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## THE CALL

# Resistance to the Call

Juilene Osborne-McKnight

Patrick the holy man was traveling the roads of Ireland with several of his new followers. He was in a more irascible mood than usual, haranguing his brothers on the evils of heathen practice, when two riders edged from the forest and blocked Patrick's path.

He shielded his eyes and regarded them: two men in green plaid cloaks astride huge horses, one black, one grey. Between them was a wolfhound as large as a pony.

Not one to suffer impediments, Patrick called aloud to them.

"You there. Clear the road that we may pass."

The men exchanged glances.

"Are you Padraig?"

"I am not. I am Magonus Succatus Patricius, late of Britain. Who calls me by this Irish name?"

"Sure, he is Padraig," the fair-haired rider said aloud.

Behind him, Patrick heard the brothers whispering. He turned.

"Who are these riders?"

Patrick's scribe Breogan detached himself from the brothers.

"Do you not know, then?"

"Know what, man? Am I expected now to know every stranger on the roads of Ireland?"

"These are Fenians, Padraig. Fenians are these riders."

Now Patrick was furious. He slashed the air with his fist and shouted at the brothers.

"What have I told you of heathen belief? This is the year of our Lord. The Fenians have been dead for two hundred years!"

He turned and began to stride toward the

riders, determined to show the brothers their error. As he did, the fairer of the two riders swung down from his saddle. His foot struck the earth. Patrick stared in amazement and blinked.

What had looked like a young man in the full power of his years was an aged, withered old oak of a man. Thinking that it must be a trick of the light, Patrick hurried to his side.

"Who are you, old man? Speak, that you may ease the superstitious fears of my brothers."

"I am Oisian, son of Fionn, poet of the Fianna. I am sent to one Padraig, that I may tell him the Fenian tales."

Patrick scoffed aloud, turning to the brothers who had gathered around.

"What foolishness! The raving of an ancient, longing for the days of old. Do you see now what heathen practice will bring you?"

But from atop his horse, the old man's companion spoke.

"Oisian speaks truth, Padraig. For you he has given up his youth in the Land of Light. For you, he has returned to tell the tales."

"And who has sent me this gift?"

Patrick waited for the answer, but it did not come from the rider or from the old man. Nor did it come from the brothers. It came from deep within him, from the Voice which had cajoled and pushed him back to Ireland when he did not wish to go.

"I have sent him," It said.

And Patrick drew his arm around the shoulders of the old man and called to his brothers.

"Come," he said. "We must bear him back to the monastery."

**P**ATRICK OF IRELAND has been painted for centuries as the liberator and protector of the Irish, a man more Irish than the Irish themselves. The truth is that Patrick spent his youth as a slave among the Irish, disliked them thoroughly, and had no desire to return to them as the bearer of Christianity.

The story of Patrick is the story of a man who was called and tried to say no. Patrick resisted the call of the Spirit for eighteen years. He procrastinated, he wandered around Europe, he protested his inadequacy; in fact, he did everything possible to avoid God's wish that he preach to the Irish.

In the story of Patrick of Ireland, we see the Caller at his relentless best; for, once the Spirit had decided on Patrick as the saint of the Irish, Patrick's fate was sealed. The Caller would not permit Patrick to say no.

Patrick came from an upper middle-class Romano-Briton family. His father, Calpornius, was a Roman functionary (a decurion) and a deacon in the Christian church. His grandfather, Potitus, was a priest in the pre-celibate Christian religion. Patrick may have been christened Succat (clever in war) or perhaps Magnus Succatus. In his *Confession* Patrick himself tells us that he had been an easy youth, pampered, not at all religious and perhaps a little wild.

At the age of sixteen Patrick was kidnapped by Irish raiders from his father's villa in the west of England and sold into slavery, probably in the west of Ireland. There, Patrick spent six long, achingly lonely years tending sheep, living under the open sky, dressed in the shabbiest of rags, sleeping in the company of wolfhounds and praying for all he was worth. He drew comfort from the prayers, for in his *Confession* he tells us,

The Lord opened the sense of my unbelief that I might at last remember my sins and be con-



verted with all my heart to the Lord my God, who had regard for my abjection, and mercy on my youth and ignorance, and watched over me before I knew Him, and before I was able to distinguish between good and evil, and guarded me, and comforted me as would a father his son.<sup>1</sup>

Toward the end of Patrick's six years, the Caller began to communicate with Patrick directly, a Voice that Patrick would hear in his head for the rest of his life.

One night while Patrick was sleeping, the Voice awoke him. Patrick had been fasting; the Voice praised him and gave him hope: "It is well that you fast," it said, for "soon you will go to your own country." Wherever Patrick was tending sheep, it was not on the coast, but in a remote interior location that would make escape difficult. Yet, at the urging of the Voice, Patrick immediately abandoned his slavery. Despite the danger of being caught and severely beaten, Patrick trekked across Ireland to board a ship

bearing a cargo of wolfhounds, bound for England. He was joyfully reunited with his parents, who prayed that he would never be taken from them again.

While remaining at home was probably Patrick's most fervent wish, the Caller had other ideas. Patrick had been home only a short time when the Spirit sent him the vision of a messenger called Victoricus, bearing a letter from the Irish. In the letter, the Irish cried out to Patrick, "We ask thee boy, come and walk among us once more." Now Patrick knew that God wanted him to return to the country of his slavery; he tells us that he wept.

Added to Patrick's reluctance to return to Ireland was his deep-seated feeling of inadequacy. In his *Confession*, Patrick says,

I am Patrick, a sinner, most unlearned, the least of all the faithful and utterly despised by many. . . . I had long had in mind to write, but hesitated until now; I was afraid of exposing myself to the talk of men, because I have not





studied like the others, who thoroughly imbibed law and Sacred Scripture, and never had to change from the language of their childhood days, but were able to make it more perfect. . . . I blush and fear exceedingly to reveal my lack of education.

These protestations are not just false modesty. The Latin of Patrick's *Confession* is rough and ungrammatical. In education, Patrick really was inadequate to the task the Caller wanted him to do. He was not a learned and erudite Roman Christian; he was a middle-class Briton boy, who never really did grasp the intricacies of Church language. After his years of slavery, Patrick spoke fluent Irish. He was also somewhat quick-tempered and stubborn as a hound.

In short, Patrick was perfect for the Irish. What Patrick could not see, the Caller must surely have seen, for Patrick's lack of education was irrelevant to the Spirit. Andrew Greeley states that

"Graciousness is not to be denied . . . we must dialogue with it. . . . We must be able to listen to Graciousness speaking to us and to respond."<sup>2</sup> But Graciousness had a difficult threefold task in Patrick: to get Patrick back to Ireland, to overcome his deep-seated awareness of his own inadequacies, and most difficult of all, to awaken in Patrick some kinship, perhaps even some love, for the people who had enslaved him.

**P**ATRICK TELLS US that it took him eighteen years to return to Ireland. One of the reasons that it may have taken so long is that Patrick tried to educate himself, to compensate for his lack of learning. He studied for monastic orders and later for the priesthood, perhaps in Gaul, but certainly not in Ireland. Somewhere along the way, he was given the Christian name Patricius, but again, not while he was in Ireland. Obviously, Patrick spent eighteen years "preparing"



for a mission he never wanted to do.

And then, at last, at the age of forty, Patrick gave in.

What caused Patrick to capitulate? His *Confession* indicates that he did not return to Ireland until he was nearly worn out. Does he speak of his vast age? Forty was ancient by the standards of his time. Or does he speak of being worn down by the Spirit?

Jung says that “God speaks chiefly through dreams and visions.” Patrick was besieged constantly by his Voice, as he describes in his *Confession*:

And again I saw Him praying in me, and I was as it were within my body, and I heard Him above me, that is, over the inward man, and there He prayed mightily with groanings . . . But at the end of the prayer He spoke, saying that He was the Spirit.

Did the Voice become so relentless that at last, Patrick just gave in?

Whatever the reason, Patrick returned to Ireland still convinced of his inadequacy, for he tells us, “the Lord had mercy on me thousands and thousands of times because He saw that I was ready, but that I did not know what to do in the circumstances . . . because—and this I own myself—of my rusticity.”

He also returned disposed to dislike the Irish, referring to them as heathens and barbarians and constantly bemoaning his homesickness. Patrick had at last returned to Ireland, but as Magonus Succatus Patricius, very much the Romano-Briton, uncomfortable with his social standing in the Church and nursing a long-held grudge against the Irish.

The Caller had his man, in body, but not in spirit.

Now came the most difficult part of the Caller’s courtship, for how was he to make this angry, homesick, irascible, and thoroughly prejudiced character love the Irish?



AS HE HAD DONE before, God courted Patrick through the word. He had placed voices in Patrick's head; now He placed stories in Patrick's path. According to the legends, God sent Oisian (O-sheen) and Caoilte (Kweel-ta) to tell Patrick the Fenian tales.

The Fenians were romantic warriors of ancient Ireland who lived by a chivalric code of behavior. Their leader, Fionn Mac Cumhail (Finn Mac Cool) was a hero who would have appealed to Patrick. In his youth, Fionn had been separated from his mother and raised in the wild forests of Ireland. Fionn could disappear into the solitude of Ireland's forests for months at a time, and regularly encountered the Other, taking such intersections between this world and the next as part of the ordinary course of life. In the stories of Fionn, Patrick would surely have seen parallels to his own separation from his family, his own solitude, his own constant interactions with the Spirit who spoke inside him.

At first Patrick was resistant to the tales, but slowly, Oisian drew him in. According to the legends, Patrick came in daily from the fields, exhausted, but demanding that Oisian tell him stories of the hunt or the heroic battles of Fionn. Tale by tale, Oisian wove Patrick into the life, the beliefs, the mythology of the Irish. Eventually, Patrick came to love the tales so much that he ordered his scribe to copy them down and preserve them for future generations.

But did the tales really change Patrick? In his *Confession*, the testament of his old age, Patrick continued to bemoan his homesickness, crying out, "Wherefore, then, even if I wished to leave them [the Irish] and go to Britain—and how I would have loved to go to my country . . . I am afraid of losing the labor I have begun."

In his letter to Coroticus, again written near the end of his life, Patrick writes

that he lives "among barbarians, a stranger and exile for the love of God."

Yet, in that same letter, Patrick begged the raiders of Coroticus to return his kidnapped parishioners to their homeland, crying, "Is it a crime to be born in Ireland? Have we not the same God as ye have?"<sup>3</sup>

Finally, near the end of his *Confession*, Patrick prays, "May God never separate me from his people on this island, which stands at the very edge of the earth."<sup>4</sup>

At some time in the course of his life, Patricius, the Romano-Briton monastic and proselytizer, became, by his own definition, Patrick, "resident of Ireland,"<sup>5</sup> defender of the Irish, lover of the Fenian tales of Ireland.

Did Oisian and Caoilte really come back from the land of the Other with the express purpose of telling their tales to Patrick? The country is Ireland, the Caller is God, lover of tales, who wooed Patrick by whispering in his ear, by writing him letters, and by telling him stories. By whatever means, the Word came to Patrick again and again. By the Word, Patrick was bound to the Irish.

It took a lifetime, but at last the Caller heard Patrick's resounding answer to the call.

And the answer was yes. □

## NOTES

1. From "The Confession of Patrick," Prof. Ludwig Bieler, tr., in Paul Gallico, *The Steadfast Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), p. 203. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from the *Confession* are from this translation.
2. Andrew Greeley, *Life for a Wanderer: A New Look at Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 139.
3. Seumas MacManus, *The Story of the Irish Race* (Greenwich, Conn.: Devin-Adair, 1921), p. 119.
4. From "The Confession of Patrick," *Celtic Fire*, Robert Van de Meyer, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 34.
5. Katharine Scherman, *The Flowering of Ireland: Saints, Scholars, & Kings* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1981), p. 96.