

February 1 St Brigid's Feasday.



Confirmed historical facts about St. Brigid (Brigit, Bride/Bree, Bridget, Ffraid) are few because the numerous accounts of her life include many miracles and anecdotes deeply intertwined with pagan Irish folklore. Nevertheless, these accounts taken together give us a strong impression of her character and her importance to

countless generations of Celtic women and men.

Brigid was born in approximately the year 453 in Faughart, a few miles from Dundalk, county Louth. Some say her parents were of humble origin; others that they were Dubhthach, an Irish chieftain of Leinster, and Brocca (or Brocessa), a slave at his court. Shortly after Brigid's birth, she is sent away to Murroe in East Limerick to be put to fosterage. When she comes of an age to be useful, Brigid returns to her father's house, taking her mother's place in the usual bondswoman/house servant duties - minding the livestock, cleaning, serving at meals, etc.

Even as a child it was already apparent that Brigid had a calling as she showed a special love for the poor. She kept a secret store of clothes and food for them, and on one occasion when her mother sent her to collect butter, the child gave it all away. She even makes gifts to the poor from her father's property when there is nothing else available. Dubhthach and his wife are less than tolerant of this behaviour, and together they seek ways to make Brigid someone else's responsibility.

One day Dubhthach takes his daughter in a chariot to the King of Leinster to see if he can strike a deal to make her a member of the King's court. Brigid is left outside in the chariot, and while there, a leper approaches her, seeking alms. Without hesitation, Brigid hands over her father's sword, an item of great value. In the warlike province of Leinster, this says more than words can capture about Brigid's system of values. Needless to say, these values do not correspond with her father's, and he is furious when he discovers her action. Fortunately for Brigid, the King of Leinster is present as Dubhthach begins to chastise her, and he checks Dubhthach rage, saying: "Leave her alone, for her merit before God is greater than ours." Thus Brigid returns home, and through this incident of being praised by the king is also delivered from bondage. In time, Dubhthach tries to arrange a marriage for his daughter (another way of making her someone else's responsibility), but she isn't interested. Beautiful Brigid consecrated herself to God at a young age, choosing a life of virginity, dedication to God and service to the poor.

Brigid's sanctity drew many others. When she was about 15 she settled with seven other like-minded girls near Croghan Hill in order to devote herself to God's service. Along with these seven also seeking the veil, she approaches St. Macaille for guidance. At

first, Macaille is doubtful of the wisdom of Brigid's decision, thinking it a case of misdirected zeal. However, the more time he spends with Brigid and her postulants, the more he comes to see that the hand of God is guiding them. When Brigid and her virgins appear before Bishop Mel, various accounts tell that a miraculous manifestation of the Holy Spirit occurred. For humility Brigid had sent herself to the back of the line so that she might be the last to whom a veil should be given. But a fiery pillar appeared to rise from her head to the roof ridge of the church, inspiring Bishop Mel to call her forth: "Come, O Holy Brigid, that a veil may be on thy head before the other virgins." As a result of this supernatural intervention, the form of ordaining a bishop was read out over Brigid. St. Macaille protested that it was not proper that a woman receive Holy Orders as a bishop. But reportedly Bishop Mel replied: "No power have I in this matter. That dignity hath been given by God unto Brigid, beyond every (other) woman."



Another possible interpretation of this story relates to the fact that the Roman diocesan system was unknown in Ireland. Monasteries formed the centre of Christian life in the early Church of Ireland. Abbots and abbesses held the rank and function that a bishop would on the Continent. Evidence of this can also be seen at councils, such as the Synod of Whitby, convened by St. Hilda. Brigid, as a preeminent abbess, might have

fulfilled some standard episcopal functions, such as preaching, hearing confessions, and serving as pastoral leader for a large geographical area. There is no evidence that she ever ordained any priests.

At Bishop Mel's request, Brigid founds a convent at Ardagh, the first convent of strict religious observance to be established on Irish soil. It soon becomes a centre of great activity. Thousands come to receive instruction in the Christian faith. Never one to rest on her laurels, Brigid sees potential in what she has achieved in Ardagh, and is curious to see if this success can be repeated elsewhere. Accompanied by a group of sisters and her spiritual guide, Natfraoch, she sets out on a journey around the country. Brigid's approach to the establishment of new foundations is of the hands-on variety. She supervises all the work connected with the building of the wattle huts for the new sisters, and as soon as she sees the new convent staffed, she starts off to repeat the work elsewhere. Everywhere she goes in Munster and Connacht, postulants come to her. This is a movement that has been waiting to happen. Many women of noble birth leave their homes and flock to the shelter of her convents.

Brigid's most famous foundation is at Kildare, established on a generous grant of land from the king of Leinster. It is generally thought to have been a double monastery, housing both men and women, with Brigid presiding over both communities. Double monasteries were a common practice in Celtic lands, later taken by the Irish to the continent. Brigid made her monastery a remarkable house of learning for both men and women, including an art school

devoted to for the creation of highly decorated handmade copies of scripture texts and other holy writings. The illuminated manuscripts originating there were highly praised, especially the Book of Kildare, one of the finest of all illuminated Irish manuscripts before its disappearance three centuries ago.

A woman of wisdom and common sense, Brigid's genius for leadership and organization is widely recognized. She establishes schools, sets sisters to work making vestments, and organizes the episcopal government of her city. After some years in charge at Kildare, she is the most significant religious leader in the Liffey plain. Bishops, priests, chieftains and kings frequently seek her counsel. Many and notable are the names that come to her for help: St Fiach, bishop of Sletty, seeks her guidance in the founding of his monastery in Laoghis, and St. Finian consults her about his monastery at Clonard. More than anything else, however, Brigid is renowned for her hospitality. The poor and the infirm come in their multitudes. She makes provision for the sick, tending to them with her knowledge of contemporary medicine. Kildare becomes a place of holy pilgrimage for all, from the prominent and powerful to the lowly and forgotten.

Cill means cell or church, and Daire is a type of oak tree, so Kildare means "Church of the Oak." This is one of many ways Brigid the Saint echoes a pagan goddess of the same name, since the oak was sacred to the druids. In the pre-Christian period of Celtic history, Brighid (a derivation of the word Brig, meaning "valour" or "might") was the name of one of the most beloved goddesses. Both solar and lunar, Brighid guaranteed the fertility of the fields, sheep, cows, and human mothers; and she protected all bodies of water. Her principal symbol was a perpetual fire, representing wisdom, poetry, healing, therapy, metallurgy, and the hearth. St. Brigid's double monastery at Kildare was built at a location previously sacred to her pagan namesake, and the inner sanctuary of the Kildare Church also contained a blessed fire perpetually maintained by the nuns of her community. Some have speculated that St. Brigid herself once served as the last high priestess of a community of druid women worshipping the goddess Brighid, and that she led that entire community into the Christian faith.

St. Brigid saw that the needs of the body and the needs of the spirit intertwined. Her generosity in adult life was legendary: It was recorded that if she gave a drink of water to a thirsty stranger, the liquid turned into milk; when she sent a barrel of beer to one Christian community, it proved to satisfy 17 more. Many of the stories about her relate to the multiplication of food, including one that she changed her bath-water into beer to satisfy the thirst of an unexpected clergyman. Even her cows gave milk three times the same day to provide milk for some visiting bishops. The best-known custom connected with Brigid is the plaiting of reed crosses for her feast day. This tradition dates to the story that she was plaiting rush crosses while nursing a dying pagan chieftain. He asked her about this and her explanation led to his being baptized. Many traditional blessings invoke her in Irish (Brid agus Muire dhuit, Brigid and Mary be with you) and Welsh (Sanffried suynade ni undeith, St. Brigid bless us on our journey). A blessing over cattle in the Scottish isles goes: "The protection of God and Colmkille encompass your going and coming, and about you are the milkmaid of the smooth white palms, Brigid of the clustering, golden brown hair."

Brigid was one of the many Celtic saints who insisted that a vital component of the spiritual life is having a soul friend (anam cara). Her own dear friend was the younger nun Darlughdach, who slept with her and sometimes functioned as her ambassador. When

Brigid told her that she expected to be dying soon, Darlughdach begged that they might die together. Brigid responded that she would outlive her for one year, in order to succeed her as abbess. Ancient accounts show that their souls were so connected even after death that Darlughdach outlived Brigid by exactly one year.

The relics of Saint Brigid are presumably buried at Downpatrick with those of Patrick and Columba. A tunic reputed to have been hers, given by Gunhilda, sister of King Harold II, survives at Saint Donatian's in Bruges, Belgium; a relic of her shoe, made of silver and brass set with jewels, is at the National Museum of Dublin. In 1283, three knights took the head of Brigid with them on a journey to the Holy Land. They died in Lumier (near Lisbon), Portugal, where the church now enshrines her head in a special chapel.

She is usually portrayed in art with a cow lying at her feet, or holding a cross and casting out the devil. Her emblem is a lighted lamp or candle (not to be confused with Saint Geneviève, who was not an abbess). At times she may be shown with a flame over her; with geese near her; next to a barn; letting wax from a taper fall upon her arm; or restoring a man's hand. Brigid is the patron saint of poets, dairymaids, blacksmiths, healers, cattle, fugitives, Irish nuns, midwives, and new-born babies. She is highly venerated in Alsace, Flanders, and Portugal, as well as Ireland and Chester, England.

Brigid died shortly after her 70th birthday, after a long and productive life in the service of others. Her spirit lives on in the hospitality afforded by the nuns at Kildare, and she is still revered as a patron of Irish women and motherhood. She is one of the two patron saints of Ireland and the only native one, since Patrick was born elsewhere. Christians and pagans alike celebrate Brigid's feast on February 1, also known as Imbolc, the ceremonial first day of spring; thereby perpetually connecting St. Brigid with the renewal of the earth, the promise of abundance, the hope of new growth, and the eternal cycle of new life.

