

# The Papal System – II. The Ancient Irish Church



Continued from [I. The Ancient British Church](#).

## **THE POPES HAVE NO POWER IN THE IRISH CHURCH FOR MANY CENTURIES AFTER CHRIST.**

The people of Ireland, for ages, were called Scots. Bede tells us that Laurentius, the successor of Augustine, wrote an epistle, in which he exhorted the "*Scots who inhabit the island of Ireland*," as well as the ancient Britons, to maintain conformity with the Church of Christ spread over the world. This was the common designation of the inhabitants of Ireland for ages. It is not certain at what time the first light of the gospel reached the natives of Ireland; but it is well known that there were Christians in that country before the time of St. Patrick. He, however, properly merits the title of

### *The Apostle of Ireland.*

There are conflicting accounts of his birth, nationality and acts, some insisting that there were three Patricks, whose deeds are commonly credited to one. The most probable history of the great Patrick is, that he was a native of Scotland; that his name was Succathus; and that he had a godly father, who gave him religious instruction in early life. At the age of sixteen, he was captured by pirates, and sold as a slave to the Scots in what is now called Ulster in Ireland. His daily toil in the neighborhood of Slemish, a beautiful mountain, from whose top the prospect is sublime, and his helpless and hopeless wrongs, led him to think of that Saviour of whom he had heard so much on the banks of his native Clyde. He touchingly describes his exercises at this time in his confessions:

"I was sixteen years old, and knew not the true God; but, in a strange land, the Lord brought me to a sense of my unbelief, so that, although late, I minded me of my sins, and turned with my whole heart to the Lord my God, who looked down on my lowliness, had pity on my youth and ignorance, who preserved me ere I knew him, and who protected and comforted me as a father does his son, ere I knew how to distinguish between good and evil."

He found Jesus, and afterwards escaped from bondage and reached his friends. After passing through various changes, some of them of a very unhappy

character, he felt he must go and preach to the pagans of Ireland the salvation of Jesus. He had calls in visions of the night, and deep impressions throughout the day, that he must be a missionary in Ireland; and, in opposition to remonstrances from friends, and misgivings in his own mind, after some preparation, he started for the scene of his future labors and successes. It is probable that he was ordained a bishop in Britain in his 45th year, notwithstanding all the tales of monks about Pope Celestine sending Patrick to convert the Scots to the faith of the Holy Trinity.

Nennius says that he preached in Britain some time before he went to Ireland. The Irish, he says, beheld in Patrick the most astonishing powers, natural and supernatural. He gave sight to the blind, cleansing to the lepers, hearing to the deaf; he cast out devils, raised nine persons from the dead, and redeemed many captives of both sexes. He wrote three hundred and sixty-five canonical and other books; he founded as many churches, and ordained as many bishops, and three thousand presbyters. He converted and baptized twelve thousand persons in Connaught. He baptized seven kings in one day, the sons of Amalgaid, king of Connanght. He fasted forty days and nights on the summit of Croagh Patrick, and made three requests to God for the people of Ireland. First: That God would receive every repenting sinner, even at the last moment; second, that the Irish might never be exterminated by barbarians; and, third, as Ireland will be overflowed with water seven years before the judgment, that the crimes of the people might be washed away through his intercession.

Matthew Paris says that in preparing for his ministry "he read through the Holy Scriptures, and made himself master of their divine mysteries." He preached in Ireland eighty years, and reached the age of 122. He repeats everything mentioned by Nennius in such a way that it is evident either one is a copy of the other, or that both are transcripts of some old document.

Patrick invented the Irish alphabet, and infused a love for learning and for the sacred Scriptures among his converts, which rendered the monastic schools of Ireland the wonder and admiration of Europe for several ages.

Patrick was a man of extraordinary ability; he gathered the people by beat of drum, and listening thousands caught the words of life as they fell from his lips. In his day chieftains wielded immense power over their dependents, and the Irish apostle laid siege to their hearts first, and he quickly enlisted them and their clans. Their bards were men of commanding influence, and Patrick secured many of the most illustrious of them, and induced them to compose eloquent songs in honor of the man of Nazareth. Ireland under this remarkable preacher was completely renovated, and piety of a high order reigned all over the Green Isle. St. Patrick's religion was

#### *Bible Christianity.*

This truth is strikingly exhibited in the history of the Church which he planted. The monkish historians of the middle ages have many allusions to this fact in the character of the Irish Christians. Bede, speaking about Coinwalch, says: "There came into his kingdom out of Ireland a certain bishop called Agilbert, by nation a Frenchman, but who had then been in Ireland a

long time, 'for the purpose of reading the Scriptures.'"

Bede speaks of the most reverend father Egbert, who long led a monastic life with St. Chad in Ireland, praying, observing continency, and "meditating on the Holy Scriptures."

Columbanus, a celebrated Irish monk, a missionary on the continent, was accustomed to retire from his convent into the dense forest, bearing on his shoulder "a copy of the Holy Scriptures, which he wanted to study in the solitude."

Bishop Clement, an Irishman who had some trouble with the renowned Boniface, apostle of Germany, is said to have denied "to the writings of the older fathers, and to the canons of councils, authority binding on faith," from which Neander justly infers "that he conceded *such authority to the Holy Scriptures alone*, acknowledging them as the *only fountain and directory of Christian faith*."

And speaking of the pious Irish generally, Neander says: "Ireland became the seat of famous monasteries, in which the Scriptures were diligently read, ancient books eagerly collected and studied. They became missionary schools." Like the revered Patrick, they became masters of the mysteries of the divine Word by careful reading. For a couple of centuries, Ireland was the Bible school of western Europe, whither the student and man of devout meditations came to read the Scriptures, The Church of St. Patrick was distinguished by

#### *Generosity.*

In A. D. 664, a pestilence swept over the south and north of England, destroying a great multitude of people, and creating universal dismay. The same plague raged with equal fury and fatality in Ireland. Many of the English nobility, and persons of inferior rank from England, were at the time in Ireland, either "for the sake of divine studies, or of a more continent life. The Scots (Irish) willingly received them all, and took care to supply them with food, and also to furnish them with books to read, and their teaching gratis." Such is the testimony of the English Bede about men who rejected the pope whom he revered, and who belonged to a foreign nation. The Irish Church, for centuries after St. Patrick, was

#### *Independent of the Pope.*

Easter in the West showed whether a Christian was a papist or a Free churchman. The Irish followed no Romish custom, and they were specially vigorous in declining the papal time for observing Easter. Laurentius deplores their obstinacy in a letter addressed to them and the ancient Britons, in 605, soon after he succeeded Augustine as Archbishop of Canterbury. Himself wearing the livery of the bishop of Rome, he wanted the independent churches of Britain and Ireland to assume it too, And in this letter he tells the Scots that he once had a very exalted opinion of them; but Bishop Dagan (an Irish bishop) "coming into this aforesaid island, and the Abbot Columbanus in France informed us that the Scots (Irish) in no way differ from the Britons in their behaviour; for Bishop Dagan coming to us,

not only refused to eat with us, but even to take his repast in the house where we were entertained." It is evident that the Irish had no respect for the Roman bishop at this time, when such an insult, solely on religious grounds, was leveled at one of his exalted prelates.

Pope Honorius wrote to the Irish about Easter, and gave them to understand how presumptuous it was for a handful of people, living on the outskirts of the earth, to think themselves wiser than "all the ancient and modern churches of Christ throughout the world, and to celebrate a different Easter." John, his successor, when pope elect, wrote to the Irish, admonishing them about Easter, telling them that "some among them, contrary to the orthodox faith, do through ignorance reject our Easter, when Christ was sacrificed." But neither popes nor archbishops could turn the hearts of these old heroes from the Bible and the usages of mighty Patrick.

The Irish missionaries in France and Germany established churches and monasteries everywhere, taught the purest piety, and exemplified it in their own lives; and if they did not convert nations, they led hundreds of thousands to the true Saviour, who read the Scriptures, trusted Jesus, and walked with God. These men were a great source of trouble for a long period to the nominal Christians around them, who belonged to the old Frankish Church, and in later times to the Romish Church set up in Germany by Boniface. They were hated as Christ's disciples were detested by the Pharisees; and *their worst enemies were not the numerous Pagans, but the Christian priests of Gaul and Germany.*

And we are not surprised at this treatment; for these missionaries loved God, and were not much afraid of men. They had an offensive way of telling popes, when they were wrong, that they disliked heresy or iniquity in any one; and of practising their Church rites in the heart of Germany or France before the eyes of Romish priests or bishops, entirely indifferent to their expostulations and prohibitions. Columbanus wrote Gregory the Great that he ought not to be governed by a false humility in refusing to correct what was erroneous, even though it bore the authority of Pope Leo the Great; "for," said he, "a living dog may be better than a dead lion." He adjured Boniface IV., by the unity of the Christian fold, to give him and his people permission, as strangers in France, to observe their own ancient customs; for they were just the same, dwelling in the wilderness, as if they were in their own country. And when Boniface, the Englishman, gathered such hosts in Germany from idols to the gospel of Augustine of Canterbury, and of the Pope of Rome, the pontiff, expecting some trouble from a man coming from the country of the ancient Britons, and Scotch heretics, and Irish independents, prescribed a solemn oath for Boniface, which he took at the tomb of St. Peter in Rome, which, in substance, was as follows:

"I promise thee, the first of the apostles, and thy representative, Pope Gregory, and his successors, that, with God's help, I will abide in the unity of the Catholic faith; that I will in no manner agree with anything contrary to the unity of the Catholic Church; but will in every way maintain my faith pure, and my cooperation constantly for thee, and for the benefit of thy Church, on which was bestowed by God the power to bind and loose, and for thy representative aforesaid and his successors,

And whenever I find that the conduct of the presiding officers of churches contradicts the ancient decrees and ordinances of the fathers, I will have no fellowship or connection with them; but, on the contrary, if I can hinder them, I will hinder them; and, if not, report them faithfully to the pope."

This entire oath supposes that in Germany, the See of Boniface, there were bishops and churches who broke the unity of the pope's faith by not receiving him as their master, which he was determined to crush. And Neander is not mistaken in asserting that the oath of Boniface was expressly intended to suppress the Irish and British churches in Germany. The author of a learned work recently published, states the exact truth when he says: "In the West, the ancient Irish and the ancient British Church remained for centuries autonomous, and under no sort of influence of Rome."

*The English gave Ireland to the Pope.*

In A. D. 1155, Ireland was not in the papal ranks. And Henry II. of England, sent a solemn embassy to Adrian, to Rome, to solicit his permission to "subdue Ireland, and bring into the way of truth its bestial inhabitants, by extirpating the seeds of vice among them." Adrian readily consented, and issued a bull, declaring, among other things, "that to extend the frontiers of the Church, to teach a rude people the doctrines of the Christian faith, to extirpate the seeds of vice out of the Lord's field, to secure to St. Peter the annual sum of one penny for every house, and to extend the Christian religion, he might seize Ireland." It is very evident that the Irish of A. p. 1155, were, like Bishop Dagan and Columbanus, that they had nothing to do with Rome; and while in the twelfth century they had lost the piety and learning of the sixth, seventh and eighth, they were still free from the Roman yoke. And these ages of freedom from Romish interference and ecclesiastical supremacy are the most glorious centuries in the history of the Irish people.

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