



March 17

Commemoration: Patrick, bishop, missionary to Ireland, 461

Patrick was born into a Christian family somewhere on the northwest coast of Britain in about 390. His grandfather had been a Christian priest and his father, Calpornius, a deacon. Calpornius was an important official in the late Roman imperial government of Britain. It was not unusual in this post-Constantinian period for such state officials to be in holy orders. When Patrick was about sixteen, he was captured by a band of Irish slave-raiders. He was carried off to Ireland and forced to serve as a shepherd. When he was about twenty-one, he escaped and returned to Britain, where he was educated as a Christian. He tells us that he took holy orders as both presbyter and bishop, although no particular see is known as his at this time. A vision then called him to return to Ireland. This he did about the year 431.

Tradition holds that Patrick landed not far from the place of his earlier captivity, near what is now known as Downpatrick (a “down” or “dun” is a fortified hill, the stronghold of a local Irish king). He then began a remarkable process of missionary conversion throughout the country that continued until his death, probably in 461. He made his appeal to the local kings and through them to their tribes. Christianizing the old pagan religion as he went, Patrick erected Christian churches over sites already regarded as sacred, had crosses carved on old druidic pillars, and put sacred

wells and springs under the protection of Christian saints.

Many legends of Patrick’s Irish missionary travels possess substrata of truth, especially those telling of his conversion of the three major Irish High Kings. At Armagh, he is said to have established his principal church. To this day, Armagh is regarded as the primatial see of all Ireland.

Window: Saint Patrick stained glass window from Cathedral of Christ the Light, Oakland, CA.

Date: Taken on February 3, 2009

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