

## DAY ONE

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# *Discovering God in All*

### *Introducing Our Retreat Theme*

The theme of our retreat is discovering God in all. What we are seeking is the real, fully alive and present God. Sometimes Christians, in attempting to live a good and sincere life, ask themselves the question, “What would Jesus do?” if he were here in these circumstances. I suggest that the question should be “What could Jesus be saying here and now?” What does the living Christ himself do and want us to do in our everyday lives?

The mystery of the Christ, God made flesh, has both tantalized and confused Christians for two millennia. Historically, we have found it difficult to keep a balanced understanding. Some heresies have denied the humanity of Christ. Jesus, from this point of view, is God in a human appearance, like angels who, in biblical stories, took a human form to communicate with earthly beings. This Christ is worshipped and adored, but perhaps at times pushed too far away from us, elevated from, and outside of, his creation. Other intermediaries, such as saints, then must fill his role as mediator and human representative.

But Christ is God made flesh who is to be embraced as our way to the Father. He is the head of the Church and of every Christian community. He is the leader—the center—of every Christian gathering. No other human

being can take his unique place.

However, the divinity of this Christ can be forgotten or underemphasized as well. He becomes so like us that he is a buddy, a friend, an exemplar, merely one of many humans in history who helps us to find our way to God. The result is the loss of the cosmic, transcendent and mysterious realities of Christ.

The Christ who is human and divine, intimate, cosmic, transcendent and mysterious is the Christ, I believe, that Patrick discovered, whom Patrick loved, whom Patrick followed and shared with others in a work of passion and service. Patrick had been taught about Christ in his home. But it was in his own experiences that he discovered this intimate and loving Christ. Open to see God's plan in his own life's journey and open to the people and culture in which he unexpectedly found himself, Patrick sought and gradually found a Christ that was in all and everything, a Christ whom he could have hardly imagined in his youth.

In this retreat we let Patrick guide us in our own search for God. We will look at some themes that emerge from his writings, his *Confession* and his "Letter to Coroticus." The medieval lives of Patrick will not be entirely neglected either in our attempt to understand the life and teachings of this holy man. Finally we will also draw upon the so-called "Breastplate of Saint Patrick," a wonderful prayer that sums up so much of Celtic spirituality. Scholars who have examined the language do not believe Patrick wrote this personally; it is usually dated some two to three centuries after his death. Perhaps it was preserved in a largely oral culture and later updated and recorded. Perhaps it was adapted from some ancient prayer of Patrick. Or perhaps it was not his at all. In any event, the content of the prayer is thoroughly consistent with the writings of Patrick and helps us to

place his thought and piety in a wonderfully prayerful expression of praise.

We look at all these ancient writings in the context of what we know of the Celtic Christian Church, and how we have come to understand and imagine Patrick's message in today's Church and world. So a stanza from the breastplate will be the opening and closing prayer of each day and offer us our day's theme.

### *Opening Prayer*

For my shield this day I call:  
A mighty power:  
The Holy Trinity!  
Affirming threeness,  
Confessing Oneness,  
In the making of all  
Through love....

O holy Three-in-One God, I arise today through the power of your love and goodness. You are all that is and can be found in all that exists, and I hope to find myself in you. I arise today mindful of your creating touch in my whole being and in the being of this good world in which you have placed me. I arise today, knowing that Christ walks with me before you, Father, with the power of your Spirit. May your holy name be praised as I seek to know myself better, to understand better this world in which I live and thus come to understand the Christ through whom, with whom and in whom all of my world holds together.

## RETREAT SESSION ONE

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### *You Are Not Alone*

Truly, if you have the Celtic spirit, you know that Patrick still lives. He is here with us now. Try to imagine this presence. The typical holy card picture may not really help. Rather, imagine some wise and gentle elderly person you have known. Patrick is a wise and well-proven senior. He has been tested in life, come through adversity, has emerged as a kind, tolerant and loving person. He looks upon you as a younger brother or sister whom he loves and wants to help. He wants to share his story with you.

His viewpoint now is from eternity. He remembers his time on this earth, and he can still experience it. He also knows the events which followed his time here, the successes and failures of Christianity in Ireland and throughout the world since then. He knows the stories of the millions who have sought meaning in their lives, as he did, by being open to life's experiences. Let him speak to you now and share his story.

"It is good to have these days to share some thoughts with you. Come and take the time to slow down and be with me in prayer and reflection. I will be praying for you and with you as you retreat this week.

"Consider, my friends, have you ever experienced a significant and painful loss in your life? I believe that this is part of the life experience of most, if not all, people. For some it is the death of someone they really love. For others it is the loss of a job or a place of position. Perhaps you have been betrayed by a friend or suffered some form of injustice triggered by jealousy. Some people have been scarred by their experiences in war or by abuse sustained while either a child or adult. As for me, my world fell

apart right before my sixteenth birthday. My carefree and secure world was shattered when I was kidnapped and taken captive into a foreign land.

*“I Patrick, ‘a sinner,’ very rustic, and the least of all the faithful, and very contemptible in the estimation of most people, was captured. I was then almost sixteen years of age. I was indeed ignorant of the true God, and I was taken in captivity to Ireland with so many thousands of people...because we turned away from God and we did not keep watch over his precepts.”<sup>1</sup>*

“My home was in Britain, then a province of the Roman Empire. The years before my birth were generally peaceful and prosperous, though uncertainty grew as the Roman authorities began to be more concerned with threatening circumstances back in Rome. I came from a good, solid family and was blessed with love, good care and physical well-being. We had a rather good-sized farm which my father administered. He was a minor official in the provincial government and was also a deacon of the Church. His father was a priest and also lived in our area. So I had good religious training, a solid foundation in Christian belief and practice. I was educated in our local school of grammar. I had friends and we enjoyed doing things together, such as fishing and collecting firewood in the hills. At this time in my adolescent life, there was also a girl who held considerable attraction for me. I suppose I had it all and didn’t realize it. I certainly was not a serious lad. Church, religion, education, work and responsibility were all tedious parts of my life for which I compensated by having much fun and engaging in some rebellion.

“Then, one day, as a few of us boys were on our way home from school and were walking in a wooded area, we were ambushed and taken captive. I was filled with a fear such as I had never known before. With bonds on hands and feet and a gag in my mouth, I was thrown into

a cart where I began to tremble and cry. Soon we were on a boat and in chains. When we had crossed the sea and arrived at the land, which I came to know as Ireland, I was blindfolded, separated from the others. All I wanted to do was somehow undo the past few hours and be back in my own safe home. 'O, God,' I prayed, 'Do not punish me for my evil ways. I will mend my life and be more serious if only you restore me to my home and good parents.'

"Before long the journey was over and I was released into the hands of a farmer someplace near the sea. I had no idea where I was. I was frightened, I was sick and in a state of near delirium. Reality set in slowly. I spent the next six years as a slave for my new owner, tending sheep and doing menial tasks. As I grew to young manhood, I was kept in a condition of servility, struggling with hunger, cold and near-nakedness. The physical pain and discomfort were bad. But the mental torment was worse. I believed I was being duly punished for the sins of my youth and that this was to be my lot for life. I was terribly lonely, abandoned and scared.

"I began to recite the prayers I had learned as a boy. Being alone for hours on my own, I would simply repeat them over and over. And then that very loneliness became a school of solitude and inner silence. I was forced to be with myself and look at myself in a way that I would never have chosen. I contemplated my soul and was frightened by what I saw. There was no escape, no place to run. And then, the miracle happened. By staying with my poor self and slowly coming to a certain acceptance, I reached a place of deep peace. I was overwhelmed by an encompassing and protective presence that I could only call God and recognize as the Triune God of my Christian upbringing. I felt like the prodigal son unaccountably loved by God who was

Father. I felt closely allied with the Christ who suffered and with whom I was now suffering. I experienced the comfort and touch and inner breath of the Spirit that glowed within me. I cried for happiness even while lamenting my predicament as slave.

*“There the Lord opened my heart to an awareness of my unbelief so that, perhaps, I might at last remember my sins, and that I might turn with all my heart to the Lord my God, who turned his gaze on my lowliness and had mercy on my youth and ignorance and kept watch over me before I knew him...and he protected me and comforted me as a father comforts a son.”<sup>2</sup>*

“God in his goodness, I realize now, had been preparing me for this conversion. I not only had to face myself but also was completely open to the might, power and beauty of God’s created world. I learned from the sheep I tended, the birds that greeted me each day, the winds and the sea that surrounded me, and even the rain that fell so frequently. Sunrises and sunsets, the monthly resurrection of the new moon, the nobility of trees, the wild red deer, the elk and other animals were all revelations of God’s wonderful universe, even the wolves and foxes who threatened the sheep! All of creation proclaimed to me the glory of this God whom I was learning to recognize.

“And then there were the people—my captors—simple hardworking people not very different from those I had left behind in Britain. These were a people who lived close to the earth and who were intimate with the divine, the world of the spirit, which they apprehended in everything. They had a keen sense of the presence of the other world and of all who had gone before them. They never seemed alone. And I learned from them.

“I could have become bitter during this experience, hardened and forever concerned only for myself. I could have been consumed with my anger, fear and self-pity. I

look back with wonder and realize that none of these things happened—God’s grace and love proved to be stronger than my own smallness and my pitiful resistance.

“The miracle of that experience is that I found I was not alone, that my God was intimately close to me, that I was cared for and loved. My time of captivity turned out to be a time of proving and growth. Because I had learned to attune my exterior senses to the presence of God in nature and in the people, my interior senses also developed. I became more sensitive to the reality of the spirit world and of the Holy Spirit stirring within me. When I was ready, a voice in my heart said that I must leave and that a boat awaited me on the eastern shore. My time of captivity had come to an end. After a long journey, I was able happily to return to my parents’ home.

“You are well aware, I am sure, that I eventually did return to Ireland. The Spirit continued to guide me, to speak to me. After some restless pondering, I decided to pursue a vocation to the priesthood. Because my formal education had been interrupted years before, this was not to be an easy undertaking. After my ordination to the priesthood, my knowledge, interest in and love of the Irish came to the attention of the ecclesiastical authorities. When a voice summoned me back to Ireland, I was chosen to be a bishop to bring the gospel to these people at the edge of the (then) known world. The years after that brought much satisfaction as I traveled among the people of Ireland, speaking of the love of the triune God. I suffered hardships and isolation at various times. I was once again taken into captivity and put into chains. I was an object of scorn, jealousy and suspicion. And the worst part of it was that it did not come from the ‘pagan’ peoples of Ireland. It came from my ecclesiastical peers who derided me for my incompetence, my lack of

learning and my simple and inept ways of evangelizing. One former friend revealed a story of my youth, an old sinful experience that has always shamed me, thus casting disgrace upon me. I was discouraged and often tempted to give up what seemed to be a foolhardy adventure.

“Despite all that I endured, that intimate presence of God which I had found in captivity never left me completely. ‘You are not alone, Patrick,’ I would hear, ‘you are not alone.’ Unworthy and inept as I was, God had chosen me and was with me. I did not understand why, and sometimes I wished it were otherwise. The years in Ireland brought struggle and setbacks. But the grace of the Lord flowed through my work and many people embraced the Christian faith. I can only give praise and thanks to a God who never forsook me, even when many around me did.

*“Therefore I give unwearied thanks to my God, who kept me faithful in the day of my trial, so that today I may confidently offer in sacrifice to him my life as a living host to Christ my Lord, who has saved me from all my troubles.”<sup>3</sup>*

“I am sure that you, too, have experienced some large crisis or setback in your life. I know I was not unique in my life’s struggle. I offer you my story on this first day of retreat so that you may reflect on your own journey and realize how you are never really abandoned, that you are never alone, that there always is for you, as for me, a God present and ever loving to accompany you on your way.”

### ***For Reflection***

- *Like Patrick, when have you experienced a great loss that became a source of growth and soil for conversion? How were you able to emerge from this loss with greater love*

*and faith? How do you deal with the scars that need healing so new life may come forth?*

- *In our own time we have witnessed the tragic and horrific experiences of many people. Terry Anderson was a hostage in Beirut for almost seven years, often in solitary confinement. He came forth, due to his faith, as a stronger and more compassionate person. Nelson Mandela spent twenty-seven years in a South African prison but emerged with seemingly little bitterness or anger. How do you think you would have handled a similar experience? What are you doing now that can prepare you for such an experience?*
- *It is part of the human predicament to experience loneliness. How do you recognize your own need for silence and solitude? What forms of discipline and asceticism do you practice to help you grow in self-knowledge?*
- *Patrick's conversion was due in part to his acute attunement to the created world around him. His exterior senses became aware and appreciative of the natural universe as revealing God's presence, love and goodness. How does nature, in both its beauty and its awesome power, reveal to you the triune God who has "made all through love"?*
- *The sensory openness to all of God's creation further helped Patrick to open his interior senses of awareness and perception both of the world of the Spirit and of the closeness of Christ, Mary, the angels and saints. In what ways do you open your soul to the spiritual world?*

## *Closing Prayer*

For my shield this day I call:  
A mighty power:  
The Holy Trinity!  
Affirming Threeness,  
Confessing Oneness  
In the making of all  
Through love...

Blessed and all holy Three-in-One God, I confess my belief in your intimate and all involving presence in my life. I acknowledge you have made all through love. All the earth, all the universe, every human being, and every human experience I have lived has been full of your intimate and guiding love. Help me, with Patrick as a guide, to believe more strongly in that presence and to live my life in more open awareness of the gifted world around me and within me. Help me in my loneliness to know you are near. Help me to hear your voice that reminds me that I am never alone. To you be honor and glory. Amen.

## *Notes*

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<sup>1</sup> *Confession*, I, v. 1. All quotations are from the translation of Máire B. dePaor, pp. 221-265.

<sup>2</sup> *Confession*, Part I, v. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Confession*, Part III, v. 34.