingly people; and the island which we inhabit is well called "holy," for every sod of earth you turn in it, is the relic of a saint.

All this, to unbelievers, is a wonder of wonders a people walking in an unseen world, holding converse with unseen beings, seeing by faith more clearly than natural things are known by reason - despising the things of earth in comparison with the things of Heaven, and glorying, like St. Paul, in the cross of Christ, which has been laid heavily upon them. This is a tangible proof to unbelievers that Christianity is not dead in the world, that at least in the hearts and minds of one people it survives and bears great fruit. For the sanctity of the Irish people is commensurate with the faith of the Irish people, and men do not know which to admire most, their unsullied virtue, or their unswerving faith. Now, to what are we to attribute this? I do not mean to inquire why this was the design of God, but I wish to trace out the means by which the Almighty worked out His purpose. We find that of themselves the Irish people were pre-disposed to Christianity; and that Almighty God chose for his Apostle the man who, above all others, was qualified to teach the faith and practices of Christianity.

For the Irish race was then, as it is now, a race of strong passions and ardent affections; and wherever nature is strong and uncorrupted, it naturally seeks for something higher than itself to interpret itself. Its morals were pure, and therefore it easily embraced the morality of Christianity. It was a strong, imaginative race; it sought for a religion higher than nature could discover, and, therefore, when Christianity was preached, its wonderful mysteries captivated the people. They were a people, generous, ardent, self-sacrificing, and, therefore, they eagerly embraced a religion which constantly teaches self-sacrifice, self-denial, and whose central dogma was that God, in human form, had sacrificed Himself for His people. The Irish people had strong affection and reverence for their poor, and they saw that Christianity taught that the poor were its Founder's Divine legacy, and that kindness to them was to be the measure of our fitness for Heaven.

And God, looking upon this people with eyes of love, chose as their Apostle from His whole Church a man according to His own heart. By nature, by grace, by his training under the hands of Providence, St. Patrick was fitted for the great work of the apostolate to which he was called. Whatever disputes may rage about his nationality, there cannot be the slightest doubt that he was a man of singular sanctity, and endowed with every natural and supernatural gift that could qualify him for his mission. As a child, he was remarkable for his piety and holiness; and God tried him in his youth as He tries all His saints, by bitter adversity; and when he was tried and not found wanting, God placed him under the care of three of the greatest saints of the Church, St. Martin of Tours, St. Germanus, and St. Vincent of Lerins. From St. Martin, his uncle, he drew that zeal for the salvation of souls for which he was so remarkable; from St. Germanus, he learned the great science of the saints and became thoroughly acquainted with the magnificent theology of the Catholic Church and from St. Vincent, he learned that deep love for God,

which influenced all his actions during life, was the source of his zeal, and the reason of his success. Looking back all these years to those wild and barbarous times, there is something very touching in the sight of that young saint, exiled from home, a slave engaged in the most servile occupation, in a strange land, and amongst a wild people, and finding his only consolation in worshipping the great unseen Father who was so tenderly watching over him, and preparing him for the most glorious mission that apostle ever received. The young swineherd in the bleak mountains of Donegal, with no companions but the beasts he tended, knelt one hundred times by day and one hundred times by night, to worship God. All his strength came from prayer, and from union with the cross of his Divine Master.

**H**e bore that captivity for six long years, his great heart all the time yearning towards the strong, passionate people that lived around him, who, in their own rude way, were worshipping the unseen God in groves of oak, and offering sacrifices of human beings towards the creations of their own imaginations. St. Patrick could not approach them, he could not speak to them; he wept and prayed for them; but God's time had not come, and the Saint, with great sorrow in his heart, bade farewell to the Irish shores and left the people whom he loved in darkness and the shadow of death. But see how wonderfully God works! The Saint thought that he was abandoning his people for ever. The Eternal Father was only removing him for a moment to unite them again on firmer and more lasting bonds of spiritual affection. He removed St. Patrick to prepare him by study and prayer – and by the Sacrament of Holy Orders and by the blessing of the Supreme Pontiff for his exalted mission.

**A**nd when the time was come, in sleep, in a vision, he received from God his mission. And he rose up and obeyed, and on the same shores that he had sanctified by his prayers before, he landed again – no longer a slave, but a prince and prelate of God's Church – no longer clad in sheep-skin, but in the sacred vestments of a Bishop, no longer bearing a shepherd's staff, but the crozier, the emblem of pastoral love and fatherly care and affection – no longer alone, but surrounded by priests and monks and levites – the precursor of that glorious Irish hierarchy that has

evangelised the world, and carried to all nations the name and doctrine of Jesus Christ. And then occurred that wonderful and sudden resurrection of a whole people from darkness to light, from the black and terrible mysteries of druidism to the Christian religion, with its doctrines of love and mercy and pity. It was not that St. Patrick made a convert here and a convert there, but the whole nation, the nation that had cried to him in his dreams rose up at his bidding, and casting aside the traditions of two thousand years, embraced the doctrines that St. Patrick preached to them, because the very instincts of the people told them that these doctrines were true. And it was not the poor alone that St. Patrick converted; but the rich, the educated, the powerful, the druid priest, and the bard that was omnipotent all, as if they had been expecting for years the summons of Christ's Apostle, cast aside their power and their wealth, and made themselves disciples of Patrick and slaves of Christ. The old fierceness of the people vanished before the mild teachings of Christianity. The old men, warriors and clansmen, went down into their graves without a wish for revenge; and the young – the pure, young Irish, fascinated by the glories of Christianity, came in thousands to the feet of Patrick, and gave themselves body and soul to the service of Jesus Christ, their Master.

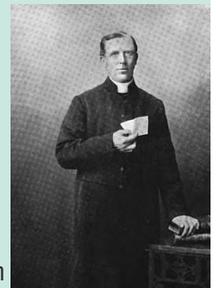
**C**onvents and monasteries covered the land, and schools sprang up by their sides, and the schools developed into colleges, and the colleges grew into universities, and when learning was banished from Europe, it found a home in the West, and Europe, in its despair, looked to Ireland, as to a nation of Apostles, who were to evangelise and educate it.

**M**eanwhile, the grand old Saint had gone to his reward. His life was laborious, but quiet, travelling from end to end of the island, preaching, catechising, healing the sick, consecrating bishops, and ordaining priests, receiving the vows of countless Irish virgins and clothing them with the consecrated veils, symbols of that immaculate purity which at all times has characterised the daughters of St. Bridget. And when the time of his reward had come, he received the Body of Christ from the hands of one of his Bishops, and passed into Heaven, bearing as his offering to God, and as the result of his life's labours, a whole nation,

a nation of Saints and doctors, whose fidelity to God is as certain as that of the angels, who have been confirmed by God in their glory.

**A**n old chronicle sums up his virtues and sanctity in this way: "A just man, indeed, was this man; with purity of nature, like the patriarchs; a true pilgrim, like Abraham; gentle and forgiving of heart, like Moses; a praiseworthy psalmist, like David; an emulator of wisdom, like Solomon; a chosen vessel for proclaiming truth, like the Apostle Paul; a man full of grace and the knowledge of the Holy Ghost, like the beloved John; a fair flower garden to children of grace; a flaming fire; a lion in strength and power; a dove in gentleness and humility; a serpent in wisdom to do good; gentle, humble, merciful, towards sons of life; dark, ungentle towards sons of death; a servant of labour and service for Christ; a king in dignity and might, for binding and loosening, for liberating and convicting, for killing and giving life." Such was the Apostle of Ireland, the glorious St. Patrick.

Patrick Augustine Sheehan (17 March 1852 – 5 October 1913) was an Irish Catholic priest, author and political activist. He was known as Canon Sheehan after his 1903 appointment as a canon of the diocese of Cloyne.



He was born on St. Patrick's Day 1852 in Mallow to Patrick and Joanna Sheehan and the third of 5 children. When he was 13 years old he lost both his parents within 7 months. He and his siblings became the ward of the Parish Priest of Mallow, Dr. John McCarthy who later became Bishop of Cloyne. Canon Sheehan studied in Maynooth College and his first parish was Exeter in Plymouth. He later returned to Cork where he was priest in the parish of Cobh/Queenstown before being transferred to Doneraile. Apart from his priestly duties, he was a prolific writer and wrote beautifully about Irish life and faith at the turn of the century. His books were very popular and he was known and loved by many as Canon Sheehan of Doneraile. He also had a love of gaelic sports. Canon Sheehan had great devotion to Our Lady and Saint Patrick. Interestingly, in this article, he places St. Patrick's 6 years of captivity in County Donegal, not on Slemish in County Antrim. Canon Sheehan died on Rosary Sunday 1913.