

Saint Brigid “The Mary of the Gael”

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This is a story about Saint Brigid, the goddess of fire. What's important to know about St. Brigid is she came from a time which is prewritten history in Ireland. Because of this, unlike St. Patrick, very little is known about St. Bridget. Patrick wrote a letter of excommunication against the soldiers of Coroticus, and he wrote a confession referring to events during his life for the people he was leaving behind. So, we have a link with the person – his thoughts – his actual words. When it comes to Brigid, we have mythology. We have very little information about the life of Brigid except what we get from biographies written about her in the 7th century. We do know that she was one of the first saints that was not a martyr. Before her women saints were put to death for their faith.

Once upon a time.....The year was 450AD, after the time of the collapse of the Roman Empire, Irish raiders would kidnap people from across the Irish sea and bring them back as slaves. One such slave women had been bought by a young pagan chieftain called Dubhtach. Being a chieftain of Leinster, Dubhtach held a lot of power and instantly took an interest in this slave women. Despite being married he started a relationship with her, and she conceived a baby girl and named her after one of the most powerful goddesses of the pagan religion, Brigid (pronounced Brig-id).

From an early age it was clear that Brigid had a special devotion to God, and as she grew so did that devotion. Brigid had been elevated out of slavery and enjoyed what were called the “privileges of family.” She was now a free woman and being a free woman meant she was now part of her father's clan and eligible for marriage to one of the other clansmen. They began to seek her out as she was known for her beauty, but she consecrated herself to Christ and wanted no part of marriage. This was a decision that angered her father as it would have impeded the growth of his kingdom. Despite her father's objections she entered a convent at an early age and became a nun. Soon after this, around the age of 16 or 17 she left home to travel the country looking after the sick, poor and outcast. She roamed the land looking for people to help. She is said to visit every house to make sure the people had plenty of food to eat, the crops would be planted, and the cattle would be safe so the cows would deliver plenty of milk. Because of this generosity and her care towards livestock and animals that Brigid became synonymous with the seasons and farming. She was very much a spiritual leader, down to earth – a women of the land. Her outreach to the poor is legendary.

Brigid had a very powerful personality. The town of Kildare is regarded as the true home of St. Brigid. Legend has it that she convinced a local chieftain to give her land, so one night she took the chieftain to the spot of land she wanted and the chieftain being a conceited man made a deal with her. He said take the cloak off your back and whatever area it covers you may have that land for your monastery. Brigid had great faith in God, so she took off her cloak and it unrolled and unrolled, acres unending and she got her site for the monastery. Within 100 years of her death, Kildare was described as a monastic city and its importance is attributed to Brigid.

The true story of Brigid's conversion to Christianity is lost in legend. One story states that it was Patrick himself who converted and baptized the women; another has the influence of her Christian mother weighing heavy on the girl. Regardless, Brigid and her fellow virgins all converted and became the first community of Christian women in Ireland. They were the first order of nuns in the country, the first group in a long line of Irish women who dedicated themselves to Christ. She founded two monastic institutions: one for men and one for women. She invited a hermit that lived in the next village to help her run the main section of the monastery and they worked this in collaboration with the sisters. As time went on so did her monastery, attracting girls from all over the country. Brigid's status as a leader was now solidified.

In 1814, some workers in Lismore Castle in County Waterford uncovered a damaged manuscript that became known as *The Book of Lismore*. The book contained *The Life of Saints* written sometime in the sixteenth century; yet the section of Brigid seems to have been taken from the works written in the seventh and tenth centuries. The Life of Brigid is not really a life at all but a catalog of the miraculous occurrences that surround her name.

We are told she was a peacemaker and was asked to intervene in local feuds which were commonplace at the time – she was titled a woman who turned back the stream of war. She and St. Patrick paved the way for Catholicism and Christianity throughout Ireland. St. Brigid probably didn't realize it at the time because she thought she was just doing the Lord's work, but she gave faith to the local communities.

There are stories that Brigid was good friends with Patrick that they had just one heart and mind and that through them Christ performed many great works. The meetings with Patrick would have had great effect on Brigid and she would carry his message throughout the country.

There are hundreds of wells dedicated to St. Brigid across Ireland. Not only do holy wells adorn every part of the country in St. Brigid's name but places themselves are also named after her – more than St. Patrick or any other saint. The St. Brigid name eclipses Patrick in townlands and parishes and there is probably more tradition associated with Brigid than with Patrick.

Here in the United States, we watch with bated breath to see if the beloved groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil, will predict an early end to winter on February 2. The feast day in Ireland devoted to St. Brigid is February 1 and is associated with the beginning of new growth and the coming of spring. The familiar St. Brigid cross was woven by her while she prayed for a man waiting to die – before he passed into the next world.

So great was her name, so exemplary her reputation, and so admired her character, that nobleman, gentleman, and knights took to calling their own loved ones by her name – Bride. It is from this usage that we get the term used to describe a woman who is to be married. An honor for a woman who was never married except symbolically to Christ.

Although she died 1500 years ago, St. Brigid still lives in the hearts and minds of the people of Ireland.