

PROPOSAL

Saint Patrick Option: proclaiming Christ in a world of new paganism

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On 17 March, the Catholic Church celebrates St Patrick, the evangeliser of Ireland. This feast is celebrated in many parts of the world because the Irish diaspora of the last two centuries, especially in the 19th century due to the terrible misery caused by British

colonial exploitation, meant that Irish migrants brought their granite Catholic faith with them. A faith that has been handed down through the centuries, even through terrible persecutions. It all began with the proclamation of Christ by Saint Patrick in the 5th century, who converted this island of proud warriors and turned it into an island of saints.

Today, Patrick, his story and his witness are more relevant than ever. One could even speak of a 'Patrick option' for today's secularised Western world. The dominant ideologies, especially the "woke" and "cancel" cultures, are orienting society towards forms of neopaganism. Having abandoned the theories of classical atheism and agnosticism, in practice suggestions of ancient, pre-Christian paganism are re-emerging, with all its paraphernalia of idolatry, superstition and even obscure and disturbing rites. Neopaganism seeks to eradicate Christianity by bringing back pagan horrors, idols and superstitions. Modern technology only encourages the spread of neopaganism and extends its reach. A form of high-tech paganism is also emerging, especially with the introduction of artificial intelligence and its misuse.

This is a crisis that needs to be faced, in search of a new perspective for the Christian presence in the world. In recent years there has been much talk of the so-called "Benedict Option", launched by the American intellectual Rod Dreher, which has aroused a certain interest in the Catholic world. In short, this option proposes a kind of "withdrawal from the world", following the example of the monastic communities founded by St Benedict of Norcia; a kind of parallel society. But simply withdrawing from the dominant culture, as the Benedict Option proposes, is not enough. Christians have a duty to do much more.

We would therefore like to make our own modest proposal, that of the Patrick Option. In the 5th century, this missionary, born in Britannia, travelled to Ireland, an island where not even the Roman legions had ever landed, an island of proud warriors who were obviously also pagans, just like the Germans. Patrick succeeded in evangelising Ireland and in giving birth to an extraordinary civilisation. The first two centuries of Christian Ireland can be defined as the age of the saints: a veritable golden age of Irish Christianity. Ireland saw the birth and development of a completely original Christian civilisation in a short space of time.

Patrick spoke and preached in the ancient Celtic language, he studied Irish customs and traditions, and he knew how to transform existing beliefs. The Church's activity in Ireland did not result in the mere destruction of pagan rites and ancestral customs, but in their assimilation, purification and transformation. As the Irish became

Christians, Patrick abolished those profane rites that were a tribute to the devil, while at the same time enhancing pre-Christian Celtic art and culture.

One of the great innovations brought by the evangelisation of Ireland was the adoption of the Latin alphabet, which allowed the Irish to intensify the literary use of their language, composing poetry, commenting on religious texts, and developing the ancient epic cycles that had long been handed down only orally.

Gaelic literature thus became the oldest in Europe after Greek and Latin, an expression of the society of educated men into which the Church had been incorporated: men trained in the accurate recitation of oral teachings. The Irish clergy continued to make use of this traditional culture, derived without contamination from that of the ancient Celts, combining it with an accurate and passionate study of the Scriptures, as evidenced by certain manuscripts from the 8th century, in which the monks commented on the Latin ecclesiastical texts in the language of the people, providing a glossary and putting their erudition at their service.

This creative aspect of Irish Christianity impressed the most eminent scholars of the Middle Ages, such as the historian Jacques Le Goff, who wrote: "Without giving rise to national churches, Celtic Christianity, and Irish Christianity in particular, was distinguished by its marked originality. The most striking aspects of this originality were undoubtedly the wealth of missionary initiatives and the exceptional artistic production.

The Irish Church founded by Patrick endured through the centuries, resisting the Viking invasions as well as the terrible persecutions carried out by the English after the schism of Henry VIII. Patrick founded the Irish Church as the Roman Empire was collapsing. He didn't bother to prop up decadent institutions, but set about building a new civilisation based on Christianity, turning pagan barbarians into monks, scholars and knights. For all that, it really would be worth having the courage to try a Patrick Option.

To speak of the Patrizio Option is to emphasise the missionary role of witness that the Church must have. This witness must be carried out in a context that is certainly different from that of the Apostle of Ireland: he went out in search of the truth to meet pagans who enthusiastically welcomed the proclamation of Christ, whereas today we live in a society that has known Christ but has rejected him. Like Patrick, we must start again from the proclamation, from the proposal of Christian truth without ifs or buts, and in the same way try to grasp the good that exists, according to the method of St Paul, "testing everything and holding on to what is good", trying to be in the world without being of the world. A demanding method, but one that can bear extraordinary

fruit.