

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Patrick

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: March 17

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IN BRIEF

Saint Patrick

Fifth-century missionary bishop, apostle and patron saint of Ireland.

Feast day	March 17
Born	late 4th or early 5th century, Roman Britain (present-day Great Britain)
Died	March 17, c. 461 or c. 493 (date debated), Saul (Northern Ireland), according to tradition
Canonized	pre-congregation saint (immemorial cult)
Era	5th century
Patron saint of	Ireland

In this booklet

Life

Saint Patrick's Breastplate, Prayer of Protection

Novena to Saint Patrick

Downpatrick and the Grave of Saint Patrick

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Patrick

Saint Patrick is the apostle of Ireland. Born in Roman Britain, he was kidnapped at sixteen by Irish raiders and sold into slavery, escaped, and then freely went back, as a bishop, to bring the Gospel to the people who had enslaved him. He is one of the very few saints of his time who left personal writings, above all his *Confession*. He died on a March 17 in the fifth century, and that day, his feast, has become the national day of the Irish all over the world.

Who was Saint Patrick?

Patrick, *Patricius* in Latin, was born at the end of the fourth or the beginning of the fifth century into a Christian family of Roman Britain, present-day Great Britain. He names the place of the family estate himself, *Bannavem Taburniae*, but no one has been able to identify it with certainty. His father, Calpornius, was a deacon and a member of the local gentry; his grandfather, Potitus, was a priest. Patrick admits that as a young man he paid little attention to the faith.

The dates of his life are debated. Irish tradition places his arrival as a bishop in 432 and his death in 461; other historians favor a later mission and a death around 493. What is certain comes from his two authentic texts, written in Latin: the *Confession*, an account of his life and a long act of thanksgiving, and the *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*, in which he denounces a British chieftain who had massacred and enslaved newly baptized Irish Christians.



Slemish Mountain, where tradition places Saint Patrick's years of captivity.

Key dates in the life of Saint Patrick

- **Late 4th or early 5th century**: Born in Roman Britain.
- **Around age sixteen**: Captured by raiders and taken to Ireland as a slave.
- **Six years later**: Escapes, boards a ship and, after many hardships, returns to his family.
- **Some years afterward**: In a dream, he hears "the voice of the Irish" calling him back.
- **431**: Pope Celestine I sends a first bishop, Palladius, to the Irish who believe in Christ.
- **432, according to tradition**: Patrick returns to Ireland as a missionary bishop.
- **The following years**: Preaching, baptisms and ordinations, especially in the north and west of the island.

- **Date unknown**: Writes the *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus* and the *Confession*.
- **A March 17, around 461 or around 493**: Dies, at Saul according to tradition, and is buried at Downpatrick.

A slave in Ireland

Captured along with thousands of others, as he tells it, the young Patrick was sold in Ireland and spent six years tending flocks. Tradition places his captivity on the slopes of Slemish Mountain, in what is now County Antrim, though he does not say so himself. It was in this solitude that he turned to God. He writes that he prayed up to a hundred times a day and almost as many at night, in the woods and on the mountain, in snow, frost and rain, and felt no harm from it, because the Spirit was burning within him.

One night a voice told him that a ship was waiting for him. He fled, traveled a long way to the coast and persuaded sailors to take him on board. After a hard crossing and a difficult journey, he found his family again, and they begged him never to leave them.



Saint Patrick depicted as a bishop in a church stained glass window.

The call of the Irish

Back home, Patrick saw in a dream a man named Victoricus who handed him a letter headed "The Voice of the Irish." As he read it, he seemed to hear the people who lived near the Wood of Foclut, by the western sea, crying out: "We beg you, holy youth, to come and walk among us once more." He then prepared for the priesthood. Medieval tradition has him study in Gaul, with Saint Germanus of Auxerre or at the monastery of Lérins, but his own writings do not say so.

Once a bishop, he returned to Ireland. He traveled the country, baptized thousands, ordained clergy, and encouraged young men and women to consecrate their lives to God. He refused gifts from kings and wealthy people, so that no one could accuse him of seeking his own profit. He also knew danger: he says he was imprisoned and threatened with death more than once.

History and legend

From the seventh century on, a rich body of legend grew up around Patrick. It is told that he lit the Paschal fire on the Hill of Slane in defiance of the High King at Tara, that he drove the snakes out of Ireland, or that he explained the Trinity with a shamrock leaf. None of these stories appears in his writings, and the shamrock was linked to him only later. Tradition also credits him with founding the Church of Armagh, the see of the Primate of All Ireland, and with the famous prayer known as *Saint Patrick's Breastplate*, which probably dates from a few centuries after him.



Croagh Patrick, Ireland's holy mountain, where tradition places a forty-day fast by the saint.

What can we learn from his holiness?

Saint Patrick is a witness to forgiveness and to mission. He went back freely to those who had enslaved him, to offer them what he held most precious. His *Confession* reveals a humble man, aware of his lack of learning, amazed at what

God had done through him. He is invoked for Ireland and for the Irish scattered around the world, for missionaries, and for all who go through exile or captivity.

To pray with him, you can use the prayer of *Saint Patrick's Breastplate* or follow the novena to Saint Patrick from March 8 to 16, so that it ends on the eve of his feast.

Why is Saint Patrick the patron saint of Ireland?

Patrick is honored as the patron of Ireland because the Irish Church has always seen him as its founding missionary. He was not the first Christian on the island, since Palladius had been sent before him, but his long mission, his preaching across the country and the memory kept at Armagh, Downpatrick and Saul made him the father in faith of the Irish. His feast on March 17 is a solemnity in Ireland and a public holiday. Because Irish emigrants carried his memory with them, his day is also celebrated in the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and many other countries, and great churches bear his name, such as Saint Patrick's Cathedral in New York.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Patrick in art

- **Bishop's vestments**: he is usually shown with a miter and a crozier, as the bishop of the Irish.
- **The shamrock**: the three-leaved clover of the Trinity legend, a late but very popular emblem.
- **Snakes**: sometimes at his feet, recalling the legend that he drove them from Ireland.
- **Green**: the color of Ireland, often associated with his feast, although older images do not always use it.

Where to pray to Saint Patrick

- **Downpatrick** (Northern Ireland): Down Cathedral and the granite stone that marks his grave according to tradition.
- **Saul** (Northern Ireland): the site of his first church and, according to tradition, of his death.
- **Armagh**: the two Saint Patrick's Cathedrals, Catholic and Anglican, at the see of the Primate of All Ireland.
- **Croagh Patrick** (County Mayo): the mountain climbed by pilgrims, especially on the last Sunday of July.
- **Lough Derg** (County Donegal): the island of "Saint Patrick's Purgatory," a penitential pilgrimage.

PRAYER

Saint Patrick's Breastplate, Prayer of Protection

The best-known prayer associated with Saint Patrick is the *Breastplate*, or *Lorica*, a long prayer of protection in Old Irish. Tradition attributes it to him, but historians usually date it to the seventh or eighth century: it expresses the faith of the Christian Ireland that honored him. Below you will find its most famous passage, an authentic line from his *Confession*, and an original prayer to Saint Patrick.

Saint Patrick's Breastplate (excerpt)

The prayer opens by calling on the Trinity, then asks for the protection of Christ on every side.

> *I arise today*
> *through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,*
> *through belief in the threeness,*
> *through confession of the oneness*
> *of the Creator of creation.*
>
> *Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,*
> *Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,*
> *Christ on my right, Christ on my left,*
> *Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,*
> *Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,*
> *Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks of me,*
> *Christ in every eye that sees me,*
> *Christ in every ear that hears me.*

Source: the *Lorica* known as "Saint Patrick's" (in Irish *Faeth Fiada*), preserved notably in the Irish *Liber Hymnorum*, an eleventh-century manuscript. English after the public domain translation by Kuno Meyer.

Words of Saint Patrick himself

> *"I, Patrick, a sinner, the most unlearned of men, the least of all the faithful, and utterly despised by many..."*

Source: Saint Patrick, *Confession*, chapter 1 (fifth century), translation by Saintspedia. This is how he begins the story of his life: not with his successes, but by admitting his littleness, before giving thanks for all that God had done through him.

Prayer to Saint Patrick

Saint Patrick, you who prayed on the mountainside in cold and rain, when you were a slave far from your own people, teach me to pray in my loneliness and in my trials.

You who went back freely to those who had enslaved you, to bring them the Gospel, give me the strength to forgive and to do good to those who have hurt me.

You who traveled across Ireland asking nothing for yourself, make me generous and joyful in serving others. I entrust to you Ireland, the Irish scattered throughout the world, exiles, and all who are deprived of their freedom.

I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

May Christ be with me, before me and behind me, today and every day of my life. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Patrick's feast is on March 17, in the middle of Lent. In Ireland it is a solemnity and a national holiday, and Irish communities around the world keep it with Mass and celebrations. The *Breastplate* also makes a fine morning prayer, said on rising, or a prayer before a journey or a difficult day. For a longer time of prayer, you can follow the novena to Saint Patrick from March 8 to 16, and read more about the life of Saint Patrick.

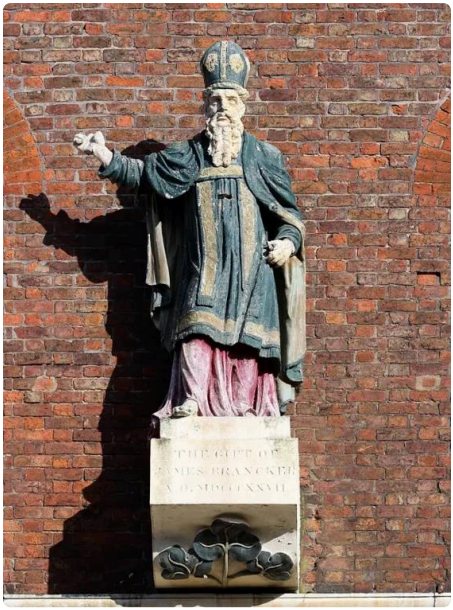
NOVENA

Novena to Saint Patrick

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the *Confession* of Saint Patrick. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on March 8; it ends on March 16, and March 17 can be lived as a day of thanksgiving. Each day follows a stage of his life, from captivity to mission, so that his story can shed light on our own: our trials, our call to forgive, and our share in spreading the Gospel.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father. The episodes recalled are taken from the *Confession* unless stated otherwise. The small act suggested for each day helps carry the prayer into daily life, in this season of Lent.



Saint Patrick, church statue.

Day 1: Acknowledging our littleness

Patrick begins his *Confession* by calling himself a sinner with little education. He is not ashamed of his limits: he marvels at what God was able to do with them. Humility is not self-contempt: it is the truth about ourselves, seen in the light of God's mercy. Every mission begins there, with an honest heart that knows it has received everything.

Prayer: Lord, I bring you my weaknesses. Make them the place where your strength is shown.

Today: Make a simple examination of conscience, without judging yourself harshly.

Day 2: Torn from his family

At sixteen, Patrick was kidnapped and taken to a foreign land. He lost his family, his freedom and his language. God did not abandon him in that night. Later he would read this ordeal as the moment when the Lord opened his eyes and turned him back to the faith he had neglected. Even the darkest hours of a life can become the place where God finds us.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you all who are kidnapped, enslaved or trafficked. Be their strength and their deliverance.

Today: Learn about an organization that fights human trafficking.

Day 3: A hundred prayers a day

As a shepherd, Patrick prayed constantly, in snow and in rain. He discovered that prayer warms the heart more than any fire. He had no church, no priest, no book, only the hills and the sky, and yet the love of God grew in him day after day. We too can pray anywhere: at work, on the road, in the kitchen, in the hospital.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, kindle in me the desire to pray, even when everything around me is cold.

Today: Pause to pray at several moments of the day, even very briefly.

Day 4: The voice that sets free

One night a voice told him that a ship was waiting. He dared to leave, without knowing how he would get there. Faith sets out before it has all the answers. The road to the coast was long, the sailors at first refused him, and yet the door opened. God often asks us for one step at a time, and gives light for that step alone.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to take the step you ask of me, even when I cannot see the whole road.

Today: Take a step you have been putting off for a long time.

Day 5: The voice of the Irish

Back home, Patrick heard in a dream the people calling him: "Come and walk among us once more." Those who had enslaved him became those he longed to save. Nothing obliged him to go back. He could have stayed safe at home, with the family that begged him to remain. He chose to return out of love, and this choice is the heart of his holiness.

Prayer: Lord, turn my wounds into love. Teach me to want the good of those who have hurt me.

Today: Pray by name for someone who has wounded you.

Day 6: A long preparation

Patrick did not go back right away. He studied, he waited, he faced criticism. Mission needs patience as much as zeal. He even tells of a friend who betrayed a confidence from his youth and used it against him. Patrick suffered from it, but he did not give up. God's work matures slowly, and our impatience can be offered to him too.

Prayer: Lord, teach me patience. Let me not confuse your hour with mine.

Today: Set aside time to read and reflect on a passage of the Gospel.

Day 7: Proclaiming without taking

As a bishop in Ireland, Patrick refused the gifts of kings and gave back those the faithful offered him. He wanted the Gospel to be received as a free gift. He knew that a single suspicion of greed could close hearts to the faith. Our way of

giving, without calculation, is often the first sermon others hear from us.

Prayer: Lord, make me generous and selfless, so that my words and my actions speak of you.

Today: Do someone a service for free, expecting nothing in return.

Day 8: Defending the baptized

When soldiers massacred and carried off Christians he had just baptized, Patrick wrote a burning letter in their defense. Love of neighbor also knows how to denounce injustice. Patrick did not stay silent to protect himself: he named the evil and asked that the captives be set free. Charity is gentle, but it is never indifferent to the suffering of the weak.

Prayer: God of justice, I entrust to you persecuted Christians and all who suffer violence.

Today: Support, with a gift or a prayer, an organization that helps persecuted Christians.

Day 9: Christ with me

Irish tradition placed the *Breastplate* on Patrick's lips: Christ before, behind, above, within. His whole life was a journey in the presence of Christ. Whatever the true author of the prayer, it sums up what Patrick lived: no place, no danger and no person lies outside the reach of the Lord. To end this novena, let us place ourselves, with all we carry, under that protection.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Patrick, be with me, before me and within me, today and always. Amen.

Today: Pray slowly the excerpt of *Saint Patrick's Breastplate*.

Closing prayer

Saint Patrick, slave who became an apostle, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I carry. Pray for Ireland, for exiles, for captives and for all who proclaim the Gospel. Obtain for me a forgiving heart, a faith that prays without ceasing and the courage to bear witness. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint Patrick and pray *Saint Patrick's Breastplate*.

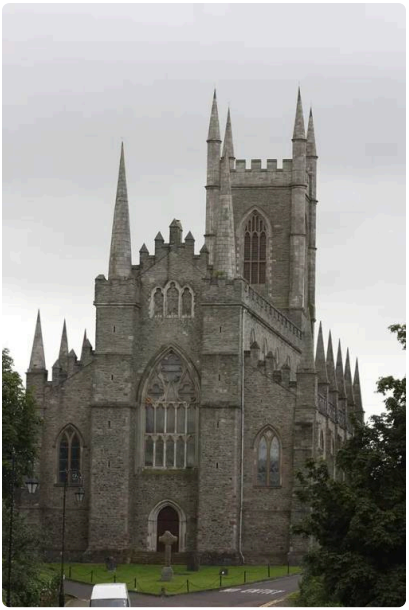
PILGRIMAGE

Downpatrick and the Grave of Saint Patrick

Downpatrick, a small town in County Down in Northern Ireland, is where tradition places the grave of Saint Patrick. A few miles away, Saul preserves the memory of his first church and of his death. It is the heart of a pilgrimage that can be extended to Armagh, Croagh Patrick, and Lough Derg.

A town that bears his name

The name Downpatrick means "Patrick's fort." According to tradition, the saint, who died nearby at Saul, was buried on the hill where Down Cathedral now stands. In the Middle Ages, an abbey was established there, and legend gathered the three great saints of Ireland there: Patrick, Brigid of Kildare, and Columba of Iona. The present building, a cathedral of the Church of Ireland, was largely rebuilt in the late 18th and early 19th centuries on the ruins of the old abbey church.



Down Cathedral, in Downpatrick.

The grave of Saint Patrick

In the cathedral graveyard, a large granite stone engraved with the name *Patric* and a cross was placed in the early 20th century to mark the traditional site of the saint's grave, and to protect the place from pilgrims who were carrying away its soil. Nothing allows us to establish with certainty that the saint rests at this spot, but veneration there is ancient. On March 17, the faithful of all denominations come to pray there.

Saul, the first church

About two miles from Downpatrick, Saul (*Sabhall*, "the barn") is, according to tradition, where Patrick first celebrated Mass in Ireland, in a barn given by a local chieftain, and where he died. A small memorial church was built there in

1932-1933, for the fifteen-hundredth anniversary of his traditional arrival. Not far away, on the hill of Slieve Patrick, a large statue of the saint overlooks the countryside.



The memorial church at Saul, near Downpatrick.

Praying in Downpatrick

Before your visit, you may reread the life of Saint Patrick or a few pages of his *Confession*. On site, a time of silence before the stone of his grave, then at Saul, lets you entrust an intention, for example for a loved one in exile or someone deprived of freedom. The prayer of Saint Patrick's Breastplate suits this moment well. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Patrick

- **Armagh**: the primatial see associated with Patrick by tradition, with its two Saint Patrick's Cathedrals, Catholic and Anglican.

- **Croagh Patrick** (County Mayo): the holy mountain, climbed by thousands of pilgrims on the last Sunday of July.
- **Lough Derg** (County Donegal): the island of "Saint Patrick's Purgatory," a pilgrimage of fasting and vigil.
- **Slemish** (County Antrim): the mountain where tradition places his years of captivity.
- **Slane** (County Meath): the hill of the legendary Paschal fire.

Practical information

Downpatrick is about twenty-five miles south of Belfast. The town also has an interpretive center devoted to Saint Patrick, which presents his life and writings. Around March 17, the town organizes religious and festive celebrations. Check the opening hours of the cathedral and its services with the cathedral or the tourist office before you come.

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