

St. Patrick, St. Patrick's Day & St. Patrick's Confession
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St. Patrick's Day, March 17th, is a time when many people wear green and eat corned beef and cabbage. Wearing colors from the Irish flag (green, white, and orange) and eating Irish food is a way to show support for Ireland and the many Irish immigrants throughout the world. Plus, it is a lot of fun, and a lot of Irish food is delicious.

Ireland is sometimes called the Emerald Isle, after a poem written by William Drennan, "When Erin first rose," but there are also places actually named Emerald Isle in Canada, North Carolina, Egypt, and a mysterious island early explorers reported existing between Australia and Antarctica. Neat!

St. Patrick's Day, however, is not really "Irish Day." Many of the traditions we may be familiar with are recent and simplified versions of much more complicated practices. For example, in Ireland, wearing green used to be a sign of being Roman Catholic, whereas orange was a sign of being a Protestant. (In 1690, William of Orange, the king of England, Scotland, and Ireland, defeated King James II, a Roman Catholic, in the Battle of Boyne close to Dublin. That victory affirmed Protestant dominance on the island.)

Historically, Ireland has been divided between Protestant and Catholic with very sad consequences. "Catholic" and "Protestant" became an ethnic and sectarian element rather than reflecting actual religious beliefs. Wearing green or orange were political statements rather than religious expressions.

In the past, Protestant Englishmen discriminated against Catholic Irish. An extreme example is that Irish exports to England by English noblemen *increased* during the Irish Potato Famine, which is also called The Great Hunger (1845–1852).

Tensions and divisions within the country finally resulted in two Irish countries: Ireland and Northern Ireland. Ireland governs five-sixths of the island and is traditionally Catholic. Northern Ireland was created in 1921 and mostly consisted of Protestant descendants of colonists from Great Britain, who wanted to remain within the United Kingdom, or UK, the full name of which is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

In more recent history, 1960s to 1990s, "The Troubles" also known as the "Northern Ireland conflict" spilled violence into Ireland, England, and Europe. It was a struggle to try to reunite Ireland, and more than 3,500 people died.

While St. Patrick's Day has very much become an opportunity for Irish nationalism—often reminiscing away from home—and feasting, that has exceedingly little to do with the very real man, St. Patrick.

As Christians, we do not need to believe that St. Patrick drove all the snakes out of Ireland—Ireland is awfully cold for snakes anyway. We get to remember him as a brother in Christ, a missionary to Ireland who loved his people despite many tragic circumstances. He was also a man who strove to teach and affirm the doctrine of the Trinity, which is a wonderful thing to do.

According to his autobiographical writings, *Confessio*, he was captured by Irish pirates from his home in Roman Britain when he was sixteen. He was taken as a slave and used to look after animals. After six years, he escaped and returned to his family. After becoming a priest, however, he returned to

northern and western Ireland, bringing God's Word and doing his best to bring salvation and knowledge of God to the pagans.

St. Patrick probably lived in the late fourth and into the fifth century. Early medieval tradition credits him as the first bishop of Armagh and Primate of Ireland, as though he is the founder of Christianity in Ireland. St. Patrick is also known as the Apostle of Ireland, though more often you will hear him described as the patron saint of Ireland. He was never formally canonized by the Roman Catholic church, but he has been venerated as a saint in the Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Anglican Communion, and Lutheran Churches.

To be honest, there is not a lot of collaborating documentation or evidence about him, although he did live fifteen hundred years ago so what would we expect. Some even speculate whether there were two different Patricks. Even so, St. Patrick's Day is March 17, the supposed date of his death, and the Irish have celebrated it as a religious holiday for over a thousand years. It used to be very solemn. Then, as Irish men and women immigrated around the world, it became an important way to remember Irish heritage and culture no matter where one might be.

St. Patrick has two writings we can still be very familiar with. "St. Patrick's Breastplate" is a poem and hymn that we still sing in congregations today: "I Bind unto Myself this Day." Go [here](#) to read the text online. It is a powerful confession from the fifth century! The other writing is St. Patrick's *Confessio* or Confession. It is very accessible: easy to read, [free online](#), and quite short. It offers a poignant account of his life, conversion, and work among the Irish Celts.

Have you read many things from the 5th century? Patrick writes as a "simple country person, and the least of all believers."

Patrick does speak about receiving voices, visions, and dreams from God. As Lutherans, when we hear about such things, the first thing we do is compare the message with the Word of God. There are other examples from the early church of extraordinary occurrences and miracles when the Gospel is first brought somewhere. Although St. Patrick lived a little later than the Early Church, as we normally think of it, he still lived in Late Antiquity. Thanks be to God that Patrick does not rely only upon personal revelations, but primarily on Christ and the Word of God, which he quotes quite a bit in his confession.

Possible discussion questions about the *Confessio* include, "How does St. Patrick's *Confessio* display humanity and humility? What does Patrick teach about God's mercy? Was Patrick Irish or something else? What else was happening in Christianity in the fifth century?"

In the fourth century, there was a prominent defender of Trinitarianism: Athanasius. In the fifth century, his clarity of language, thought, and teaching was brought together into the Athanasian Creed. Patrick, therefore, may not have had access to all the creedal language, but he did his best to proclaim the Trinity among the Celts, who worshiped many false gods.

Some say that Patrick taught the Trinity using a shamrock, a three-leafed plant, but we know God isn't really divided into thirds, as though each Person is only a "part". On the other hand, how can something be one and three? A shamrock is. Patrick's hymn is a much better exploration and application of the Gospel and Scripture's trinitarian teaching. (It may be that it is called his breastplate because it became an old Irish prayer of protection.)

A popular legend also suggests that Patrick invented the celtic cross, a cross with a circle around the top.

Can we give thanks for this man to this day? Yes! Why? And in what way does St. Patrick belong to the whole church?