

**1Homily for St. Patrick's Day 2009**  
**St. John the Baptist Cathedral**  
**Savannah, Georgia**

First, I would like to express deep gratitude and appreciation, in accepting the invitation of Bishop Boland and the Cathedral Parish, to speak to you this morning as Savannah celebrates Ireland's Patronal Feast. It is a celebration observed worldwide, and by many more than just the Irish and their friends. One biographical dictionary of the saints, citing St. Patrick's contemporary document, *Confession*, has put it this way in his own words toward the end of his life:

'I fear to lose the labor which I began. . .Let it not happen to me from my God that I should ever part with this people which He purchased in the ends of the earth. . .'

The Irish people have responded with a depth of human affection undiminished by the passage of centuries. On March 17th they celebrate his feast all over the world with a fervor which makes his cult perhaps the most living one of all fifth century saints. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*The Saints: A Concise Bibliographical Dictionary*, John Coulson ed. (New York:1958) p591

There are many facets of this great man, and of the greatness that he has inspired in others, that I could use to help celebrate his feast day with you. Here, however, in this sacred space that is more sacred by our observance with due solemnity and enthusiasm, let me concentrate on the chief heritage of St. Patrick left to the Irish: his Catholic faith. In a very serious way that word “catholic” extends beyond the confines of denominational divisions in keeping with the gift of the Lord to Patrick and his desire that that gift be shared as fully as possible. It extends to all those who, in true faith, have accepted that same Lord and live Patrick’s creed in their hearts. Indeed, his example more than his words, as extended through the Irish influence on so much of history, speaks of this good man. His words which have survived to us are few, the principle document as I mentioned is his *Confession*, and from it we learn with confidence that St. Patrick was chief shepherd of the faith in Ireland for over thirty years in the 5th Century. I am sure his story is not unknown to most of you how, the son of a minor but significant official in the Roman Empire, he was abducted at age fifteen from Wales and taken as a slave to Ireland there to attend flocks. This situation continued for six years until he was able to escape and return to his homeland. It was a time in which the young Patrick was schooled by circumstances into a fine tuning of his Christian faith. Those hard and powerful lessons, the results of which would be long-lasting for the land in which he had first served unwillingly, returned a faith and love for the Irish people that he would express throughout his whole life.

The former slave came back to that land as a bishop and his work has been summarized in these words: “The whole island was almost entirely linked up, even to its remotest parts, with churches and monastic foundations, to which flowed a strong tide of conversions. A vigorous native clergy was in possession; a native bishop had been nominated to succeed him.”<sup>2</sup>

In all of this, he was the Lord’s true servant and friend, as he related from the *Confession*: “From the time I came to know Him in my youth, the love of God and the fear of Him have grown in me, and up to now, thanks to the grace of God, I have kept the faith.” This faith that stands out as the hallmark of St. Patrick’s Christianity and his gift of it to others became his entire reason for living and loving. He expressed the hope and prayer that those who would receive the gift would in some like measure pass it on. “Regardless of danger I must make known this gift of God and everlasting consolation, without fear and frankly I must spread everywhere the name of God so that after my decease I may leave a bequest to my brethren and sons whom I have baptized in the Lord. . . .”

There would come a time, however, in his own beloved Ireland when the faith would be under heavy duress. It occurred in later centuries after the unity of Christendom had been splintered. The land of saints and scholars saw persecution of the ancient faith and those who sought to serve and profess it and did so often at the cost of their lives. Let us fast forward for more than a thousand years and see one of Patrick’s successors, Blessed Oliver Plunkett born in Ireland in 1629. He was unable to be educated there because he was a Catholic, and sought both education, and eventually priesthood, on the continent. Named Patrick’s successor as Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of Ireland in July

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 589

1669, Blessed Oliver was consecrated a bishop in Ghent and reached Ireland in March 1670. There, for the next 11 years, he would labor under the most difficult of circumstances to preserve and foster the Catholic faith as its leader in the land. Such a position itself marked him for imprisonment and eventually death, and this came in 1681 when having been arrested in Ireland, Plunkett was taken to England where he was tried in London. In the words of the Encyclopedia Britannica “He made a good defense, but on the most absurd of evidence the jury convicted him of treason, and on July 1, he was hanged, drawn and quartered at the Tyburn.” This worthy successor to St. Patrick has left us a like testimony to the quality of the faith planted by St. Patrick in letters, the first written to a colleague in Brussels when he said, among other things, “I am morally certain that I shall be taken, so many are in search of me. Yet in spite of danger I will remain with my flock, nor will I abandon them til they drag me to the ship.”<sup>3</sup>

Two years would pass before his prediction would come true, and on July 1, 1681, the archbishop wrote to his former secretary, then a student in Rome, of his situation from prison where he had already been condemned:

Sentence of death was passed against me on the 15th, without causing me any fear, or depriving me of sleep for a quarter of an hour. I am innocent of all treason as the child born yesterday. As for my character, profession and function, I did own it publicly, and being also a motive of my death, I die most willingly. And being the first among the Irish, I will teach others, with the grace of God, by example, not to fear death. But how

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<sup>3</sup> *Blessed Oliver Plunkett*, Emmanuel Curtis, O.C.S.O. (Dublin, 1963), p. 128

am I, a poor creature, so stout [brave], sensing that my Redeemer began to fear, to be weary and sad, and that drops of His blood ran down to the ground? I have considered that Christ, by His fears and passions, merited for me to be without fear. <sup>4</sup>

A hundred years later Sir Edmund Burke said of Irish subjugation through the penal system and its laws:

You abhorred it, just as I did, for its vicious perfection. For I must do it justice: it was a complete system full of coherence and consistency, well digested and well composed in all its parts. It was a machine of wise and elaborate contrivance, and as well fitted for the oppression, impoverishment, and degradation of a people, and the debasement, in them, of human nature itself as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man. <sup>5</sup>

All suffered, many, too many, died. One of the ways out was taken by those who emigrated and left Ireland for other shores. Irishmen of all ages and circumstances, but especially the poor, the landless, and those utterly dependent upon the largess of the landlords left the country in droves. Most came to the United States, and their life forever altered the face of American Catholicism. Writing to a colleague in Rome on February 25, 1835, John England, the Bishop of Charleston, noted one of the reasons: “The Irish are easily amalgamated with the Americans. Their principles, their disposition,

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.172

<sup>5</sup> *The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke* 7th ed. (Boston, 1881), IV, 305.

their politics, their notions of government, their language and their appearance become American very quickly, and they praise and prefer America to their oppressors at home.”<sup>6</sup>

From a different perspective, and somewhat later, George Foxcroft Haskins, a convert and priest from New England said the same thing, remarking that the Irish had never accepted the English constitution, but they themselves had chosen to live under the American Constitution. He continued “They have resolved to live under it, and to die under it. They have sworn fealty to it. They revere it, and will stand by it. They will defend it against all enemies, and if need be, will die for it.”<sup>7</sup>

As the 19th turns to the 20th century, we enter, in Ireland, a period of intense struggle, some of it legal, some of it violent, all infused with the desire of the Irish people to have a land that was truly their own, a republic properly so called. Many leaders emerged and the events in which they participated make a stirring story in themselves. Resistance was met with brutal oppression: a universal disregard of civil and human rights.

Perhaps it was coincidence, but, as Pope John Paul the Great was so often to note, God does not know of “coincidences”, shortly after the emergence of Eamon DeValera as prime minister an International Eucharistic Congress was held in Dublin. A vast throng of over 1 million people, it was estimated that half came from outside Ireland and many from the United States, converged on Phoenix Park in Dublin to close the Congress on June 26, 1932. The effect of such a gathering and for such a

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Guilday, *The Life and Times of John England, First Bishop of Charleston, 1786–1842* (New York, 1927), I, 481

<sup>7</sup> George Foxcroft Haskins, *Travels in England, France, Italy and Ireland* (Boston, 1856), p. 287

circumstance could not have been lost on those still negotiating with regard to the future. An outside observer, G. K. Chesterton, described one single moment in that huge assembly and the effect that it had on him.

“But I think everyone who heard all those things directly or indirectly will agree. . .that the most astonishing thing they heard was something they could hardly hear. At one of the moments when Catholics would be accustomed to hear the clear and rather shrill tinkle of the bell of the Sanctus, there was heard a sound that must be almost unique in human history. It was as faint as the sound of a far-off sheep-bell and as weak as the bleat of a sheep; but there was something about it that was not only weighty, but curiously hard; almost dead; without the resonance that we mean by music. It was as if someone came out of the Stone Age; when even musical instruments might be made of stone. It was the Bell of St. Patrick; which had been silent for 1,500 years.

I know no poetical parallel to the effect of that little noise in that huge presence. . . . From far away in the most forgotten of the centuries, as if down avenues that were colonnades of corpses, one dead man had spoken and was dumb. It was Patrick; and he only said: ‘My Master is here.’”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Christendom in Dublin* (New York, 1933), pp. 73–75.

Let me close this extended journey through the rich history of Irish faith and freedom with comments made by President John F. Kennedy on a visit to Dublin on June 26–28, 1963, he had just returned from Berlin. The second day of his visit President Kennedy spoke to the Irish Parliament of the very real ties that bind our two nations:

“No people have ever believed more deeply in the cause of Irish freedom than the people of the United States. No country contributed more to building my own than your sons and daughters.

They came to our shores with a mixture of hope and agony. . . .  
They left behind heart, fields and a nation yearning to be free. It is no wonder that James Joyce described the Atlantic as a ‘bowl of bitter tears.’

Our president went on to say that Ireland today is a very different country. “It is a free country and that is why any American feels at home. . . .”

It is this quality of the Irish—a remarkable combination of hope, confidence and imagination—that is needed more than ever today. The problems of the world cannot possibly be solved by skeptics or cynics, whose horizons are limited by the obvious realities. We need men who can dream of things that never were and ask why not? <sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *New York Times*, June 29, 1963.

On the very evening of his arrival President Kennedy responded warmly to the invitation of Eamon DeValera for the visit and said he had many reasons to accept, for example eight of the grandparents of their family “left these shores in the space, almost, of months, and came to the United States. No country in the world, in the history of the world, has endured the hemorrhage which this Ireland endured over a period of a few years for so many of her sons and daughters.”

These sons and daughters are scattered throughout the world, and they give this small island a family of millions upon millions who are scattered all over the globe, who have been among the best and most loyal citizens of the countries that they have gone to, but have also kept a special place in their memories, in many cases their ancestral memory, of this green and misty island, so in a sense, all of them who visit Ireland come home.<sup>10</sup>

The words of President Kennedy speak to all of us who, whether we have seen Ireland and had a chance to visit there or not, still consider it for lots of different reasons to be a “second home.” All of us who look forward to St. Patrick’s Day find that on this day Ireland “comes home” to us. So what you do here in Savannah’s Cathedral, and afterward, celebrates this homecoming. Pause for a quiet moment. If you listen well, you will hear Patrick’s Bell and Patrick’s voice, “My Master is here!”

Most Reverend Oscar H. Lipscomb  
Archbishop Emeritus of Mobile  
March 17, 2009

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<sup>10</sup> *New York Times*, June 27, 1963.